



2013

Kara Walker: Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)

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Kara Walker: Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)

Description

The preface to the original edition of Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War, published in 1866 by Alfred H. Guernsey and Henry M. Alden asserts, "We proposed at the outset to narrate events just as they occurred; ... to praise no man unduly because he strove for the right, to malign no man because he strove for the wrong." The suite of lithographs on display at Schmucker Art Gallery by prominent contemporary African-American artist Kara Walker entitled Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated), on loan from the Middlebury College Museum of Art, challenges the truth Guernsey and Alden claimed to recount and inject a discourse about rightness and wrongness the authors professed to omit. Walker's silhouettes of distorted, fragmented and flailing black bodies are silkscreened over an enlargement, using offset lithography of woodcut plates, of the original Harper's prints published in Guernsey and Alden's text to incorporate a new understanding of suffering, loss and horror absent from the nineteenth-century illustrations. [excerpt]

Keywords

Kara Walker, Harper's Weekly, Civil War, black body, racist pathology

Disciplines

African American Studies | Art and Design | History | Social History | United States History

Publisher

Schmucker Art Gallery, Gettysburg College

Comments

Kara Walker: Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated) was on exhibition at the Schmucker Art Gallery at Gettysburg College, January 25 - March 8, 2013.



KARA WALKER: *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)*



*Exodus of Confederates from
Atlanta. (detail)*

*Harper's Pictorial History of
the Civil War (Annotated),
2005*

Offset Lithography/Silkscreen

Paper size 39 x 53 inches

Edition of 35

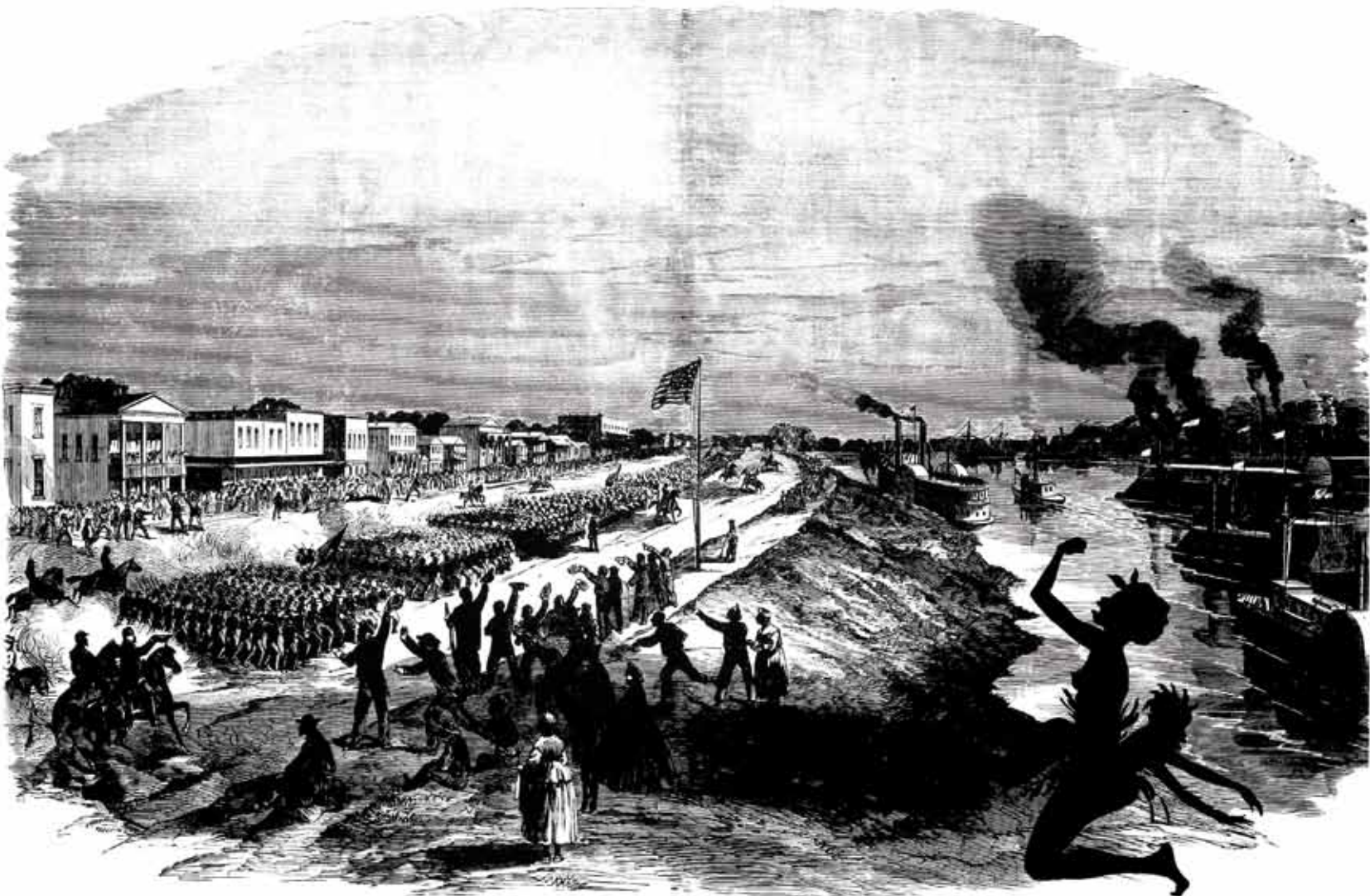
The preface to the original edition of *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War*, published in 1866 by Alfred H. Guernsey and Henry M. Alden asserts, "We proposed at the outset to narrate events just as they occurred; ... to praise no man unduly because he strove for the right, to malign no man because he strove for the wrong."¹ The suite of lithographs on display at Schmucker Art Gallery by prominent contemporary African-American artist Kara Walker entitled *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)*, on loan from the Middlebury College Museum of Art, challenges the truth Guernsey and Alden claimed to recount and inject a discourse about rightness and wrongness the authors professed to omit. Walker's silhouettes of distorted, fragmented and flailing black bodies are silkscreened over an enlargement, using offset lithography of woodcut plates, of the original *Harper's* prints published in Guernsey and Alden's text to incorporate a new understanding of suffering, loss and horror absent from the nineteenth-century illustrations.

