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Dark Water: Rememory, Biopower, and Black Feminist Art

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Rememory, Biopower, and Black Feminist Art

Stephanie Troutman & Brenna Johnson

Abstract

What does water mean to contemporary society today? This paper is interested in water and race; Blackness specifically, wherein the Middle Passage (Mid-Atlantic Slave Trade) marks the beginning of a fraught and complex relationship between African-Americans and water...typified many might argue by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath in 2005. This article looks backward at water's ability to destroy and to create through lenses focused on race and art: something akin to water as a symbol of America's complicated relationship with race. Using cultural texts such as art and film this piece works to unsettle the intimate connections of power, gender, and sexuality and offer alternative cartographies of empowerment and survival with regard to racialization and water.

Introduction

...the main character in the drama of Hurricane Katrina was water. Water is fluid; strong and flexible, it can cause great destruction and withstand great challenges. In Eastern spiritual traditions, the strength and fluidity of water is revered. A rock may crumble, a tree may fall, but water will become one with the wave. Water can also flush out hidden debris, and clear out the dirt that soils personal and collective histories. (C. Marzo, 2006)

What does water mean to contemporary society today? From the Dakota Ac-

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cess Pipeline—a land dispute between the government and the water protectors, emanating from the current political regime’s disavowal of global warming and climate change coupled with corporate avarice that would mine oil at the expense of indigenous people and their legally protected lands, to the crisis of lead poisoned water in minority/predominantly Black communities in Flint, Michigan (...because Flint hasn’t seen enough human denigration over the past several decades) communities, to the 2016 film *Moana*, wherein corporate media giant Disney attempts to deploy its conscious take on Hawaiian culture to tell kids that “water is life,” water is (rightfully) at the epicenter of many global concerns and social issues. Water is indeed life and without it humanity would perish; from a religions symbolic standpoint, water holds the power to cleanse and purify.

This article, however, is interested in water and race; Blackness specifically, wherein the Middle Passage (Mid-Atlantic Slave Trade) marks the beginning of a fraught and complex relationship between African-Americans and water...typified many might argue by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath in 2005. This paper looks backward at water’s ability to destroy and to create through lenses focused on race and art: something akin to water as a symbol of America’s complicated relationship with race. Remembering, in the Morrisonian (*Beloved*, 1987) sense of the word—as the process of complex reflection or returning to memories in ways that affect the experience of the present—illuminates Hurricane Katrina’s powerful revelation of conditions governing the continued marginalization of the Black body. In thinking about representations of Hurricane Katrina, we have products like the film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, that offer misery and suffering packaged uncritically as victory over circumstance with no political imagination for challenging the national conditions that devalue Black lives. If we allow our rememories to transport us further back, before and beyond Katrina, to the Middle Passage, the last leg of the slave trade that traveled across the Atlantic Ocean from West Africa to the New World, a history of violence and slavery emerged from this crossing, which led to the birth of race-based subordination in the United States. Today this history is inscribed on our bodies consciously and unconsciously and Tom Feelings (1995) in *The Middle Passage: White Ships Black Cargo* calls this “race memory” a concept that connects to Toni Morrison’s “rememory.” *Race memory* reaffirms the belief that “bodies do not exist outside of history, for it is produced in and through it” (Grosz, 1994, p. 148). Grosz suggests our bodies are inscribed on and perform history, which means our lived experience is complicated by past historical events. This inquiry, therefore, will focus on the productivity of history and its effects on recent (Katrina and post-Katrina era) experience through the legacies of colonization. Using cultural texts such as art and film I hope unsettle the intimate connections of power, gender, and sexuality and offer alternative cartographies of empowerment and survival with regard to racialization and water.

