

2025

Sugar-Coated Subjugation: The Sugar Sphinx as a Commentary on Black Women and Labor Histories

Praise Lundgren

University of Washington Tacoma, praiselundgren6@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/access>



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lundgren, Praise (2025) "Sugar-Coated Subjugation: The Sugar Sphinx as a Commentary on Black Women and Labor Histories," *Access*: Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Research and Scholarship*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/access/vol9/iss1/4>

This Undergraduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Teaching and Learning Center at UW Tacoma Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Access*: Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Research and Scholarship by an authorized editor of UW Tacoma Digital Commons. For more information, please contact taclibdc@uw.edu.

Abstract

This textual analysis essay explores Kara Walker's enormous sugar sculpture, *The Sugar Sphinx*, as a critical lens through which we can examine the historical and ongoing exploitation of Black women's labor in the United States. Oriented at the intersection of race, gender, and labor, the sculpture invokes the enduring legacy of the "mammy" archetype and the systemic devaluation of Black women's work, both physical and emotional, from slavery through the post-emancipation era. Drawing on scholarship in labor history, Black feminist theory, and art history, the paper argues that Walker's work critiques the sexualization, control, and socio-economic marginalization of Black women, while also highlighting their continued resistance and resilience. The installation's materiality, form, and location collectively challenge viewers to confront the enduring impacts of white supremacy and question whether Black women are truly seen as autonomous individuals or still burdened by exploitative societal expectations.

Keywords: art, art history, sociology, labor, migration, labor history, women's studies, Black women studies, intersectionality, slavery and slave labor, slave communities

Introduction

The act of undermining the Black woman's autonomy is a foundational piece of slave culture. In 2000, artist, activist, and abolitionist Kara Walker appointed a large-scale installation: 35-feet-tall, 75-feet-long, and made entirely of bleached sugar, located at the site of a major labor strike



A Subtlety, Brooklyn, New York, June 6, 2014.

known as the Williamsburg Domino Sugar Factory Strike.¹ The sculpture was created in the shape of a woman who exhibits features that resemble the Black “mammy.” The mammy figure, along with other slave archetypes such as the sambo, were and continue to be the personification of white supremacy in American history.

The mammy is a fictitious character that symbolized “a content and loyal household worker who nurtured and protected white children.”² By creating an image of willing subservience, the mammy became a code for the appropriate behavior expected of Black women, a code that quickly became performative and essential to survival, giving the Sugar Sphinx added emotional depth. The Black woman slave contributed some of the only labor that was mutually beneficial to the white slave master and the fellow slaves. As slave communities grew, they tended to adopt a matriarchal structure where the mother was a worker in the fields and an emotional laborer in the home.

¹ Stephanie Iasiello, “Photographing A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby: Kara Walker’s Take on the Neo-Slave Narrative,” *Callaloo* 40, no. 4 (2017): 14-29.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/cal.2017.0133>.

² Premilla Nadasen, *Household Workers Unite* (Beacon Press, 2016), 12.

Unfortunately, both the role as field worker and nurturing mother could not co-exist amongst the political climate and thus, was undermined by the use of rape and devaluation of domestic work and affective labor. The position of Black women slaves within the slave community was so threatening to the broader system that leaders, especially women leaders, were an incredible risk to the status quo. Slave John Henrik Clarke stated, “the family as a functional entity was outlawed and permitted to exist only when it benefited the slave master.”³ This meant that the matriarchal structure of a slave family was a threat because of the enormous influence and strength that the female mammy embodied, unless her labor was for the betterment and convenience of the white family.

Literature Review

Arguably, all women face the consequences of such narratives and the influence they had on the views of womanhood and motherhood more broadly. Historically, “since the era of slavery, the dominant view of Black women has been that they should be workers, a view that contributed to their devaluation as mothers with caregiving needs at home.”⁴ According to statistics in 1880, 35.4% of married Black women and 73.3% of single Black women were in the labor force compared to only 7.3% married white women and 23.8% of single white women.⁵ In 1920, 46% of all employed Black women were in “domestic and personal service,”⁶ emphasizing the staggering discrepancy

³ Angela Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves,” *The Black Scholar* 3, no. 4, (1971) 81-100: 83, https://digitalcollections.libraries.ua.edu/digital/collection/u0003_0001823/id/2/.

⁴ Nina Banks, “Black Women’s Labor Market History Reveals Deep-seated Race and Gender Discrimination,” *Economic Policy Institute* (Feb, 2019), <https://www.epi.org/blog/black-womens-labor-market-history-reveals-deep-seated-race-and-gender-discrimination/>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 211.

between the limited social acceptance of Black women laborers and their white women counterparts.

These numbers are indicative of the views society had on the role of Black women in the labor force. Black mothers were expected to work and care for their own children and do it with a polite demeanor. The act of household labor, such as childcare, cleaning, grocery shopping, and more, was considered not just women's work but more so Black and minority women's work. The work was an active tool for the continued subjugation of domestic labor and the women who performed it. "Traditionally the labor of females, domestic work, is supposed to complement and confirm their inferiority,"⁷ which allowed for an environment where other methods of control were normalized.

Another strategy employed by slave masters to control and demean their women slaves as a whole was sex. "The act of copulation, reduced by the white man to an animal-like act, would be symbolic of the effort to conquer the resistance the Black woman can unloose."⁸ By understanding that the taking of the woman's body in this way is about control above just pleasure, you can begin to conceptualize the whole body entitlement felt and given to slave masters by the larger society. In order to control and "break" the spirit of the slave woman, and the slave community in tandem, rape was a tool to dehumanize.

