

POST-RACIALITY OR A RE-IMAGINING OF WHITENESS? AN INTERVIEW WITH CLARENCE E. WALKER

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INTRODUCTION

Clarence Walker is recognised as one of the leading historians of American race relations, and is noted for his advocacy of critical historical analysis of race relations and discourses as a way of understanding the present. Walker has written widely on issues relating to black American history, including five books covering variously race and politics (2009), race and the national imaginary (2010); Afrocentrism and discourses of black Africanism (2001, 1999) and the history of nineteenth century black religion (1982).

Walker's most recent work, with Gregory Smithers, explores the emergence of discourses of post-raciality during the 2008 United States election campaign (Walker and Smithers 2009) where Walker argued that the historical superficiality of journalism exacerbates racial tensions rather than creating greater cultural understanding on racial issues (2009, p. 39). In this interview, he discusses the applicability of what he describes as reactionary discourses (that of post-raciality, colour blindness and colour neutrality) in the context of shifting media usage and tensions arising from perceived challenges to the dominant, white-centred national imaginary.

The critique of white-centred accounts of history has been central to Walker's work, and was the subject of his compelling book *Mongrel Nation* (2010), in which he argues for the need to recognise the interracial founding of the United States. The book contextualises the controversy surrounding 1990s claims that Thomas Jefferson, one of America's Founding Fathers, had one or more children in an interracial relationship with a slave girl called Sally Heming. These accounts were refuted heatedly by segments of academia who pointed to Jefferson's documented concern about the dangers of amalgamation as an indication of the unlikely nature of his having an interracial affair. Walker argues persuasively and with historical force that such refutations need to be contextualised as reactionary discourses within a history of white-centred historicising and imagining of national identity in the United States.

Walker is also known for his sustained criticism of ahistorical analysis, perhaps most notably in relation to Afrocentricity. Afrocentricity views Africa (and Egypt) as the source of Western culture rather than Ancient Greece and seeks development of a positive African-centred history (2009; 2001). As Walker argues, it promulgates an essentialist Africanness that smoothes out differences past and present and neglects to contextualise historical and local conditions such as colonialism, slavery, subjugation and cultural diffusion and appropriation (2001, pp. 44-46). In doing so, he argues that not only is it essentialising and racialising, drawing on European eighteenth century notions of race, but also erases the history of agency of black people in the United States (and elsewhere).

Walker grew up in West Berkeley, California. He received his PhD in nineteenth century American history and race relations at the University of California, Berkeley (1976). In 1973 he was appointed lecturer in American History and American Studies at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, where he lectured on American Studies, History, and Southern Gothic Film. Currently, Walker is Professor of History at the University of California, Davis, a position he has held since 1985. He lectures predominately on Black American History, focusing on the period from 1450 to the present. He also teaches nineteenth century Social and Political History of the United States, and the History of Sexuality, Film and Popular Culture. As well as numerous articles and books, Walker was also academic advisor to the PBS American Experience television series (*Reconstruction: The Second Civil War*, 2004). In this interview, he discusses further the relationship between the history of race relations and contemporary discourses of post-raciality in media and political debates.

PLATFORM: Throughout your career you have consistently emphasised the need for critical appraisal of historical interracial relations as a basis for understanding the present. When did you first become interested in issues of race and race relations, and how has this interest developed throughout your career?

Clarence Walker: Before I went to graduate school in 1967 I grew up in the working-class neighbourhood of West Berkeley. This was America in the 1940s and my family was the first black family to buy a home in the neighbourhood. The kids that I played with from the very beginning were Asian, Caucasian, black, and in some cases Mexican. From early on my education was integrated, and I was very much interested in issues of race and racial differences from about nine years of age. This interest certainly grew apace when I went to junior high, high school and college. But my professional interest developed when I entered the Berkeley graduate program in American history and focused on the History of Black People and American Race Relations. In the 1960s as a result of the Civil Rights Movement we barely spoke about relations with other groups such as Asians and Mexicans, all of the discussion was about black and white people. I felt that that was quite deficient and that one had to broaden one's purview to understand the nature of race in America. Particularly given that this country is a colonial settler society in which race and sexuality were important components in development of the national identity. Our history was not to be understood through master narratives constructed by white people which effaced

America's racialised subjects. The history of white Americans can only be understood as growing out of contact with people of colour, be these Native Americans, African slaves, or Mexicans, for example.

