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CONSTRUCTIONS OF BLACK IDENTITY
IN THE WORK OF GLENN LIGON AND KARA WALKER

by

Shadé R. Ayorinde

A THESIS

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CONSTRUCTIONS OF BLACK IDENTITY
IN THE WORK OF GLENN LIGON AND KARA WALKER

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University of Nebraska, 2014

Advisor: Marissa Vigneault

In this thesis I reference artworks and installations by Glenn Ligon and Kara Walker, as well as contemporary mass media images, to offer a reading of various constructions of black identity in the 1990s and into the 21st century. I specifically note the continuation of social biases against black bodies, which in large part stems from historical conditions of 19th century America and the lingering legacy of slavery. I also address how the absence or implied absence of the black male body, as referenced in works by both Ligon and Walker, relates to contemporary social conditions in which black male bodies and black families are profiled and negatively categorized by the American media.

I draw a connection between 1990's American print media and Ligon and Walker's art from the same period, as I believe both address cultural discourses on the categorization of black men and women, as well as the subsequent elimination of individual identities in favor of social stereotypes. I argue that this drive towards social categorization is based on a tension between visibility and invisibility that Ligon and Walker both explore by absenting the black male body in their work. Late 20th century newspaper and magazine photographs and headlines pushed black bodies into the spotlight and portrayed them as a threat to white Americans, and, more specifically, to white patriarchal power. In response, Ligon and Walker used their art as a means to question how the negativity surrounding black identity changes when the threat is removed from direct view, pointing out that the stigma of antebellum stereotyping still lingers even when the physical body is invisible.

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It is only as we collectively change the way we look at ourselves and the world that we can change how we are seen. In this process, we seek to create a world where everyone can look at blackness, and black people, with new eyes.

-bell hooks, *Black Looks*, 1992

In the above statement, black social activist and author bell hooks reflects on how limited black people in America feel in controlling images and crafting identities of themselves in visual culture. In the mainstream media, Black Americans are presented to the American public as something to be feared, mistrusted or discounted and thus understood as a cultural and social problem. The media continues to construct narrow stereotypical categories for blacks leaving little to no room for the variety of unique identities and experiences that black people actually live, and it seems blacks cannot do much to change the situation. hooks believes that when black people become aware of their inability to control their public image they become angry and will internalize negative representations until they are driven to complicity.¹ This introduces a vicious cycle, for, if this is true, it begs the question: who is really creating negative images of black men and women? Is it the media fueled by longstanding stereotypes, or are black men and women perpetually confirming these stereotypes by performing to the racialized standards set by white America's prejudice? And if black people internalize and then perform these stereotypes, are negative media representations really inaccurate? If not, what sorts of black identities are invisible next to those that are prominently visible to the public?

In this thesis I reference artworks and installations by Glenn Ligon and Kara Walker, as well as contemporary mass media images, to offer a reading of various constructions of black identity in the 1990s and into the 21st century. I specifically note

¹ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 3-4.

the continuation of social biases against black bodies, which in large part stems from historical conditions of 19th century America and the lingering legacy of slavery. I also address how the absence or implied absence of the male slave body as referenced in prints and mixed-media installation by both Ligon and by Walker relates to the condition of black male bodies and black families being profiled and categorized historically by the American public as a threat to moral order and to the country's political and economic stability. Ultimately, I ask, do Ligon and Walker make work that perpetuates negative stereotypes or do they instead make room for a variety of black identities by subtly critiquing dominant society?

I draw a connection between print media and high art in America in the 1990s as both speaking to the same cultural discourse on the categorization of black men and women, and the subsequent elimination of an individual identity in favor of a social stereotype. I argue that this drive towards social categorization is based on a tension between visibility and invisibility that artists Ligon and Walker both explore by absenting the black body in their work. Newspaper and magazine photographs and headlines push black bodies into the spotlight portraying them as a threat to white Americans, and more specifically, to white patriarchal power, positioning them as dangerous and untrustworthy. In response, Ligon and Walker have used their art as a means to question how the negativity surrounding black identity changes when the threat is removed from direct view, pointing out that the stigma of antebellum stereotyping still lingers even when the physical body is invisible.

How and when America became obsessed with race and the connection between race and gender are topics that both Ligon and Walker explore through their art making.

Both artists worked and exhibited in New York City throughout the 1990s and both produce work that references the antebellum South as a point of origin for the struggles of black people in America and as a source for the way we understand blackness today. Ligon and Walker work opposite one another to investigate race and gender in contemporary American society. Ligon gives us the present moment using descriptions of his own black body and personal experiences, but then looks back to the historical rhetoric of slavery in the antebellum period, telling his story by recreating his own slave bills and slave narratives. On the other hand, Walker starts with the plantation setting, including imagery and characters from the Old South and asks us to consider how we continue to reference antebellum characters when we profile and categorize black people in our current society. In looking at works by Ligon and Walker we understand that racial injustice was not left behind in the 19th century or resolved during the Civil Rights movement; the issues addressed continue to be relevant and inform how we process history. From one generation to the next our collective ideas about certain historical moments can change as we gain additional information showing that history is not static, but constantly re-envisioned.² In this way we are able to understand blackness as a social and cultural construct. Art by Ligon and Walker is not a representation of race, but instead a representation of what it means to be raced by others.³

Ligon and Walker are further related in the way they use the black body. Varying levels of legibility and invisibility of the black body are themes that run throughout works by both artists. In Ligon's work the body is often missing all together, leaving only traces, a description or a sound. Walker has become famous for her use of the silhouette,

² Glenn Ligon, Interview, National Gallery of Art, March 15, 2013.

³ Colin Harrison, *American Culture in the 1990s* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 139.

cutting figures out of contact black paper so that the viewer only observes the outline of a body. In the gallery space viewers watch shadows dance on the wall and are then forced to fill in the black hole and the missing information, such as skin color and facial features. We understand a shadow as being the reaction to a presence of a body but not the body, and thus there is a level of uncertainty about what Walker is showing us versus what we are projecting or adding based on our own biases. Both artists lead the viewer to question how we read and rationalize the identity of others through stereotypes, through history, and through abstraction, and they challenge viewers to consider how much control we each have over our own identities.

In 1944, Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal published a book called *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. He traveled from Stockholm to observe and evaluate America's attitudes and actions towards the "Negro" and to uncover discrepancies between American moral, religious and civic values and behaviors with respect to the "Negro" as a minority group. He traveled throughout the southern states and through rural and urban areas making contact with large numbers of black and white leaders in schools, churches and state and community agencies. He determined that white Americans struggle "with feelings of individual and collective guilt" over the presence of the "Negro" in American society.⁴ He argued that the "Negro's" entire history of existence in America is "an anomaly in the very structure of American society." Accordingly, the dominant society's attempt to avoid facing the inconsistencies between the sentiments of liberty and equality that America was founded on and the treatment of "Negro" people causes anxiety in white Americans, which

⁴ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, 20th anniversary edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 1xix-1xxxii.

Myrdal described as “the Negro problem.”⁵ Extending this argument to the present day, negative stereotypes about blacks are rooted in longstanding structures and widespread beliefs within American society from the 18th and 19th centuries that blacks were biologically inferior to whites. Blacks were viewed as subhuman savages who were hypersexual and intellectually incapable; lazy good-for-nothings who, if left unsupervised, would violently rise up against the white population. Myrdal’s observations led him to conclude that whites saw blacks as “dangerous to the white man’s virtue and social order.”⁶ To many whites, blackness, which was equal to “dirt, sin and the devil,” existed as the antithesis to the “character and properties” of white people, which were good, virtuous, intelligent and clean, and thus blacks were placed at the bottom of the racial and social caste system.⁷

In the 1980s and 1990s, ideas on the biological inferiority of blacks were visually, linguistically and culturally manifested in various forms of what anthropologist John U. Ogbu called “expressive exploitation.”⁸ According to Ogbu, “caste thinking” serves an emotional function for whites, as they express their beliefs that blacks are inferior through denying them recognition for their intellectual accomplishments. Whites attribute to blacks traits they regard as undesirable in themselves, often using blacks as scapegoats, blaming blacks for their own political or economic hardships and making blacks collectively responsible for the offense of a single black person.⁹ Myrdal wrote that “the Negro problem” was linked to all social, political, economic and cultural problems in the

⁵ Ibid., lxix.

⁶ Ibid., 100.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John U. Ogbu, “Racial Stratification and Education,” in *U.S. Race Relations in the 1980s and 1990s: Challenges and Alternatives*, ed. Gail E. Thomas (New York: Hemisphere Publishers, 1990), 10-12.

⁹ Ibid., 10-12.

United States, an assertion that remained true through the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and into the 2000s with the election of the first black president, Barack Obama. Americans continue, in the 21st century, to be gripped by issues regarding race and the separation of people in society, in particular the marginalization of Black Americans.

There are several decades throughout America's history where a historical discussion of the social issues surrounding race and gender is appropriate; the 1990s however, is a decade particularly ripe for such exploration. According to Colin Harrison, author of *American Culture in the 1990s*, most decades turn out to be periods of transition, but the 1990s were "peculiarly marked with change."¹⁰ Changes included the "end of the Cold War, opening of global markets and frenzied expansion of digital technology."¹¹ Leadership changed in the White House from the Republican President George Bush to the Democrat President Bill Clinton. A wave of political battles over government spending on the arts and education and welfare reform flooded the media, and the public was divided by the "Culture Wars" and issues like AIDS, homosexuality, drugs, abortion and gun politics. The U.S. economy in the 1990s seemed healthy, unemployment decreased and for many Americans there was serious potential for increased wealth. But with great change comes great uncertainty and Harrison points out that the 1990s was similar in its "unstable prosperity" to other decades in American history.¹² For example, an editor from *The New Yorker* magazine coined the 1990s the 'New Gilded Age,' a reference that becomes particularly compelling when considering race relations in America at the end of the 20th century.¹³ In relating the idea of the "New

¹⁰ Colin Harrison, *American Culture in the 1990s*, 207.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 207.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Gilded Age” to the 19th century Gilded Age, I am connecting the political, social and economic conditions and commenting on the effect such conditions had on race relations in America. Looking back to this historical moment will help to tease out the similarities between the types of stereotypes and racial profiling that pervaded both time periods separating blacks and whites in society.

The Invention of Black Masculinity in American Society

The Gilded Age (1878-1889) brought about an onslaught of social changes that threatened the middle-class structure for white men. The ideal of manliness widespread in the 19th century was eroded by racial, gender and economic changes in the Gilded Age. Industrial expansion changed the work environment to one where many white men were no longer self-employed, but instead taking managerial positions in corporations. A rollercoaster of economic depressions also rocked the nation, causing many to fall into bankruptcy and further eroding manliness as something attached to economic independence. The increasing social presence of women and immigrants challenged manhood, as well. Women were demanding more rights and immigrants were taking jobs and introducing new traditions, languages and religions.¹⁴ As black men became legally defined under the law as citizens, white men felt pressure to limit the inclusion of black men as civilized people and political and economic competitors. Similar to the social upheaval of the Gilded Age, the 1990s saw not only a widening of the gap between the rich and the poor, but also, and more pointedly for the purposes of this paper, “the struggle over national identity and the dismantling of former certainties such as whiteness

¹⁴ Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*, 12-17.

and masculinity.”¹⁵ In order to stabilize the sense of national identity and reaffirm white supremacy, white America needed a target that served as the antithesis to white manhood: the black male. Thus, the young black man once again became a visible figure in 1990s, surveyed by the public eye and assigned to shallow racist categories based on antebellum stereotypes such as being violent, unintelligent, uncivilized and immoral.

Curator Thelma Golden describes the construction of the threatening African American male as “one of the greatest inventions of the 20th century...’invented’ because black masculinity represents an amalgam of fears and projections in the American psyche which rarely conveys or contains the trope of truth about the black male’s existence.”¹⁶ Glenn Ligon’s work aims to deconstruct the black male experience, playing on the fears associated with a black male body as wild and unrestrained, while also disrupting our understanding of stereotypes about the black male. In works such as *Runaways* (1993), Ligon presents descriptions of himself and his unique identity in order to challenge normative widespread generalizations regarding black male identity in America.

The black man was, and continues to be, pigeonholed by various forms of mass-media into distinct categories, including: the athlete, the violent criminal or the hypersexual predator. The cultural images presented tend to become the identity that the public perceives as truth. The “drug wars” of the 1980s disproportionately affected minority males, who were incarcerated at a much higher rate than their counterparts, and the issue appeared to the American public to be a racial problem concentrated within the inner city. Various stories in the national media in the early 1990s that depicted black male bodies as dangerous and unrestrained seemed to be an epidemic, running the full

¹⁵ Colin Harrison, *American Culture in the 1990s*, 207.

¹⁶ Thelma Golden, *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1994), 19.

gamut of negative stereotypes applied to blacks since the antebellum period. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, who was nominated to the Supreme Court in 1991, appeared as the hyper-sexed black male unable to restrain his lust. Dozens of articles were published in 1991 after Anita Hill, an attorney who worked for Thomas, testified at his confirmation hearings that Thomas had sexually harassed her. Each article was loaded with graphic details of Thomas's alleged attempt to force himself on Hill.¹⁷

Concurrently, Rodney King was positioned as a dangerous criminal in order to justify his beating by Los Angeles police officers, and the violent murders of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman in 1994 kept OJ Simpson's face in the media for well over a year-and-a-half. All of these stories combined brought about a storm of bad press marking the black male body as a dangerous threat to society. Unfortunately, media conversations about blackness in the 1990s were not focused on issues of systematic oppression, poverty in the inner cities or any other social hardship blacks faced, making the abundance of negative media images seem representative of an innate barbaric quality in black men.

The American public experienced an influx of images of black men on the evening television newscast, and similar images were being produced in the world of music and film. The 1990s saw the release of several crime drama films directed by black men about violence and drugs and the struggles of black men in the inner city, including: *Boyz n the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991), *New Jack City* (Mario Van Peebles, 1991), *Juice*

¹⁷ *CBS News* article "Anita Hill vs. Clarence Thomas: The Backstory," published October 2010, and *Time Magazine* article "Sex, Lies and Politics: He Said, She Said," published October 1991, both include detailed information on the alleged affair. Referring to historical constructions of black men as rapists, Thomas himself referred to his hearing as a "high-tech lynching." It is important to note that in saying this Thomas was not addressing a white accuser, but Hill. His comment positioned Hill as black matriarch or the Sapphire character, the "angry black women who try to emasculate or otherwise hinder the black man's well-being. I discuss these types of stereotypical characterizations of black women in chapter 2.

(Ernest R. Dickerson, 1992) and *Menace II Society* and *Dead Presidents* (The Hughes Brothers, 1993 and 1995). Hip Hop and rap music went mainstream in the 1990s and offered white America a glimpse into the social and economic conditions for many blacks in society. The genre was quickly determined by white mainstream society to be a threat to public safety, in complete ignorance of the complexities of rap as a musical expression and as a narrative illustrating the realities of a disenfranchised group of people that deserved political and social attention. For example rap group N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude) came across as a highly aggressive and resilient strain of the black male plague on American society. Their album *Niggaz4Life*, 1991, included tracks titled: “Appetite for Destruction,” “Real Niggaz Don’t Die,” and “Findum, Fuckum & Flee.” Ice-T and Body Count released a single called “Cop Killer” in 1992 in the wake of the L.A. Riots. Dr. Dre titled his debut CD *The Chronic*, 1992 (after high-end marijuana), and his protégé Snoop Dogg released his debut album *Doggystyle* a year later. *Doggystyle*’s cover art shows a cartoon dog dressed in West Coast fashion, (jeans, a flannel button down shirt and sneakers), climbing on top of a doghouse. He reaches down towards the rump of a female dog whose front half is already in the doghouse. The sexual references both in the title of the album and in the cover art are fleshed out in a track called “Ain’t No Fun (If the Homies Can’t Have None).” Snoop’s lyrics reinforce myths about the rampagous black male penis: “guess who’s back in the mutha-fuckin’ house with a big fat dick for ya mutha-fuckin’ mouth;” and hypersexual behaviors: “how many bitches wanna fuck this nigga named Snoop?” The types of movies and music produced in the 1990s showed visible black men in the entertainment industry as adhering to and perpetuating negative stereotypes about black male sexuality. For whites who were

listening and watching, the more unsavory characteristics of black masculinity that black rappers and black movie directors were highlighting came to represent the larger black male population.

