

2

The afterlife of stereotype: Kara Walker, Kehinde Wiley, DJ Spooky and *The Birth of a Nation*

Robert Burgoyne

The extraordinary political and cultural controversies generated by *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) over the past 100 years have centred, for the most part, on its extreme stereotypes of Black characters and imagined Black behaviours, set forth in scenes and images perceived to be so toxic that they have largely been bracketed from critical scrutiny. The racist stereotypes repeatedly evoked in the film, which were once a mainstream topic of graphic art and entertainment – regularly featured in publications such as *Harper's Weekly*, *Currier and Ives* and in blackface performances – are today seen as manifestations of a social pathology so threatening that the film, and the traditions from which it emerged, have been placed in a kind of critical quarantine, seen as a malignant cultural force with the power to re-infect.¹ Thus the re-emergence of racial stereotype as an aesthetic resource and political provocation in the work of several Black visual artists is a surprising development, a rethinking that challenges our notions of aesthetic value.² In the work of the artists I consider here – Kara Walker, Kehinde Wiley and Paul Miller (aka DJ Spooky, that Subliminal Kid) – racial stereotype is repurposed as a political and aesthetic strategy, a critical tool and a device for reawakening what Walker calls the ‘unspeakable past’.³ Each of these three artists employs stereotype in ways that are deeply historical and critically informed, bringing to the surface the undercurrents of a past that still troubles our historical lives today. Probing eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early twentieth-century art forms for the larger histories concealed within them, Walker, Wiley and Miller conduct a kind of rack-focus reframing of several different artistic and popular visual traditions, including the silhouette, monumental sculpture, heroic painting and classical film.

Walker’s recasting of the medium of the silhouette engages with a dense cultural history, exposing the racial undercurrents of an art form that has signified in radically different ways in different historical periods.⁴ Originally associated mainly with white, European bourgeoisie culture, it later became the emblematic graphic design form for artists of the Harlem Renaissance, a powerful expression of an emergent Black modernism, used on posters,

murals, dust jackets and in paintings. As Frank Mehring writes, the silhouette contributed to a 'new visual rhetoric that both affirmed African American cultural recognition and became complicit in racialized fantasies of modernism'.⁵ The silhouette also was employed in radically different political contexts. In the United States in the nineteenth century, for example, the silhouette was conceived both as a popular, democratising form, one that could serve as an index of the multi-ethnic society the United States was becoming, and as part of an exclusionary immigration policy: silhouette profiles played a major role in establishing a racialised quota system.⁶

In the work of Kara Walker, the medium of the silhouette is extended in yet another direction. Depicting the violence, perversion and faux-romance of the plantation South in wall-size panoramas, her art references and parodies racial stereotypes of the past, deploying representations of enslaved people, masters and mistresses in carnivalesque inversions. Scenes of grotesque couplings, mutilations and perversions dominate her images of the antebellum South, vignettes that conjoin the gruesome events described in slave narratives with the 'magnolias and moonlight' mythology of plantation life.

In the work of another artist I discuss in this chapter, Paul Miller, who performs under the stage name 'DJ Spooky, That Subliminal Kid', Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* is reimagined as a prototype for remix, DJ culture. Staged as a live performance, and also issued as a DVD, Miller's *Rebirth of a Nation* (2007) samples the images, intertitles and musical accompaniment of Griffith's film – which Miller calls the DNA of American cinema – to rethink the codes of racial imagery in mainstream narrative work.⁷ As Jesse Stewart writes,

In addition to providing a critique of the film's racism, *Rebirth* critically examines the effects of *The Birth of a Nation* on subsequent perceptions of race in America. Miller's use of gridlines, blueprints, and circuitry serve as visual metaphors for the ways in which the film's portrayals of racial and social hierarchies have been woven into the circuitry of the mediated American political landscape.⁸

In the heroic paintings of Kehinde Wiley, the third artist I consider in detail, the classical and Romantic traditions exemplified by the painters Jean-Louis David, Eugene Delacroix, Theodor Gericault and others are given a new accent. In Wiley's outsized compositions, Black men and women, long bracketed from view in classical painterly traditions, take centre stage, adopting the poses, props and personae of figures such as Napoleon and King Philip II of Spain, portrayed riding on horseback, sitting on thrones, or in grandiose settings. The shadow presence of Black labour, the economic platform on which the imperial societies celebrated in these paintings were built, is here brought into relief. Clothed in ordinary street garb, the subjects

of Wiley's paintings – young, athletic-looking Black men, pictured in heroic artistic poses that propped up images of white power in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – are a powerful riposte to the pictorial canon of triumphant white Europeans, as well as to the stereotypes of Black men that dominate contemporary media. As Andre Carrington writes, 'in light of the ways young black men are already subject to being perceived by others and the ways already we put ourselves on display, Wiley is fashioning a new space for black bodies to inhabit in order to remove them from their usual conditions of visibility'.⁹

The direct and indirect influence of *The Birth of a Nation* on the work of these contemporary anti-racist artists provides one of the key questions for this essay. All three artists make reference to the film: Miller engages directly with Griffith's work in his *Rebirth of a Nation*, whereas Walker refers to it as a primary influence on her work, specifically in terms of the 'Negress' persona she has adopted in her silhouette panoramas. Wiley is somewhat more indirect and allusive in his references to *The Birth of a Nation*; however, at least two of his paintings appear to quote from the film.