Here I revisit and investigate the film *Daughters of the Dust* (1992) by Julie Dash (recently proliferated by Beyonce’s 2016 multimedia production *Lemonade*)

and the artwork of contemporary artist Kara Walker. Both artists, dash and Walker, use Black feminist formations to explore the antebellum South through different lenses based on their own unique agenda. Dash depicts the Peasant family who is transition—negotiating the scars of the past with present and future, while Walker’s work reinvents satirical moments through installation and painting that explore the exchange of power within the master/slave dichotomy. Kara Walker and Julie Dash take up historical moments and endow them with the language of race, gender, and history via artistic representations that extend concepts of power as determined by Foucault. It is necessary to outline several key ideas from Foucault’s seminal texts, as critical theory helps to disaggregate and understand the entanglements of power relations around race and water enmeshed in these texts.

Discipline & Punish (1977) is Foucault’s detailed genealogy of the ways in which the body became the index of the soul, the bearer of habitus—who you are can be read through how you behave, which is enacted/performed by the body. This idea is re-traced by Foucault against the backdrop of the history of tortures and bodily responses to such torture, as the responsibility of the individuals within a given society. Particularly, Foucault examines the shift (via what he terms “technologies of the self”) of the human capacity to endure punishment and internalize and almost embrace the self-inflicted subjugation implied by self-governance, which the new torture/punishment, known as ‘discipline’ demands. Particularly, these ideas look further into notions of agency and power through the body as indicator of habitus, and as conduit for the ‘technologies of the self’ that continue to re-inscribe themselves in, on, and through the skin. These powerful social behaviors and the subject positions produced therein, become complicated even further when Foucault begins to introduce race through biopower.

In *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France 1975-1976* (1997) Foucault outlines the historical evolution of subjugation through a network of power relations. For Foucault, subjugation does not have one single starting point rather it’s a multiplicity that needs to be studied as “relations of force that intersect, refer to one another, converge, or on the contrary, come into contact and strive to negate one another” (p. 266). These “relations of force” are essentially historical-political discourses that carry some claim of truth, which are used as a weapon to control the individual in society. This weapon, named by Foucault as *biopower*, is the development and understanding of race as a category that can be placed into a hierarchy.

Foucault (*The History of Sexuality, Volume I*) goes on to discuss how the current utility of race—in, on, and through the body, as a means of shoring up political power, began to take on new iterations during the second-half of the nineteenth century, though of course race and difference pre-date this—hence the subject of Walker and Dash’s work, as previously described. However, Foucault discusses his mapping of race (and demography) in relation to sexuality stating, “racism took shape...and it was then that a whole politics of settlement, family, marriage, education, social

hierarchy, and property, accompanied by a long series of permanent interventions at the level of the body, conduct, and everyday life, received their color and their justification from the mythical concern with protecting the purity of the blood and ensuring the triumph of the race” (1978; p.149). Recognizing ‘race’ a marker of difference is not only obvious, but almost pointless without consideration of the multiple functions and material consequences (then and now) that are created by and continue to work along racial formations. According to Foucault, “bio-power” can and does produce a “hierarchy of race” can subdivide humanity into good and bad categories—creating binaries, but more importantly a number of configurations within these very binaries.

The configurations between established binaries and divisions along power-lines are what is at play—and what is at stake in the artworks by Kara Walker and Julie Dash that are theorized in this paper. By extending Foucault’s concepts of power and technology combined with Morrisonian rememory, these works culminate as an insurrection of subjugated knowledges that restructure history and embodied experience. Furthermore, an extension of Foucault paired with rememory as explored through these Black feminist artworks offer different ways to conceptualize historic understandings of racialized survival whose unspoken presence lives with and continues to unfold around and within us. Dash captures the essence of what it means to survive and what survival entails; Walker reinvents survival with historically missing moments that resonate in current conditions of race-power dynamics in contemporary life in the U.S. Metaphorically, these artists trouble and muddy the waters of the legacies of the Mid-Atlantic slave trade against a post-Katrina landscape in ways that powerfully resonate in this moment of water protectors, the movement for Black lives (M4BL), post-human conditions in Flint, and the ongoing, complex relationship between water and race.