Art historian and cultural theorist Kobena Mercer describes the plight of underprivileged, young, black, American males in the 1990s, which he refers to as “invisible men,” as having to bear the burden of public hate and distrust as a result of the actions of a few men who appeared to be confirming century’s old stereotypes about black masculinity.¹⁸ The struggle of black men is an ongoing attempt to overcome the obstacles of racism and prejudice in order to form an individual identity. Under the fearful gaze of the public, invisible black men appeared to be dressed in negative stereotypes in the same way they might dress themselves in clothing. The troubling images and actions of visible black men in the media are assumed to reflect the character of all black men in the public eye and as a result society is only able to see black men through the lens of prejudice and stereotyping and they are blind to the unique personalities, talents and behaviors of the invisible black man.

Black men have been socially and culturally shortchanged in print media ever since the 19th century. Newspaper and magazine cartoons represented black men as incompetent, uncivilized and ill-mannered in order to calm the fears of white citizens who needed reassurance that after emancipation conditions for blacks had not really changed. Between 1876-1884 *Harper’s Weekly Magazine* published a series of satirical

¹⁸ Kobena Mercer, “Engendered Species: Danny Tisdale and Keith Piper,” *Artforum International* 30 (1992): 74. A description of the black male identity as “invisible” is also seen in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, written in 1952. In the book the narrator explains that he is the “invisible man,” not in that he is physically invisible, but that people refuse to see him because he is black. One of the book’s main themes is visibility, what people see, what they can’t see and what they choose not to see. In this way the narrator is being seen as a black man not as an individual, what he sees as his true identity is what is invisible to others.

cartoons called *Blackville* (fig. 1). Because of *Harper's* popularity with a middle-class audience and their national distribution, images like the ones in *Blackville* played a significant role in shaping and reflecting white Northern opinions and concerns about race and gender.¹⁹ The *Blackville* series is an example of how the middle-class could highlight black males as uncivilized, and thus not manly, to calm white fears, while still reinforcing their desire to see or even appropriate the primal physicality assigned to the black male body.

Examples of erasing black male individuality in favor of a prescribed identity determined by stereotypes is also apparent in print media of the 1990s. In December 1994, an unidentified black man was photographed for the cover of *New York Times Magazine* (fig. 2). The image is of the back of his head and the title of the feature article is scrolled across the back of his neck: "The Black Man Is in Trouble, Whose Problem is That?"²⁰ The "problem" with the photograph lies in the viewer's inability to see facial features that could help the viewer to recognize an individual person and clearly differentiate this black male body from others. The text furthers the "problem" by addressing all black men as a unified crowd and an inseparable group; "The Black Man" becomes a unit, a thing that must be considered and dealt with as whole. Together the wording and image "demonstrate the photographic ways white people tend to look at black people in racist societies," as this magazine cover "pictures the nation picturing black men."²¹

¹⁹ "Background: Harper's Weekly", accessed November 19, 2013. <http://0-app.harpweek.com.library.unl.edu>

²⁰ Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775-1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 20-21.

²¹ Ibid.

Magazines and newspapers fed the nation many damaging headlines and stories that helped to oversimplify black male identity, while also vilifying black men and making them seem less than human. The *New York Daily News* published a story in April of 1989 about the ‘Central Park Five,’ a group of black and brown teenagers who were accused (and then exonerated in 2002) of brutally raping and beating a white woman jogger Central Park. The article referred to the group as a “wolf pack” that was out “wilding” and wreaking havoc on innocent people in the park.²² The group of five young brown males was presented as rapists framing fears and stereotypes from the Jim Crow era about the black man’s propensity to rape white women, an offense punished by castration, brutal beatings and lynching. On the other hand, rappers pictured in urban magazines like *Rap Pages* and *Hip Hop Connection* were not necessarily described as crazed sexual predators, but instead as threatening criminals with headlines including words like, “violent,” “nightmare” and “dangerous.”²³

In the midst of all of the representations and interpretations of black manhood being circulated by the media in the 1990s, there were visual artists who were making work that recognized, recorded and re-worked the same issues. In the fall of 1994, the Whitney Museum of American Art opened a show called “Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art,” curated by Thelma Golden. The show was a survey on how contemporary artists understood black masculinity based on how it was portrayed in popular culture. The show included works by Lorna Simpson, Fred Wilson, Gary Simmons and many others, and focused on the idea that discussions about

²² Stuart Marques, “Park Marauders call it: ‘Wilding’,” *New York Daily News*, April 22, 1989, accessed January 19, 2014, <http://www.nydailynews.com/services/central-park-five/park-marauders-call-wilding-article-1.1304526>.

²³ “KRS-ONE: Sex and Violence,” *The Source*, (April 1992) and “Rape Suspect’s Jail House Boast: ‘She Wasn’t Nothing’,” *New York Dailey News*, April 23, 1989.

race in America are really discussions of black masculinity; Golden the two concepts are “synonyms in a weird way.”²⁴ This is still the case as issues with black masculinity are still very prevalent in American society. See, for example, the January 2014 the case of Darrin Manning, a 16-year-old West Philadelphia high school student who was sexually assaulted and had his testicle ruptured by a cop during a racially motivated stop and frisk.²⁵ Or the recent controversy surrounding Seattle Seahawks player Richard Sherman and his comments after the Seahawks won the 2014 Super Bowl. In the days after the game Sherman was repeatedly referred to as a “thug” in print and on television. Sherman’s responded to the media claims by making a distinction between gangsters in the inner-city and himself, “a guy on a football field just talking to people.”²⁶ But he was offended at the language saying that calling him a “thug” was just another, seemingly more acceptable, way of calling him a nigger. These stories confirm that the perceived black male identity and the treatment of the black male body have not really changed since the 1990s or even the Old South.

Black Women and the Welfare Reform Debate

In Kara Walker’s installations tension is played out between the real and the outrageous as she explores the many ways that the true lives and identities of black

²⁴ Diane Haithman, “ART: As Defiant as Always: Thelma Golden, curator of the L.A.-bound ‘Black Male,’ has been caught in a firestorm of criticism and protest. It’s OK; she can stand the heat,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 23, 1995, Accessed January 19, 2014, http://articles.latimes.com/1995-04-23/entertainment/ca-57939_1_black-male.

²⁵ “Officer Accused of Rupturing Teen’s Testicle During Search,” *NBC10.com*, January 18, 2014, Accessed March 16, 2014, <http://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/Officer-Accused-of-Rupturing-Teens-Testicle-During-Search-241010151.html>

²⁶ Ryan Wilson, “Richard Sherman: ‘Thug’ is accepted was of calling someone N-word,” *CBSsports.com*, January 22, 2014, Accessed March 16, 2014, <http://www.cbssports.com/nfl/eye-on-football/24417234>

women are distorted, falsified and dramatized. The silhouette functions as stereotypes do in society, hiding the facts or the important details on the subject, offering very little information but allowing for major assumptions to be made about the physical body and by extension behavior and social placement.

The politics of being a black woman in America is in part a constant struggle for recognition between both a human identity and a national identity. Professor and MSNBC political commentator Melissa Harris-Perry says in order to “understand black women’s politics, we must explore their often unspoken experiences of hurt, rejection, faith, and search for identity,” and in this we can understand how they yearn for and work towards recognition as ‘good citizens.’²⁷ One major hurdle black women face in citizenship is misrecognition. Black women have historically been categorized into groups based on their perceived attitudes and behaviors. Titles such as Sapphire and Jezebel assign exaggerated emotional qualities and traits like hypersexuality to the black female body, and this type of profiling prevents black women from interacting with peers as valued members of society.

One particularly damaging case of inaccurate representation occurred during Ronald Regan’s 1976 presidential campaign tour. He introduced a highly exaggerated but believable character who he called the “welfare queen.” The story revolved around a woman in Chicago willfully ripping off the welfare system by collecting checks under a dozen different names, addresses and social security cards. Reagan said she was raking in a six-figure salary, an income many times more than most hard working Americans. For many people it made no difference that this narrative later turned out to be fabricated, or

²⁷ Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 4.

that Reagan never directly stated that the welfare queen was black. Ideas about poor black women and their children living off taxpayer money had already been circulating; Reagan's story simply confirmed their concerns.²⁸ The story about the welfare queen served to vilify black women driving a discernible wedge between them and the rest of the white American public.

During the 1992 presidential elections welfare reform was once again a hot topic. Presidential candidate Bill Clinton promised to make radical changes to the welfare system, a strong platform, as studies conducted during the race revealed that many white Americans believed that the vast majority of people receiving welfare were black, and that single black mothers were lazy and unmotivated, thus undeserving of public assistance. In 1996, President Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). The act shifted the responsibility of welfare assistance from the federal government to the state, and replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. The new guidelines no longer guaranteed recipients would receive aid as long as they needed it; instead it limited assistance for a maximum of five years over a lifetime. These initiatives stemmed in large part from negative views toward welfare, including beliefs that people getting assistance were inappropriately dependent on the government and preferred to collect a welfare check instead of getting jobs. In an attempt to motivate self-sufficient attitudes among the poor, PRWORA mandated that those receiving benefits had to work. If the work obligations were not met a recipient could be sanctioned or lose their benefits

²⁸ John Blake, "Return of the 'Welfare Queen,'" *CNN*, January 23, 2012, accessed March 16, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/01/23/politics/welfare-queen/>

all together.²⁹ The racial overtones of the provisions of the bill were generally understood, as many people believed that welfare was a “black program,” but race was clearly and directly brought to the forefront at the bill signing ceremony at the White House. Photographs of the event showed the president bent over the bill, pen in hand, with black mothers at his sides.³⁰

Misconceptions about black mothers existed because often images of the inner city were associated with terms such as “welfare queens,” and *generations of welfare dependency*, language perpetuated by the media, politicians and scholars.³¹ Dána-Ain Davis quotes cultural theorist Wahneema Lubiano on the perception of poor black women: “the agent of destruction, the creator of the pathological Black urban poor family from which all ills flow; a monster creating crack dealers, addicts, muggers and rapists,” and it is this depiction that Davis says is “seared into the minds of the public.”³² The matriarchal household structure common among black families in the 20th and 21st centuries has been labeled as the root of the instability within the black family and the depravity within black communities. The black woman has also been blamed for the sorry state of black masculinity, as her “ascendency to power has resulted in the psychological castration of the black male,” cleaving their confidence and stunting their progress towards becoming productive members of society.³³

The topic of impoverished black mothers is not far from discussions in present day politics. On the 2012 campaign trail, Republican presidential candidates Newt

²⁹ Dána-Ain Davis, *Battered Black Women and Welfare Reform: Between a Rock and a Hard Place* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 2-3.

³⁰ Kenneth J. Neubeck and Noel A. Cazenave, *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card Against America's Poor* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 4.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Dána-Ain Davis, *Battered Black Women and Welfare Reform*, 41-42.

³³ Robert Staples, *Black Masculinity: The Black Male's Role in American Society* (San Francisco: The Black Scholar Press, 1982), 9.

Gingrich, Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum made comments about President Barack Obama's leniency with regard to welfare. Gingrich called Obama a "food-stamp president" and Romney accused Obama of transforming America into an "entitlement society."³⁴ Santorum said he had not meant to specifically direct his comments towards blacks but he told voters, "I don't want to make black people's lives better by giving them somebody else's money."³⁵ The underlying figure in this sort of discourse is the black female. Black women continue to be shamed and blamed within political conversations as welfare cheats, with more than just personal attacks, but also as a significant cause of America's struggling economy.

Against such vicious attacks black women have had to learn to be strong. But the "strong black woman" is also a construct along the lines of Jezebel or the welfare queen as it does not accurately frame a true identity for black women, but instead functions as a defense mechanism against unrealistic and racist citizenship expectations assigned to them by American society. Carlene Young describes the strong black woman as "caught in the "double bind" of attempting to assume the mantle of "strength" and to function as the idealized "strong woman." She confronts all trials and tribulations on behalf of those she loves, perseveres with no attention to her needs as an individual or woman."³⁶ Black women have historically had to perform these seemingly heroic feats, because the black community expects it from them and the hostility they face from rest of society requires them to find a way to protect themselves and their families.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Carlene Young, "Psychodynamics of Coping and Survival of the African-American Female in a Changing World," *Journal of Black Studies* 20 (1989): 210.

In the chapters that follow I outline various reasons why white patriarchal America scrutinizes the black body. In the chapter on Ligon I frame my discussion of his works with writings on black masculinity and hip-hop culture and situate visual and textual imagery of the *Runaways*, 1993, lithographs amongst the multiple mass-media images of popular rap artists. I draw a connection between the compositions of runaway slave ads from 19th century newspapers and cover images and headlines from urban magazines in order to show that both the invisible and the visible black male body are feared in the public eye. Ligon's *Runaways* highlight the discomfort surrounding the unrestrained black male body, but also remind us that there are legible identities for black men outside of those based in antebellum stereotypes.

While Ligon shows us the men who have escaped or run away, Walker pictures the women who remain. In the chapter on Walker I focus on the media vilification of poor single black women during the welfare reform debates in the 1990s. I situate the large-scale installation *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*, 1994 within theoretical writings on race and politics in order to demonstrate how longstanding stereotypical caricatures like the hyper-fertile welfare queen and the man-eating matriarch stand in the way of the American public viewing black women as respectable citizens.

Chapter 1: The Invisible Man

Los Angeles in the 1990s was a dangerous place for black men. Racial profiling and police brutality were on the rise, hundreds of complaints were being filed against the police department and racial tensions were at a boiling point. On the night of March 3,

1991, amidst growing social tension in L.A., Rodney Glen King reacted to being pursued by the police in a manner that had become standard practice for black men all over the country: he attempted to make himself scarce. Nervous that he would be sent back to jail (he was on parole) he led the L.A. cops into a high-speed chase, which ended with King brutally beaten, stomped and tased for resisting arrest. The event was videotaped and King was catapulted into stardom in his own horror film. His story made national and international headlines, and the end of his trial, where his attackers were acquitted, resulted in one of the worst riots in U.S. history. In the summer of 2012, King died from accidentally drowning in the pool in the backyard of his home in California. Articles written about him mention his ongoing struggles with the law, including spousal abuse, alcohol and drug use, which made up the rest of King's short life, marking him with the identity of troubled, violent, hoodlum, as a social stereotype that has been placed on black men in America for centuries.³⁷ A *New York Times* article referenced a pair of sandals found during the investigation of King's death, sitting next to the pool as though they were the last marker of his body and its significance in larger discourses about the law, abuse of power, and racial tensions in the U.S.³⁸ King's timeline outlines the condition of the young, underprivileged black male in America in the 1990s; those trying to escape the headlights and those existing in the spotlight.

In contrast to the seemingly ever-present black male body within early 1990s print media, as discussed in the introduction, Glenn Ligon exhibited *To Disembark* (fig. 3), a

³⁷ The *Time Magazine* article "The L.A. Riots: 15 Years After Rodney King," published April 2007 and the CNN report, "Police: Rodney King's 'accidental drowning' involved drugs," published August 2012, both describe King's ongoing struggles with the law.

³⁸ Jennifer Medina, "Rodney King Dies at 47; Police Beating Victim Who Asked 'Can We All Get Along?,'" *New York Times*, June 17, 2012. Accessed December 7, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/18/us/rodney-king-whose-beating-led-to-la-riots-dead-at-47.html?_r=0.

collection of work where the black male body was not visible. First shown in the fall of 1993 at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., the exhibition focused on the missing bodies of slaves and stories about escaping slavery. The idea of escape is presented as both triumphant and mournful; escape as liberation, but also as death.

To Disembark raises questions about how we understand black masculinity in the 1990s and how it relates to historical struggles and stereotypes. The title of the exhibition gives the impression that the end of a journey has arrived, but the contents of the show indicate that African Americans remain in route, working to cope with racism and the multiple ways it materializes in popular culture as a space to disembark from.³⁹ Ligon arranged the exhibition by reimagining historical happenings and emphasizing multiplicity in four parts. In one gallery ten lithographs entitled *Runaways* line the wall. Each print references the appearance of 19th century runaway slave advertisements. Scattered around the room and obstructing any direct pathway to the *Runaways* prints are large wooden crates. These crates refer to the method of travel for a slave named Henry “Box” Brown who stuffed himself into a crate to ship himself from slavery in Virginia to freedom in Pennsylvania. Each box was designed with similar dimensions as the box that Brown was shipped in and is marked with symbols to indicate the fragile nature of whatever might be inside.⁴⁰ A separate gallery includes three stenciled wall paintings of quotes from Zora Neale Hurston’s 1928 essay “How it Feels to Be Colored Me,” along with nine etchings designed to look like cover pages of slave narratives. While no narratives were actually written, each cover includes a title and text that are loosely based

³⁹ Kimberly Rae Connor, *Imagining Grace: Liberating Theologies in the Slave Narrative Tradition* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 159.