"One of the themes in my work," Walker states, "is the idea that a black subject in the present tense is a container for specific pathologies from the past and is continually growing and feeding off those maladies. Racist pathology is the muck."² Walker's *Harper's Pictorial History* series draws particular attention to the past, and her *Occupation of Alexandria*, for example, presents the event as a relatively intact historical scene. Troops in rigid formation march toward the background of the print. The Red River of Louisiana flanks the road on the right, and the town of Alexandria is seen on the left. Men in the crowds wave their hats vigorously as the troops pass, and others on horseback kick up clouds of dust. African-Americans sit rather passively on the edge of the dynamic cavalcade in the immediate foreground in marked contrast to the movement of the soldiers and presumably white onlookers. A central figure, an African-American woman dressed in white with a kerchief tied around her head, observes dispassionately as large steamboats make their way up the Red River.

Onto this scene Walker places two larger silhouetted figures in the right foreground. One nude female, kneeling with a fist raised in supplication and anguish, wears a kerchief similar to the figure in the original *Harper's* illustration. The second black body, identified as such by his Afro-textured hairstyle, leaps toward the river. The two figures intersect perpendicularly at their midsections, and flame-like shapes erupt from their overlapping forms.

Occupation of Alexandria appears in *Harper's Pictorial History* as one of several illustrations in the chapter describing “The War on the Mississippi.” In the spring of 1863 Union forces under the command of Admiral David Dixon Porter and General Nathaniel P. Banks occupied Alexandria, arriving by gunboats and cavalry.³ The Union immediately seized hundreds of bales of cotton from the area, and the Union set the city afire the following year. Guernsey and Alden do not report on the Union abandonment of the city in 1864, but Walker's positioning of figures into the scene completes the story by suggesting the devastation that came as a result of the rampant flames. The fires spread rapidly through the town and forced all residents regardless of race—women, children, the elderly—to run to safety carrying only a few possessions. The excruciating heat then drove many people to drop their belongings and flee to the river.⁴ Although the original publication recounts in detail the specifics of military maneuvers and campaigns, political developments and profiles of significant leaders, a larger social history is omitted from this narrative. Additionally, the focus, both in the text and illustrations, rests consistently on the white men leading and fighting the battles. Women, children and African-Americans are represented, with few exceptions or if at all, on the peripheries of the original compositions. As seen in this print, Walker focuses on the people *Harper's* ignores, as well as the destruction, fear and tragedy that accompanied these events.