Viewing these works as dialogic encounters with the racist tradition crystallised in *The Birth of a Nation* provides a useful heuristic map of a chain of influences that extend from at least the eighteenth century. To begin with, Griffith's work can be seen as a project of pictorial dialogism: the extreme race imagery popular in the nineteenth-century US is given a twentieth-century iteration, translating fading traditions of minstrelsy, blackface and racial cartoons into the emotional language of film, with its close-ups, dramatic chases, cross-cutting and musical accompaniment.¹⁰ The potent vocabulary of film here becomes a vehicle of translation, converting the grotesque visual traditions of the nineteenth century into imagery of cinematic forcefulness and power. *The Birth of a Nation* can thus be understood as a hinge point between the imagery of the nineteenth century and contemporary cinema, or, to use another metaphor, a transformer, converting signals and codes from the past and projecting them into the present and future. Its influence can be seen throughout the history of the medium. Although it is seldom screened today, it has continued to serve as a shorthand reference and privileged intertext for works as different as *Apocalypse Now* (1979), with its 'Ride of the Valkyries' helicopter attack sequence – the music that served as the original score for the Klan ride in *The Birth of a Nation*; *Django Unchained* (2012), which quotes Griffith explicitly in its white-robed Klan raid sequence; and *BlacKkKlansman* (2018), where scenes from *The Birth of a Nation* are screened at a meeting of black activists. Many other films refer to the work as well, several of which simply quote scenes from the film as a gesture of acknowledgement, critique and, oftentimes, condemnation.

But it is possible to go in another direction. The founder of the Situationist movement, Guy DeBord, for example, outlined a possible form of *détournement* for *The Birth of a Nation*. In describing the act of *détournement* – ‘turning away’ or hijacking a work so that it expresses something very different than it did in its original form, he highlights Griffith’s work:

We can observe that *Birth of a Nation* is one of the most important films in the history of cinema because of its wealth of new contributions. On the other hand, it is a racist film and therefore absolutely does not merit being shown in its recent form. But its total prohibition could be seen as regrettable ... It would be better to *detourn* it as a whole, without necessarily even altering the montage, by adding a soundtrack.¹¹

In the work of Paul Miller, aka DJ Spooky, the first artist I consider here, *The Birth of a Nation* is cross-hatched with contemporary music culture in a way that is intended to interrogate, reframe and rewrite the imagery of the 1915 work. In *Rebirth of a Nation*, Miller applies the hip-hop aesthetic of the remix to the racial stereotypes of the original, performing an intensive visual and musical interpretation. Staged live in a number of venues between 2005 and 2007, and presented widely again in 2017, his DJ performance of *Rebirth of a Nation* involves recuts of the original film, superimpositions and mirror images (Figs 2.1 and 2.2), spread out across a three-screen array,

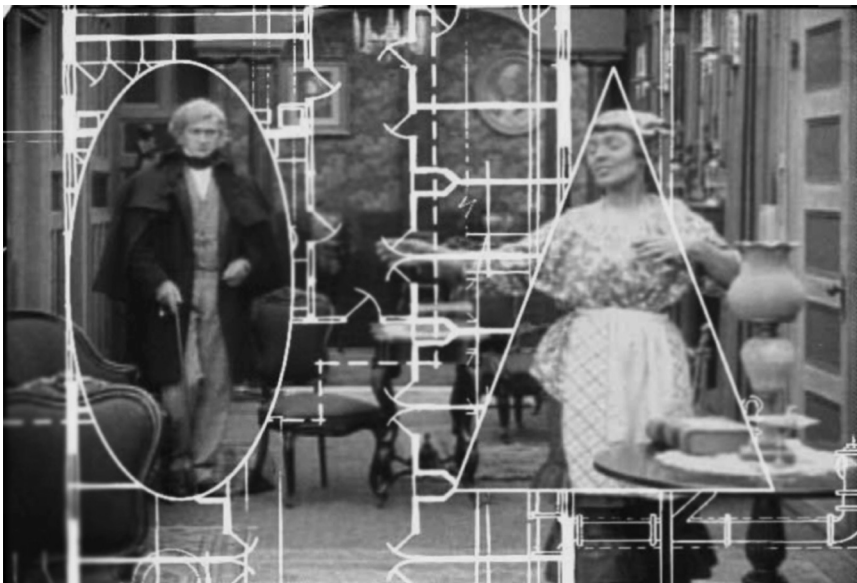


Figure 2.1 DJ Spooky, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 2007.

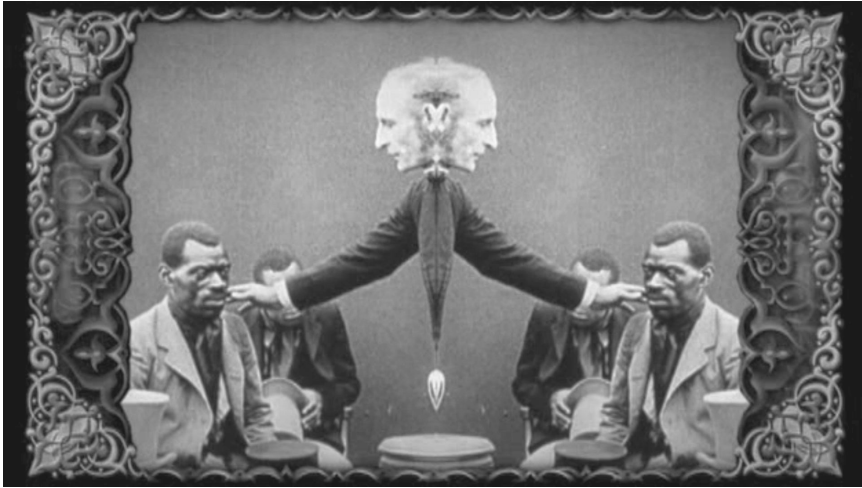


Figure 2.2 DJ Spooky, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 2007.

accompanied by dance and contemporary music, some of which Miller composed. Griffith's original film serves here as a kind of canvas, or better, what Miller calls a data field governed by specific codes, which he then subjects to the file transfer protocol of the remix.

Miller has described his practice as using film and music to open up a space for another image of America, another concept of race relations, a potential that he finds, paradoxically, in the cut-up, fragmentary, multiple story lines of Griffith's film.¹² *The Birth of a Nation*, for Miller, can be seen as the prototype for recut culture, the source code for the fragmentation and remixing of imagery, narrative and music that dominate remix practices. Emphasising form, underlining Griffith's use of close-ups, cross-cutting, and the orchestration of simultaneous dramatic lines, Miller acknowledges the importance of *The Birth of a Nation*, which he says forms the DNA of American film and, by extension, the genetic code for the culture of sampling. Calling his performance piece a 'digital exorcism', the mirror imagery, black-white reversals and superimpositions evoke, he writes, 'a parallel world where Griffith's film acts as a crucible for a vision of a different America.'¹³ In one scene, for example, Miller's montage cuts together the mounted members of the KKK seeming to salute marching Black soldiers.

