

there may be individuals on the other side of the situation you find yourself in, can also help you ideate tactical ways forward, back, or even sideways. The RBMS annual conference is one avenue for this. A more informal and regular community such as TPS (Teaching with Primary Sources) Collective is another avenue for idea-sharing and connection. Building supportive environments for affective learner responses to the materials in our care can provide frameworks for—but should never come at the cost of—our own needs as people, not simply as primary source instructors.

These five areas of communication and reflexive practice could bring a few different results. One powerful outcome is greater ability to forge the very senses of supported connection for ourselves as special collections instructors that we seek to establish for students encountering primary source materials. Such practice could also serve as a model for students to incorporate affective lenses to their own research and learning. Another possibility that might emerge is a clear recognition of one's own need to step back from the work as it stands. If the answer to the question of the work being sustainable as-is, is a "no," follow-up focuses might include finding, reestablishing, or connecting with much-needed support networks.

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## **Artists' Books and Critical Literacy Pedagogy: Kara Walker's *Freedom: a Fable***

by Sam Regal

### **Introduction**

Centered within library instruction, Kara Walker's *Freedom: a Fable: A Curious Interpretation of the Wit of a Negress in Troubled Times* (*Freedom: a Fable*) activates students' interdisciplinary engagement and deeply enriches their understanding and appreciation of Black American identity through an art historical lens. The artwork engages with the history of the silhouette form in America and its complex relationship to racial identity and expression, recalling the works of Auguste Edouart (1789–1861) and formerly enslaved silhouette artist Moses Williams (1777–c.1852), and functions as challenging indictment of racism, human subjugation, and flattening by intervening upon the slave narrative tradition through the work's formal elements.<sup>55</sup> In instruction, *Freedom: a Fable* encourages students toward critical engagement with the visual narrative form and challenges held notions about Black American history, identity, and representation.

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55. The author acknowledges the work of Elissa Watters; while it ostensibly covers the same subjects, this essay predates Watters' publication on *Freedom: a Fable*. See *Abstracts 2024: CAA 112th Annual Conference*. New York: College Art Association, 2024: 88.

## Critical Library Instruction and Artists’ Books

The artist’s book contains an inherent, critically generative duality: it is at once “a ‘book’ (written or printed pages attached and bound together, primarily to record information) and a three-dimensional artwork.”<sup>56</sup> Because artists’ books tend to engage with social, cultural, and political themes, they are valuable teaching tools in critical literacy. When librarians teach toward a critical literacy, they empower students to learn “not only how to find information, but also how to evaluate and contextualize it . . . [and] conduct research that matters to their personal experience and to the communities to which they belong.”<sup>57</sup> By developing adaptable, participatory, and contextual instructional practice, librarians empower students to engage in innovative, socially engaged scholarship.

Object-based learning has ties to active learning, participatory engagement, and constructivism, the latter of which posits that “knowledge and meaning are generated through an interaction between experiences and ideas constructed in the mind.”<sup>58</sup> Object-based instruction also allows for multisensory engagement, proven to promote reflective experiential learning. Centering artists’ books in library instruction, instructors engage students in participatory and densely contextual critical inquiry practice, “making [the lesson] more memorable, and complex or difficult concepts easier to apprehend.”<sup>59</sup> Artists’ books serve to break down students’ conceptual barriers surrounding these topics, a process reflective of the threshold concepts, or “portals to enlarged understanding or ways of thinking and practicing,” as articulated in ACRL’s *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*.<sup>60</sup> Artists’ books can also be effectively utilized to establish critical visual literacy and visual narrative comprehension, helping students to meaningfully engage with visual information in their material, aesthetic, sociopolitical, and historical contexts.

## Kara Walker’s Silhouettes

Kara Walker (b. 1969) gained prominence in the 1990s for her challenging and provocative representations of the Black body through black cut-paper silhouette. Walker’s artworks are relentless and complex, and her employment of the silhouette produces a negative representational space—“an anti-image, a black hole”—through which she

56. Stephen Bury, *Artists’ Books: The Book as a Work of Art, 1963-1995*, Aldershot, Hants, England; Scolar Press, 1995, quoted in Gustavo Grandal Montero, “Artists’ Books in HE Teaching and Learning” *The Blue Notebook* 7, no. 1 (2012): 41. Some artists’ books challenge or intervene upon the traditional book form, suggesting additional layers of material and critical complexity.