Kara Walker’s Remaking of History Through Art

I make art for anyone whos forgot what it feels like
to put up a fight whose forgot what pure sins about
when pigs are out
I make art...
art makes me...
att makes me xeeex
so giddy

—Index card writing by Kara Walker.

The artwork of contemporary artist Kara Walker both compliments and complicates the work of Julie Dash. In this inquiry Walker’s work extends our exploration of race to include visceral images of racially motivated violence and abuse. Walker creates satirical images based on historical fact, as well as historical fantasy, to play with notions of power-relations according to gender and sexuality. These

constructions lend themselves to a Foucauldian reading in the sense that they construct alternative discourses that disrupt dominant versions of historical realities. She does this by studying race in America through film, installation, painting and mixed media. Walker is most known for her silhouettes, which are cut out of large sheets of black paper that depict men, women, and children in complex power relationships that are usually sexual and violent in nature. Her explorations of power are based on the master/slave dichotomy of the antebellum South. Walker problematizes the notion of giving and receiving in this dichotomous relationship and is blurring the boundaries between various bodies including the young and old; male and female; child and adult. These couplings produce grotesque and abject visual images.

Charles Molesworth (2008) in *Kara Walker: Her Enemies and Her Brothers* asserts, “Walker places her artistic trust in the notion that racism and slavery are variations of a third thing: subjugated identity” (p. 6). Therefore, can her work emancipate our own enslaved identity? And does her work have a positive influence on race relations in America?

Walker intimates that her work “gives the illusion of past events, the illusion that it’s simply about a particular point in history and nothing else.” Through the illusion of history Walker creates panoramas in a gallery setting of stereotypical images embedded with a perverse twist of Antebellum South. In *Insurrection! (Our Tools Were Rudimentary, Yet We Pressed On)* 2002 an entire narrative unfolds on the walls of the Guggenheim Museum. Walker states, “the idea at the outset was an image of a slave revolt in the antebellum south where the house slaves got after their master with their utensils of everyday life, and really it started with a sketch of a series of slaves disemboweling a master with a soup ladle. My reference, in my mind, was the surgical theatre paintings of Thomas Eakins and others.” Here Walker has ‘raced’ each body that is depicted in the slave rebellion through the black silhouette. In this counter-narrative demonstration of biopower, the flesh of each body can be understood as either black or white through their subject positions/loci of power, since (essentially) Walker has made them all “appear” black. See: www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_work_md_214_2.html

By inscribing race/color on the body in reverse-fashion, Walker flattens out difference to call specific attention to the boundaries of racial identity. Where does it begin and end? Does it? By calling attention to the bodily relationships emerging in this narrative we can begin to address the rebellion against slave domestication. A group of individuals young and old attack a man, then a man with a top hat is being mounted by a slave, and a southern belle—who seems to have four legs—is watching in horror, as these events unfold. What are these raced-bodies invoking? What discourses emerge if we force ourselves to continue to look? As spectators of these scenes we see Walker’s inability to separate race and sex as co-conspiring discourses whose entanglement produces an image-based conception of Foucault’s notion of biopower.

Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*: History Reconfigured

I wanted to take the African-American experience and rephrase it in such a way that, whether or not you understood the film on the first screening, the visuals would be so haunting it would break through with a freshness about what we already know.

—Julie Dash, Interviewed by Kevin Thomas

Daughters of the Dust takes place on the Sea Islands of the Gullah off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. Today these islands are populated by descendants of enslaved Africans who came to the New World from West Africa via the Middle Passage. These communities have been able to retain some of their African culture, religion, social, and linguistic customs that white slave owners tried to destroy. In the film, set in 1902- at the turn of the century, Dash uses feminist perspectives to focus on the Peazant family. The narrative takes place on the family's final day on Ibo Landing, the eve of their migration north. We witness a reunion that brings together the family members who have remained on the island, and two women who left—Yellow Mary (and her lover Tula) and Viola, who brings along Mr. Snead—a photographer brought to the island to document the family reunion. This family is led, protected, and guided by Nana Peazant. She has been able to instill dignity and meaning into the lives of her children and the extended family while living on Ibo Landing. Nana embodies the African traditions of the past and its legacy... present incarnations and possible future directions; it is the future that is story is about. Crossing the water to that future, the Peazant's will have to heal their past experiences of rape and subjugation on a communal level.