⁴⁰ Des Moines Art Center, “News,” January-February, 1995.

on the artist's biography.⁴¹ In an interview with Phyllis Rosenzweig, Ligon said, "I was interested, to paraphrase Stuart Hall, in how I positioned myself and was positioned by these narratives of the past. I am positioning myself against a certain historical experience and trying to find the connections between it and who I am."⁴²

What *To Disembark* takes from the 19th century and inserts into the contemporary gallery is, I argue based on the scholarship of Huey Copeland, an evaluation of the state of the black male body as an incarnation of the fears of the American public.⁴³ By repeating forms and standardizing composition to the point where figures become nothing more than nonspecific icons, Ligon questions the likelihood of society accepting a unique character among black men, especially as it applies to visual and textual representation and the development of racial and gender identity. *To Disembark*, and particularly the *Runaways* lithographs, acts as both an extension of and a challenge to widely disseminated popular American representations of black masculinity in the 1990s. On one hand, Ligon's multiplied prints align with the way images of black male rappers were repeatedly shown personifying negative stereotypes of hyper-sexuality and violence in visual culture, specifically on mass-distributed magazine covers such as *The Source* and *Hip Hop Connection*. On the other hand, Ligon focuses on bodies that are missing or escaped, only giving a description of what was once there, challenging our ability to categorize these bodies as threatening or safe. In denying us a body, Ligon makes reference to the danger of making the black male body visible, while simultaneously pointing out that when exposed black masculinity is an illegible identifier, void of

⁴¹ Huey Copeland, "Glenn Ligon and Other Runaway Subjects," *Representations* 113 (2011): 82.

⁴² Glenn Ligon, *Yourself in the World: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. Scott Rothkopf (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 77.

⁴³ Copeland "Glenn Ligon and Other Runaway Subjects," 82.

individual characteristics. In this way, the black male body is showcased as the “public enemy,” a title relevant to blacks as slaves in the 19th century and perpetuated in 1990s marketing tactics.

In his article "Engendered Species," Kobena Mercer discusses black male bodies that were caught in the public eye, like O.J. Simpson and Clarence Thomas, and the impact that their bad deeds had on broader ideas about black masculinity. Mercer describes the way that the general population of black men was vilified through the actions of a few:

...exposed to glaring media visibility, it is the “invisible men” of the late-capitalist underclass who have become the bearers – the signifiers – of the hopelessness and despair of our so-called post-Modern condition. Overrepresentation in statistics on homicide and suicide, misrepresented in the media as the personification of drugs, disease and crime, such invisible men, like their all-too-visible counterparts, suggest that black masculinity is not merely a social identity in crisis. It is also a key site of ideological representation, a site upon which the nation’s crisis comes to be dramatized, demonized and dealt with.⁴⁴

To Disembark references the invisible man as the entire exhibition is about the black male body that cannot be seen, that has escaped undetected or has been forced into hiding. At the same time, Ligon’s repetition of objects and images relates to the cultural oversaturation of the most unflattering elements of black manhood through print media, erasing the possibility of an identity beyond the stereotypes.

Though absent of a body, the Henry “Box” Brown crates emit barely audible sounds. From inside one box comes the sound of a heartbeat, while others play the songs “Strange Fruit” by Billie Holiday and KRS-One’s “Sound of Da Police.” Both songs refer to the profiling of black bodies and the awful things that happen to those bodies when

⁴⁴ Kobena Mercer, “Engendered Species: Danny Tisdale and Keith Piper,” *Artforum International* 30 (1992): 74.

they are detected. “I know this for a fact, you don’t like how I act, you claim I’m sellin’ crack,” some of the lyrics to “Sound of Da Police,” highlight how no black male body can be overlooked or considered nonthreatening. “When my car is hooked up, you know you want to follow me,” suggesting that there is always reasonable cause for suspicion.⁴⁵ KRS-One draws a connection between police officers and plantation overseers pointing out that neither really needed much provocation to harass or kill black men:

The overseer rode around the plantation, the officer is off patrolling all the nation. The overseer could stop you want you’re doing, the officer will pull you over just when he’s pursuing. The overseer had the right to get ill, and if you fought back, the overseer had the right to kill. The officer has the right to arrest, and if you fight back they put a hole in your chest.⁴⁶

“Sound of Da Police” speaks to the frustration of an entire generation of black men who feel little had changed since slavery. KRS-One’s solution: “The police them have a little gun so when I’m on the streets, I walk around with a bigger one.”⁴⁷ In contrast, *To Disembark* recommends avoiding the altercation all together; running and going into hiding may be a safer option. Here, to make oneself invisible is a form of self-preservation.

“Strange Fruit” offers a haunting description of black bodies that have found an end to their suffering; in loosing their lives they have been symbolically “freed.” Holiday sings: “Southern trees bare strange fruit, blood on the leaves and blood at the root. Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze, strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.”⁴⁸ Holiday juxtaposes the sickening details of a lynching - “bulging eyes and twisted mouth” - with a beautiful illustration of being put out of one’s misery - “pastoral scene

⁴⁵ KRS-One, *Sound of Da Police*, © 1993 by Jive Records, Compact discs.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Billie Holiday, *Strange Fruit*, © 1939 by Commodore Records, Vinyl record.

of the gallant South... scent of magnolia, sweet and fresh.”⁴⁹ Between KRS-One crying “WHOOOP WHOOP!” in warning of a lurking beast and Holiday’s gut-wrenching tone, Ligon’s crates tell the tale of bodies that were once there, but have since found a way to escape, fleeing for their lives. But they are also coffins reminding us that escape is also linked to death: death by lynching, death at the hands of the plantation owner or the police.

Ten prints make up the *Runaways* series included in *To Disembark*. Each *Runaway* includes a description written by one of Ligon’s friends who were asked to write about him as though he had gone missing and they were describing him to the police. All of the writers offered an overview of his body, including age, height, weight, skin color, and the clothes he was last seen wearing. A handful of them described mannerisms and personality traits. Each of the prints includes a generic icon of a figure Ligon found in 19th century newspapers and in abolitionist tracts.⁵⁰ Put together, the icon and text create bills that resemble 19th century newspaper ads for the capture and return of runaway slaves. One of the *Runaways* (fig. 4) prints includes this description:

Ran Away, Glenn, a young black man twenty-eight years old, about five feet six inches high. Dressed in blue jeans, a blue buttoned-down shirt, black shoes. Medium build. Very short haircut (not quite shaved head). Large neck. Green tinted sunglasses.⁵¹

An image of a small, running slave carrying a bundle accompanies this text, clearly not a likeness of Ligon, but certainly a confirmation of the out-of-sight black male body.

Because all ten prints have the same composition and are the same size, we are reminded

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ “Glen Ligon. Runaways,” MoMA, accessed November 13, 2013, http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=73006.

⁵¹ Ibid.

of the frequency at which these types of ads were printed in the 19th century. The text does not offer a clear image of Ligon, either. Huey Copeland describes the prints as giving no solid, tangible impression of Ligon's body; instead there is merely a textual outline of the body that was once there.⁵² The coupling of the language with a generic image that is not of the runaway body is confusing and unsettling, and as viewers we become implicated in this process of searching and scrutinizing. We begin to survey the area around us on the lookout for the escaped bodies. We do not actually know the identity of the missing person or runaway slave; the only thing we can be sure of, Copeland says, "is that some species of black flesh has gotten loose from its moorings within the social hierarchy and must be put back in its place."⁵³

Runaways

Looking to locate and retrieve their property, slave owners in the 19th century would post ads in their local paper about their runaway slaves (fig. 5). The ads normally included a description of the slave's body, skin color, distinguishing scars or marks, location last seen, name and the reward offered. In this way the ads turned the authoritarian white gaze onto the black body to scrutinize and profile, assuming that any black body could be a runaway body and that all black bodies should be regarded with caution, suspicion and fear. Despite the fact that runaway slave ads mentioned distinct features of the slave who had fled, the actual postings have a sameness that undercuts any sense of individuality. In addition, there were tens of thousands of ads posted throughout the 19th century. Ads were generally three to four sentences long and included the term

⁵² Copeland, "Glenn Ligon and Other Runaway Subjects," 92.

⁵³ Ibid., 92.

‘runaway’ in big bold letters. Sometimes an image of a running slave was included, though not normally a likeness of the slave described in the ad. Often the amount of money the owner was prepared to offer as a reward was printed at the top of the ad in order to draw interest, but also made clear the fact that the body they were looking for was regarded as nothing more than a commodity object. The combination of a generic image and the dollar amount indicate that the descriptions of the body are secondary; in the most general sense, what is most important is that the missing black bodies be located and contained.

But what exactly were black men running away from in the 1990s more than a century after the abolition of slavery? Without slave owners and overseers or minstrel shows or segregated drinking fountains, what was their struggle? Kevin Powell points out that in the 1990s the legacy of slavery was alive and well in the hearts and minds of black people, “and colored people have had to lug around the added burden of being marked as a minority, defined by the dominant culture as the “other,” the outsiders whose purpose is to define White life, usually in the negative function as an antithesis of the ideal.”⁵⁴ Long after the institution of slavery and decades after the Civil Rights Movement, blacks were still trying to escape an identity created for them while attempting to find their own. Powell also makes a point about why black men in particular were so viciously demonized, arguing that in American patriarchal society, white men were most threatened by non-white men. He argues that the spirit of colonialism called for manhood to be defined by what one could rule and regulate and destroy if necessary. The Civil Rights Movement challenged white supremacy and frightened white men who did not

⁵⁴ Kevin Powell, *Who's Gonna Take the Weight?: Manhood, Race and Power in America* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003), 86.

want to share their power.⁵⁵ In order to fight for that power, black people needed heroes to champion their cause. Great leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King and passionate groups like the Black Panther Party stepped up and spoke out. In order to combat the negative press and negative stereotypes circulating in the 1990s, the invisible black man needed a hero, too. Such a hero was manifested in hip-hop and the clever-tongued, inner city ruffians who made it their business to push the invisible man into the limelight.

Slightly younger than Ligon is Kehinde Wiley whose paintings of black men, both the visible and the invisible, exude heroism and power. Wiley is well-known for painting portraits of young inner-city black men in the latest hip-hop fashions assuming poses found in seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth-century European portraiture by the “Old Masters,” such as Titian, Van Dyck and Ingres. To find models, Wiley scours the streets of Harlem, looking for invisible (aka general population) black male subjects to render visible and monumental in his paintings. By posing in traditional ways these young black men perform the “power and pomp that recall the stances of omnipotence and pageantry of European portraiture” and enact a visual vocabulary of prestige and supremacy.⁵⁶ In 2005, the television network VH1 commissioned Wiley to paint portraits of the honorees in that year’s Hip Hop Honors.⁵⁷ The very visible rapper Ice-T posed as the great military leader and emperor Napoleon, in a copy of Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres’s *Napoleon I on his Imperial Throne*, 1806 (fig. 6). In the painting Ice-T retains his own style – black basketball shoes, black pants and a sleeveless black jersey top – but he is draped in an imperial robe with plush red fabric and white fur. He sits upright and

⁵⁵ Ibid, 98.

⁵⁶ Krista Thompson, “The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop,” *The Art Bulletin* 91 (2009), 490.

⁵⁷ “Paintings: Kehinde Wiley,” National Portrait Gallery, accessed March 19, 2014, <http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/recognize/paintings.html>

regal on the imperial throne holding the hand of justice in his right hand and cradling the salute of Charlemagne against his left knee. A few shiny accessories adorn his wrists and hands, and he is crowned not with golden laurel leaves, as in Napoleon's portrait, but with a black baseball cap, a more standard headpiece for urban black men. The brim shades his eyes, but he looks out at the viewer with a triumphant expression, his mouth turned down at the corners and his chin lifted. The standard conventions for representing power changed when Wiley substituted Ice-T for Napoleon.⁵⁸ The painting signifies the importance of rap music as a form of entertainment, while disrupting the general understanding of black masculinity as low class and incapable. Seated on the imperial throne in a style traditionally reserved for the world's most powerful and heroic men, Ice-T's power as a famous rapper with money and influence is elevated as equal to great historical rulers. In this way, Wiley acknowledges the perceived danger to the ruling class associated with black masculinity. Napoleon is remembered as a great conqueror who at the height of his career as Emperor of France controlled most of Europe. Wiley's portrait of Ice-T raises these historical memories which leads us to question the force behind hip-hop music and culture, as well as the fears that lyrics by black gangbangers, drug dealers and pimps would poison the minds of America's youth.

In the early 1990s, published photographs of Ice-T generally played into society's expectation of black masculinity as presenting an aggressive attitude and violent behavior. Ice-T posed for the cover of *Hip-Hop Connection* magazine in the summer of 1993 (fig. 7). Dressed in black, brows furrowed, his eyes narrowed in a hostile glare and his upper lip cocked, he points a semi-automatic handgun directly into the camera and into the face of the reader. The bi-line reads: "Guns, Rap's Lethal Weapon," but the

⁵⁸ Thompson, "The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop," 490.

undertone reads: Ice-T's black body, America's Lethal Weapon.⁵⁹ By the early 1990s it was commonplace to see rappers on magazine covers, and the recipe for representing black masculinity included a combination of an angry expression, dark clothing, violent gestures or a threatening stance. In the summer of 1990, *The Source* magazine featured Ice Cube on the cover, frowning and dressed in black, staring menacingly for the photograph (fig. 8). Dangling near his face is a set of handcuffs and the title of his cover story: "Ice Cube: Solo, At Large & In Effect." KRS-One posed for *The Source* in the spring of 1992 (fig. 9). His dark coat, black hoodie sweatshirt and black beanie fit the pattern. His face is shown twisted into a combative expression, which is mimicked by his gesture of slamming his right fist into his left palm. "KRS-One, Sex and Violence" is printed in big bold letters next to his head and below his tightly set mouth is the phrase he is presumably asking the reader: "You wanna test me?!"⁶⁰ Such representations of black men highlight what Tricia Rose describes as the perceived public problem in the 1990s with communities or "hotbeds of crime, drugs, and violent behavior."⁶¹ Society's understanding of black male identity exists in a vicious cycle. These magazine covers are based off of the same stereotypes that they perpetuate. Placing these popular public images side-by-side and along side any of the other hundreds of images printed throughout the first half of the 1990s results in an overload of negative information. Oversaturation leads to honing in on the more unattractive attributes and we simplify black manhood into a stereotype.

⁵⁹ "Guns, Rap's Lethal Weapon!", *Hip-Hop Connection* (August 1993).

⁶⁰ "KRS-ONE: Sex and Violence," *The Source*, (April 1992).

⁶¹ Tricia Rose, "Rap Music and the Demonization of Young Black Males," in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, ed. Thelma Golden (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1994), 150.

Media Misconceptions

Magazine cover images of hip-hop artists and runaway slave ads from the 19th century seem eerily similar in their composition, which reinforces the connection of the magazine covers and the slave ads to Ligon's *Runaways*. An illuminating comparison can be made between Ice Cube's 1990 *The Source* cover and a 19th century ad for Dave, an escaped slave from North Carolina. The following ad appeared in the *Carolina Watchman* in July of 1840:

RUNAWAY: FROM the Point Plantation on the 11th Inst., a Negro boy by the name of DAVE. Said boy is about 25 years of age, about 6 feet 2 or 3 inches high, slim made, and is of a dark complexion, has a short nose, and speaks quite and gross. Said boy is well known, as he has kept the Ferry at the Point, for the last five years. A reasonable reward will be given to any person who will deliver said boy to me, or confine him in any Jail, so that I can get a speedy notice, and get him again. Said boy belongs to the estate of Joseph Pearson, dec.⁶²

The title of the magazine, "The Source," is large and centrally located at the top of the page; the word "Runaway" appears in the same way in the ad. In each composition the black male body is visually framed as a way to contain the figure. On the magazine cover Ice Cube's image is cropped limiting the viewer's information to only a disembodied head; in the ad a thick line runs along the edges. Both names, Dave and Ice Cube, are shown bolded and larger than the rest of the text followed by the descriptive text below.