57. Maria Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier, eds. *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*. Illustrated edition. Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010, xi.

58. Helen Chatterjee and Leonie Hannan. *Engaging the Senses: Object-Based Learning in Higher Education* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2015), 3.

59. Montero, 41.

60. “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.” Text. Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), February 9, 2015. <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.

explores racial stereotypes and produces grotesque visual narratives of Black American history.<sup>61</sup> Walker has remarked upon the silhouette's singular representational utility, noting, "[t]he silhouette says a lot with very little information, but that's also what the stereotype does. So I saw the silhouette and stereotype as linked."<sup>62</sup> The artist portrays visual narratives of slavery and plantation life through delicate cut-paper silhouettes, and her artworks are often life-size, spanning museum and gallery walls; the fact of these artworks' size and positioning raises challenging questions about the histories reflected within institutional spaces and suggest that her silhouetted figures may "[...] swallow the dismissive and trivializing way that black subjects have been represented in art history."<sup>63</sup>

Walker inspired critics to debate whether her approach to the silhouette "simply reiterates racist stereotypes or resignifies them."<sup>64</sup> Walker's silhouettes are negations of stereotype figures—they are erasures or chasms—that may allow for a regenerative potentiality that, ultimately, rests in the eye of the beholder. Walker places her silhouette figures within violent or obscene vignettes, a move theorized to "engage . . . the bodies of looking audiences, rather than straightforwardly represent[ing] the affect and embodiment of black subjects."<sup>65</sup> Walker's forms can be understood as refutations of the stereotypes they depict, but they ultimately "foreclose . . . the very interpretive impulses [they] invite"<sup>66</sup> in their inherent resistance to specificity. This move is intentional; Walker commented:

I do love this moment of a sort of schism where you as a viewer are reminded that you're just not who you think you are. You are, in some kind of sadistic way, a character of my own devising.<sup>67</sup>

The viewer fills the silhouette's void with their own held knowledge, inadvertently activating the artwork's conceptual dimensions. Walker's silhouettes challenge individuals and institutions to consider historical entanglements with racial politics and representation. Ilka Saal suggested that, in Walker's hands, the silhouette:

. . . serves as both the medium and object of inquiry, bringing into focus the historical role this art form has played in the collusion of fact and fic-

61. Philippe Vergne. "The Black Saint Is the Sinner Lady." *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2007), 14.

62. Alexander Alberro. "Kara Walker," *Index* 1, no. 1. (2006): 25-26, quoted in Vergne, "Kara Walker: My Complement," 1.

63. Vergne, "The Black Saint," 14.

64. Amy Tang. "Postmodern Repetitions: Parody, Trauma, and the Case of Kara Walker." *Differences* 21, no. 2 (September 1, 2010): 144, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2010-006>.

65. Anna Ioanes. "Disgust in Silhouette: Toni Morrison, Kara Walker, and the Aesthetics of Violence," *Journal of Modern Literature* 42, no. 3 (2019): 113.

66. Ioanes, "Disgust in Silhouette," 110–28.

67. Olga Gambari et al. *Kara Walker: A Negress of Noteworthy Talent* (Torino: Fondazione Merz, 2012), 184.

tion that has informed perceptions of Blackness from the late eighteenth century onward. At the same time, the silhouette also becomes a potent means for intervening in this long history of constructions of Blackness.<sup>68</sup>

Walker’s silhouetted figures are performative mediations of historical racial stereotypes, but their function as narrative objects is ambiguous.