Eli Peazant, the son of Nana Peazant, wants the family to leave Ibo Landing to join the "Great Migration" that took place in American in the early 1900's. This migration was seen by many black Americas as an opportunity to find a better life that would allow them to leave the racialized Deep South. For the younger family members of the Peazant family, staying on Ibo Landing keeps the history of oppression alive; therefore, they want to re-cross the Atlantic Ocean. This crossing could symbolize a rebirth, but before the family can make this journey history and memory will be revisited. The memories of each individual and the collective community will be brought forward to unsettle their subjugated experience. This leads us to ask, "How can this family transcend the scars of the past?" In *Skin Memories* (2001) Jay Prosser asserts:

Skin re-members, both literally in its material surface and metaphorically in resignifying on this surface, not only race, sex, and age, but quite detailed specificities of life histories. In its colour, texture, accumulated marks and blemished, it remembers something of our class, labour/leisure activities, even (in the use of cosmetic surgery and/or skincare products) our most intimate psychic relation to our bodies. Skin is the body memory of our lives. (p. 52)

It is this rememory I want to explore in *Daughters of the Dust*. How does the collective memory of the Peasant family reveal their historical melancholia that is based on a communal experience of racism and subordination? How have each of these family members internalized this oppression? Further, for the Peasant women, they themselves have been subjugated through their bodies and have struggled to properly mourn the violence and dehumanization that they have individually and collectively experienced. The period of one day that we witness in *Daughters of the Dust* is the reckoning of this history. Not only does this mark the history of one family, but the history of an entire community—a community whose bodies and memories attest to subjugation and survival.

For Foucault "...it is always a body that is at issue...its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission." (1995, p. 25) Through Dash's work we see the bodies of the Peasant women/family coming to terms with both docility and submission, at both the personal and collective level. For example, we see the older Peasant women engage in a collective remembering of their former slave work. Dash brings us into a quiet, intimate space in the woods filled with large tubs, barrels, and bricks. Here the women are convened in a circle, working with hot water and indigo dye, adding dark blues and purples to white fabrics. Their collective quiet indicates the importance of this labor—a precision labor that affords the ability to avoid repercussions, if done well. In addition to displaying the bodies laboring for their survival, we also see the effects of this particular work on the flesh; as a result of direct bodily contact with the indigo dye, the women's skin has been marked, permanently, the skin on their hands a bright blue. These blue hands visually testify to the internal condition of the slave soul—a soul that remains contingent upon a particular (shared) history. The blue hands signify a collective memory that continues to reproduce the power slavery had over this community. And this captures Foucault's "technologies of the body" where the body becomes that object and target of power. Through this scene, Dash reveals a particular moment in slavery whereby "the body becomes the surface of the mind" (Luke, 1995). Further, this speaks to how discipline is internalized through power-relations, and is then made visible on the outward surfaces of the body itself- revealing the 'habitus' of slavery.

Dash continues marking bodies in *Daughters of the Dust* in terms of the environment as well as the on the bodies of human subjects. The geography of her story bears the consequences of slavery- marked specifically by the island, the water, the ways in which the Peasant family has been able to recover and resurrect their African history (roots) while simultaneously, forcibly engaging their colonized work. We see these worlds collide, visually, through the character's Victorian dress in contrast to the simple clothing- plain dresses and aprons worn by the women who have stayed on the island. Even while Nana Peasant speaks of the African ways and spirits, her attire speaks of the body colonized. Additionally, while African adornments cloak the simple dwellings of the families and the bottle tree marks

ancestral memory, this island recreation of Africa, Dash foregrounds the island as a site that has and continues to be penetrated—both literally, and figuratively by slavery and colonial legacies. The Bible, the photographic equipment brought to the island, and the rape of Eula, symbolize the manifestation of this hybridized cultural circumstance. When Viola Peazant reaches Ibo Landing with Mr. Snead, she has her Bible in hand and through dialogue with her island relatives, conveys her Christian faith. She is unable to reconcile her new faith with the spirituality of Africa and the past, as presented by Nana. Her appearance marks her as a proper citizen of the mainland, while also situating her within the family's genealogy and their island history. This complexity reveals the terrain for which Dash uses a range of black (diasporic) identities, within a singular family, to explore.