The prominence of the names on the ad and the magazine cover brings up an interesting point about the significance of names and titles for slaves and rap artists. In the 19th century slaves were given names by their owners. Taking away their African name and labeling them with a surname or a generic American one was one way to claim ownership over black bodies and dehumanize them. Highlighting the word 'Dave' within

⁶² "North Carolina Runaway Slave Advertisements, 1751-1840," UNCG Libraries, accessed November 15, 2013, <http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/RAS>.

the description is a reference to his status as property; it is not really a distinguishing marker. In the ad the word 'boy,' is used in a similar way, a title used to infantilize black men and do away with their individuality. In 2008, Congressman Geoff Davis referred to then presidential candidate Barack Obama as a "boy" at a political event.⁶³ The Congressman may not have felt that President Obama was ready to lead or defend the country, but by calling him "boy" the condescending attack went beyond speculating on the candidate's possible immaturity as a politician and crossed over into an attack on Obama's manhood.⁶⁴

On the other hand, for a male rapper, his name as an artist is distinct and personal, a name chosen for himself. For black men, naming themselves means taking back ownership as rapper names are often linked to personal stories, childhood nicknames or what region they come from. They are specifically meant to communicate aspects of their identity. Rapper Earl Simmons calls himself DMX, which is an acronym for 'Dark Man X,' a testament to his very public self-destructive behaviors, including drug addiction, multiple arrests, and sexual promiscuity. In his song lyrics DMX is very candid about the sources of his demons as originating from a painful childhood full of neglect. For some rappers, their names evolve as they gain popularity and are recognized for their talent. No longer invisible or someone's boy, rappers use names to elevate themselves from the lowest social position to a height above their oppressors. Both Jay-Z and Kanye West have changed their names to liken themselves to dieties. Jay-Z as Hova and West as Yeezus appear determined to shed the old impression of black men to be feared because

⁶³ Kate Phillips, "G.O.P. Rep. Refers to Obama as 'That Boy'," *New York Times*, April 14, 2008, Accessed on December 31, 2013, <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/04/14/gop-rep-refers-to-obama-as-that-boy/>.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

of their criminal acts and sexuality, towards being revered as an all-powerful being. In the *Runaways* each lithograph merely says the runaway's name is 'Glenn.' Posing as the 'invisible man,' Ligon retains his given name for the slave bill demonstrating that he does not have control over how he is represented and as a fugitive black man he might be someone to be feared.

Slave ads did not always directly describe the missing slave as a threat. The ad for Dave does not really imply that Dave is someone to be feared; neither do the descriptions in Ligon's prints. In fact, many of the *Runaways* describe Ligon as someone a person might actually want to run into, the exact opposite of the image of Ice Cube who has freed himself from his handcuffs and is "at large."⁶⁵ Some of the more flattering language in the *Runaways* includes: "He has a sweet voice, is quiet. Appears somewhat timid. Very articulate, seemingly well-educated, does not look at you straight in the eye when talking to you. He's socially very adept, yet paradoxically, he's somewhat of a loner."⁶⁶ Terms like "calm," "smile" and "distinguished" stand in stark contrast to the Ice Cube bi-line titles, which include words like "nightmare," "predator" or "most wanted." But, does it matter if the information given makes the subject seem approachable or not? In both representations black men are shown misbehaving. Regardless of any social advancement blacks have made throughout America's history, black men have often been regarded with fear and skepticism by white Americans. But that fear does not override a fascination with the black male body, and this is why descriptions of the male figure and character are so rich. They are an exploration of the body and an attempt to capture something of the essence of a person. In Ligon's prints and the 19th century slave ads one

⁶⁵ "Ice Cube: Solo, At Large & In Effect," *The Source* (Summer 1990).

⁶⁶ "Glen Ligon. Runaways."

understands the black male body as made up of parts: “large neck” or “short nose” and “dark complexion.” Hip-hop magazines describe a wild nature, an uncivilized and uncontrolled body, but either way we are looking for and gazing at the marginalized Other.

The struggle to rail against demonizing images and labels has led to a gray area in determining black male identity. As bell hooks writes:

...And it struck me that for black people, the pain of learning that we cannot control our images, how we see ourselves, or how we are seen is so intense that it rends us. It rips and tears at the seams of our efforts to construct self and identity. Often it leaves us ravaged by repressed rage, feeling weary, dispirited, and sometimes just plain old brokenhearted. These are the gaps in our psyche that are the spaces where mindless complicity, self-destructive rage, hatred and paralyzing despair enter.⁶⁷

bell hooks' comment complicates any possibility of a static and legible black male identity in the 1990s. In neither the high art realm of the museum nor the neighborhood newsstand can we find a representation that highlights the array of identifications available to black males. At the point at which black men accept and participate in negative images, because they feel they have no other choice but to comply with negative stereotypes, they become powerless to construct their own identity. Ligon asking his friends to describe him instead of describing himself in the *Runaways* is an indication that Ligon was already aware that he has no control or power over how he is perceived. What little control he does have is in choosing his critics; he knows the descriptions will be biased, but positively so. His friends chose what they viewed as the most important identifying characteristics and completely omitted any information about who or what Ligon was running away from. In creating *Runaways* Ligon positioned himself in the old slave condition of those who were powerless to change public perceptions about race.

⁶⁷ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 3-4.

The *Runaways* position Ligon not as one single black man that we can see and relate to as an individual, but in line with the broader array of negative stereotypes surrounding black manhood. The *Runaways* remind us that identities and formations of black masculinity have not really changed from the 19th century to the 20th century, and that regardless of any social advancement black men still have not been able to separate their current images from damaging historical representations or American's prejudices.

Tricia Rose explains how one-sided media stories and images about young black males create and perpetuate fear and denial in the public psyche. She says, "The white American public, many of whom only tangentially know any young black men personally, has been inundated with images of young black men who appear fully invested in a life of violent crime... for no apparent reason."⁶⁸ She plays up this issue of young black men acting out for no good reason saying the idea of senseless, innate violent tendency is the source of the public's fears about black men and it makes them seem animalistic or like monsters.⁶⁹ This is the constant struggle that black men have had to face since the antebellum period, the idea that someone on the outside gets to determine what black masculinity is in order to manipulate fact and situation to fulfill their agenda. Rose says, "Making monsters out of a multitude of young people who struggle to survive under immense pressures involves drawing attention away from the difficulties they face, minimizing the abuses they suffer, and making their cultural activity seem a product or example of their status as dangerous creatures."⁷⁰

Dehumanized and oversimplified, the black male body functions as the same "generic

⁶⁸ Rose, "Rap Music and the Demonization of Young Black Males," 153.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

placeholders” that exist in Ligon’s *Runaways*, and the language surrounding their images becomes just a broken record replaying the hurtful terms.⁷¹

Rapper Tupac Shakur sat for an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* in late October of 1995. He had just been released on bail from Rikers Island where he was serving time for a sexual abuse conviction. In the interview Tupac insisted that he was not a gangster and that rapping about gang violence, drug dealing and other ugly parts of life was his job as an artist. But Tupac could not understand why the American public only saw his negative side. He said, “The thing that bothers me is that it seems like all the sensitive stuff I write just goes unnoticed . . . the media doesn't get who I am at all. Or maybe they just can't accept it. It doesn't fit into those negative stories they like to write.”⁷² To his fans Tupac was a man and an artist that covered a full gamut of identities, someone who was passionate and intelligent, sexy and confident, humble and soft-spoken, but also aggressive and threatening. However, with the words ‘thug life’ tattooed across his stomach and plenty of bad press for arrests and controversial song lyrics, only his thug tendencies seemed to matter.

In March of 1996, Tupac appeared on the cover of *The Source* wearing a white “wife-beater” tank top and various pieces of jewelry (fig. 10). A multitude of tattoos are spread across his tensed biceps and forearms and he rubs his hands together as though preparing for confrontation. His eyes are squinted and fixed at the camera, his upper lip slightly cocked in a snarl. The bi-line simply reads: “Tupac Free?”⁷³ The image along with the suggestive tone of the question perpetuates fears associated with the black male body. No matter if Tupac is free or Ligon has fled, if an image is captured on a magazine

⁷¹ Copeland, “Glenn Ligon and Other Runaway Subjects,” 92.

⁷² Chuck Phillips, “Tupac Shakur: ‘I am not a gangster,’” *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 1995.

⁷³ “Tupac Free?” *The Source*, (March 1996).

cover, or if we are left with mere descriptions wondering where the black body might be lurking, the implications are the same. Black men still cannot “runaway” from media vilification and in the end are stuck searching for individual identities that exist outside of public scrutiny and beyond the confines of America’s historically vicious treatment of black people. The *Runaways* indicate that for Ligon the idea of the “invisible” is a category of identity for black men, a strategy for survival.

Chapter 2: Gone

Black Girls do not posses a collective heart that can be broken. We embody the will to power. Just Look. We are Superman. Venus, Oprah, Toni, Angela, Tina, Serena, Kara, etcetera. We End in Vowel sounds and Our names Last Forever when you speak them aaah!

- Kara Walker, *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*, 2003

...Always making work which Invisibilifies The Black Male real and imagined. I would like to point out that Invisibility can be a form of power- CAN BE- didn’t say is don’t put words in my mouth.

- Kara Walker, *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*, 2003

Kara Walker makes work about power. Her large-scale silhouette installations are well-known for referencing 18th and 19th century literature and imagery as a means to comment on the power dynamics of race in America, both contemporary and historical,

as well as violence, sexuality and desire. The work, which takes on an almost narrative structure, is set within the genteel backdrop of the antebellum South where the characters engage, often brutally, in battles of power: the exchange and abuse of power, the taking and maintaining control of that power and the destruction of those that appear powerless.

The 1990s in America was a time of great tension between white and black citizens, as black bodies were constantly being vilified in the media, often associated with the worst attributes of society and described with a number of negative stereotypes that overshadowed any unique sense of identity blacks may have tried to adopt for themselves. Walker appeared on the artistic scene in the mid-1990s at a moment when work about race relations was just as valid and important as it had ever been because attitudes about blackness within large swatches of white American society had not significantly advanced beyond those of the antebellum period or Jim Crow laws, or the Civil Rights movement. Walker describes her work as addressing the historical memory of America and “whether or not there is such a thing as a past and present, or if the present is just like the past with new clothes on.”⁷⁴ In the 1990s America’s ever-present issues with the legacy of the Old South and slavery were manifesting themselves in print media images and political policy and blacks still had very little influence or authority over how they were represented or perceived.

Black women in American society in the 1990s seemed to be positioned right at the center of public disdain and were even more powerless than black men to change public perceptions. Black women were left alone to head a single-parent household, blamed in the media for persistent social problems like crime and immorality, broken by

⁷⁴ Matthea Harvey, “Artists in Conversation: Kara Walker,” *Bomb Magazine*, Summer 2007, 100.

poverty, battered by partners and immobilized by welfare reform.⁷⁵ In this chapter I explore Walker's treatment of female figures in *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*, 1994 (fig. 11), as a reference to black women's lack of power under the surveillance of a white, patriarchal governing body in America. In addition, I read Walker's representation of the black female body as empowered to be the leader of her family against all odds and to seek a personal identity outside of cruel media labels and misguided public opinions. With respect to the plight of single black women, Walker's claim that her work "invisibilifies the black male" suggests that she has the power to transform a once visible black male body into an obscure presence or in some cases complete absence, which parallels to the way black male identity has been reduced to categories of negative stereotypes, as discussed in Chapter One. Walker brings attention to the black male bodies that were "gone" in late 20th century America: the absent fathers, those who had died or those who were incarcerated. Through the form of the silhouette Walker traced and recorded conservative white attitudes towards and expectations of the black family, missing black men, and the stories both past and present that shape the black woman's role as an American citizen.

Walker started making silhouettes while she was in graduate school at the Rhode Island School of Design 1991-1994. She moved north after graduating from the Atlanta College of Art in 1991 where she had avoided making work about race because she felt it was what her instructors expected her to create. Having lived in Stone Mountain, Georgia, and then Atlanta since her early teens, Walker viewed her life and racial identity

⁷⁵ Dána-Ain Davis, *Battered Black Women and Welfare Reform: Between a Rock and a Hard Place* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 41-43.

as a performance she had to put on each day.⁷⁶ Once she “escaped” from the South and went “up North to make good,” she felt free to investigate race and racism and sought out references to black womanhood and early American portraiture and read novels like *Gone With the Wind*.⁷⁷ Walker started graduate school making abstract paintings, but soon found that the silhouette was the most effective means to edit the swirling issues and emotions about race that she had held onto from her time growing up in the South and condense them into a functional space.⁷⁸

Walker’s mid-1990s installation *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* stretches across the gallery space with dimensions of 13x50’ and is comprised of cut black contact paper silhouettes that are applied to a white wall. To create these life-sized figures Walker first draws with chalk on black paper and then cuts them out using an X-Acto knife. The scenes are then staged on the wall to surround the viewer, either covering several flat walls or installed in-the-round in a cyclorama. As viewers walk by their shadows are also cast on the wall so that as they attempt to “read” the story presented in front of them their own bodies become part of the scene (fig. 12). This allows for the deceptive simplicity of the silhouette to engage the viewer in active looking which may also lead to and racist scrutinizing, implicating viewers in the actions of the figures they watch, but also in social profiling.

⁷⁶ Gwendolyn Dubois-Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 12-13.

⁷⁷ Jerry Saltz, “Kara Walker- Ill-Will and Desire,” *Flash Art* (1996): 84. For a discussion of the book *Gone With the Wind* and the possible connections to Walker’s *Gone*, see Lisa Saltzman, *Making Memory Matter: Strategies of Remembrance in Contemporary Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 59.

⁷⁸ Dubois-Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable*, 12-13.

Walker's work has met with much controversy since 1994, when she first exhibited *Gone* in her first major installation, at the Drawing Center in New York City. Much of the backlash came from older African American artists like Betye Saar who were outraged that Walker would use her power as an international artist not to uplift black people in America, but instead to perpetuate vicious stereotypes and returning to the hateful social structures blacks had fought so hard to escape.⁷⁹ Lisa Saltzman describes Walker's use of the silhouette in combination with horrifying content as "negative images of negative images."⁸⁰ Though Walker's use of the silhouette technique references pre-photographic contact images and her subject matter references a racist institution that is 150 years behind us, her work remains undeniably current and innovative as a means to explore "how you make representations of your world given what you've been given?"⁸¹

In order to comment on the social issues blacks faced in the 1990s, such as poverty and racial profiling, Walker turns back to the antebellum south, a setting that is prettier and more genteel than the inner-city street corners and over-crowded project housing. Among the green acres, grand plantation homes and romantic "weeping willow" trees, black bodies were trafficked, dehumanized and brutalized. Walker has said in interviews that the silhouette "lends itself to avoidance of the issue, not being able to look at it directly."⁸² In the same way the plight of many black families was washed over as

⁷⁹ Jerry Saltz, "An Explosion of Color in Black and White," *New York Magazine*, November 1, 2007.

⁸⁰ Lisa Saltzman, *Making Memory Matter: Strategies of Remembrance in Contemporary Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 58-59. Saltzman describes Walker work as negative images both in the use of demeaning stereotypes, but also in its formal state, a "shadow captured in outline." Walker's negative images are silhouettes of stereotypes.

⁸¹ "Kara Walker in 'Stories'," PBS Art 21, access February 18, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/kara-walker>

⁸² "Kara Walker in 'Stories'."

the cause of pathology or the habits of the black urban poor, not a social problem or a governmental responsibility. The origin of this type of racial profiling can be traced back to the physiognomic studies of Swiss minister Johann Caspar Lavater.

Silhouettes and Stereotypes

In the 18th century Lavater developed the “science” of physiognomy by using silhouetted profiles, which he referred to as “shades” to classify and compare people of different races.⁸³ He believed a person’s natural moral character could be determined by reading their facial structure and features. By the 19th century white Americans in the south were subscribing to Lavater’s ideologies and as a way to justify slavery through the belief that non-white races would never advance to the point of civilization that whites had, regardless of their efforts, because they were biologically incapable of developing intelligence, high-minded moral values, or refined manners.⁸⁴

During the 19th century silhouette portraiture became popular as an art form, practiced as a craft in parlor games, but also highly regarded as fine art used to represent important statesman. The process was quick and inexpensive and required little skill, as it only necessitated an artist trace the shadow of the sitter as it was cast on the wall by a single light source. Many silhouette artists were black women, as silhouette cutting was regarded as craft, or low art, and therefore as a weaker, more feminine artistic practice. Once oppressed as the subject of racial profiling, black women cutters were simultaneously called upon to use the tool to render others, though not necessarily by choice. In contrast to her historical sisters, Walker purposefully engages in the practice of

⁸³ Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, (London: William Tegg, 1869), 190-191.

