# Kelley Walker's Negro Problem

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"He's white?" This has been asked of me enough times with a double take or a sputter of disbelief that I know the question signifies something beyond mere curiosity about Kelley Walker's race. The incredulity with which the revelation is greeted owes in part to the "blackness" of some of Walker's most celebrated works—chocolate smeared images of civil rights protesters and covers of black gentlemen's magazines overlaid with digitally scanned toothpaste—coupled with uncertainty about his "right" to use those images. Walker's whiteness is thought to be a problem because these images are considered the natural purview of black artists, for whom there is imagined to be a distinct, already known, separate-but-equal entity called "black culture" which we use as our birthright and white artists use at their peril. But while there are certainly images with black people in them, is there really such a thing as "black images"? In what sense is a white photographer documenting the brutality of white southern policemen against civil rights workers creating "black images"? If a black person had made the same photographs, would they be even blacker images? Or are "black images" just images commandeered for use by black people, the way the word "nigger" has been transformed from a slur to a term of endearment (albeit one that white people speak at risk of bodily harm)?

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If we agree for the moment that there is no such thing as "black images"—that there are only "images"—then what, exactly, is so troubling about Walker's use of images with black people in them? The answer may be that his work forces us to acknowledge that although race is a biological fiction, it remains an entrenched social and political fact. Even if we say "race doesn't matter," in reality it matters a great deal. This might explain the teeth-sucking sound or resigned sighs that knowledge of Walker's whiteness provokes in some quarters: "Just another example of white folks appropriating black culture." But if we can acknowledge the private whispers about this thorny issue, how do we explain the profound silence in the critical writing on Walker's work (and in the art world more generally) about how race operates? It is as if questions of race are deemed irrelevant, uninteresting, or just too complicated to deal with. In Europe, where Walker has received substantial curatorial and critical support, the issue of race in his work may be deemed "too American" to address, and in America it may be thought "too black." This silence is troubling, I would argue, because Walker is quite aware of the intractability of the "problem" of his racial identity in relationship to images of black people, and part of the impact of his work is that it calls attention to very difficult and still unsettled questions about the politics of representation.

One of the problems with discussions of race is that no one ever has to speak up on whiteness, while

those who are not white get called upon to speak their difference again and again. In the art world, the discourse around black artists often focuses on race even when their work does not. Take, for example, the following quotation from a review of Steve McQueen's film *Deadpan* (1997), a complex restaging of a scene from the Buster Keaton movie *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928) in which a house facade falls over a standing man:

*Metaphors crowd in. Seen in an American context, the house suggests a sharecropper's cabin; its destruction evokes Abraham Lincoln's Civil War caveat, "a house divided against itself cannot stand," referring to a nation riven by the question of slavery. (Mr. McQueen is black.)*[1]

While the reviewer is clearly sympathetic to McQueen's artistic project, he equates the blackness of the artist's body with the "blackness" of his work, and once that occurs, metaphors do, indeed, crowd in. A racial reading that feels tangential to the film's primary concerns is privileged over an exploration of McQueen's relationship to, say, theorist Tom Gunning's notion of a "cinema of attractions" or to an experimental filmmaker like Michael Snow. This is not to suggest that the race of the protagonist of the film doesn't matter; it's just that in this case race seems to matter too much.

If the work of black artists provokes overdetermined readings, what do we make of the critical response to Walker's work, in which black bodies appear front and center but barely get a second glance? An argument could be made that Walker's digital and appropriative strategies, along with the leveling effect of collage, render his subject matter irrelevant. Yet if this were his goal, it is hard to imagine why he would repeatedly use subjects that, given our long, troubled history and current political reality, are so resistant to being made irrelevant. And if it were true that Walker's (black) subjects do not matter, why wouldn't the critical writing on his work simply say as much, rather than sidestepping the issue by quickly mentioning race only to move on to yet another discussion of Warhol and appropriation? Don't think this silence doesn't operate on an institutional level too. The cultural critic Hazel Carby once suggested that for many non-black individuals, black cultural products are a substitute for prolonged and meaningful contact with black people, and given the dearth of exhibitions that include black artists (or their segregation into race- and identity-themed shows), it seems that many museums and Kunsthalles find it easier to deal with images of blacks rather than with the people themselves, images which Walker's work readily provides. While this is in no way Walker's responsibility—after all, hate the game, not the player—it is shocking that what was once the subject of academic conferences and anguished curatorial meetings is now considered too boring (or problematic) to discuss.

When is a race riot not a race riot? When it is a Warhol. But is a race riot not a race riot when it is a Kelley Walker? Walker has put some distance between himself and Warhol by using different source photos for his *Black Star Press* works, rotating the images, and overlaying them with chocolate or turning them Coca-Cola red. He has also put some distance between himself and his subject matter, and here time is on Walker's side. When Warhol used similar images they were current news. In Walker's paintings, the photographs are now almost a half-century distant from the events they depict and have lost some of their original frisson, rendering them in the minds of some commentators "just images" to be used without regard to their historical and political specificity.

Yet if Walker's interventions create a distance between the race riot photograph and us, they also brings us closer to the image, in part because of the nagging worry that the images are not his to use. Race riots are race riots—and not just Warhols—in Walker's work because our anxiety about his whiteness and his chocolaty transgressions reveals that we are not "beyond" race; we have just begun to address it. This ultimately points to our failure to realize the "post-racial" society that the men and women in those images were marching to achieve. If we had made it to that promised land, these images would belong to "culture" as opposed to "black culture," thereby detaching the racial identity of the maker or user of an image from its politics, whether correct or not. Perhaps in that promised land, knowledge of Walker's racial identity would be met with a shoulder shrug, and the power of the work would be less dependent on some (by then dated) notion of racial

transgression (which his toothpaste- and chocolate-smeared images of black people currently trade in) than on how he lays bare the complicated ways in which we (re)make images and on the instability of their meaning. In that future world, the ways race operates in his work would already have been thoroughly considered by others as integral to the work's meaning (and would not be seen as black people's obsession).

Speaking of obsessions, here's Walker on one of his: "There is something amazing and extremely tragic about Whitney Houston that is very American."[2] But really the most amazing and tragic and American thing about Whitney Houston, and about Michael Jackson, Sonny Liston, civil rights protestors, and *King* cover girl Regina Hall (all of whom populate Walker's art) is that they point to the fact that there is nothing more American than black Americans. America without black people would be like a day without sunshine. And I know that Walker is a good American boy because he, like many other white Americans, has a healthy, wholesome, complicated, troubling, and troubled obsession with black people, an obsession that I confess I happen to share. Until we get to the promised land let us think of Kelley Walker's "negro problem" as an American dilemma, a dilemma which gives enormous vitality to his work and one which we all ignore at our peril.

1) Holland Cotter, "Art in Review," *The New York Times*, 23 January 1998, section E, p. 35.
2) Christopher Bollen, "Kelley Walker," *Interview Magazine*, December/January 2009, p. 159.

*KELLEY WALKER, UNTITLED, 2006, light box with duratrans, 60 3/4 x 120 x 4" /*
*OHNE TITEL, Lichtkasten mit Duratrans, 154,3 x 304,8 x 10,2 cm.*