### Race and the Silhouette in America

Kara Walker explicitly engaged with the silhouette tradition by opening her 2007 visual essay, *After the Deluge*,<sup>69</sup> with *The Magic Lantern* (ca. 1835), a work by French-born silhouettist Auguste Edouart. Before the emergence of photography, the cut-paper or painted silhouette was considered an accessible means of portraiture, enjoying peak popularity in the American republic in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>70</sup> Gilles-Louis Chrétien’s 1786 invention of the physiognotrace revolutionized the process of cutting outlines and effectively democratized the tech-



**Figure 1.** Auguste Edouart (French, 1789–1861), *The Magic Lantern*, ca. 1835, cut paper and wash, image: 9 1/2 x 13 3/8 in. (24.2 x 33.9 cm), sheet: 10 1/4 x 13 1/2 in. (26 x 34.3 cm), bequest of Mary Martin, 1938, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/365307>.

68. Ilka Saal. “A Sidelong Glance at History: Unreliable Narration and the Silhouette as Blickmaschine in Kara Walker,” in *Collusions of Fact and Fiction: Performing Slavery in the Works of Suzan-Lori Parks and Kara Walker* (University of Iowa Press, 2021), 96.

69. Kara Elizabeth Walker. *Kara Walker: After the Deluge* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007).

70. Karen Chernick. “How Cut-Paper Silhouettes Ensured Portraiture Wasn’t Just for the Rich,” *Artsy*, May 22, 2018. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-cut-paper-silhouettes-ensured-portraiture-rich>.

nology.<sup>71</sup> The silhouette also served to reinforce racialization and racial stereotypes, as demonstrated by Edouart's *The Magic Lantern*<sup>72</sup> (figure 1).

This work depicts a domestic scene featuring a projectionist, people of all ages, and a playful dog. One figure stands apart from the group: a silhouette in a tenuous attitude hovering at the threshold of the parlor. Saal interpreted this figure as a Black house servant:

Clearly not part of the intimate family/business triangle, he nonetheless seems to be crucial to it. [. . .] He is, furthermore, also set apart from the people inside the room by his distinctive facial features (rounded nose, full upper lip) and hair (short and wavy)—visual clues that invite a racial reading.<sup>73</sup>

Edouart's piece encapsulated the nineteenth century racial economy, served as its own mechanism of racialization, and enforced stereotypes. Saal noted that, "[n]ot unlike the projection screen on the right-hand side of the image, [the figure at left] too serves as a surface for phantasmagoric projections."<sup>74</sup> Using silhouette, Edouart enacted a mode of racial fabulism, reinforcing racist hierarchies through erasure, abbreviation, and flattening.

A similarly complex mode of racial codification is evident in the portrait of Moses Williams (figure 2). Williams was a talented silhouette cutter, born into slavery, and "instructed in taxidermy, animal husbandry, . . . [and] the use of a silhouette-making machine."<sup>75</sup> Williams is depicted in the 1803 silhouette *Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles*.<sup>76</sup> Commonly attributed to Raphaele Peale (1774–1825), the work has also been convincingly theorized to have been completed by Williams himself.

71. Chernick. Given the artform's relative accessibility, silhouettes from this period represent people of marginalized identities, including, "the first Hispanic U.S. congressman [. . .] dwarves, the handicapped, enslaved African-Americans, and same-sex couples."

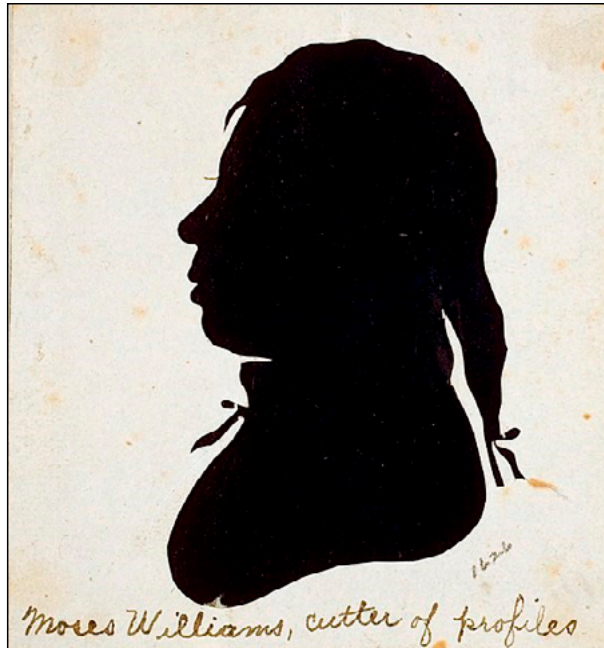
72. Emma Rutherford and Lulu Guinness. *Silhouette: The Art of the Shadow*. (New York: Rizzoli, 2009), 213. Edouart came to America after serving as the court silhouettist to King Charles X, and he was known to have produced over 3,800 silhouettes during the years of his American residency (1839-1848).

