Contemporary artist Kara Walker creates difficult work. Part of a group of young black artists who have embraced the use of stereotypically negative and historically charged images of black people, Walker has been hailed as a rising art star and condemned as a race traitor. The debate about race that rages around her artistic production confirms the importance of the issues she raises. But what exactly about her work inspires such strong reactions?

Walker delves into the psychological wound of American slavery and shows it to be unhealed. Much of her art revolves around an imagined antebellum plantation where daily life is made up of acts of implausibly scatological behavior, perverse sexuality, and grotesque violence. Using simple black cutout silhouettes, of the type produced by genteel eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ladies, Walker creates a world that replaces staid historical narrative with shocking questions. These intricately cut pieces of black material mounted on white walls use exaggerated physical features, recognizable from long-standing racist caricatures of blacks, to distinguish the black slave subjects of her story from their white masters. Rendered in large scale and placed directly onto gallery walls, the work is devoid of details such as color or texture that could offer the viewer some relief from the revulsion or titillation the pieces engender. Instead, the viewer is drawn into a tableau depicting acts of daily life, birth, copulation, eating, and celebrating; by calling on almost every conceivable taboo, they are made horrific and fantastic.

One of Walker’s better-known images is the 1997 Keys to the Coop, a piece projecting the most contested aspects of her work in relation to that most basic, yet essential, of human activities, eating. Here, a cutout silhouette depicts a young black girl, a plantation slave, in a ragged dress, caught mid-run, following a headless chicken as it flaps its wings frantically in the throes of death. In her right hand the girl clutches the chicken’s head, bringing it to her open mouth, eager to consume, her tongue straining forward from between full, protruding lips. In the girl’s left hand, stretched out behind her, the eponymous key dangles from her finger. The image, stylistically simplistic, is loaded with cultural meaning and referents that disquiet the viewer: Why is this little girl eating the head? Did she steal the chicken? Why does her impending consumption seem so primal? The raw actions of the young girl are all the more jarring for their depiction in the genteel art of the cutout black silhouette.

Kara Walker’s art is unquestionably provocative. Her use of reclaimed imagery speaks to the cultural and racial mythologies that make up our national identity. Food is an intrinsic part of that identity, a fact that can easily be seen in Keys to the Coop. While this work is imbued with narrative implications that are not primarily focused on food—such as racist mythologies about blacks and cannibalism and disparaging views of voodoo ritual—allusions to food and eating are also visible.

Walker did not randomly choose to depict this black girl with a chicken. Chicken has a particular implication in relation to blacks, who continue to have a contentious relationship with certain foods, such as chicken and watermelon (another symbolic food often found in Walker’s art). These foods have traditionally been used to develop and reinforce negative stereotypes through visual representations that conflate their consumption with demeaning and dehumanizing images of blackness that have become part of the American imagination.

When one considers the history of slavery that Kara Walker has rewritten in numerous works produced at this time, the girl’s desire for the head of the (one can assume stolen) bird can also be seen as an indictment of the place of food in our national past and a challenge to its place in our present. The consumption of the usually discarded part of the chicken is a reminder that the slaves were underfed or given poor, generally unwanted cuts of meat, such as the head, feet, or entrails. Yet the violence and lust with which the girl is prepared to devour the head of the chicken plays against these historic images, offering the possible interpretation of a reclaimed power, even as it refuses to

Challenging Consumption
Kara Walker’s Keys to the Coop
deny the possibility of a suggested truth at the heart of the stereotype. In this way Walker’s work differs greatly from other contemporary black artists who use food-related imagery in their work, such as Carrie Mae Weems or Betye Saar. Rather than changing this imagery in a manner that undermines its history and repositions the power dynamics at work within it, Walker leaves the image problematized. She acknowledges that something as banal as chicken, which for decades has been used in advertisements, illustrations, and films, continues to have value in representing identity within visual culture. As Walker said in response to an article challenging the relevance of her artistic style, “Had positive imaging of the black body to date solved the problem of representing blackness and power, thereby ceasing the need for further discussion of the issue, the ‘black’ and ‘white’ bodies in my work would be virtually silent.”¹ In allowing for narrative ambiguity, Walker does not allow the questions raised by the piece to seem either distant or overcome.

In this single cut-linoleum piece Kara Walker subtly brings the ongoing history of food into the dialogue of American race relations. In bringing up issues around access and distribution of food and food’s place in racial identification, the artist posits one more vital question: What is at stake in holding the keys to the coop?

**Note**