⁸⁴ Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 18-20, 23-29.

silhouette cutting as an artist with free will. She uses the silhouette to explore the complexities of her own life as a “black woman artist” and what it means to live, work and become successful in a society with such a deep racist history where black female bodies are constantly labeled and targeted.⁸⁵

Saltzman cites the mythic tale of the first woman silhouette artist as told by Pliny the Elder: about a Corinthian maiden, a potter’s daughter, who traced the shadow of her lover on the wall in anticipation of his going off to war. Afterward her father pressed clay to the outline and made a relief sculpture. Saltzman focuses on the idea of imminent loss and how the tracing of the human shadow to create a visual representation is a ritual of remembrance from the past that is not so far off from the way we capture likenesses in the present.⁸⁶ This idea of accurate likenesses is very much related to silhouette cutting as many professional cutters in the years before the widespread use of photography were charged with creating the most precise images so that patrons could truly have a memento to cherish and reference when away from family and friends. Walker has mentioned that early on in her work she became interested in what she says was a type of overblown advertising that traveling silhouette artists would put out about their lightening quick cutting skills and their ability to render the most exact likeness of a sitter.⁸⁷ However, unlike the 19th century cutter Walker does not cut from a shadow, and thus has no obligation to accuracy; not to a sitter or a story or social conventions. Instead she lets stereotype act as her guide. Unlike Pliny’s tale there is no concrete trapping of the body in a moment in time for the purposes of remembering. Her silhouettes reference a historical chapter in American history, but are fictional; they are bodies that were never

⁸⁵ Dubois-Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable*, 20.

⁸⁶ Saltzman, *Making Memory Matter*, 1-3.

⁸⁷ “Kara Walker in ‘Stories’,” PBS Art 21

there to begin with. We cannot hold on to them and they are not a ritual of remembrance. The silhouettes function in the present as receptacles for viewer stories, perversions, misinformation and desires, in direct relation to the ongoing stereotyping of blacks in American society.

The most effective way to approach Walker's work is to categorize figures by race. We determine their proper category by using Lavater's guidelines, first by identifying bodily features and labeling them as belonging to a black person or white person. Beyond the body, the appearance of clothing, gestures, hair texture, accessories and tools or weapons are all powerful identifiers. We then ascribe character traits to the figures and rationalize power roles between them. Lavater's was a pioneer in physiognomic research assigning "short black and curly hair, thick projecting lips and broad short nose" to "Negro" people in the 18th century, those whom he referred to as savages in comparison to Europeans due to their low intelligence.⁸⁸ Today we still recognize black people by these stereotypical features and others, like large buttocks and thick thighs, residual code from the displayed body of South African Saartjie Baartman a woman from the Khoikhoi tribe and her forced performance as the human oddity "Hottentot Venus" in the early 1800s.

The visual shorthand of the stereotype found in American visual culture is continual fodder for numerous artists working on contemporary questions of race and identity. Michael Ray Charles is known for making paintings that, like Walker's, mock the "romance" of the Old South while still using it as a vehicle for understanding blackness as an identity in a post-modern society. His figures, which are often the Sambo and Mammy-type, traditional and quite racist 19th and early 20th century imagery, have

⁸⁸ Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, 344-348.

exaggerated lips and eyes, very dark skin and nappy hair and are comparable to with how Charles sees blacks portrayed in contemporary mass-media images (fig. 13). His work suggests that negative historical representations remain constant as stereotypes in the American conscious and must continue to be confronted and questioned.⁸⁹

In 1997, Charles exhibited a solo show at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in New York City. The commemorative catalogue for the show was contained in a sealed fabric pouch that had to be cut or torn forcing a level of interaction with the contents. On the outside of the pouch is an image of a black Mickey Mouse paper doll, with block letters beneath him spelling out “cut and paste.” The features that make the Mickey black are kinky looking sprouts of hair, large oval shapes where his eyes should be, and a mouth shaped like a donut, all reminiscent of the minstrel mask. Around the figure are the eight objects that can be cut out and applied, including: a football, a hair pick, a hand gun, a chicken, a purse, a stripped tie, a banana, and a knife. This catalogue cover confronts the issue of how people recognize and read stereotypes as the objects pictured are all linked to assumptions of the black experience, like playing sports, committing violent crimes and eating chicken. Each one of these categories works to turn the white gaze on the black body in the media; great athleticism, a seemingly inherent drive to break the law, and food consumption: bananas reinforce a close relationship to primates, while chicken and watermelon recall greedy ungrateful slave children who stole from their masters.

Welfare Queens, Jezebels, and Mammys

⁸⁹ “Michael Ray Charles in ‘Consumption’,” PBS Art 21, accessed February 27, 2014, <http://www.art21.org/artists/michael-ray-charles>

In the early part of the 1990s, there was a considerable amount of conservative white scrutiny focused on the black female body, and in particular her role as the head of the poor black family. The surveying, categorizing and governmental regulation brought about by President Clinton's Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) becomes fodder for Walker's artistic production. I argue that in *Gone* Walker offers a view of life on the antebellum plantation as a parallel to the life of a single poor black woman in contemporary America. White politicians using welfare policy to regulate the lives of black women are symbolized through the brutality of the dehumanizing and oppressive institution of slavery. The title *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* references Margaret Mitchell's epic novel *Gone with the Wind* 1936, a story about love, war and the loss of a civilization. The civil war in Walker's *Gone* is understood as occurring inside and around any number of single black mothers in the 1990s; gone is her power to protect or control her own body and her family; gone is the black man as father or partner. She is left to endure hardships alone and take charge of the household.

If the title is read literally, then it is unclear in *Gone* which figure is the Negress. Along its fifty-foot length there are multiple places where one could locate activity happening between a pair of thighs. The title also implies that the work takes on a narrative structure and can be read left to right. But if read as social commentary then each grouping of figures can be seen representing a story or an observation independently, and all feed into the larger issues concerning constructions and interpretations of black female identity.

Taken as a whole, *Gone* is a romantic pastoral scene with moonlit skies, riverbanks and mossy magnolia trees. There are couples at the far left and far right that I read as bookends to the 1990s political story of welfare reform. Reform often has positive connotations; it is a word that denotes great changes that will somehow improve people's lives. In fact the slogan for PRWORA was "A New Beginning – Welfare to Work." As President Clinton signed the bill with those words posted in bright gold letters on the front of the podium, and two black women by his side, it may have actually seemed like a promise of hope for poor black families. Under a moonlit magnolia tree in *Gone* the propaganda surrounding welfare reform is cleverly presented as a courtship scene. A southern belle presses up on her tiptoes and leans toward a man in uniform for a kiss (fig. 14). Their hands touch but their lips do not. This scene of a blossoming romance is a façade, similar to how the PRWORA was romanced by the policy makers and media. Because there is a second pair of legs under the belles' full hoop-skirt, a signal that something else is going on, we sense that something is not right, and we have to look a little deeper and lift the blinders in order to find it out. On the right, a startled slave woman is carried off on the shoulders of a suited man, presumably the master (fig. 15). The woman is dressed in tattered clothing and a bow at her lower back suggests she is wearing an apron. Additional clues like her bare feet, her exaggerated lips and the handkerchief wrapped around her hair suggests to the viewer that she is both a slave and black. She fumbles with the broom she's holding as the man carries her off towards a grove of trees. The suggestion of impending sexual violence offers a moment to consider the black woman's will to endure. Here, the true colors of welfare reform come to light, as the result is that black women will come to face government surveillance, the inability

to control their families or their bodies, the threat of punishment, media vilification, and racism.

It is not in poor inner-city neighborhoods that Walker's image of romance unfolds, but instead between two young children atop a grassy hillock (fig. 16). A white boy stands with his pants down around his ankles; he holds his arms up overhead as though he has just thrown something up into the sky. In front of him a black girl has sunk to her knees and is fellating him. A reference to slavery might suggest that the boy is the master's son, and their "relationship" is only the beginning in a long line of sexual exploitation and humiliation she will face over time. The pumpkin sitting behind the couple, which suggests that this will not be a Cinderella story, further solidifies the fact that there will be no happy ending for these two. Instead this sex act represents the beginning of the:

...life-stage trajectory of Black women's images. Across the lifespan, from young to old, the stereotypes would be Jezebel, welfare queen, matriarch and Mammy. This order cumulatively casts Black women as dysfunctional both historically and throughout their own life cycles; hypersexual in youth, economically incompetent as adults, toxic as middle age women and desexualized as older women. Thus from adolescence to menopause, Black women are afflicted by pathology.⁹⁰

The vignette of the two children functions as a visual marker of the blatant hypocrisy embedded in U.S. race and economic relations surrounding black female sexuality and reproduction. Jezebel, who we here see on her knees here, is promiscuous and seductive. The construction of Jezebel was necessary in the antebellum South in order to explain white plantation owners using black women as breeders for economic purposes and as perverse sexual objects, since women in Victorian society were seen as pure and delicate

⁹⁰ Dána-Ain Davis, "Manufacturing Mammies: The Burdens of Service Work and Welfare Reform Among Battered Black Women," *Anthropologica* 46 (2004): 276.

beings who need to be protected and placed on pedestals. The Jezebel's presumed hyper-sexuality was the rationalization for the sexual violence enacted upon black women during slavery.⁹¹

In 1991, the trial that set law professor Anita Hill up against Supreme Court Judge nominee Clarence Thomas in a sexual harassment law suit set a precedent for images like those in *Gone*. Hill essentially ended up on trial and her character was called into question. In losing the case she became an example of the persistent discounting of black female subjects and the indifference towards sexual violation against women within American patriarchal society. Related to Walker's work is the art of Carrie Mae Weems, who gives Walker's silhouetted forms a face and a voice in her series *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, 1995. To make this work Weems photographed and enlarged thirty-four 19th century daguerreotypes taken in 1850 for Louis Agassiz, a Swiss naturalist attempting to find visual proof of his theories on racial inferiority.⁹² In one image titled *A Photographic Subject* (fig. 17) a black woman stares pointedly out at the camera; her expression looks as though she might at any second become sick with rage at her humiliating pose, for she is topless and exposed. It is hard to determine her age, partly because of the eerie red color of Weems' print and the quality of the original equipment used to photograph her. Presumably she is worn from work and malnourished, but it is her sagging breasts that really complicate any age distinction. The duality of the pictured breast, used for nursing the master's children, but also as a site for the master's sexual pleasure, is paralleled with the vagina in *You Became a Playmate to the Patriarch* (fig.

⁹¹ Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 54-55.

⁹² "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried," MoMA Learning, accessed March 1, 2014, https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/carrie-mae-weems-from-here-i-saw-what-happened-and-i-cried-1995

18). In this image a woman with far perkier breasts lays across a bed with her legs splayed open to the camera in a way that is reminiscent of Courbet's *Origin of the World*, 1866, symbolically understood as an origin of success for slave owners who used the black female body to populate their plantations. This woman leans back in a relaxed pose and her fingers graze her genitals. She smiles lightly as though pleased, seeming far more comfortable being on display than the woman in *& A Photographic Subject*.

Both of these images point to how we understand the black female body in America today. Professor and MSNBC political commentator Melissa Harris-Perry says, "You can turn on BET and you can see Jezebel at work, you can see the propagation and perpetration of black woman as highly sexualized."⁹³ Music videos show black women scantily clad, showing off ample breasts and booty, twerking, bouncing, and shaking to the music while hanging onto male rappers and R&B singers. But a double standard arises with this notion of black women as hypersexual when it intersects with hyper-fertility. In *Gone* this double standard is visually manifested as a black woman merely lifts a leg to demonstrate the ease of "making babies" (an ability required on the plantation and vilified in the present) as though she were a machine (fig. 19). From under her skirt she gives birth in "rapid succession" to two babies, which I propose is a symbolic representation of the welfare queen as imaged in late 20th century political discourse.⁹⁴

Some of the most disturbing conversations around welfare reform in the 1990s were those that centered on black women and reproduction. The pervasive ideology of the reproductive potential of hypersexual black women led to the image of the welfare

⁹³ "Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America," University of California Television, accessed March 1, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blX2YHdqUJA>

⁹⁴ Lisa Saltzman, *Making Memory Matter*, 62-63.

queen. A welfare queen is defined as a black woman who cheats the welfare system by producing children for the purpose of receiving government checks. Concerned with protecting the hard-working tax payer's money and propelled by white fears of speciation, talks turned to birth control measures like Norplant, a time-released synthetic hormone, and "family caps" with decreased benefits for each additional child. Support for these measures came from studies that showed blacks (over whites and Asians) had the greatest reproductive capability, were of lower intelligence and made the least amount of parental investment in their children.⁹⁵ Walker's welfare queen points an index finger back at the couple on the hillock connecting her spilled newborns to the image of the "sexually promiscuous and irresponsible African American women [who are] free and unburdened by either sexual or marital control [and who] constitute a threat to the entire society's normative order and moral character."⁹⁶

The sexual figure that completes the triangle between Jezebel and the welfare queen is the black male figure. He floats into the sky by way of his severely enlarged balloon-like penis (fig.20). I read him as a reference to the absent black male in the black family unit. His giant sex organ relates to the stereotype of the hypersexed black male body and he could well be the father of the welfare queen's babies or one of Jezebel's prior sex partners. Either way he plays a strong roll in the condition of black womanhood as impoverished, single and as a target for public contempt. The reason for this is deeply rooted in the experiences of the male slave in the antebellum south. As slaves black men were emasculated, referred to as 'boy' or 'uncle' (when they were old and presumably impotent), and essentially denied the position of economic provider or physical protector

⁹⁵ Kenneth J. Neubeck and Noel A. Cazenave, *Welfare Racism*, 153-159.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 153.

within the family unit.⁹⁷ After Emancipation and to the present, black men have found it hard to find and keep good jobs, often leaving the woman to be the sole provider. In addition, the 1990s saw black men turned into media caricatures and social statistics, deemed an “endangered species” due to murder, drugs and disproportionate incarceration rates as a result of black on black crime.⁹⁸ If the little boy on the hillock can be read as the “master’s son” then his gesture of tossing the black male figure away can be seen as representing American society and a white patriarchal system that diminishes black men socially and economically, effectively reducing his power and value within the black family unit. From this perspective the pumpkin behind the boy could be a reference to the children’s nursery rhyme “Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater,” a story of a man who was unable to “keep” his wife satisfied, from either a financial or sexual standpoint depending on the interpretation.⁹⁹ The absent black man who leaves his partner to fend for herself and her family, causing her to have to look for government assistance to avoid unmanageable poverty can be associated with Peter who leaves his wife in a pumpkin shell. In this sense, it is the welfare system that keeps the woman well, not the man. The position of the black male figure in *Gone* as up and away, rather than part of the main picture,

⁹⁷ Robert Staples, “The Myth of the Impotent Black Male” in *The Black Male in America: Perspectives on His Status in Contemporary Society*, ed. Doris. Y. Wilkinson and Ronald L. Taylor (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1977), 135.

⁹⁸ Thelma Golden, *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1994).

⁹⁹ The full Nursery Rhyme is: “Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater, had a wife but couldn’t keep her, put her in a pumpkin shell, and there he kept her very well.” Various interpretations can be found here <http://www.nursery-rhymes.org/nursery-rhymes/peter-peter-pumpkin-eater.html> or <http://www.bubblews.com/news/1364029-the-meaning-behind-the-nursery-rhyme-peter-peter-pumpkin-eater>.

signals his invisibility as a father both literally, as existing outside of the home, and figuratively, as the “absence of an adequate masculine role model” in the household.¹⁰⁰

The black matriarch has tended to be made responsible for the social ills that plague inner cities and poor neighborhoods. Supposedly economically non-productive and unable to discipline her children or to motivate them to become good functioning citizens, she is the reason why the streets teem with violent teens and drug dealing youth. She is regarded as overly aggressive and dominant with the black man, emasculating him, which leads to bitter resentment and a dysfunctional home.¹⁰¹ But within the black family she is often the sole provider and caregiver taking on all of the responsibilities related to parenting. In *Gone* she is a long-legged woman who sails towards the riverbank where a child who has just strangled a swan (fig. 21). She is positioned furthest away from the black male character and is mobilized in the opposite direction. She gestures towards the child on the bank in reprimand, a show of discipline and teaching, but one that comes too late. With her other hand she points to a disembodied head floating behind her, a bird/duck-like profile, which resembles the couple under the tree. This, I suggest, is a nod to the two-faced nature of welfare reform, but also a reference to the two hats that she must wear as both father and mother within the household. Her outstretched legs resemble the bottom of a boat, a reference to the great load she must carry and the multiple directions she is pushed and pulled in. However, and quite notably, she does not sink; she remains strong and afloat.