I would like to compare Miller's complicated embrace and reimagining of *The Birth of a Nation* to the concept of 'affirmative sabotage' set forth by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an idea that has much in common with DeBord's practice of *détournement*, as well as with Henry Louis Gates Jr's analysis of the literary mode he calls signifying. Certain works of art and

philosophy, Spivak maintains, remain aesthetically and intellectually powerful despite the fact that they may be fraught with racist, sexist or imperialistic ideas and history. Through acts of ‘affirmative sabotage’, she argues, critics and artists can find ways to repurpose problematic or reactionary works for progressive use. Internalising the codes of the work, engaging fully with the discourse, it is possible to undercut and change the meaning:

I used the term ‘affirmative sabotage’ to gloss on the usual meaning of sabotage: the deliberate ruining of the master’s machine from the inside. Affirmative sabotage doesn’t just ruin; the idea is of entering the discourse that you are criticising fully, so that you can turn it around from inside. The only real and effective way you can sabotage something this way is when you are working intimately within it.¹⁴

The musicologist Kira Thurman, borrowing from Spivak, provides a concrete example of affirmative sabotage in the somewhat surprising enthusiasm of certain Black intellectuals and musicians for the operas and songs of the German composer, Richard Wagner. She argues that the African American appropriation of Wagner provides a different way of understanding his towering and controversial *oeuvre*. Wagner’s influence on Black artists was extensive. According to the music critic Alex Ross, W. E. B. Du Bois wove the climax of one of his stories, ‘Of the Coming of John’, around the opera *Lohengrin*; and the jazz musicians Donald Lambert and Charlie Parker quoted melodies from Wagner in their compositions.¹⁵ Another example of the appropriation and repurposing of Wagner by Black artists can be seen in the recent Michigan Opera Company staging of the fourth part of the Ring Cycle, entitled *Twilight: Gods*. The Black Detroit poet Marsha Music provided a vernacular, poetic introduction to each of the acts of the work, melding the violence of the contemporary political and historical moment with the desolation that befalls Valhalla in the opera. Summarising the concept of affirmative sabotage, Thurman says in a recent webcast:

Because the person knows the technology so well, they understand how to repurpose it, to make it function for their own needs and desires. It is possible for people to admire the machinery that they’re trying to change, a technology that might be as destructive to their being as it is beautiful ... Listening to Wagner meant something different for black folks than it did for white folks in the era of Jim Crow.¹⁶

The notions of affirmative sabotage and *détournement* provide a useful critical perspective on Miller’s repurposing of *The Birth of a Nation*. In his remake, the superimposition of grid lines, interior frames, lines of connection and force – what one writer calls the circuitry of race relations – creates a different picture of race in America.¹⁷ To gloss on Thurman, the machinery of American film, which is at once beautiful and destructive in

its production of images of blackness and whiteness, can be turned around, from the inside, by way of a deep absorption in its history and visual codes. As Miller says, 'What I'm trying to understand and interrogate with *Rebirth of a Nation* is whether race itself is a code that can be reconfigured. Is that something that we use in terms of contemporary art to codify and to lock down, so to speak, what is high art versus what is low culture?'¹⁸

In Kara Walker's work, the second artist I consider, stereotypes of Black enslaved people and the soft-focus southern mythology of plantation life are joined in carnivalesque tableaux dominated by the imagery of sexual transgression, abjection and mutilation. Repurposing the art of the silhouette from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century culture to express the extreme violence, degradation and sexual exploitation of the slaveholding past, Walker's cut-outs have been described as a fusion of the slave narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass with the 'magnolia and moonlight' nostalgia industry of the old South, done in the style of the Harlequin romance (Fig 2.3).¹⁹



Figure 2.3 Kara Walker, *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*, 1994. Cut paper on wall, 396.2 × 1524 cm. Installation view: 'My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love, Hammer Museum,' Los Angeles, 2008. Photo: Joshua White. Artwork © Kara Walker, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

Walker's recoding of a graphic tradition deeply linked to racial stereotype – at its inception, the silhouette was employed to buttress the claims of a hierarchy of racial 'types' in phrenology – attempts to create a new kind of interface between the history of Black America and white America. Forcing the imaginary, the erotic and the violent dimensions of this shared history into view, her silhouette panoramas, such as *The Battle of Atlanta: Being the Narrative of a Negress in the Flames of Desire – A Reconstruction*, open up a challenging and iconoclastic reading of the history of race slavery in America. What Miller sees as the circuitry of race relations is here presented as explicitly violent and explicitly erotic, a performative history where master and enslaved person, white and Black, young and old engage in acts of sexual congress and perversion, defecation and mutilation. The mutual implication of white and Black in the imaginative constructs of racism, the eroticism that she highlights as part of the Black as well as the white imaginary, is central in her work. Discussing some of her earliest panoramas, she says in an interview, 'I guess that's when I decided to offer up my sidelong glances: to be a slave just a little bit ... So I used this mythic, fictional kind of slave character to justify myself, to reinvent myself in some other situations.' She explicitly relates her persona of 'the Negress', who appears in the titles of several of her early panoramas, to *The Birth of a Nation*:

The Negress that I initially was referring to was out of Thomas Dixon, Jr.'s *The Clansman*. This is the great racist epic of the late nineteenth century, that *Birth of a Nation* was based on ... a tawny negress who is part secretary, part lover – this nefarious, dark vixen. She's manipulating this misguided white statesman, who wants to put blacks in higher offices and change the culture ... Could this icon of all that is wrong and sexual and vulgar be uplifted to the highest? My answer being: Yes, she would, she will.²⁰

Her work has been severely criticised by an older generation of Black artists and activists as virulently racist in its own right, an example of Black-on-Black racism that perpetuates the oppression of African Americans, stereotypical representations that, in the view of some, cannot be rehabilitated. One Black writer says that Walker 'consciously or unconsciously seems to be catering to the fantasies about blacks created by white supremacy and racism'.²¹ In 1998, a group of Black artists committed to the production of positive images petitioned the MacArthur Foundation to rescind its award to Walker, who, at twenty-eight, was one of its youngest recipients.