73. Saal, "Sidelong Glance," 96.

74. Saal, "Sidelong Glance," 126.

75. Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw. "Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles': Silhouettes and African American Identity in the Early Republic," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 149, no. 1 (2005): 25. He was taught to cut profiles rather than engage in the "higher art" of painting, which was reserved for the Peale children. Freed in 1802, Williams cut silhouettes within Charles Wilson Peale's Philadelphia museum, "earning approximately eight cents per silhouette." For more on Williams, see Allison C. Meier, "The Former Slave Who Became a Master Silhouette Artist," *JSTOR Daily*, June 7, 2018. <https://daily.jstor.org/the-former-slave-who-became-a-master-silhouette-artist/>; Ellen Sacco. "Racial Theory, Museum Practice: The Colored World of Charles Willson Peale," *Museum Anthropology* 20, no. 2 (1996): 26. <https://doi.org/10.1525/mua.1996.20.2.25>.

76. Shaw, "Moses Williams," 25.



**Figure 2.** Raphaëlle Peale (1774–1825), Moses Williams (1777–1825), *Moses Williams, cutter of profiles*, ca. 1803, cut paper, sheet: 3.5 x 3.25 in. (9 x 8 cm), McAllister Collection gift, 1886, Library Company of Philadelphia, Flickr.com, <https://flic.kr/p/5s1VDk>.

Through close study of the artwork, Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw noted:

... certain discrepancies reveal both what was ignored and what was embellished during this artistic process. . . . Although the rounded nose and full lips of Williams's African blood remain to dominate his facial features, the European part of his 'Molatto' identity crowns him in the form of long, straight hair . . . it is decidedly anglicized. By deviating from the original form line, I believe that Moses Williams purposely created an image in which his own features would connote tropes of whiteness rather than blackness.<sup>77</sup>

If this was Williams' self-portrait, he literally cut and reinforced a fabulation of his racial identity. This cutting can be read as an act of reclamation or resistance—a self-determinist impulse toward defining his own racial identity and value within his social milieu. Williams used the act of cutting as a weapon of agency, carving out his own image in an act of powerfully resonant mythmaking.

<sup>77</sup>. Shaw, 36-37.

### ***Freedom: a Fable***

*Freedom: a Fable*<sup>78</sup> draws upon the American silhouette tradition to intervene upon stereotypical modes of racialization, establishing authorial agency—albeit nuanced and ambiguous in nature—through erasure (figure 3). Walker’s cut-paper silhouettes<sup>79</sup> force viewers to participate in the silhouettes’ racialization and definition, filling the expansive figures with their own held knowledge and racial impulses. In teaching this artist’s book, instructors can follow many rich and generative threads: they can explicate the cut-paper silhouette form in an art historical context and its concomitant racial implications, setting the work against that of Edouart and Williams; they can provide an analysis of Walker’s silhouette as a negative representation space opening to chasms of grotesquerie; and they can provide a formal analysis of the book as an aesthetic object.<sup>80</sup> Each of these zones of inquiry has the capacity to productively challenge students toward a critical literacy, and their learning will be catalyzed by centering the artists’ book in object-based instruction.