Dash makes plain that Black bodies in Dash's work represent both familiarity and otherness. Because Foucault's recognition of race as bound up within the power-dynamic, the Peazant family, a female majority, must reckon with what their blackness means in a number of contexts that cross through what feminist theorist Patricia Hill-Collins (2000) terms "the matrix of domination." This refers to the relational sphere through which race, gender, patriarchy, class, history (and so forth) pass, meet, cross, and intersect in a variety of ways (material and figurative) in order to explain power and experience.

By interpreting *Daughters of the Dust* as a tale of racialized bodies, mainly women's bodies, escaping from and bound to slavery and the aftermath of colonization, Foucault's biopower serves as both preface and foreshadowing to the conclusion presented by Dash: those who remain on the island are not going to be any more or less free from the implications of skin color and the body—external and internal, than the family members who choose to re-cross the water towards a new future. Water is the force moving like power, to shift Black knowledge, memory, thoughts, and bodies to different spaces; however, the experiential contexts for these bodies may change, the reproduction of their status as marginal is maintained by the structures whose survival relies on them to be depicted as such.

Educational Implications

Since race is and will continue to be present literally and symbolically, as a topic of social discussion, the creation of art, and the outward signifier of 'difference' at the most basic level, this work, while one of philosophy, aesthetics, and feminism, is also a work of education. When students enter the classroom they are shrouded in history: she [the student] enters a politics of discourse. She [the student] enters that discourse from a different location than does the male learner. (Walshaw, p. 55) *Daughters of the Dust* illuminates this point: women experience life (including race, remembering, and embodiment) from perspectives that differ from men's and what's more, differ from each other's as we see within the Peazant family. While female narrative is privileged in this telling of collective wounds,

scars, and choices, Dash manages to keep as a focal point, the merging of cultures toward a form of reconciliation between present and past that allows for survival based on a “pedagogy in the making” (Ellsworth, 2003) of sorts.

From a Foucauldian perspective Dash’s film invokes subjugated (body) knowledges in the telling of this re-imagined history, as a dominant influence over the valuation/devaluation of “black life” according to a microcosm of biopower. These (de)valuation practices changed from one generation to the next. This film offers a productive counter-discourse on what it means to survive and can be used as a tool to educate others. In conjunction with Walker’s subversive contributions and read through Foucault, the possibility exists that by engaging with these works a distinct, interdisciplinary, way of looking at race emerges; this enables new conditions for teaching and learning.

Walker’s work also must be confronted from educational and pedagogic spaces. Because Kara Walker displays race-relations that incorporate children as objects shuffled between race, innocence, victimization, and powerful agency that expands and deconstructs Foucault’s biopower argument. In conjunction with Walker’s subversive contributions (and read through Foucault and Morrisonian re-memory) affective domains are challenged and histories are disrupted (as is the present) in ways that allow for necessary, sustained discomfort which constitutes a new way of uncovering and seeing a past rendered invisible yet are detrimental to our understanding of contemporary U.S. race relations or the racial dynamics that Saidiya Hartman (2006) refers to as “the afterlife of slavery.”