Drawing a contrary message from Walker's work, Henry Louis Gates, Jr celebrates her plantation murals as powerfully anti-racist, an example of 'double voicing', of 'repetition as reversal'. Defending her practice in terms of a long-standing African American tradition of 'signifying', Gates describes her project in terms that can be directly compared to the subversive gesture

of DeBord's *détournement*, or Spivak's argument for affirmative sabotage. In '“The Blackness of Blackness,” A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey', Gates defined signifying as a specifically African and African American technique for turning a work around from the inside, 'repeating and simultaneously reversing in one deft discursive act'.²² For Gates, the value of parody, of signifying, for African American culture is that it creates a space within mainstream culture for Black expression. Walker's work, he writes, is an example of 'anti-racist parody': 'Only the visually illiterate could mistake this post-modern critique as a realistic portrayal, and that is the difference between the racist original and the post-modern, anti-racist parody that characterizes this genre.'²³

In her silhouette panoramas and in her later, monumental sculpture nicknamed 'Sugar Baby', Walker joins together two different framings of the American past, explicitly conjoining the dominant, white narrative of US history – with its doctrine of ever-expanding horizons of freedom and opportunity – with the story of the Black slave experience, a narrative that has traditionally been understood as separate, an unfortunate minor strand. The institution of slavery, in Walker's work, serves as the fold in the page that brings the two stories together. I recall the powerful point of the Black historian Nathan Huggins, insisting that we recognise the interpenetration of Black history and white history. Huggins underlined the need for a radical rethinking of the American past, the need to work against the myth that 'American history – its institutions, its values, its people – were one thing and that racial slavery and oppression were a different story'.²⁴ In articulating these stories together, Kara Walker offers a potent visual take on Huggins's eloquent appeal: 'There can be no white history or black history, nor can there be an integrated history which does not begin to comprehend that slavery and freedom, white and black, are joined at the hip.'²⁵

Her recent project, a monumental sculpture entitled *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* (2014), moves away from her trademark use of silhouettes to an entirely different medium and mode of expression. A work of public art, 'Sugar Baby' is an enormous, thirty-five-foot-tall sphinx-like sculpture of a stylised plantation-era Black woman (Fig 2.4). Made of white sugar over a rigid frame, the crouching, bare-breasted female figure was built in the abandoned Domino Sugar factory in Williamsburg, New York a few months before the factory was torn down for redevelopment. Domino is one of the largest sugar producers in the world. Originating in the slave era, it continues to dominate the US industry in the present day.



Figure 2.4 Kara Walker, *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*, 2014. Polystyrene foam, sugar, approx. 10.8 × 7.9 × 23m. Installation view: Domino Sugar Refinery, A project of Creative Time, Brooklyn, NY, 2014. Photo: Jason Wyche. Artwork © Kara Walker, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

The sculpture engages a number of contradictions: the white sugar used to represent Black slavery and the exploitation of Black workers – as one writer says, it takes a lot of pressure to turn brown into white; the monumental size of the sculpture vs the elaborate and delicate sugar confections called ‘subtleties’ that inspired it – a fashion among the royal and elite populations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the sickeningly sweet smell of molasses that permeated the Domino plant against the extreme physical suffering of the slave population who produced the syrup.

One writer reports that when Walker first visited the plant in 2013, the whole place stank of molasses, the history would not dry: when it rained, the plant would drip molasses.²⁶ Sugar cultivation was particularly dangerous and oppressive. Once an enslaved person started work on a sugar plantation, his or her future life expectancy from that point shrank to eight or nine years. The extreme cruelties involved in the harvesting and

processing of sugar cane led one eighteenth-century missionary to speculate that 'inevitably blood was in the sugar'.²⁷ As Walker says, 'Basically, it was blood sugar. Like we talk about blood diamonds today, there were pamphlets saying this sugar has blood on its hands.' To make the sugar, the cane had to be fed into large mills by hand: 'Slaves lost hands, arms, limbs and lives.'²⁸

In this sculpture, Walker conjures a 'forgotten' cultural and economic history through a combination of visual, somatic and olfactory signs, using exaggeration to bring into view – and into wider sensory awareness – the interpenetration of Black and white histories in the context of ordinary, daily life, a context that is nonetheless suffused with the violence of the past. Although the sculpture had a life span of only two months – the 'Sugar Baby' and the figures surrounding it were designed to be ephemeral – its oneiric condensation of signs and meanings has given it a potent afterlife.

The interpretative, critical work the sculpture has generated is extensive. One writer argues that it speaks not simply to the cruelties of the historical past, but importantly to a continuing history of exploitation by the sugar industry, an industry that persists in causing enormous harm to the health of minorities and the poor – the target of the industry's advertising.²⁹ On the opposite end of the critical spectrum, another author has written that the blank eyes of the sculpture are a key to its symbolic meaning, that the eyes seem to be looking into the future, as if the sphinx-like figure were peering into a future in which the nation would no longer be dominated by the white race, and no longer defined by colour.

Although I would hesitate to assert such an optimistic reading, the association of the 'Sugar Baby' with images of nation brings into view another iconography – the long-standing tradition of representing nation in the form of a female icon. Exemplified by the figures of Britannia, Germania, Marianne and Columbia, this form of national stereotype is sometimes called 'national personification'.