¹⁰⁰ David A. Schulz, “Coming Up as a Boy in the Ghetto,” in *The Black Male in America: Perspectives on His Status in Contemporary Society*, ed. Doris. Y. Wilkinson and Ronald L. Taylor (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1977), 11.

¹⁰¹ Dána-Ain Davis, “Manufacturing Mammies, 275-276.

The various groupings of characters in *Gone* are contained in the gallery space by trees situated on either end of the scene. The black and ambiguous space of silhouetted tree trunks and leaves is abruptly cut off as the wall ends suggesting there are untold stories beyond them, stories that will never be told. Within the picture plane the figures are trapped, caught in a continuous loop replaying the life stages and stereotypes they represent. The cycle begins with the hypersexual youth and the hyper-fertile young lady carried off into the welfare system and ends with the single impoverished woman, who is seen as an incapable mother and held responsible for spreading crime, violence and immorality. For many women relying on welfare stems from life occurrences outside of their control which results in economical marginalization. Several interrelated political and cultural forces such as class and gender inequality, unemployment and race cause black women's poverty, but yet the system steadily works against her and never shows her how to win.¹⁰²

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Dubois describes what it is like to live in a body that is constantly viewed with disdain, writing, "between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question...How does it feel to be a problem?"¹⁰³ In her book *Sister Citizen*, Melissa Harris-Perry turns this question directly towards the shaming of the black female body. She mentions some of the burdens that black women in particular have had to bear being associated with the "black family crisis, the welfare dilemma, and the crime problem" and being characterized as "the nations racial scar."¹⁰⁴ The shame

¹⁰² Rose M. Brewer, "Black Women in Poverty: Some Comments on Female-Headed Families," *Signs* 13 (1988): 334-336.

¹⁰³ Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 109-110

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

comes in knowing as a black woman that you yourself are a problem, but also that your uterus is a problem, as it is understood in America to perpetuate widespread failure.¹⁰⁵

Harris-Perry questions what it means to be a black woman and an American citizen, specifically what it feels like to try to do the work of citizenship when you are in a body that is racialized and gendered in a way that reproduces shame, fear and distress. She says that the federal monuments we build help us to understand our citizenship duties and responsibilities, which are raced and gendered.¹⁰⁶ She recounts a story about the proposal for the first monument honoring a black woman on the Washington National Mall. In 1923, the U.S. Senate authorized the building of the statue of an antebellum house-slave called Mammy and passed the necessary grants for the land it would sit on. The monument was killed in the House of Representatives due to push back from black groups who were outraged at the thought of erecting a statue of a completely false and fictitious character. Mammy is a stereotype most often pictured as a large, robust, dark-skinned, unfeminine figure (fig. 22). Unlike other depictions of black women where hips, breast or buttocks are accentuated, Mammy is desexualized. As the most trusted servant in the household and acting maternal figure for the children she was not to be the master's desire and was not meant to appear to have sexual desires of her own. She was rendered docile and extremely loyal, neglecting her own children with pleasure to focus all of her energies on her white family.¹⁰⁷

Mammy does not have her own black silhouette cutout figure in *Gone*. We do not see the power of the master or of governmental policy enacted against her, for Walker has

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 114.

¹⁰⁶ "Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America."

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 69-76.

taken us outside the big house and away from Mammy's gaze. Mammy represents good, black, female citizenship, so much so that it was considered deserving of a granite statue in the center of the nation's capital. Mammy's unwavering commitment to the white family "serves to stabilize the racial and gender order and therefore the order of the state," and therefore she exudes patriotism.¹⁰⁸ The PRWORA was directed at black women whose presumed self-interest, greed and lack of discipline showed disregard for the generosity of their government and the welfare of the American public, an attitude that was decidedly un-patriotic, and *Gone* is thus understood as the backlash to Mammy's perceived sense of order.

Walker has spoken about dealing with the complexities of her life through her work as it allows her to distance herself.¹⁰⁹ In *Gone* she confronts the complexities of black female identity, including proper and improper roles, servitude, sexuality and stereotypes, and uses them as a catalyst for her work. Walker uproots the normative and destabilizes moral order exposing America's racist tactics. Her work embraces society's fears, specifically those which keep us from openly addressing our prejudicial nature and ease in subscribing to negative stereotypes. In *Gone* Walker reproduces the visual experience that society has with media information containing these negative stereotypes. The media images and language we encounter are generally incomplete, void of important content that is necessary to construct a solid understanding of the issue; the form of silhouette functions in the same way. The caricatured figures in *Gone* may come across as absurd, but they push us to question the inaccuracies that drive public opinions on black women and their lifestyle. But Walker says black women are "Superman"

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 77.

¹⁰⁹ "Kara Walker in 'Stories'," PBS Art 21

against government control and white America's very narrow view of acceptable black feminine identities, leading me to ultimately believe that the echoes of strong black women are continuous and never die.

Legacy

I recently sat down with a group of thirty-one high school students in Lincoln, Nebraska, to talk about their ideas on black masculinity. The students, juniors and mostly white, were participating in an advanced literature class; I had one black male and one black female. We opened the conversation by talking about masculinity in general. I asked, "How do you describe someone who is masculine?" The students answered with ideas like: strength, intelligence, athletic and heterosexual. I put up an image of Steve Jobs on the cover of *Fortune* in order to suggest that having money and providing for women and children is often an expectation of men in American society. I also showed them a 2013 U.S. Marines ad of a very stern white man in uniform aside text about honor,

strong will and success. The students agreed that ‘protector’ is also an adjective that relates to masculinity and that in America serving the country is the ultimate demonstration of manliness.

Next I added race into the discussion by asking how any of their answers might different if they were talking specifically about black men. The conversation was quite a bit lighter. Athlete came up again, someone said loud and crass, others said criminal, I also heard ‘pimp.’ No one said anything about success or money, even though two of the most common types of black men that we see are athletes and entertainers. I put up two *Time* magazine images one after another; the first was the controversial cover image of O.J. Simpson’s mug shot from 1994 (fig. 23). *Time* was accused of altering the photograph to make Simpson look darker, which in turn made him look more sinister. In large red letters under Simpson’s chin the headline read: “An American Tragedy.”¹¹⁰ The second image was the April/May 2013 *Time* cover photograph of rapper Jay-Z (fig. 24). This time the headline read: “The 100 Most Influential People In The World.”

With Simpson the students and I talked about who or what was the “American Tragedy.” Was it the murder case? Possibly, but there were a multitude of murders in 1994, perpetrated by people from various racial groups. Those people were not as famous as Simpson, but isn’t all murder tragic? We wondered if *Time* was saying that it was Simpson specifically who was the tragic figure? Or was it blackness? Because of the murder case (as well as Simpson’s fame in football and in movies) Simpson’s face was very recognizable, but the magazine cover does not specifically include Simpson’s name,

¹¹⁰ Deirdre Carmody, “Time Responds to Criticism Over Simpson Cover,” *The New York Times*, June 25, 1994, accessed March 22, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/06/25/us/time-responds-to-criticism-over-simpson-cover.html>.

the only reference we get to the black body is the Los Angeles Police Jail identification number and a date.

Jay-Z's cover image appeared to represent a whole new position for black men, symbolizing the ascension from tragedy to international icon. But still none of the students touted Jay-Z for his intelligence, as demonstrated in his rap lyrics, or for his entrepreneurial successes. No one commented on his new role as husband and father, no one talked about his tall strong masculine form in his beautifully pressed suit; and no one talked about how the grey toned image and precise lighting made Jay-Z's skin look just a little lighter, perhaps less sinister, than OJ's.

"Who's afraid of post-blackness?" author and journalist Touré asks. The concept of post-blackness requires that we be "rooted in, but not restricted by our blackness." It also requires that black people not quarantine our blackness to just hip hop or certain stereotypical activities, but rather explore and enjoy a variety of identities.¹¹¹ bell hooks wants black people to look and think about themselves differently so that America can start looking at blackness, and black people, with new eyes. Post-black ideology may be the first step in making that change, but there continue to be hurdles. Artists like Glenn Ligon and Kara Walker fall into a category of artists described by Thelma Golden as 'post-black,' those who reject their art being labeled as "black art," but who work to tease out these complex notions of blackness that are caught in stereotypes imbedded in the very fabric of American history.¹¹² The term post-blackness gained more wide spread attention, entering into political and social conversations around the campaign and

¹¹¹ Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness? What it Means to Be Black Now* (New York: Free Press, 2011), xiii.

¹¹² Thelma Golden, "Introduction," in *Freestyle: The Studio Museum In Harlem*, ed. Christine Y. Kim et al. (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), 14.

election of America's first black president Barak Obama. Through winning the presidency in 2008 he completely shifted the landscape for defining what black people were capable of and what we could aspire to, although not entirely.

In April 2008, *ESPN* the magazine put out its NFL Draft Special featuring Darren McFadden (fig. 25). McFadden is pictured shirtless from the side making a fist with his hand and a muscle with his huge bicep. On his shoulder he has a tattoo of a fierce-looking pit bull wearing a spiked collar. "D-Dawg" is sprawled across in cursive script, presumably a reference to himself. Below in more blocked lettering next to a running football player on his arm are the words: "Bustin' Loose." These can be read as completely benign personal nicknames and football lingo, but at the same time we are reminded of the age-old association of blacks with animals, as uncivilized and primitive, and about fears of the uncontained black male body. However, it is what he is quoted as having said that is most provocative: "I don't know if I can run the country, but I know I can run the ball."¹¹³ The two tasks are completely unrelated, but in light of the presidential race *ESPN* might have thought it was important to parallel McFadden winning the draft with Obama winning the presidency. It was most important for *ESPN* to single out that particular comment and place it on the cover, asserting the black man's proper career path. McFadden is not sure his athletic black body is cut out to run the country, but *ESPN* seems to imply here that they are not sure that any black body can run the country. Why?

There is still an underlying stigma surrounding black social mobility, which was made perfectly clear in a 2014 interview on *Morning in America* where Representative

¹¹³ Darren McFadden, *ESPN Magazine*, April 21, 2008, accessed March 22, 2014, http://espn.go.com/espn/photos/gallery/_id/9135233/image/13/espn-magazine-2008-covers-espn-magazine-2008-covers

Paul Ryan (R-WI) made remarks about poor people in inner-city neighborhoods who are satisfied being poor and that anti-poverty programs created a culture of laziness, a “real culture problem that has to be dealt with.”¹¹⁴ Blackness becomes the cultural problem because Ryan did not mention any other groups outside of the inner-city who rely on government assistance. Even President Obama is careful about how he talks about the plight of black people in this country. He met with some backlash on a recent White House initiative to help underprivileged youth. Though the President says that the lack of educational and development resources for youth in many communities is an “issue of national importance,” he made comments suggesting that hard work and personal responsibility were the keys to success.¹¹⁵ Materials released by the Obama Administration for the initiative called “My Brother’s Keeper,” states that the program will “help every boy and young man of color who is willing to do the hard work to get ahead.”¹¹⁶ The stereotype of black people as lazy and unmotivated continues to pervade our countries political conversations while very little is said about the structural, educational and economical barriers that challenge these individuals.

The way Americans understand blackness in the 21st century has become a muddy pool of good and bad characteristics, old stereotypes and new achievements. In the 1990s the downgrading of blackness seemed much more mainstream and direct because of the seemingly never-ending barrage of bad press. Black masculine and feminine identities

¹¹⁴ Justin Baragona, “Paul Ryan Claims Black Men Are Lazy and The Cause of Poverty in This Country,” *Politicususa*, March 12, 2014, accessed March 22, 2014, <http://www.politicususa.com/2014/03/12/paul-ryan-claims-black-men-lazy-poverty-country.html>.

¹¹⁵ Naureen Khan, “Obama Unveils Initiative Aimed at Helping Underprivileged Youth,” *Aljazeera America*, February 27, 2014, accessed March 22, 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/2/27/obama-addresses-plightofminoritymenheadoninunveilingwhinitiative.html>.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

came under attack because of a need to answer unsettling social questions about crime and government budget spending. As we progress as a country, moving further and further away from the 1990s, or whitewashing the legacy of the Old South, or beginning to lose people who participated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955, or remembering when Martin Luther King Jr. was shot, how will racism in America change? What will be the method of remembrance? How will we situate race and gender in political conversations? Artists like Ligon and Walker, as well as others who make work investigating black identities leave footprints for us to follow as we further analysis of race as a cultural construct, Ligon and Walker invite us into a sort of purposeful misreading of antebellum stories and slave narratives so as to push against the ideas of misrecognition, and oversimplification and baseless categorization of the black body that exists in our society today.

I asked the high school students to each make a book page that would later become part of an artist book as a record of our project. I wanted them to use images and text to describe what they think of when they think of black men. One book page included various pictures of 1990s black families, from the Cosby's to the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air. The text in the middle of the images said: "I always thought of black men as good fathers." I was surprised to see such an invisible black male identity made visible by such an unlikely observer, a white high school student twenty-some years removed. There may be hope yet.

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Images

Introduction



Figure. 1 Harper's Weekly, *Fox Hunting in Blackville*, May 24, 1879.

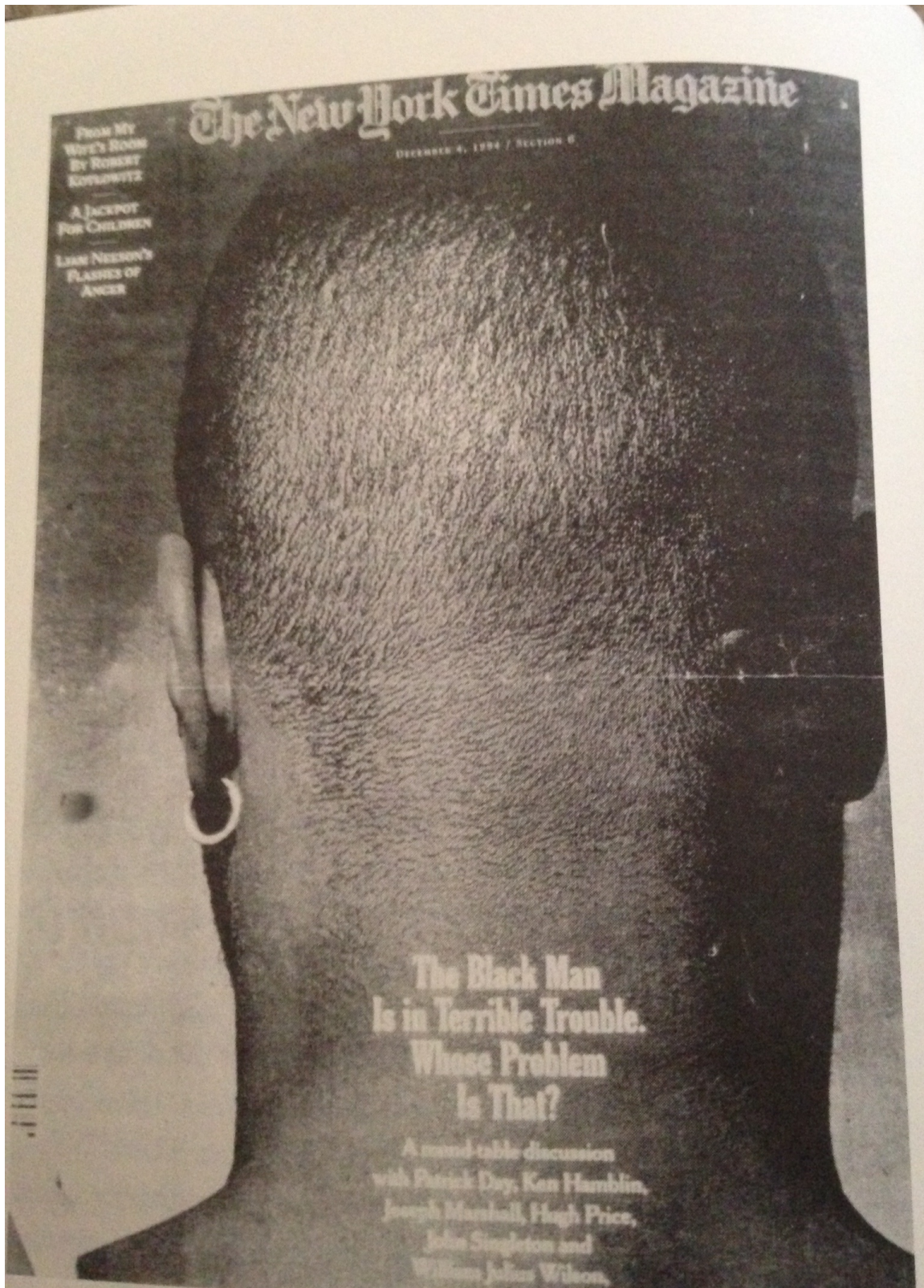


Figure 2. *New York Times Magazine*, "The Black Man is in Terrible Trouble. Whose Problem is That?" December 4, 1994.