“These prints,” Walker explains, “are the landscapes that I imagine exist in the back of my somewhat more austere wall pieces.”⁵ She layers her own now familiar aesthetic of silhouetted black figures, racially coded and understood in terms of “racist pathology,” onto this seemingly genteel and ostensibly truthful mid-nineteenth-century history. Because her use of silhouettes depict figures as racially stereotyped, Walker's work often is discussed in relation to the emergence of racial anthropology in the late eighteenth century, particularly the concept



OCCUPATION OF ALEXANDRIA.

Occupation of Alexandria.
Harper's Pictorial History of
the Civil War (Annotated),
2005

Offset Lithography/Silkscreen

Paper size 39 x 53 inches

Edition of 35



SIGNAL STATION, SUMMIT OF MARYLAND HEIGHTS.

*Signal Station, Summit of
Maryland Heights.*

*Harper's Pictorial History of
the Civil War (Annotated),
2005*

Offset Lithography/Silkscreen

Paper size 53 x 39 inches

Edition of 35



SCENE OF McPHERSON'S DEATH.

Scene of McPherson's Death.

*Harper's Pictorial History of
the Civil War (Annotated),
2005*

Offset Lithography/Silkscreen

Paper size 39 x 53 inches

Edition of 35



An Army Train.

Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated), 2005

Offset Lithography/Silkscreen

Paper size 39 x 53 inches

Edition of 35

of physiognomy advanced by Swiss pastor and mystic Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741–1801). His theories suggested a link between personality or “moral character” and physical form, and such ideas pseudo-scientifically validated ethnic and racial stereotypes. For example, physiognomic theorists in the nineteenth century believed blackness could be equated with savagery.⁶ Walker usurps the physiognomic convictions of the nineteenth century through the stereotyped African Americans pictured in the pages of *Harper's Pictorial History*, figures portrayed generically with vacuous stares as barefoot slaves and in obedient servitude. One would think at first that Walker's silhouettes flatten and stereotype these figures further. By appropriating the practice of silhouette cutting, popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Walker's now characteristic style elides individualistic facial features and denotes the appearance of sitters only by outlines and general, often racialized, characteristics. Yet, far from simply reinvigorating stereotypes, Walker's works are ambiguous and complicated; the bodies are simultaneously threatening and threatened. She points to the history of the Civil War, but encourages her viewer to consider “a black body in the present tense.” Walker's appropriation of this patently historical process ruptures a neat division of yesterday and today, or of an understanding of past atrocities and belief in present advancement and equality.

The artists of *Harper's Pictorial History* are not credited by its authors, but one can assume the works are by some of the renowned illustrators employed by *Harper's Weekly*, including Winslow Homer, Granville Perkins and Livingston Hopkins. Walker's figures are not seamlessly inserted into the works of her predecessors, but disrupt the nineteenth-century prints. The viewer, presumably white and male, in 1866 would have read the original text and relied on the illustrations to understand the strategic nuances, maps and battle plans of the American Civil War. This recounting of the War, of course, resonates with Gettysburg's profound connection to this historical moment, and Guernsey and Alden devote an entire, comprehensive and copiously illustrated chapter to Gettysburg. Here, in this town, these heroic images are already familiar to viewers who, through constant remembrance, reenactment and academic study, allow the past to intersect with the present. Walker's intervention in this history—her assertive layering of corrosive myth and repressed fantasy over allegedly factual images—unremittingly defies a narrow dissemination of history and the conviction that a particular narrative could be either comprehensive or true.

While Walker’s work is seen often as inflammatory and controversial, it is also didactic and probing. She persistently infiltrates narratives of American history with confrontational and disarming depictions of race, sex and gender. Many critics have accused Walker of reinforcing divisive stereotypes and compare her work to the racist joke, yet her oeuvre nonetheless encourages and continues a critique of racism and sexism.⁷ At this sesquicentennial anniversary of the American Civil War marked by commemoration and critical reflection, Walker’s own *Pictorial History* pictures the past as simultaneously grotesque and tragic, drolly exaggerated and painfully accurate, a discordant union that reverberates in the present tense.