In her essay, 'Body Language: The Somatics of Nationalism in Tamil India', Sumathi Ramaswamy discusses national personification in the Tamil regions of India as a form of 'somatic nationhood'. She argues that the female figure in Tamil culture is not simply the idealised female body taken as a whole; rather, it is specific parts and critical substances that are emphasised, accentuated so as 'to build the national body politic'. She isolates the imagery of the womb, milk, blood and tears as a privileged rhetoric of nationhood communicated through the female icon, which she describes as 'somatic technologies of nation building and consolidation'.³⁰

In the defamiliarised perspective that Walker provides in her sculpture, the breasts, buttocks and vulva of the 'Sugar Baby' are exaggerated to the point of aggrandisement, perhaps suggesting a new image of nationhood,

in which the vocabulary of racial stereotype is converted to a new set of themes. The body parts and substances that had once been the material of grotesque caricature in graphic art and performance are here celebrated, an iconic and ironic image, perhaps, of a new national personification, in which, as Nathan Huggins says, the stories of Black and white, slave and free, are 'joined at the hip'.³¹

The art of Kehinde Wiley, the third artist I consider, both critiques and celebrates another dimension of Black life in America. His monumental images of young Black men, posed as the heroes of classical and Romantic painting, serve as a powerful comment on the image of the Black body in Western culture. Early in his career, Wiley was struck by the seeming paradox of invisibility and hyper-visibility that attaches to the Black male body: invisible in fields of mainstream cultural prestige, but hyper-visible in the media genres of the news report, the wanted poster, the rap video, and the sports broadcast. His encounter with the portrait of a young Black man on a wanted poster provided inspiration:

It made me think about portraiture in a radically different way: I began thinking about this mug shot itself as portraiture in a very perverse sense, a type of marking, a recording of one's place in the world in time ... positioned in a way that is totally outside their control, shut down and relegated to those in power, whereas those [in classical paintings] ... were positioning themselves in states of stately grace and self-possession.³²

By painting young Black men in heroic poses copied from the art history pantheon – including equestrian portraits and figures on thrones – Wiley constructed a parallel art historical world, filling in the absent Black presence in historic images of power and prestige.

Wiley was attracted to classical and Romantic painting from an early age, and at one point asked himself why no men or women of colour were represented in this tradition except as accompaniments to the highlighted white figures that were the centrepiece of the paintings. There are, of course, many examples of Blacks in the roles of servants and attendants; occasionally, Blacks are also featured in portraits, a topic that has recently received close critical attention. Famous paintings by artists including Edouard Manet, such as *Olympia* (1863) and *Children in the Tuileries Gardens* (1861–62), Theodore Gericault, with *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–19), and Eugene Delacroix, with *Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi* (1826–27) and *Portrait of a Woman in a Blue Turban* (1827), have led to active research into the identities of the Black models, generally relegated to the background or the margins, and the roles they played in the culture of the period.³³ Wiley realised that the paintings he studied used Black bodies principally as enhancements, ornaments for the white subjects that were the centre of the works,

a visual hierarchy that extended to the colours of the painting, the composition and the general *mise-en-scène*.

In an attempt to reverse this hierarchy, Wiley selected models from 'the street', and cast them as the triumphal figures of classical painting. For the heroic series, for example, he would approach men he saw in the neighbourhood, invite them into his studio, and ask them to look through art history books and select the pose and the persona that they liked. What emerges is a deeply historical reading of the traditions of high art and vernacular culture, prestige and exclusion, white and Black.

The ornamental designs he paints – the arabesques of floral patterns that encircle the figures – are part of the mode of address of these paintings. The 'power poses' of the males on horseback are set within a delicate tracery of vines, flowers and filigree patterns. Commentators have described this as a rethinking of the 'ornamentalism' of the Black body in painting and culture, but to my mind it signifies the constructedness of these images of male performance, their self-awareness of the gestural and performative codes they are re-enacting.³⁴ Michael Jackson, for example – a master of performative identities – was painted by Wiley on horseback – an image that is ten feet high – in a pose borrowed from a Rubens portrait of King Phillip II of Spain.

In the classical tradition, the poses, costumes – the almost gaudy self-presentation of the heroic male – are aspects of a constructed space that signifies and reinforces power. The world of aristocratic privilege and domination is crystallised in the monumental scale of the works, and in the visual assertion of authority through props and other visual devices. In Wiley's paintings, however, the Black body, a body that is ordinarily under erasure of one kind or another, commands centre stage, making visible a story of invisibility – the multitudes of servants, slaves and workers that provided the support and the engine of the imperial economies that are celebrated in these works.

Wiley's major innovation can thus be seen as a confrontation of two systems of stereotype, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century heroic tradition of white males in postures of dominance, astride horses, posing amid the trappings of luxury, set against the stereotypes of Black males in twenty-first-century popular media culture. His triumphal images of young Black men cloaked in the iconography of power has led to an almost unprecedented level of success: he has painted a celebrated portrait of Barack Obama that hangs in a place of honour in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington DC (Obama asked Wiley to 'take it down a notch', to mute the heroic treatment to some degree). He has also painted numerous hip-hop artists, including LL Cool J and Ice T, who have attained a level of cultural prominence that is equivalent to the popes, cardinals and noblemen who populate the canvases of Titian and David.

With this turn to celebrity portraits, however, the tension that energised his early work – men from the street portrayed in a pictorial language previously reserved for European nobility – has been replaced with a different kind of subject and theme, in which the penumbra of fame eclipses earlier themes of racial exclusion. Whereas the projects of Kara Walker and Paul Miller are directly subversive in their unpacking of the visual lexicon of race stereotype in the US, Wiley's *oeuvre*, especially in his engagement with Black subjects at the pinnacle of power and influence, seems to have a different orientation. Indeed, he has been critiqued for being complicit with the very ideologies of wealth, capitalist excess, patriarchal dominance and class hierarchy that he ostensibly exposes in his paintings.³⁵ As Wiley has commented, 'Let's face it. I make really high-priced luxury goods for wealthy consumers.'³⁶

Wiley's complex dialogue with the history of race and representation take on a very different accent, however, in a series of paintings entitled 'Down'. In these paintings of horizontal male figures, Wiley's work is suffused with a sense of present-day crisis – cloaked in the disguise of the past. Here, Wiley moves from the triumphal portraits of the heroic series to the poses and imagery of pathos, depicting attractive young men stretched out lengthwise, re-enacting traditional subjects of painting, exemplified in his *Lamentation over the Body of the Dead Christ* (2008) or the *Christian Martyr Tarcisius* (2008) or *A Dead Soldier* (2008). The vulnerability of the figures is striking, as are their contemporary reference points. Amid a plague of race violence in America, particularly the recent epidemic of police killings of young Black men, Wiley telescopes the now familiar newspaper and broadcast images of dying and dead Black males into classical images of pathos. The long history of racial violence is evoked here. Combined with the subjects' sometimes seductive poses, violence and tragedy is somehow, paradoxically, joined to its opposite, to a sense of beauty.