PLATFORM: The idea that American society is post-racial gained renewed ascendancy with Barack Obama's election as the first (self-identifying) black President of the United States. However, narratives of post-race have been circulating in the US since the Civil Rights Act (1964). Can you elaborate on the nuances between narratives such as post-raciality, colour-blindness and race neutrality as a basis for informing analysis of their presence in political and media debates over the past two years?

CW: In my view these are all reactionary movements. They are constructed around an attempt to efface race as a site of conflict in the American past and present. To say that one is colour-blind rather than colour-conscious is to say that you see something in someone that you don't want to see, that is their colour. It's also to say that you think that these issues are somewhat superficial and that if we want to wish them away we can. You can see this in the whole construction of Asians as some kind of model minority here because they're successful academically and economically, at least in some sectors of the population. You can also see it in the hysteria over immigration with the arrival of large numbers of Spanish-speaking people over recent years.

It is the case in America that most white people do not want to talk about race. They prefer to think that the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 has effaced the racial problem, and that if there is a racial problem here it is because black people are basically angry or have refused to accept this new reality in which race is no longer a problem. But if race is no longer a problem, then why are there so many young black men between the ages of 18 and 25 including Mexicans also in American prisons? They constitute approximately one and a half million of two million people in American prisons.

Yet the Obama election was *very much* a racial election, despite these discourses of post-raciality. It was racial in the sense that it required white people to overcome their historical animosity towards the idea of a successful black candidate. I tend to think that up until the leaking to the media of the sermons of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright¹, as Gregory Smithers and I discuss in *The Preacher and the Politician*, there was little attention to the fact on the part of many white Americans that Barack Obama was black. In the case of black Americans there was great suspicion of him because he was not associated with the two historically defining moments of black American history, one being of course the question of slavery and Jim Crow², the other being the Civil Rights Movement. It was only when Jeremiah Wright's comments were leaked³ and it came out that Obama was associated with this Church which was part of a Christian black nationalist movement, a particular congregation that was Afro-centric and black nationalist, that attention started to be paid to the fact that Obama was black. This led to speculation about whether Obama therefore might have a subtext of black militancy that he wasn't talking about. This was one of the signature moments in terms of race becoming part of the election debate.

The Obama presidency has if not reignited issues about race and colour then certainly shown that they haven't gone away. In many ways the emergence of this black man as the President of the United States is comparable to the emergence of prominent Jews in France and Germany and the political and cultural life of those countries in the nineteenth century. There were elements in those societies who were opposed to Jewish civil and political equality just as there are elements in this country who feared the election of Obama or any black person as the President of the United States.

The discourse of post-racialism which emerged in relation to the 2008 campaign was itself really a product of the chattering classes, by that I mean the media commentators and academics who talked about the 'Obama moment' as the post-racial moment. For example, I teach a course called the History of Race in America here at the University of California and I have just finished teaching 80 undergraduates. I have talked about this subject in the way I have done for the 37 years of my career in that I don't mince words and I am very direct about what I want to say. Many of my students find this very disturbing because their views have been shaped by the media and some of them were very resistant to the notion that this in fact *was not* a post-racial society because we had a black president and that because he was of mixed race nobody talked about the fact that he had a white mother. I said to my students, "How would his history have been different if his mother was black and his father white rather than the other way around?" It had never occurred to them that this would have created a different historical narrative and a different historical actor, and one whom many white people in this country would never have voted for because his cultural experience rather than being that of a white working class family would have been that of a black family.

PLATFORM: In *The Preacher and The Politician* you said that the historical superficiality of journalism has the effect of exacerbating tensions regarding race rather than informing understanding. This was in the context of the shift away from mainstream media to comedic alternatives such as Jon Stewart's Daily Show as a source of reporting news and analysis during the 2008 election. What impact do you think this had on the tenor of race in the debate?

CW: I think it is a way of diffusing issues by turning to humour. It diverts you from the seriousness of the problem and makes you think that these media moments really represent a resolution or a disappearance of the deep structural issues confronting the country, whether these be racial or economic. Not enough attention in these news bites is paid to these problems, it just comes in five or ten minute segments and then it disappears. There is no protracted discussion of these issues. But this can only last for a period of time because the issues are so grave that they require serious attention. You can only laugh at this if you are refusing to think about the deeper implications of what is going on in society and its problems.

This is what Gregory Smithers and I describe as the historical superficiality of journalism. We argued in *The Preacher and The Politician* that the reaction of White Americans to Wright's sermons was grounded in an unexamined pop-culture interpretation of American history, and that the sermons weren't contextualised in

terms of both the preaching tradition of black churchmen in the United States as well as against the history of race relations.