Shannon Egan, Ph.D.
Director, Schmucker Art Gallery

1 Alfred H. Guernsey and Henry B. Alden, *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War* (New York: Grammercy Books, 1866), n.p.

2 Kara Walker, introductory text, *Kara Walker at the Met: After the Deluge*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

3 Guernsey and Alden, *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War*, vol. 2, 460.

4 On the Civil War and Louisiana, see C. Peter Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen in Civil War Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), and John D. Winters, *The Civil War in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963).

5 Kara Walker cited by LeRoy Nieman Center for Print Studies, Columbia University, 2005. <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/arts/neiman/contact.html>

6 On physiognomy and Kara Walker, see Philippe Vergne, “The Black Saint is the Sinner Lady,” in *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* (Minneapolis: Walker Arts Center and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007), 8-10, and Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

7 See the entire issue of *International Review of African American Art* 14, no. 3 (1997) for various authors’ perspectives on the controversy surrounding Walker’s work in relation to racism in the art institutions. See also Shaw, *Speaking the Unspeakable*, and Thomas McEvilley, “Primitivism in the Works of an Emancipated Negress,” in *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*, 53- 62.



Buzzard's Roost Pass.
*Harper's Pictorial History of
the Civil War (Annotated),*
2005
Offset Lithography/Silkscreen
Paper size 53 x 39 inches
Edition of 35

Kara Walker was born in Stockton, California, in 1969. She received a BFA from the Atlanta College of Art in 1991, and an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1994. The artist is best known for exploring the raw intersection of race, gender, and sexuality through her iconic, silhouetted figures. Walker’s work has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. She has been awarded Deutsche Bank Prize, and in 1997, Walker received the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Achievement Award. Additionally, Walker was the United States representative to the 2002 Bienal de São Paulo. Work in public collections includes the Museum of Modern Art, the Tate Gallery, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Walker Art Center, among others. She currently lives in New York.

A lecture by **Deborah Willis, Ph.D.** is held in conjunction with the exhibition. Dr. Willis is University Professor and Chair of the Department of Photography & Imaging at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University and holds an affiliated appointment as a university professor with the College of Arts and Sciences in Africana Studies. She has been the recipient of many awards; among others, she was a 2005 Guggenheim Fellow and Fletcher Fellow and a 2000 MacArthur Fellow. Professor Willis is both a photographer and a scholar of the medium. Her works have been included in exhibitions in the United States, Portugal, Ghana, and Canada. She is currently working on two projects *Envisioning Emancipation: What did freedom look like?* co-authored with Barbara Krauthamer for Temple University Press and *Out of Fashion Photography: Embracing Beauty* for the Henry Art Gallery. Her most recent publications are *Posing Beauty: African American Images from the 1890s to the Present* (W.W. Norton, 2009), *Michelle Obama: The First Lady in Photographs* (W.W. Norton, 2009), and, as editor, *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her “Hottentot”* (Temple University Press, 2010). Willis received the 2010 NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work—Biography/Autobiography for her book *Michelle Obama: The First Lady in Photographs*, and she is the 2010 recipient of the Honored Educator Award of the Society for Photographic Education. In her scholarship, Professor Willis has transformed the entire conversation about race and photography, and evolved a methodology that combines visual and cultural studies, high style and vernacular.

The exhibition is supported in part by the Gettysburg College Sesquicentennial Committee for the Commemoration of the American Civil War and EPACC, Gettysburg College. Special thanks are due to Kara Walker, Middlebury College Museum of Art and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

KARA WALKER:

Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)

JANUARY 25 – MARCH 8, 2013

RECEPTION

FEBRUARY 22, 4:30-6 PM | SCHMUCKER ART GALLERY

LECTURE “VISUALIZING EMANCIPATION: WHAT DID FREEDOM LOOK LIKE”

FEBRUARY 22, 6 PM | PAUL RECITAL HALL

Deborah Willis, Ph.D., University Professor and Chair of the Department of Photography & Imaging at the Tisch School of the Arts and Affiliate of Africana Studies, College of Arts and Sciences, New York University