Figure 3. Glenn Ligon, *To Disembark* (installation view), 1993. Ten lithographs, nine wood crates, overall dimensions variable. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC.

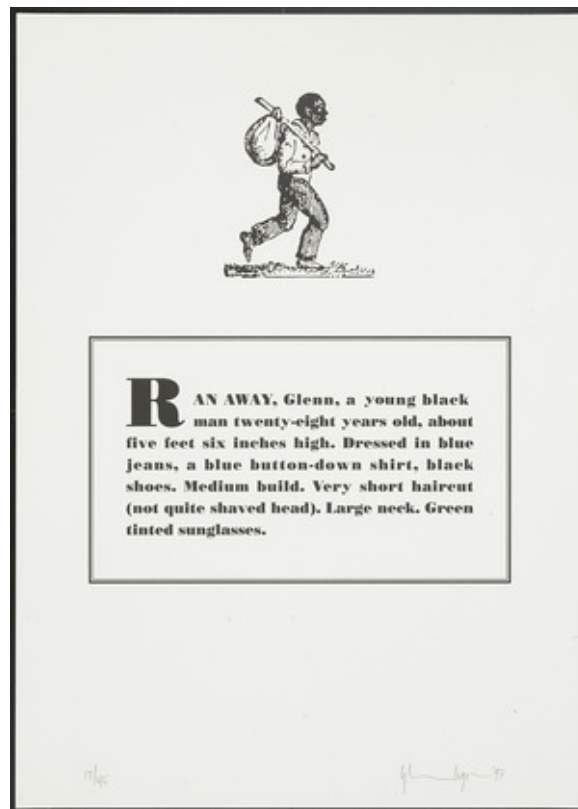


Figure 4. Glenn Ligon, *Runaways*, 1993. One from a suite of ten lithographs, 40.6 x 30.5 cm. Image from MoMA http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=0%3AAD%3AE%3A6902&page_number=13&template_id=1&sort_order=1.

\$50 REWARD.



RAN AWAY, from the Subscriber, about the first day of June last, a negro man named **JIM;**

about 30 years old, very dark complexion; about 5 feet 10 inches high; thick lips, quick spoken; a large scar on the left leg; also, a scar on the right arm. — Any person apprehending said negro, & confining him in any Jail, so that I get him, shall receive the above reward. —

CHARLES TOWNSEND.

October 7th, 1835. 527w

LIST OF LETTERS

Figure 5. North Carolina Slave Advertisement, October 7, 1835.



Figure. 6 Kehinde Wiley, *Ice T*, 2005, Oil on canvas 243.8 x 182.9 cm (96 x 72 in)
Private collection, courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery.

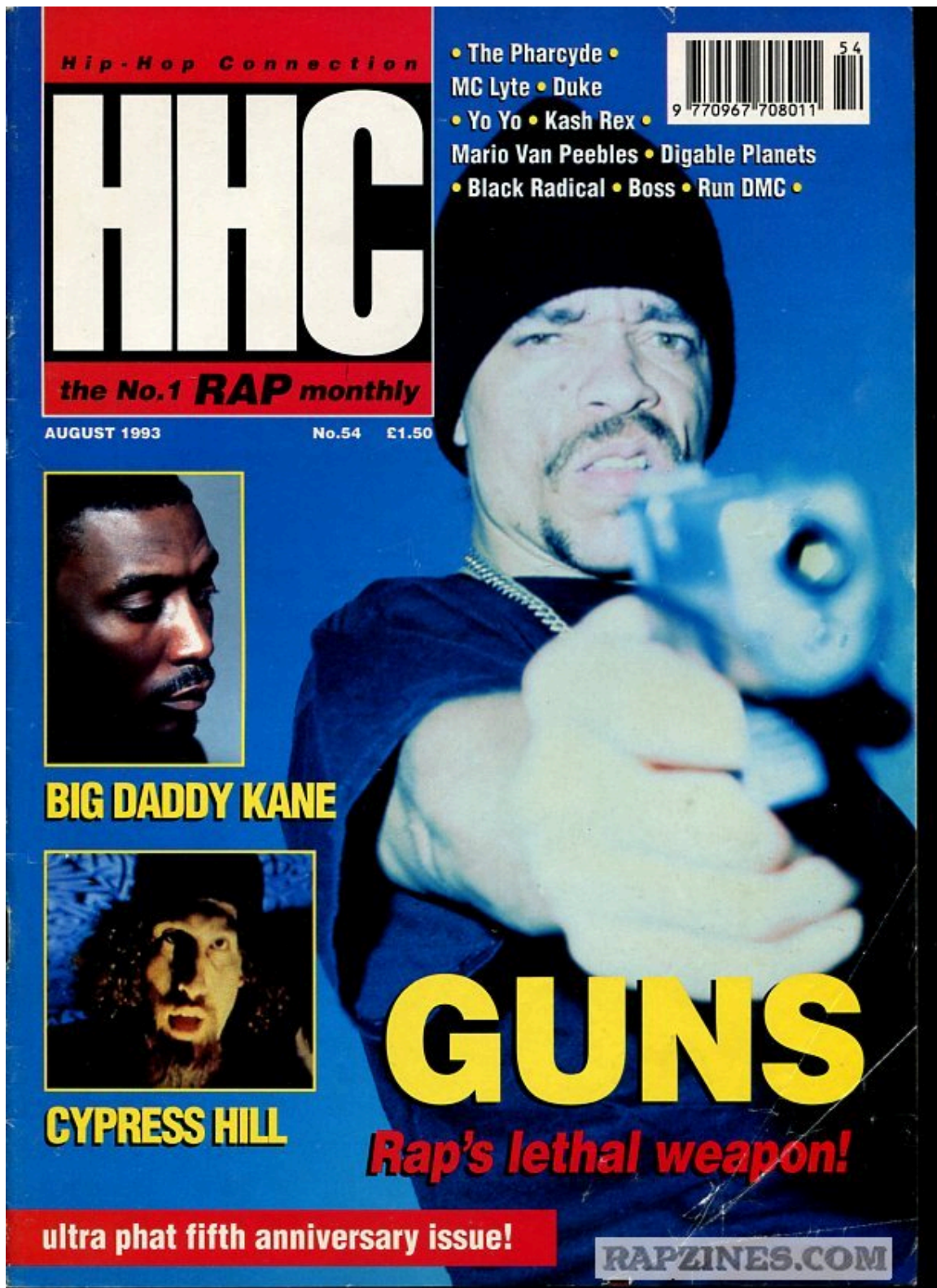


Figure 7. Ice T in *Hip-Hop Connection*, August 1993. Image from www.rapzines.com.

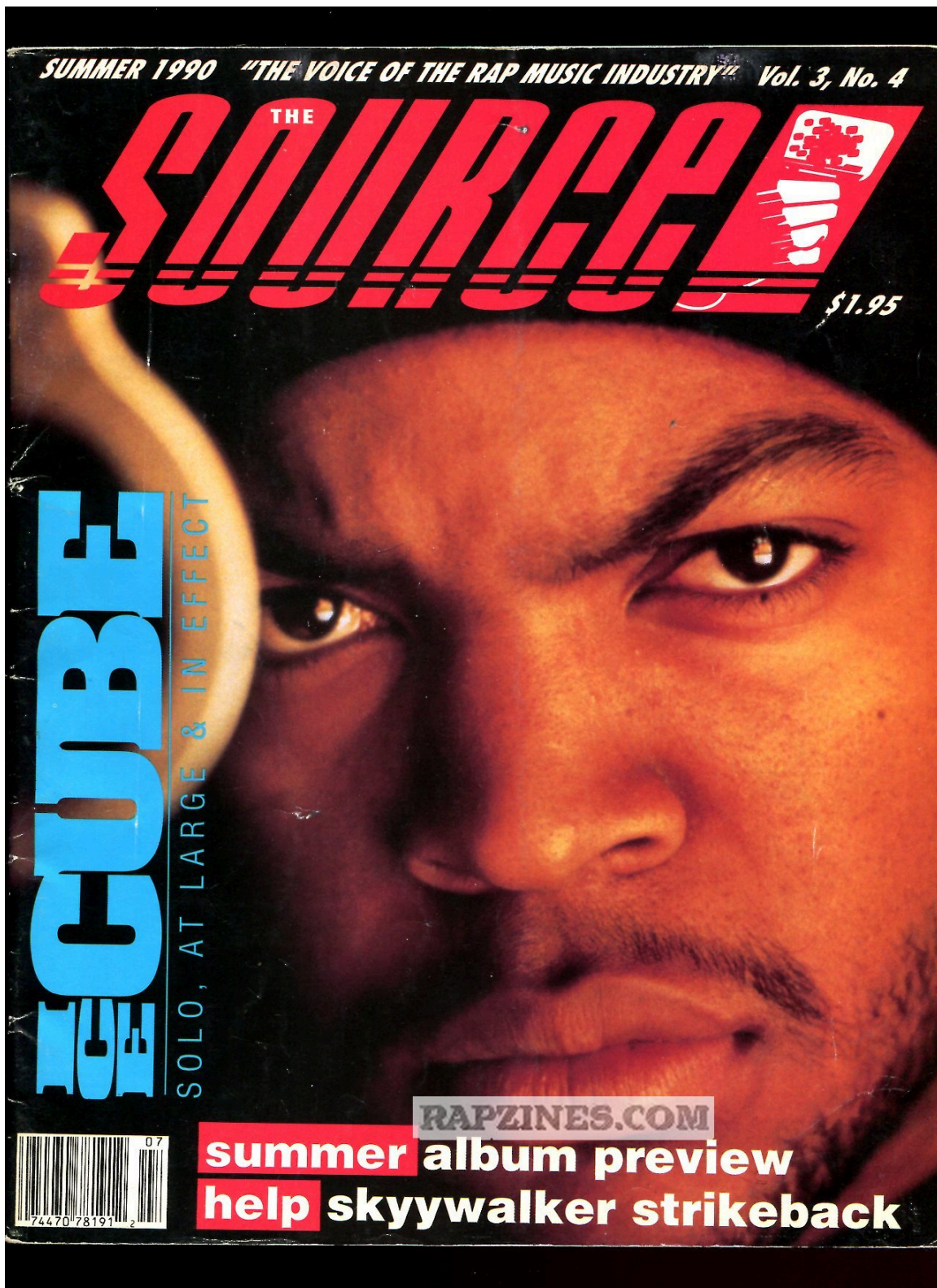


Figure 8. Ice Cube in *The Source*, Summer 1990. Image from www.rapzines.com.

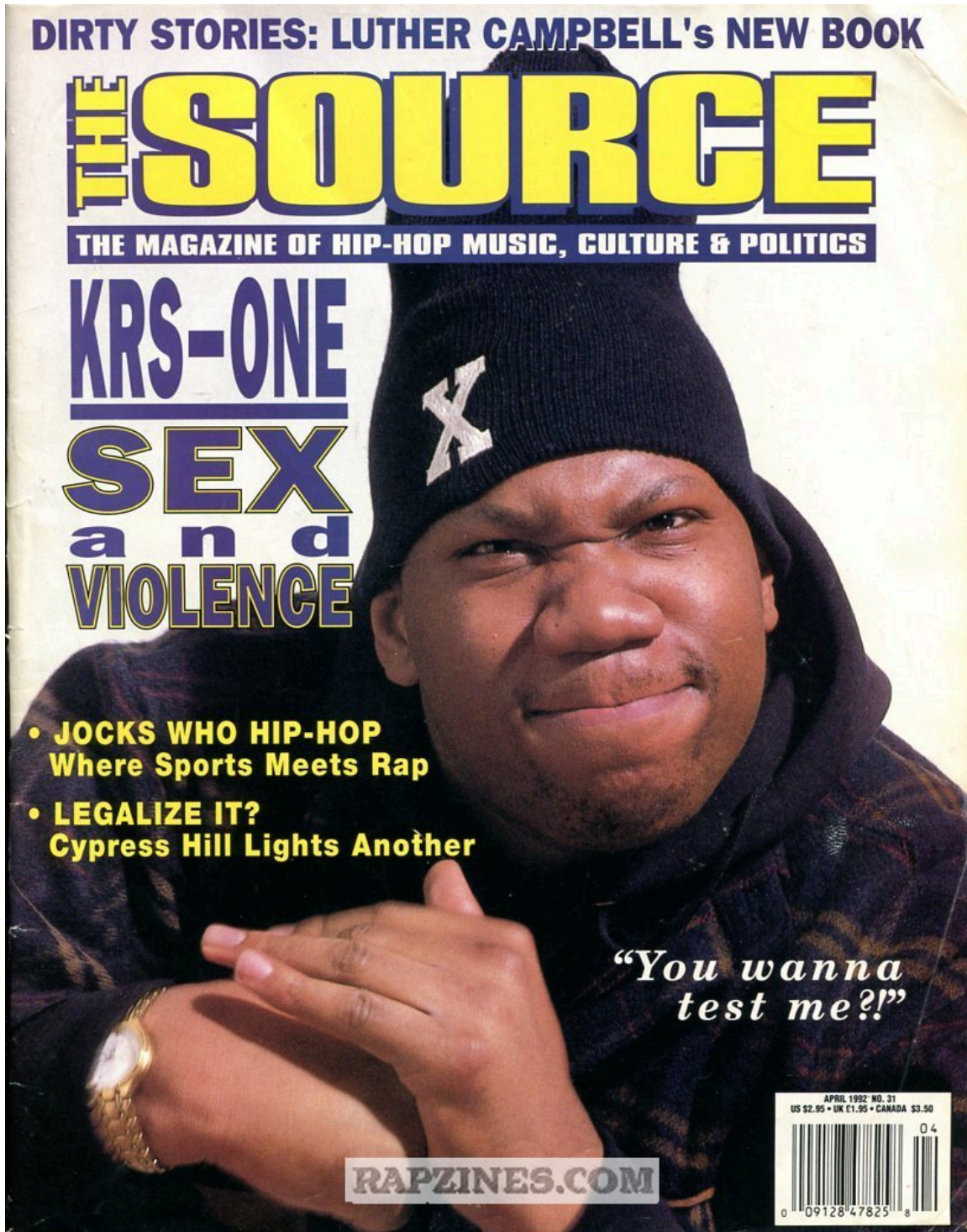


Figure 9. KRS ONE in *The Source*, April 1992. Image from www.rapzines.com.