I do think media has prepared the ground in some ways for the acceptance of a black President. Television and other media obviously play an important role in this because for many people that's where they get their history and what they understand about the world from. In American culture from the 1960s forward we see the movement of black people into roles in public television and movies and the tremendous impact that black music has had on popular culture. You can see this in many aspects of American popular culture that are contributory to an acceptance of black culture, for example The Oprah Winfrey Show, the presence of Tavis Smiley on public radio (www.PBS.org). This has prepared a generation of younger people to accept difference in a way that older generations did not.

I also think that this shift towards alternative media has contributed to media's liberalisation. The responsible media in this country has of course spoken to racism, but I don't think that they have been as aggressive as they could have been in debunking these issues. I don't think they have stood up to these issues as much as they could, or offered the level of analysis that they should have. Also the responsible media is offset by other media such as Fox News, the Rupert Murdoch organ in this country, which I would describe as extremely racist. And then you have media commentators like Rush Limbaugh⁴ who continues to describe Obama as a Muslim, 'Barack Hussein Obama', emphasising the fact that he may not be an American... One problem with the media in America, it seems to me, is that people now are so divided. If you are conservative you look at the Murdoch operatives, if you are liberal you are going to look at Stephen Colbert (Comedy Central's The Colbert Report) and Jon Stewart (The Daily Show) and PBS NewsHour (www.pbs.org/newshour). People don't read a wide variety of papers or magazines that would produce some questioning of opinions be they left or right.

PLATFORM: You have said that race is never far from politics in the United States. Whilst the current debates about post-racism have hinged upon the identity of candidates, can you elaborate on some of the other ways that race and ethnicity become visible in political campaigns and debates?

CW: Whilst the overt language of race isn't talked about any more, this is not to say that the overt language of the past hasn't been replaced by codes. The word 'nigger', for example, is not publicly acknowledged, but words such as violent and militant have come to form part of the discourse in its place. The word Muslim has also now come to mean 'nigger' here... I think that race is still there in politics but it's not often articulated in the way that it should be. For example, we have now a political situation that nobody is talking about in terms of its racial implications, and that is the fact that the Republicans now have a majority in the House of Representatives, and it is in the House of Representatives that all revenue bills in the United States originate. So if they want to slash government programs by 25 per cent this will have a disproportionate effect on poor white people, blacks, Mexicans and so on.

The Obama Presidency has created certain strains that I think the post-racialist argument did not anticipate. This can be seen in the discourses of the Republican Party and the Tea Party movement. We can now see for example that the Republican Party is basically a party of aggrieved white nationalism, of people feeling victimised by someone who ‘doesn’t share their values’. They think they are losing the country and that there is somebody in power who is different historically from what they understand. America emerged from World War II as the richest and the most powerful nation in the world and it is now no longer in that position. Globalisation, and the failure of the government here to effectively deal with our structural, social and educational problems means that we are on the down slope of empire and it means that the country at this particular moment is presided over by someone whom many white Americans cannot identify with. For that reason they are extremely angry because they understand that quality of life is going to decline. It is estimated that in the last century the United States received 90 per cent of the world’s wealth. In this century, that will decline to something like 30 per cent. And Americans are completely unprepared to accept the fact that their lifestyle is going to change, and change dramatically.

PLATFORM: So are you seeing those issues of nervousness and anxiety about change as inherent within these reactionary discourses?

CW: Absolutely they are at the very heart of those discourses. Those discourses are not to be solely understood on their own, they are at the heart of a cultural system, but also of a very material sense of the world. In healthcare, for example, they can be seen in the hysteria about the Obama healthcare program. The American right wants white America to think that it is going to have to pay for poor brown and black people (and poor white people too). The Republicans have launched a number of legal challenges in response to the health care legislation, and a Judge in Virginia recently ruled that the government could not impose the health care plan because it represented an extension of powers that the constitution did not grant to the federal government.

PLATFORM: I’d like to return to a consistent theme in your work, that of the argument that a critical appraisal of historiography is vital in understanding contemporary debates and discourses on race. In *Mongrel Nation* you particularly emphasised the resistance of historians and others to the notion of an interracial founding of America rather than the dominant constructions of whiteness that have underpinned renderings of history in the US. This was in relation to claims that Thomas Jefferson fathered one or more children in an interracial relationship with Sally Hemings. How can this historical perspective inform our understanding of the role of discourses such as post-racialism?