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Design by Ayumi Yasuda

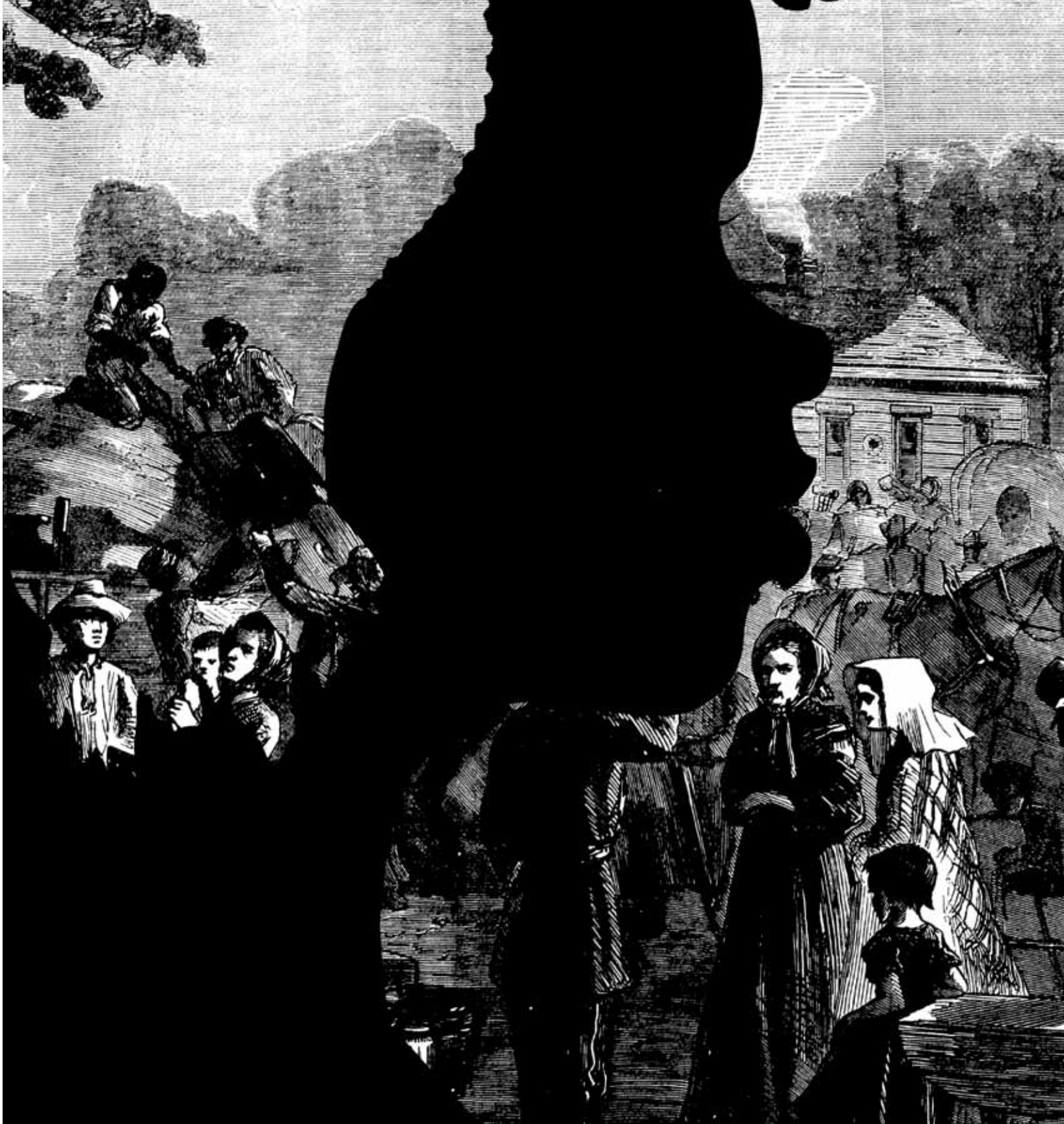
(cover) *Exodus of Confederates from Atlanta., Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated), 2005, Offset Lithography/Silkscreen, Paper size 39 x 53 inches, Edition of 35*