Visual Analysis

Kara Walker's *The Sugar Sphinx* is a towering reminder of this continued dehumanization and sexualization of the female slave and worker. The pose, material, and location of her piece was no accident and, in fact, were very much intentional. The

⁷ Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role," 86.

⁸ Ibid., 96.

use of bleached sugar was a critique of the “whitewashing” of labor history, as sugar in its raw form is brown.⁹ The position of the female on all fours, mouth and genitals on display, was a direct critique of the sexualization and stereotype that Black women are overtly sexual in nature. Some have interpreted this piece as a testament to the reclaiming of Black women’s sexuality, to which Kara Walker has contested that it is more of a question: to whom this woman belongs, herself or society?¹⁰

Both law and the social consensus encouraged white men to have sexual access to female slaves. According to the popular white society opinion, Black women had strong passions and always desired sexual relations. As a result, owners and overseers often approached slave women, expecting or commanding sexual relations to satisfy their own physical desires or to confirm their superior status.¹¹ Domestic workers post-slavery were also subjected to the same strategies of control.

Many in-home and daily domestic workers faced abuse of various types and to varying degrees. White women employers projected the fantasy of having a slave onto these workers and indulged those fantasies by enforcing uniform policies and segregation within the home. White men employers would frequently sexually abuse their household workers as a method of punishment and humiliation.¹² That history is mirrored in the pose and composition of the sculpture and expands on the vulnerability of Black women in the hands of the workforce and within the economic sphere.

⁹ Amber Jamilla Musser, “Queering Sugar: Kara Walker’s Sugar Sphinx and the Intractability of Black Female Sexuality,” *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 1 (2016): 153-174, <https://www.journals-uchicago-edu.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/doi/pdfplus/10.1086%2F686756>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Hilton Als, “The Sugar Sphinx,” *The New Yorker*, May 8, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-sugar-sphinx>.

¹² Ibid.

Employment offices and educational institutions funneled Black women into the only labor that was attainable, domestic labor.¹³

The Sugar Sphinx being located in a sugar mill is symbolic of the spaces in which Black women workers were regulated because of their economic and social vulnerability and lack of education. In the early 20th century, “fewer than 2 percent of all 18– 24-year-olds were enrolled in an institution of higher education, and just one-third of those were women,”¹⁴ meaning even fewer of those were Black women. The location was also a celebration of the activism that was born from Black laborers and their fight for decent wages, livable conditions, and workers’ protections.

Kara Walker’s *Sugar Sphinx* stands as a powerful symbol of the continued exploitation, dehumanization, and resilience of Black women throughout history. The sculpture is not merely an artistic statement but an intricate critique of the ways in which Black women’s labor, both physical and emotional, has been devalued, controlled, and, in many ways, weaponized against them. From the rise of the mammy archetype that reinforced servitude to the systemic sexual violence used to break the spirit of enslaved women and their communities, Walker’s work forces viewers to confront these historical injustices and their lasting impact.

The struggle for economic and social justice is ever changing and everlasting. Art like Walker’s highlights how Black women were essentially forced into domestic labor post-slavery, a reality that extended beyond the fields into the homes of white families. Ultimately, Walker’s work asks a sobering question: does this woman belong to herself,

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Janet L Yellen, “The History of Women’s Work and Wages and How It Has Created Success for Us All,” *Brookings*, May, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-history-of-womens-work-and-wages-and-how-it-has-created-success-for-us-all/>.

or does she still belong to society's expectations and the array of exploitative systems that continue to exist? By confronting these narratives and their historical origins, *The Sugar Sphinx* compels us to rethink the ways in which race, gender, and labor intersect. We are face-to-face with the position the sphinx is in and the position in which we have placed certain populations like Black women workers. We are then asked to recognize the resilience of those women who have fought against their forced subjugation.

Bibliography

- Als, Hilton. "The Sugar Sphinx." *The New Yorker*, May 8, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-sugar-sphinx>.
- Banks, Nina. "Black Women's Labor Market History Reveals Deep-seated Race and Gender Discrimination." *Economic Policy Institute* (Feb, 2019). <https://www.epi.org/blog/black-womens-labor-market-history-reveals-deep-seated-race-and-gender-discrimination/>.
- Davis, Angela. "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves." *The Black Scholar* 3, no. 4, (1971) 81-100. https://digitalcollections.libraries.ua.edu/digital/collection/u0003_0001823/id/2/.
- Iasiello, Stephanie. "Photographing A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby: Kara Walker's Take on the Neo-Slave Narrative." *Callaloo* 40, no. 4 (2017): 14-29. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/cal.2017.0133>.
- Musser, Amber Jamilla. "Queering Sugar: Kara Walker's Sugar Sphinx and the Intractability of Black Female Sexuality." *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 1 (2016): 153-174. <https://www-journals-uchicago-edu.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/doi/pdfplus/10.1086%2F686756>.
- McElya, Micki. *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America*. Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Nadasen, Premilla. *Household Workers Unite*. Beacon Press, 2016.
- Yellen, Janet L. "The History of Women's Work and Wages and How It Has Created Success for Us All." *Brookings*, May, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-history-of-womens-work-and-wages-and-how-it-has-created-success-for-us-all/>.