Two of his paintings directly evoke *The Birth of a Nation*. One of his images from the 'Down' series, *Sleep* (2008), portrays a young Black man lying supine on white drapery, one arm thrown out, an image that I read as an explicit quotation of Griffith's infamous image of the dead Gus, the persecuted Black man lynched by the Klan in *The Birth of a Nation*, his body thrown onto a porch with skull and crossbones and KKK initials affixed to his corpse (Fig 2.5). Similarly, Wiley's rearing cavalier portrait of *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (2005), with a Black man in camouflage pants atop the horse, appropriates the classic work by David while also evoking the release poster for *The Birth of a Nation*, depicting a hooded Klansman on a rearing horse. Wiley, in the 'Down' series, engages in a complex triangulation: images of contemporary Black men are set within two dramatically antagonistic pictorial genres – one, the classical museal tradition of images and sculptures of tragic death and languid repose, the other the violent and

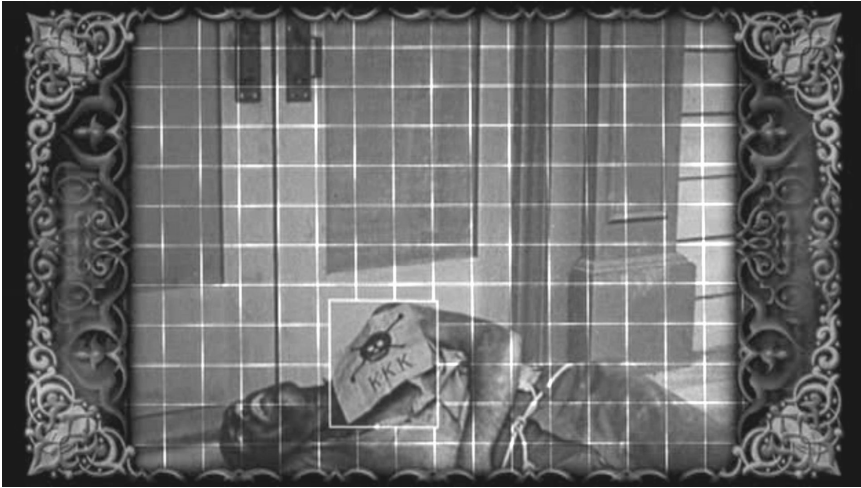


Figure 2.5 DJ Spooky, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 2007.

increasingly familiar genre of Black men murdered on the streets. It should come as no surprise that *The Birth of a Nation* serves as the connection point that brings these opposed currents together.

Conclusion

In a period of American history once again dominated by scenes of racial violence, the vision of white supremacy celebrated in *The Birth of a Nation* strikes an almost uncannily familiar chord. Against the cultural amnesia that sees the current historical moment as an aberration, a detour away from the main through-line of the American story, the Black artists I treat in this study illuminate this history of racial violence, both actual and symbolic, insisting on the continuity of the past with the present, and drawing out the hidden networks that link the artistic forms of the dominant culture to the fraught history of Black experience in the US. In Walker's silhouettes and monumental sculpture 'Sugar Baby', in Wiley's wall-sized paintings of both power and pathos, and in the hip-hop deconstructions of Miller, the history of white dominance, perpetuated and reinforced in culturally prestigious forms, takes on a different character.

Appropriating the aesthetic systems of the past, turning them around from the inside in acts of affirmative sabotage, Walker, Wiley and Miller convert the symbolic signals of both high art and popular culture to a very different message. Central to this engagement, I have argued, is the repurposing of

stereotype, the site of greatest imaginative condensation. The racial stereotypes of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries are confronted in these works, not as something to be censored or bracketed from critical scrutiny, but rather as a force field that activates a particularly charged form of historical thinking, an experience of history as seen ‘from below’ – from the perspective of the enslaved girl, the Black guy on the street, and the hip-hop artist. Engaging history from a surprising angle of attack, the work of these three artists brings to the surface the undercurrents of a visual culture that both excludes and stereotypes Black lives, probing the historical past while calling attention to the stagecraft that supports what may well be an emerging culture of prestige.

Notes

- 1 The ‘Darktown’ series, by the famous and much-loved publishers Currier and Ives, provides a flamboyant example of this type of imagery. Although the Darktown series was only a small part of Currier and Ives’ massive output, it was one of their most popular series, with one print reputed to have sold 72,000 copies. In this series, which depicts freed slaves ‘up from slavery’ who have moved north, Blacks are depicted in the full panoply of stereotypical poses and attitudes. Not only are the images offensively racist, but the snippets of ‘dialogue’ written underneath convey an intensely mocking attitude. Blacks are depicted as infantile, slow, deformed and grossly defined by appetite.

What is perhaps even more surprising is that Currier and Ives, according to one source, was pro-abolition, and very much in favour of the northern cause. John Brown, the radical abolitionist whose raid on Harper’s Ferry catalysed the abolitionist cause, was portrayed as a martyr in a famous Currier and Ives print.

A series of cartoons published in *Harper’s*, from an earlier period during the Civil War, provides another example. *Harper’s* was one of the principal northern magazines, and had many frontline correspondents reporting from the northern battlefronts. A generally liberal magazine, its cartoons are less extreme than the Currier and Ives’ Darktown series, although still trading in stereotype. The racial animus that took hold during Reconstruction appears to be marked by increasingly flamboyant stereotypes. The use of stereotype, moreover, was not limited to African American subjects – Irish, Chinese and other ethnicities were similarly treated in the visual culture of the period.

