

FICTIONAL ROUTES TO RECOVERING BLACK ROOTS:
ZADIE SMITH, KARA WALKER AND BLACKFACE MINSTRELSY

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines Zadie Smith's novel Swing Time (2016) and the black paper silhouette murals of Kara Walker (since the mid-1990s) as works that demystify cultural practices underpinned by white stereotyping of black people and generally challenge mainstream historiography of slavery. The two artists do not create alternative historiographies, but, by critically re-viewing cultural products and attitudes, propose a route to retrieving the lost past which simultaneously casts a new light on the present too. Smith and Walker challenge complacent audiences to finally see (sic) the white ventriloquism of black voices within cherished cultural practices and traditions which have sanitised or displaced racism sometimes under the guise of humour. One such tradition is blackface minstrelsy, which the artists either analyse against the grain (Smith) or mimic most exaggeratedly (Walker) to reveal minstrelsy's long shadow over the post-slavery collective imagination in the West. However, unlike the Jamaican-English novelist, the African American artist walks a step further than unmasking traditional historiographic representations of the black or faux white acknowledgement of black cultural contribution. Walker demythicises the western Enlightenment myth of rational humanity and unimpeachable civility. Her grotesque compositions featuring antebellum slavery scenes reveal all characters involved as equally driven by instincts, hence as perfectly interchangeable. Walker, I submit, uncovers the "dark" roots of humankind, which no process of civilisation has ever "reformed" but only abjected (in Kristeva's sense) and projected onto the social other.*

KEYWORDS: *Swing Time (novel, Zadie Smith), Swing Time (film, starring Fred Astaire), paper silhouettes (Kara Walker), racist stereotyping, blackface minstrelsy, identity roots, abjection*