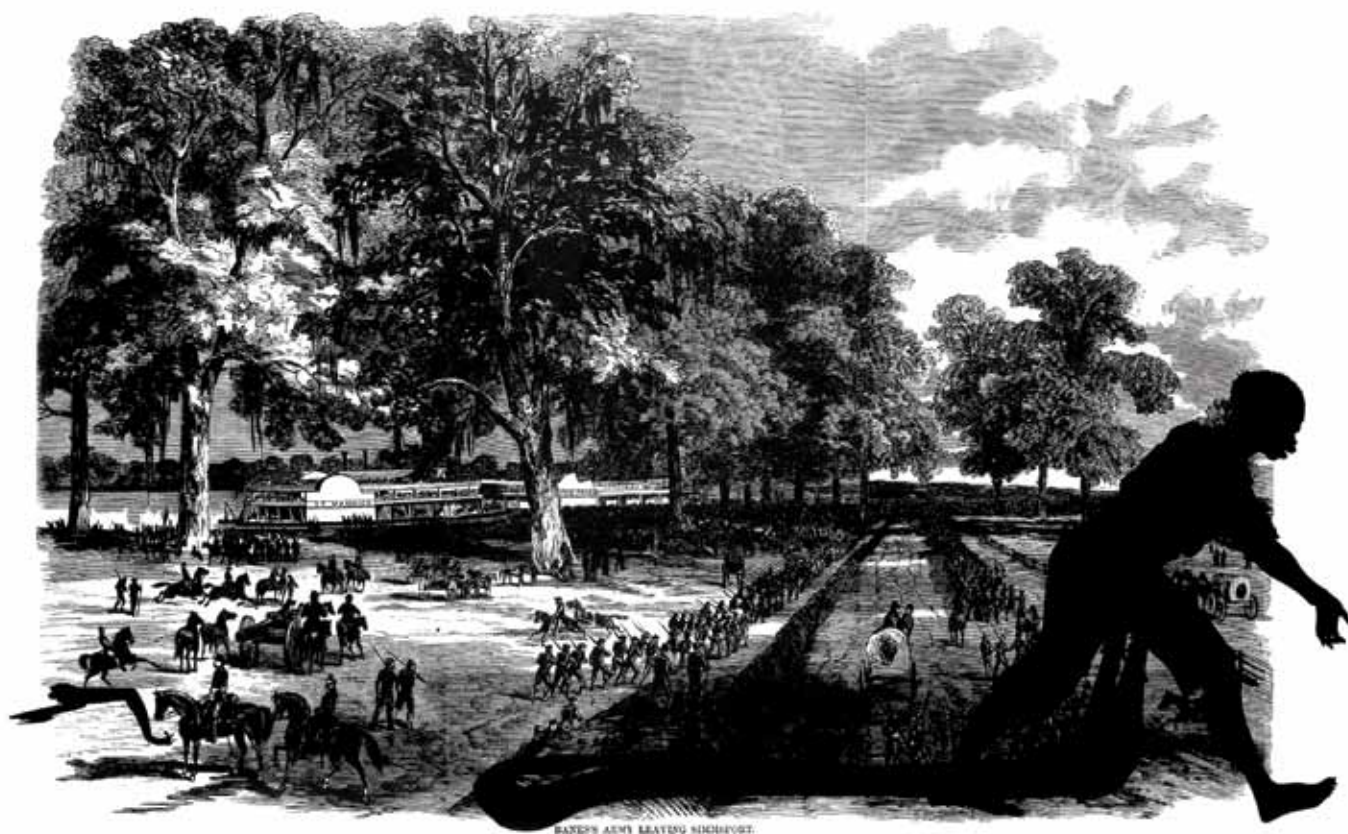
(back cover) *Banks's Army Leaving Simmsport., Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated), 2005, Offset Lithography/Silkscreen, Paper size 39 x 53 inches, Edition of 35*

Artwork ©2005 Kara Walker. Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

Collection of Middlebury College Museum of Art, Vermont. Gift of Kathy and Richard S. Fuld, Jr.

This exhibition is supported in part by the Gettysburg College 150th Committee for the Commemoration of the American Civil War and the Events Planning and Coordinating Committee.





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