**Figure 3.** Kara Elizabeth Walker (b. 1969). Opening, “Thinking her deed done . . .” (unpaginated) from *Freedom: a Fable: A Curious Interpretation of the Wit of a Negress in Troubled Times*, 1997, pop-up book, 9 3/8 × 8 3/8 in. (23.8 × 21.3 cm). Image Source: Author

78. Kara Elizabeth Walker. *Freedom: a Fable* (Pasadena, Calif: Typecraft, 1997). Created in collaboration with paper designer David Eisen, *Freedom: a Fable* was sponsored by the Peter Norton Family Christmas Art Project (1988–2018) for circulation among friends and colleagues.

79. Printed in an edition of 4,000, *Freedom: a Fable*’s silhouettes were, in contrast to Williams and Edouart, laser cut.

80. Contributors to the production of *Freedom: a Fable* include David Eisen, Eisen Architects, Inc., Boston, MA (pop-up design); Lasercraft, Inc., Santa Rosa, CA (laser cutting); Timothy Silverlake, Valencia, CA (text design); Typecraft, Inc., Pasadena, CA (printing); Roswell Book Binders, Phoenix, AZ (binding); Marketing Techniques Inc., Carlsbad, CA (assembly and fulfillment).

*Freedom: a Fable* is a pop-up book, and this formal choice produces its own rich thematic tensions. Movable books have existed as early as the thirteenth century, when they were primarily used as scientific objects for adults. In the 1850s, British publisher Dean and Son created what is credited as the first "pop-up" book as an amusement for children, and movable books enjoyed a "golden age" in the late nineteenth century.<sup>81</sup> The pop-up book form's renaissance meaningfully overlapped with the explosion of the silhouette as a populist artform, and Walker's choice of this particular book form demonstrates thoughtful historical parallels. The pop-up form is also commonly associated with children's books, which are often crafted centering pedagogical objectives. While Walker's book holds gestural parallels to the fairytales of children's literature, it is overtly sexually suggestive, depicts crude racial stereotypes, and is decidedly not for children. *Freedom: a Fable* subverts the pop-up form through destabilizing and outwardly offensive content, and it also intervenes upon expectations.

In opposition to books with clear and traceable narratives, *Freedom: a Fable*'s pop-up silhouettes have little relationship to the book's text: "what the reader views has little correlation with the ensuing storyline."<sup>82</sup> *Freedom: a Fable* is a tale of attempted African repatriation. In a complication of novels like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the tale's narrator, N— takes the role of colonizer: she is "culturally divided and full of well-meaning condescension towards the blacks she intends to civilize in/on the way to the African homeland."<sup>83</sup> She intends to claim ownership of the Black people she encounters, "But not with papers or deeds or laws or such-like, but with undying devotion, and when I've earned myself that then I'll work on the White people as well!"<sup>84</sup> N— boards a ship to Africa that never sails, spews words of illogic and ideology, and irritates her shipmates, and the reader is left with the understanding that N— was thrown overboard or cannibalized. The tensions produced by this unstable tale, set against its diachronic illustrations, expand upon the impulses found throughout Walker's oeuvre, which demonstrate, "the existence of a shared visual memory of slavery each time [they reference], yet [refuse] to fully deliver, a familiar story."<sup>85</sup>

On its face, the nonsensical book forces the reader to reflect on their held racial biases and senses of historicity in this midst of absurdist narrative. Under closer

81. Eric Faden. "Movables, Movies, Mobility: Nineteenth-century Looking and Reading," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 5, no. 1 (April 2007): 74-75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17460650701269820>. The term first appeared in 1926. See Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "pop-up (adj.), sense 1," July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9589062222>.