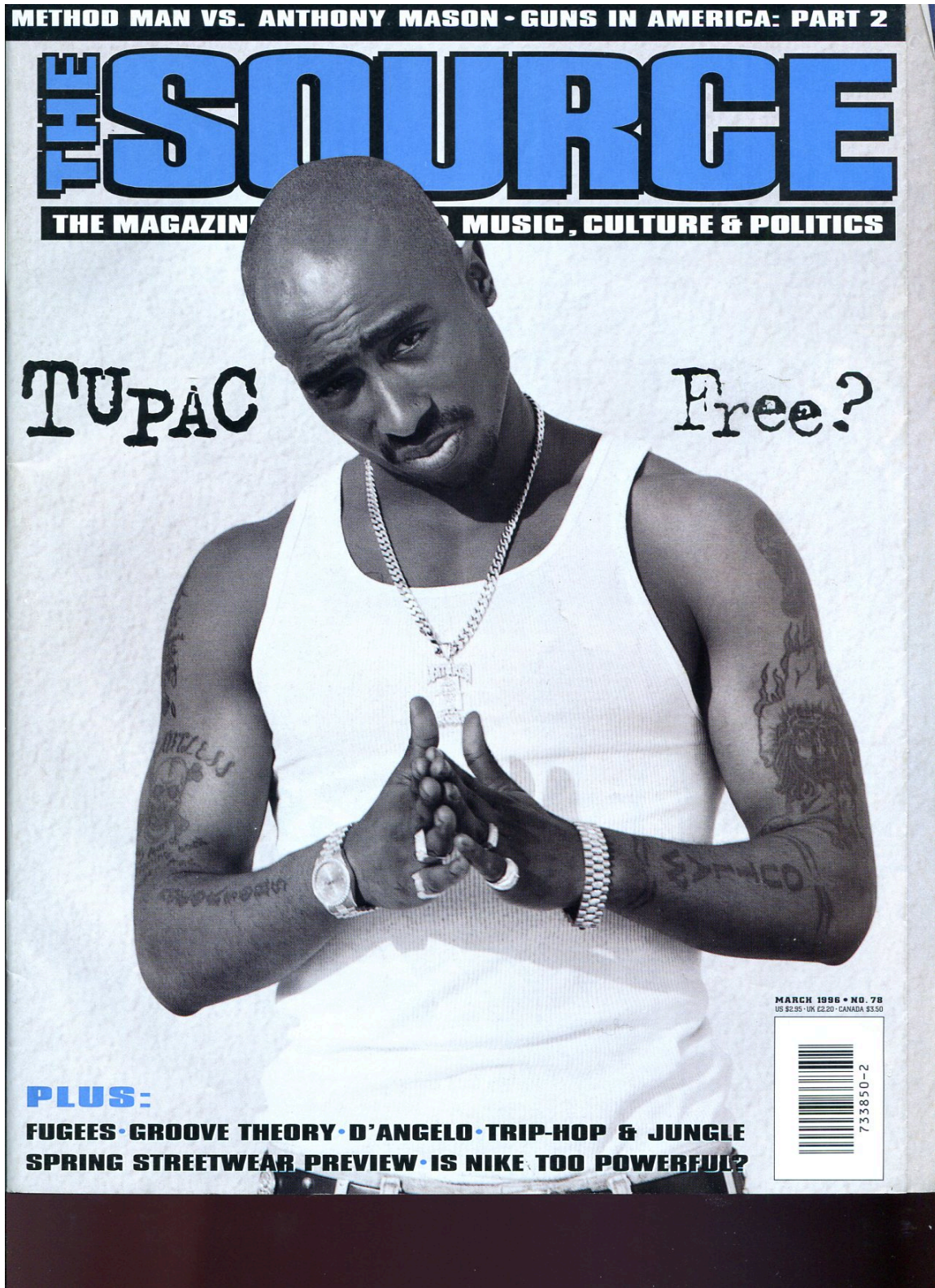


Figure 10. Tupac Shakur in *The Source*, March 1996. Image from www.rapzines.com.



Figure. 11 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, 13x50 ft. Installation view Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, California, 2008. Image courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins Co.



Figure. 12 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, 13x50 ft. Installation view Museum of Modern Art, New York City, 2010.

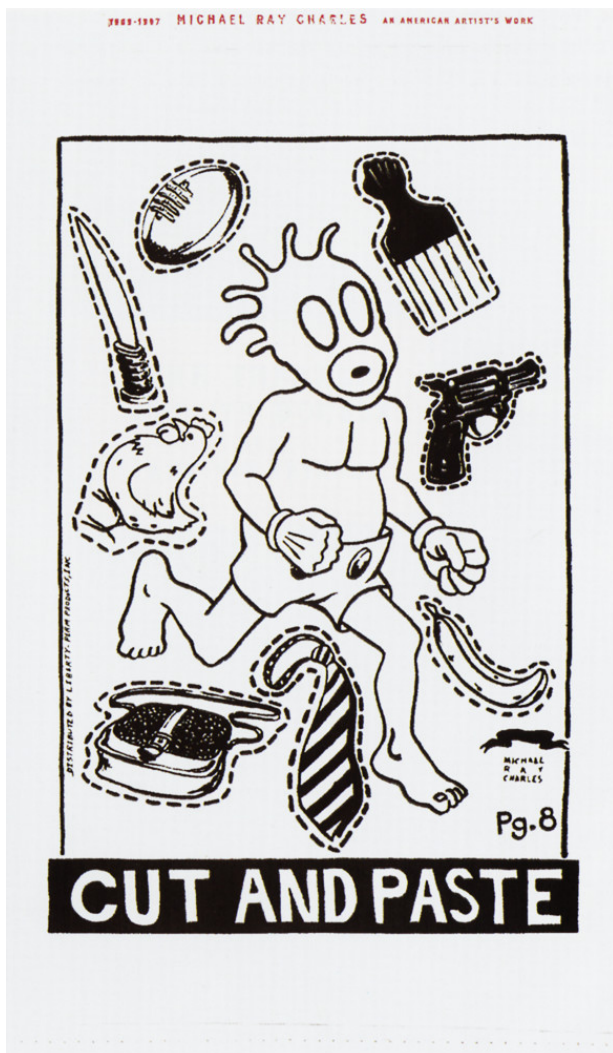


Figure. 13 Michael Ray Charles, *Cut and Paste*, 1997. Exhibition show commemorative catalogue.



Figure. 14 Detail, *Gone*, 1994.



Figure. 15 Detail, *Gone*, 1994.



Figure. 16 Detail, *Gone*, 1994.

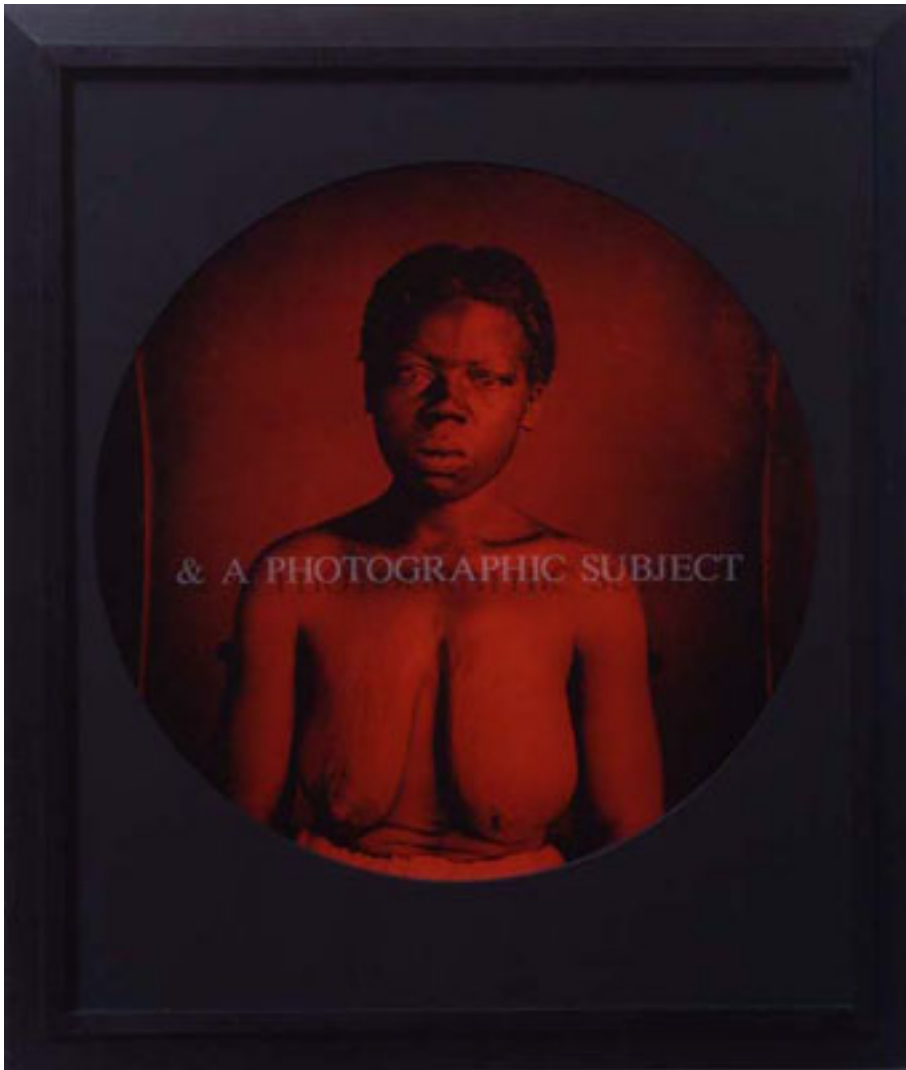


Figure. 17 Carrie Mae Weems, *& A PHOTOGRAPHIC SUBJECT*, 1995. One from a suite of twenty-eight chromogenic color prints with sand-blasted text on glass, $\frac{3}{4}$ x 22" (67.9 x 55.8 cm). Image from artist's official website <http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html>.



Figure. 18 Carrie Mae Weems, *YOU BECAME PLAYMATE TO THE PATRIARCH*, 1995. One from a suite of twenty-eight chromogenic color prints with sand-blasted text on glass, $\frac{3}{4}$ x 22" (67.9 x 55.8 cm). Image from artist's official website <http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html>.



Figure. 19 Detail, *Gone*, 1994.



Figure. 20 Detail, *Gone*, 1994.



Figure. 21Detail, *Gone*, 1994.



Figure 22. Hattie McDaniel as Mammy, *Gone With the Wind* (Fleming 1939).

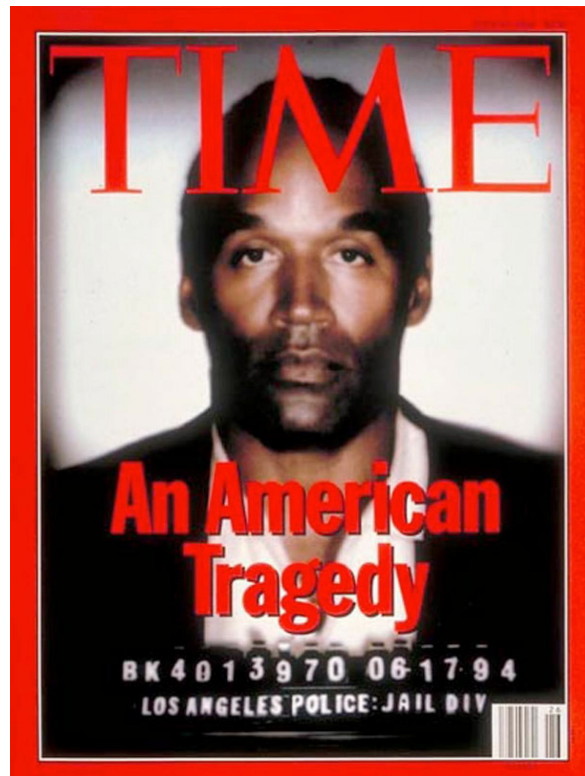


Figure. 23 O.J. Simpson in *Time Magazine*, June 27, 1994. Image from www.content.time.com.

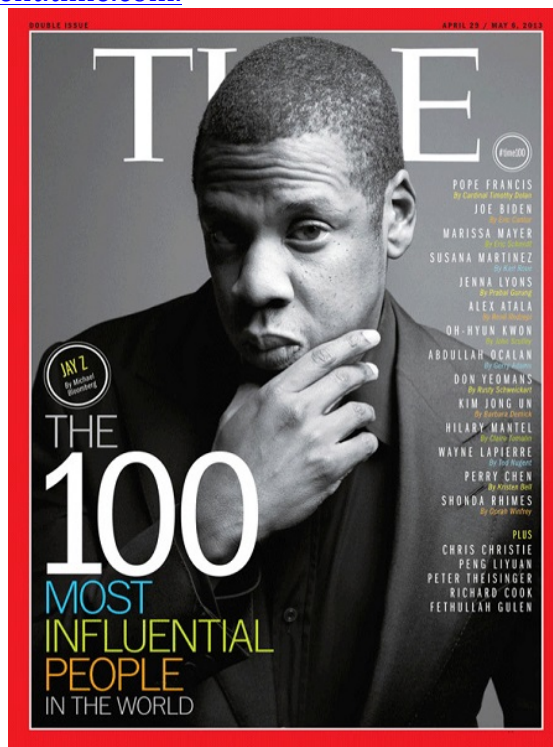


Figure. 24 Jay-Z in *Time Magazine*, April 29/May 6, 2013. Image from www.allhiphop.com.

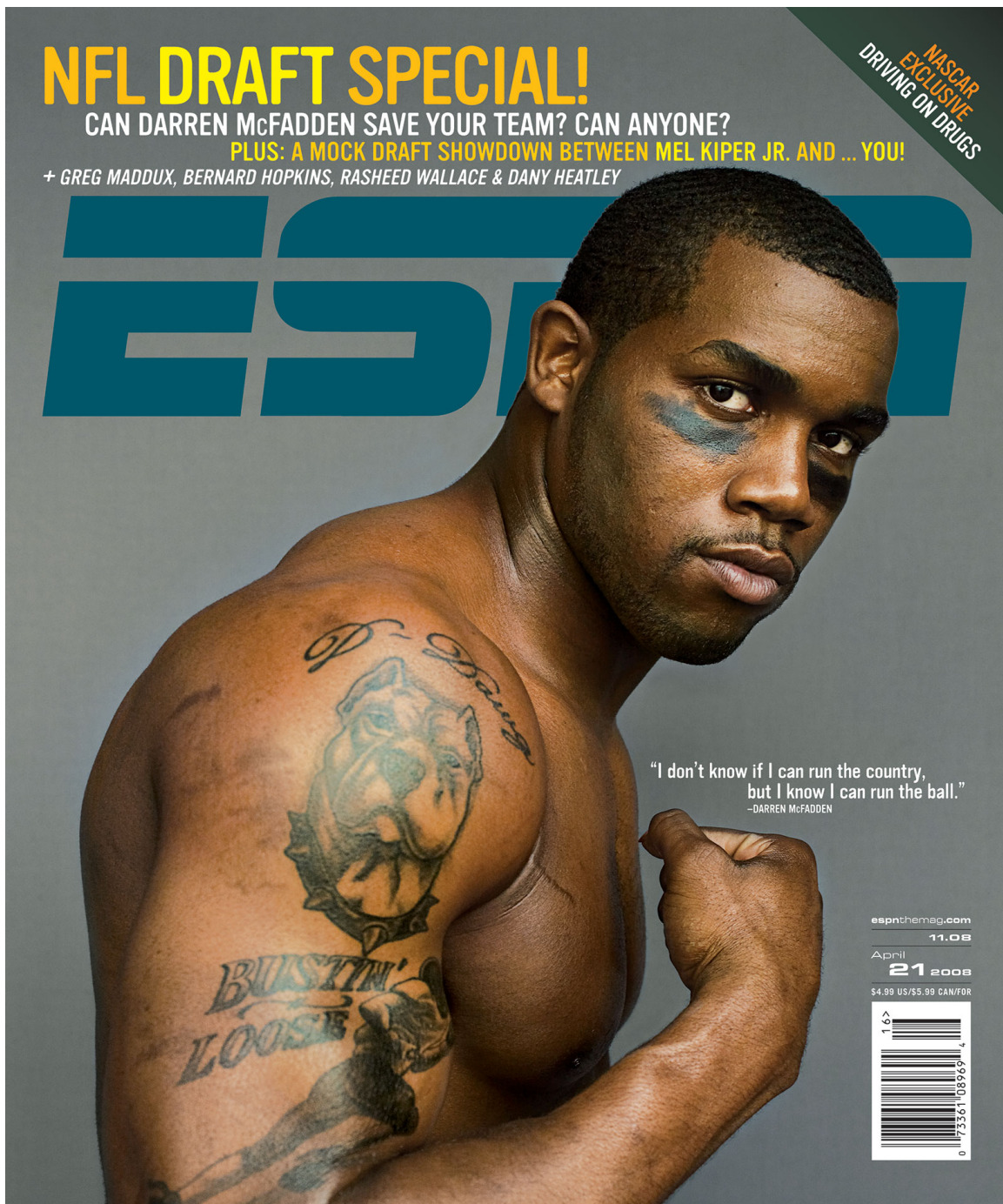


Figure. 25 Darren McFadden in *ESPN Magazine*, April 21, 2008. Image from www.espn.go.com.