- 2 A complex and challenging engagement with stereotype can also be found in the film *Bamboozled* (2000) by Spike Lee, and in the work of Betye Saar, in particular the piece entitled ‘The Liberation of Aunt Jemima’. Recently, a museum of stereotype, the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, opened at Ferris State University in Michigan.
- 3 G. DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

- 4 For a fascinating overview of the silhouette in American culture, see Asma Naem, *Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).
- 5 F. Mehring, 'How Silhouettes became "Black": The Visual Rhetoric of the Harlem Renaissance', *Terraamericanart.org* (December 2019), 182–3.
- 6 Mehring, 'How Silhouettes became "Black"', 190.
- 7 DJ Spooky, *Rebirth of a Nation* (DVD, 2008).
- 8 J. Stewart, 'DJ Spooky and the Politics of Afro-Postmodernism', *Black Music Research Journal*, 30:2 (2010), 352.
- 9 A. M. Carrington, 'The Cultural Politics of Worldmaking Practice: Kehinde Wiley's Cosmopolitanism', *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, 8:2 (2015), 249.
- 10 As Todd Boyd has said,

If you plant seeds, what grows from those seeds is going to be based on what you planted ... *Birth of a Nation* ... is at the foundation of what would become Hollywood. So if this is at the root, then it shouldn't be a surprise when in the last few weeks, there have been discussions about the lack of people of color being nominated for the Oscars. In my mind, this is very much a branch that grew out of the tree that was *Birth of a Nation*.

Todd Boyd, '100 Years Later, What's the Legacy of Birth of a Nation?' *Code Switch*, NPR (8 February 2015), www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/02/08/383279630/100-years-later-whats-the-legacy-of-birth-of-a-nation (accessed 7 December 2020).

- 11 Guy Debord, 'Methods of Détournement', *Les Lèvres Nues*, 8 (1956); Joan Hawkins brings DeBord's interest in *The Birth of a Nation* to light in 'DJ Spooky's "Re-Birth of a Nation"'. Her excellent short essay is published in *The Ryder, Movies for Moderns*, www.theryder.com/magazine/feature-articles/dj-spookys-re-birth-of-a-nation (accessed 25 November 2020).
- 12 The film's fragmentary nature was one of the things that attracted Miller to the work in the first place. As he says in an interview: 'It was Griffith who made the "cut-up" film part of the popular culture ... Griffith created stories out of fragments way before it actually was a part of the basic structure of film and media.' See Jesse Stewart, 'DJ Spooky and the Politics of Afro-Postmodernism'.
- 13 K. Gewertz, 'Birth of a Nation – The Remix', *Harvard Gazette* (17 March 2005).
- 14 B. Evans and G. Chakravorty Spivak, 'When Law is not Justice', *The Stone* (13 July 2016).
- 15 A. Ross, *Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2020).
- 16 A. Ross and K. Thurman, 'Alex Ross and Kira Thurman on Afro-Wagnerism', *Popular Music Books in Process Series* (2020).
- 17 Stewart, 'DJ Spooky and the Politics of Afro-Postmodernism', 352.
- 18 Stewart, 'DJ Spooky and the Politics of Afro-Postmodernism', 353–54.
- 19 M. Coriss and R. Hobbs, 'Reading Black Through White: Kara Walker and the Question of Racial Stereotyping. A Discussion between Michael Coriss and Robert Hobbs', *Art History*, 26:3 (2003). Reprinted in G. Perry (ed.),

Differences and Excess in Contemporary Art: The Visibility of Women's Practices (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 104–23.

- 20 K. Walker, 'The Melodrama of *Gone with the Wind*', Public Broadcasting Service, *Art in the Twenty-first Century* (2003), www.pbs.org/art21/artists/walker/clip2.html. (It should be noted that Dixon's *The Clansman* was published in 1905.) The complete quote is here:

The Negress that I initially was referring to was out of Thomas Dixon, Jr.'s *The Clansman*. This is the great racist epic of the late nineteenth century, that *Birth of a Nation* was based on. And there's a figure in there, who's described as a tawny negress who is part secretary, part lover – this nefarious, dark vixen. She's manipulating this misguided white statesman, who wants to put blacks in higher offices and change the culture – and with this tawny negress, with this vixen, be the arbiter of our social norms. Could this icon of all that is wrong and sexual and vulgar be uplifted to the highest? My answer being: Yes, she would, she will.

Kara Walker, interview, *art21*, <https://art21.org/read/kara-walker-the-melodrama-of-gone-with-the-wind> (accessed 7 December 2020).

- 21 H. Pindell, quoted in Coriss and Hobbs, 'Reading Black Through White', 430.
 22 H. L. Gates Jr, 'The "Blackness of Blackness": A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey', *Critical Inquiry*, 9:4 (June 1983), 686.
 23 H. L. Gates, in Coriss and Hobbs, 'Reading Black Through White', 118.
 24 N. Huggins, 'The Deforming Mirror of Truth: Slavery and the Master Narrative of American History', *Radical History Review*, Winter (1991), 43.
 25 Ibid.
 26 D. St. Felix, 'Kara Walker's Next Act', *New York Magazine* (17 April 2017), www.vulture.com/2017/04/kara-walker-after-a-subtlety.html.
 27 Ibid.
 28 A. Cornish, 'Artist Kara Walker Draws Us Into Bitter History With Something Sweet', Interview with Audie Cornish, NPR (16 May 2014).
 29 N. Hopkinson, 'A Mouth is Always Muzzled: Six Dissidents, Five Continents, and the Art of Resistance', *The New Press* (February 2016).
 30 S. Ramaswamy, 'Body Language: The Somatics of Nationalism in Tamil India', in Insa Hartel and Ingrid Schade (eds), *The Body and Representation* (Berlin: Springer Science and Business Media, 2013), p. 190.
 31 Huggins, 'The Deforming Mirror of Truth', 39.
 32 E. Tsai, *Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic* (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum) (Catalogue for the exhibition 'Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic', Brooklyn Museum, 2015).
 33 See the wide-ranging and perceptive essay by Andre M. Carrington:

Black bodies occupied the margins of paintings with beautiful and elevated white subjects at the center, reiterating the black presence in the lives of slaveholders as status symbols. Many of these exotic figures were distinguished visually with turbans, jewelry, and other lavish costumes that signaled their function as representations of their owners' worldliness.