82. Brown, 193.

83. Faden, "Moveables," 192.

84. Walker, *Freedom: a Fable*.

85. Rebecca Peabody. *Consuming Stories: Kara Walker and the Imagining of American Race* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016), 20.



analysis, Walker's text is also understood as a meditation on freedom. N—'s pontifications directly reference Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech,<sup>86</sup> and the work serves as a "complex interrogation of freedom and futurity suggesting that each or both is fable or fabulation."<sup>87</sup> Despite its fabulism, the book is an enactment of freedom that involves the reader in its storytelling. N— suggests that liberty can be articulated as an extension of the body: "[this] woman's body is like our history, starting from places of darkest mystery and capable of bringing to light New Worlds."<sup>88</sup> Freedom, in this case, is posited as a sensorial or erotic experience. The book also demonstrates a conceptual freedom tale: "the text seems to insist on an emancipation of word from image, of narrator from N—, of reader from viewer, and of any from artist."<sup>89</sup> In *Freedom: a Fable*, Walker raises questions about the meaning—or viability—of freedom in post-Civil Rights generations, and the artist articulates gestures toward liberty through complex conceptual frameworks of race and gender.<sup>90</sup>

## Conclusion

Kara Walker's *Freedom: a Fable* is an effective teaching tool in its embeddedness within multiple, complex sociocultural, political, and art historical traditions.<sup>91</sup> Library instructors invested in teaching toward a critical literacy can use the text to productively challenge students to consider the complex systemic issues that determine their social milieus. The text's nuance and ambivalence toward its racialized figures is of great potential use in an instructional setting, as it forces students to reflect upon their own held knowledge, perspectives, and biases. Library instructors can use *Freedom: a Fable* to expand upon the history of the silhouette in America, to point to silhouettes' racial implications, to investigate Walker's artworks' representational resonances, and to interrogate an innovative intervention on the pop-up book form. *Freedom: a Fable* exists within a complex web of historicity, and its focused examination can raise constructive questions about race representation in America.

Issues of race and racism must be raised in classroom spaces to encourage students toward critical, empathic, and socially responsive research practices. The utilization of artists' books and object-based learning can prove to be useful mechanisms in approaching these sensitive subjects. Instructors may encounter student resistance in teaching toward these themes, and they should be prepared to encounter unsympa-

86. Tang, "Postmodern Repetitions," 161.

87. Hazel V. Carby. "Black Futurities: Shape-Shifting beyond the Limits of the Human" *In Visible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture*, November 15, 2020. Accessed February 2, 2022. <https://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/black-futurities/>.

88. Walker, *Freedom: a Fable*.

89. Brown, 196.

90. Brown.

91. A longer version of this paper would include instructional examples and assessment data.

thetic audiences. This resistance should not be framed as the fault of the student. In *Teaching About Race and Racism in the College Classroom*, Cyndi Kernahan offered,

... many Americans (especially Whites, but not only Whites) believe in the notion of colorblindness, rejecting the notion of widespread institutional discrimination. Similarly, there is little understanding of our history and the racist ideas that shaped the United States from the beginning. ... Given this, it is not surprising that our students struggle to make sense of what we are teaching them and that they slip back just as we push forward.<sup>92</sup>

Educating students about issues of race is reflective of threshold learning concepts in that, "... learning about race involves seeing oneself in a new way and in a way that can be hard to 'unsee.'"<sup>93</sup> Though taking on this subject matter in library instruction may prove challenging, it is critical to engage students in these fundamental issues—they govern the worlds in which students live and learn.

Artists' books have the potential to break difficult conceptual barriers and facilitate meaningful engagement with the material in its social, cultural, political, and art historical contexts. Kara Walker's *Freedom: a Fable* can challenge and inspire students toward similarly rigorous critical engagement. The book's richness, resonance, and complexity may productively discomfit students and encourage self-reflective and responsive scholarly practice.

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## The Necessity of Embracing Collection Gaps: Moving Towards Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Collecting

by Ruth Kramer

Many special collections and rare book departments within American academic libraries are changing their collection development policies to reflect the need and call for diverse collections. However, many of these altered policies do not adequately address what a diverse collection is, and how to achieve this. Moreover, while institutions look to diversify their collections, they are also filling "collection gaps," or, acquiring items in areas of weakness, to better strengthen the overall research and instruction value of the entire collection. To better understand these policy changes, we can look at a variety of academic institutions that differ in size, geographic location,

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92. Cyndi Kernahan. *Teaching about Race and Racism in the College Classroom: Notes from a White Professor* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2019), 48.

93. Kernahan, 49.