



## The Culture War Within the Culture Wars: Race

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Everybody knows that “war” means the situation is pretty bad. A war is a fight, or a series of battles, over something about which people have agreed to disagree; at least temporarily, peace is out of the question. I first heard the term “culture wars” in the late 1980s, around the time I first discovered Robert Mapplethorpe’s extraordinary photographic nudes, which were then causing all the fuss. The photographs were beautifully made compositions of mostly nude black and white men. Serene, fluid, and formally well-executed, these photos were at the same time surprisingly and precisely pornographic. Given this particular context, I wondered what “culture wars” meant for black people, or even for people like myself—black cultural workers, intellectuals, artists, and academics. Just exactly who was at war, over what, and how many sides were there? Were we (black people) participants, and, if so, whose side were we on?

According to then-current usage, the phrase “culture wars” was limited to the immediate ramifications of the successful effort by the Christian right and conservative politicians to censure and decimate the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). “Culture Wars” was, for example, the title of a book, edited by Richard Bolton (New Press, 1992), that referred specifically to the series of published attacks on works of “high culture” that the right considered religiously blasphemous or too salacious. The most famous examples were Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ*, which Sen. Alfonse D’Amato denounced on the floor of Congress in the spring of 1989, and Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs of gay black and white men engaging in sex acts. Many progressive commentators noted at the time that a recurrent theme of these assaults on culture was a thinly veiled attack on gay sex. Yet, at the same time, very little was made of the insistent denigration of nonwhite races in censoring these works.

In this broader frame, the specifically targeted campaign aimed at the heart of the National Endowment for the Arts seemed all of a piece with the contemporaneous strengthening of the flagging right-wing political agenda. Attacks on art were part of a general but well-calibrated opposition to other “objectionable” materials in

Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Woman Brushing Hair)*, 1990, gelatin silver print, 28 3/4 x 28 3/4 in. Photo courtesy of PPOW Gallery, New York. Art Matters grant recipient, 1989.

the public realm, such as passages in school textbooks that were perceived to be anti-American or anti-Christian, or "pornographic" or homosexual imagery in magazines, films, and television programming. The year before the assault on visual art began, the American Family Association, led by its executive director Rev. Donald Wildmon, had sharpened its teeth on popular culture with an attack on Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Wildmon complained that the picture was "immoral" and "anti-Christian" because Christ was portrayed by Willem Dafoe as an imperfect and sexual human being.

In other ongoing battles, often on a local level, the right repeatedly sought to overturn liberal "victories," such as the right to abortion, the provision of bilingual education, and the very existence of Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The consistent theme of such policies, to say the least, was that the right wasn't feeling generous. That the right was unwilling at the moment to tolerate some of the more nihilistic impulses of modern art was, in other words, a minor symptom of a much more extensive disease. Unprecedented fortunes were being amassed in the U.S., even as government policies cut away at the monies devoted to ameliorating the problems of the poor and beefed up funding for prison construction (along with promoting arguments supporting the death penalty). Nevertheless, a U.S.-engineered global capitalism, depleting and exploiting the resources of the rest of the planet, had turned the United States into the port of choice for the increasingly impoverished and dislocated masses of Asia, Africa, South America, the Caribbean, and Eastern Europe.

In her 1989 article "The War on Culture," anthropologist Carole S. Vance suggested another possible explanation for the timing of the attack on the fine arts in Congress. As she pointed out, both legislative houses were under Democratic control, and Reaganomics had peaked, which left the conservative right casting around for more vulnerable chinks in the armor of public opinion. Since "high culture" seemed so central to white liberal hegemony, edgy work such as that of Mapplethorpe and Serrano was perfect for their purposes. But what, if anything, did this rarefied arts dispute have to do with the ongoing and bloody struggles of the race wars in which this country had been engaged since the first Africans stepped off the boat onto the coast of Virginia in 1619?