34 Carrington, 'The Cultural Politics of Worldmaking Practice'.

35 Jerome Weeks puts this succinctly:

One shouldn't overlook that Wiley's title 'A New Republic' – and the selection of pieces on display – tend to give an egalitarian gloss to a body of work that also includes pop-celebrity worship. The only megastar portrayed in this show is Michael Jackson – in a strangely stiff painting, 'Equestrian Portrait of Philip II.' But courtesy of a VH1 commission, Wiley lived up to his Renaissance predecessors in portraying our Medicis and Borgias of today: rappers such as Ice-T, Grandmaster Flash, LL Cool J and Big Daddy Kane.

<http://artandseek.net/2015/09/21/kehinde-wiley-at-the-modern-adding-color-to-our-cultural-history/#sthash.wnAwq8dr.dpuf> (accessed 5 December 2020).

36 Tsai, *Kehinde Wiley*.

References

- Boyd, Todd, '100 Years Later, What's the Legacy of Birth of a Nation?' *Code Switch*, NPR (8 February 2015), www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/02/08/383279630/100-years-later-whats-the-legacy-of-birth-of-a-nation (accessed 7 December 2020).
- Carrington, Andre M., 'The Cultural Politics of Worldmaking Practice: Kehinde Wiley's Cosmopolitanism', *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, 8:2 (2015), 245–57, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2015.1027325> (accessed 5 December 2020).
- Coriss, Michael and Robert Hobbs, 'Reading Black Through White: Kara Walker and the Question of Racial Stereotyping. A Discussion between Michael Coriss and Robert Hobbs', *Art History*, 26:3 (2003). Reprinted in Gill Perry (ed.), *Differences and Excess in Contemporary Art: The Visibility of Women's Practices* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 104–23.
- Cornish, Audie, 'Artist Kara Walker Draws Us Into Bitter History With Something Sweet', Interview with Audie Cornish, NPR (16 May 2014), www.npr.org/2014/05/16/313017716/artist-kara-walker-draws-us-into-bitter-history-with-something-sweet (accessed 7 December 2020).
- Debord, Guy, 'Methods of Détournement', *Les Lèvres Nues*, 8 (1956).
- Evans, Brad and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'When Law is not Justice', *The Stone* (13 July 2016), www.nytimes.com/2016/07/13/opinion/when-law-is-not-justice.html (accessed 4 December 2020).
- Gates, Henry Louis Jr, 'The "Blackness of Blackness": A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey', *Critical Inquiry*, 9:4 (June 1983), 685–723.
- Gewertz, Ken, 'Birth of a Nation – The Remix', *Harvard Gazette* (17 March 2005), <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2005/03/birth-of-a-nation-the-remix/> (accessed 8 December 2020).
- Hawkins, Joan, 'DJ Spooky's "Re-Birth of a Nation"', *The Ryder, Movies for Moderns* (Bloomington, IN: The Ryder Magazine and Film Series, 2017),

- pp. 18–22, www.theryder.com/magazine/feature-articles/dj-spookys-re-birth-of-a-nation (accessed 25 November 2020).
- Hopkinson, Nathalie, 'A Mouth is Always Muzzled: Six Dissidents, Five Continents, and the Art of Resistance', *The New Press* (February 2016), <https://longreads.com/2018/02/27/kara-walkers-subtlety/> (accessed 5 December 2020).
- Huggins, Nathan, 'The Deforming Mirror of Truth: Slavery and the Master Narrative of American History', *Radical History Review*, Winter (1991), 25–59.
- Mehring, Frank, 'How Silhouettes became "Black": The Visual Rhetoric of the Harlem Renaissance', *Terraamericanart.org*, December (2019), 180–216, www.terraamericanart.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/06_Frank_Mehring_How_Silhouettes_Became_Black_Terra_Essays_03_Circulation_20171.pdf (accessed 1 December 2020).
- Naem, Asma, *Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).
- Ramaswamy, Sumathi, 'Body Language: The Somatics of Nationalism in Tamil India', in Insa Hartel and Ingrid Schade (eds), *The Body and Representation* (Berlin: Springer Science and Business Media, 2013), pp. 189–200.
- Ross, Alex, *Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2020).
- Ross, Alex and Kira Thurman, 'Alex Ross and Kira Thurman on Afro-Wagnerism', *Popular Music Books in Process Series* (2020), www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVA862NDiD4&fbclid=IwAR0o8OVkPy2Q_edtCn0hmWXVA2C_B_iMu9TrXFSDCuY-PvIW7qSF9_mbrSswww.youtube.com/watch?v=IVA862NDiD4.
- Shaw, Gwendolyn DuBois, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
- Spooky, DJ, *Rebirth of a Nation* (DVD, 2008).
- St. Felix, Doreen, 'Kara Walker's Next Act', *New York Magazine* (17 April 2017), www.vulture.com/2017/04/kara-walker-after-a-subtlety.html (accessed 4 December 2020).
- Stewart, Jesse, 'DJ Spooky and the Politics of Afro-Postmodernism', *Black Music Research Journal*, 30:2 (2010), 337–61.
- Tsai, Eugenie, *Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic* (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum) (Catalogue for the exhibition 'Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic', Brooklyn Museum, 2015).
- Walker, Kara, 'The Melodrama of *Gone with the Wind*', Public Broadcasting Service, *Art in the Twenty-first Century* (2003), www.pbs.org/art21/artists/walker/clip2.html (accessed 7 December 2020).
- Weeks, Jerome, 'Kehinde Wiley at the Modern: Injecting Color into our Cultural History', KERA FM, *Art and Seek* (21 September 2015), <https://artandseek.org/2015/09/21/kehinde-wiley-at-the-modern-adding-color-to-our-cultural-history/> (accessed 5 December 2020).