CW: In the national imaginary up until recently the United States was historically imagined by historians as purely a white nation. This is changing with the work of the very distinguished historian Annette Gordon Reid and others, as well as in my work, where you see a rethinking of the American past that is more in line with what the country was like in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and what it is like today. The resistance to this arises out of the fact that it is very hard for some people, older people in particular, to think of the United States as anything other than ‘whiteland’ or

‘whitetopia’ and the fact that they refuse to come to grips with this. You see this most clearly in their hostility to Barack Obama. His election is something that is contrary to fact. If this is a white nation then what is it doing with a “coloured” president? And if this is a white nation, then what does it mean for the future? It means that we will have an Asian president, it means that we may even have a Muslim president, we may even have a woman president, and I hope we do. It’s not just that every generation writes history according to its own desires but that there has to be a recognition in the United States that although it was the product of white colonial settlers that the country did not remain white very long.

PLATFORM: On the topic of whiteness, you have also described colour-blindness as a form of “disavowal” that through an eradication of diversity perpetuates the authority and hierarchy of whiteness (2001, p. 87). To what degree would you see discourses of post-racialism as a further disavowal against broader projects of opposition to or perpetuation of the dominant culture?

CW: I do see them as a further disavowal because I see them as a retreat from colour consciousness. We have to be aware of these colour differences because they speak to all kinds of inequalities and injustices in society and it’s a mistake to assume that just because you pass certain laws that the world has become all of a sudden a place where everything and everybody is equal. I know every day as a black university professor that I don’t have the power of Bill Gates, and I also know as a black man walking around in this country I might be subject to indignities and injustices in the same way that someone living in a ghetto might be victimised. A recent example of this was the brouhaha around Professor Henry Louis Gates, the Professor of African-American Studies at Harvard who was arrested by the police as he was trying to enter his Cambridge home in July 2009. The door to Gates’ home was stuck and he was trying to open it. The local police arrived in response to a 911 call about a man breaking and entering. When they arrived they asked Gates to step to the porch and show his ID. Gates refused and said you wouldn’t treat me this way if I were white. The police then shackled him and took him to jail with the neighbours looking on. Gates responded by saying that the policeman would never have acted that way if he had known who Gates was. I tend to think that this represents a certain kind of racial/class amnesia on the part of Gates, in that some members of his generation of black professionals think that all their accomplishments have somehow effaced the racisms that earlier generations of black people and black men in particular faced. In many ways, black men are still viewed as a menace to society, to quote the name of a famous movie [referring to the 2003 film *Menace II Society*].

The Gates incident illustrates the limits of post-racism. Although we have come very far in American race relations there are still a lot of problems that we have to address, and one of these is this image of black men as a threat in society even when they are accomplished. There has been this debate recently about post-racialism that if Obama had been more outspoken and militant then this would have frightened white people away. But it seems to me that the issue is not about the binary of militancy or accommodation but just the mere fact of his blackness. It didn’t make any difference when it came down in the final analysis to Martin Luther King or Malcolm X, they were both perceived as threats to American society.

What this points to is the failure of society to be as liberal and progressive thinking as it wants to under the rubric of post-racialism and colour-blindness. This suggests to me that a lot of this is purely some kind of verbal fantasy. The United States continues to be a society deeply riven by anxieties about colour and about equality that we would have thought would have gone away some 40 years or more after the passage of the Civil Rights Acts. We have come a long way, and pop-culture programs such as the Oprah Winfrey Show certainly give the appearance of having moved the nation in a new direction. The election of presidential candidates identifying as black *is* significant. But we still have a long way to go before race is not an issue, as discourses of post-racialism would have us believe.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Jeremiah Wright was at the time the pastor at the Trinity United Church of Christ, a Chicago-based church with a congregation of 6,000 or more members (Wikipedia 2011).
- 2 The term Jim Crow originated in a white minstrel show performed by Daddy Rice in the 1830s. By the 1900s, however, it had generally come to refer to the range of legal, institutional and other activities that disadvantaged and discriminated against black Americans from the period of the late nineteenth century through to the Civil Rights Movements of the 1950s and 1960s. In particular, Jim Crow referred to the laws mandating segregation between black and white Americans during between 1870s through to the 1950s (JimCrowHistory.org).
- 3 Wright expressed what were commonly described as Anti-American views, including perhaps most contentiously the comment that the attacks of September 11 were proof that the “chickens are coming home to roost” (Walker and Smithers 2009, p. 50; Wikipedia 2011).
- 4 The Rush Limbaugh Show is a popular radio talk show hosted by Rush Limbaugh. According to the program’s website it is broadcast on more than 600 radio stations throughout America (www.rushlimbaugh.com).

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