These works reflect the very history of the students we teach. In classrooms everywhere a contemporary history is unfolding in concrete and intangible ways that whisper, cry, scream, and speak in both the hidden and visible curriculum. Social dynamics and power relations are ever-present and evolving toward imaginings of multi-culturalism side-by-side with colorblind discourses that not only contradict one another, but would obscure the importance of finding new paradigms by which to engage the politics of race and the difficult dialogues that bodies require. Black Lives Matter and DACA *are* race in America and water *is* life and it is all happening so quickly that history/ies must be recovered and tools for excavation must include critical theory, sociocultural studies, social justice conversations and rememories that allow us not only to know and understand but to feel. As bell hooks (1994) reminds us in *Teaching to Transgress*, “no education is politically neutral.” With this recognition in mind, the classroom spaces can be powerful when connected to difficult and complex works, like Walker’s and Dash’s. Black feminist knowledge via productions and artifacts that push for consideration of deliberately silenced, marginal or hidden voices are necessary in our educational spaces if we are to construct the critical conversations that are necessary to help students connect their/our past and present in ways that allow for transformational visions of the future. Such works have the potential to take something like the element of *water* (multi-faceted symbolically and essential materially) and use it to guide us on a

journey of race relations that connects several continents through the power of the visual, the historical and the counter-narrated. Using water as a (mutual) entry point and point of departure for U.S. race relations (specifically Blackness) these artists unsettle and challenge colonial logics and the politics of domination through discourses of accountability, and reckoning and through pedagogies of rememory and critical remaking.

Conclusion

Foucault's scholarship recognizes the roles colonization and war have played in the maintenance of (an imagined) pure and healthier society. This notion of a society maintained by racial purification (as well as stream-lined sexuality, normative behavior brought about by disciplinary measures on the body, etc.) is directly at odds with the actual conditions by which bodies—gay, trans, white, female, black, disabled, etc. in and with which we have and continue to live. Paired with Walker and Dash, his work reveals the inter-connectivity between past usages of race through biopower and the current subjugation of blacks in the U.S. Now more than a decade after Hurricane Katrina and in the wake of the Obama presidency—and all of the issues underlying and giving rise to multiple social movements (collectively known as the Movement for Black Lives/M4BL) clearly race still matters. Through the discursive functions and contemporary implications of multiculturalism and colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) the disciplining of black bodies can occur without calling attention to *race*...as in Hurricane Katrina and in the ongoing endeavors of the prison industrial complex, efforts to control the food available to SNAP recipients, the repeal of CHIP low-income health insurance for children, lack of attention to water poisoning in Flint, MI, and so forth—all of which effect Blacks at disproportionate levels given their minority status in terms of their presence in the overall population. Such conditions, given the particularly compelling saga of Hurricane Katrina, lead to a revisiting of Foucault's notions of race and survival in this time of advanced biopower.

From a Foucauldian perspective, it could be argued that the world is not getting 'better' just 'different'—and as determined by Walker and Dash the contemporary politics of race illustrate just that. By manipulating events through imagined histories- recontextualizing historic artworks and documents and by inserting the customs and knowledges associated with racial identities emanating from cultural practices into the gaps that are intuitively felt (if not directly perceived) through rememory and critical-making, Walker and Dash map a relationship between slavery in the American south and current race relations, against a political landscape that traffics in alternative facts, suppression and imperialist logics. Furthermore, their work suggests that Black women and women of color (in particular) are still adding intriguing and must-see/must-hear information to the discourse(s) of race: past, present, real and imagined.

In terms of Blackness and African-American identity/ies in the context of the United States, water has been central, not only in shaping the events that have entered into social memory as Hurricane Katrina but to Julie Dash's film and to Kara Walker's art; and perhaps most importantly, water serves as the conduit between the legacy of slavery and its afterlife in America. Water also grounds this work in that it resembles Foucault's analytics of power. While power finds its way into, out of, and in-between the film *Daughters of the Dust* and Walker's installations, the power attaches itself to race and sexuality, whereby the struggle for survival or is made visible and rendered intelligible. For the mind to enter into this dark water—to remain submerged there for a time, not drowning or crossing or sinking, but floating- covered and conscious, to emerge with new knowledges produced therein is the space for which we must, as educators, advocate and participate in constructing.

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