In one sense, it seems too obvious to point out that artists of color have always been especially dependent upon public funding such as that provided by the NEA, since they continue to lack the kind of private sector patronage that even moderately successful white artists take for granted. In every conceivable sector of the

arts, "successful black artists" either earn proportionately less (as musicians, movie actors, or stage performers), have substantially fewer success stories (as painters, dancers, photographers, and sculptors), or both (as architects, film and theater directors, as well as in other kinds of management positions, such as museum directors, curators, and book editors).

Nevertheless, in the so-called black community, or even among black artists and cultural workers generally, the culture wars as defined by Bolton and Vance were perceived as having little relative consequence.<sup>1</sup> The reason was not that such battles were considered trivial or unimportant, and, therefore, subordinate to more serious racial problems. Rather, the trouble was that black artists rarely (actually, never) occupied the hallowed berths reserved for art world stars like Robert Mapplethorpe or Martin Scorsese.

The Corcoran Gallery of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Walter Reade Theater at Lincoln Center are still relatively new venues in terms of the exhibition of black culture. The fact is, the culture wars represent a pitched battle among hegemonic white insiders only. The two contenders in the game are the reigning liberal bourgeoisie and the conservative nouveau-riche wannabes.

Since blacks rarely get to be contenders, except for some rare and comparatively recent instances in sports (e.g., Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan Inc.) and entertainment (e.g., Michael Jackson, Bill Cosby, and Oprah Winfrey), we have little input in this arena, and most of us seem to know it. For the black visual artist, then, the paramount problem is not too much controversy and censure. No matter how successful she appears to be, the big hurdle for the black visual artist is too much public neglect—that is, too small an audience, too few collectors, too little access to the few powerful dealers, too little media coverage, and too little fame. The reasons for this studied neglect have everything to do with the programmatic suppression of African-American culture.

So, for me, the larger and more interesting issue, beyond this particular culture war between bourgeois liberalism and the nouveau yahoos, is the longer and more protracted culture war over race. This is, of course, a vast and vastly sad story. But it may suffice here to delineate some of the main lines of what is really a long-standing



Lyle Ashton-Harris, *Kym*, Lyle and crinoline, 1992, black-and-white photograph, 60 x 40 in. Photo courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery, Art Matters grant recipient 1990, 1992.

and globally deployed conflict. We might recall, for instance, that at least since the American Revolution, the institution of slavery required a complex set of relations among an international cartel of slaveholders and slavetraders who freely traveled from place to place to avoid compliance with local abolitionist tendencies, liberalization of slave laws, or gradual emancipation. For instance, when the Haitian Revolution occurred at the turn of the nineteenth century, Haitian slaveholders fled with their "property" to Louisiana or Florida or South Carolina, where the institution of slavery was more stable. By the time slaves in the United States were emancipated nationally in 1865, some slaveowners who had anticipated this development had already fled with their slaves to such places as Brazil or Cuba, where slavery had not yet ended. Despite these wholesale relocations to alien environments, Africans, even as slaves, retained and grafted onto new practices much of their original cultures in the form of religions, performative rituals, and belief systems.

Later in the century, during the brief Spanish-American War of 1898, race and cultural domination were central, if largely unacknowledged, issues. The struggle of still-enslaved Cubans for freedom and independence was a key factor in precipitating the conflict. When the U.S. "liberated" the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic from the Spanish, inhabitants of these places hoped this meant that they would now be free citizens, as was true, presumably, of the former slaves of the South. Yet, they might have realized that their hopes were in vain if they had known that at that very moment the South was undergoing a brutal struggle to deny the former slaves their civil rights.

In retrospect, we can see that there was a relatively seamless replacement of transatlantic slavery by a well-oiled international system of European and U.S. imperialism. This led to the continuous exploitation of native and diasporic populations in South Asia, the Pacific, Africa, and the Americas. American politicians like Theodore Roosevelt told the public that Europe was carving up Africa (with the support and cooperation of U.S. missionaries and journalists) to stop the slave trade internal to the continent. And yet, Europe's *modus operandi* in ravaging Africa's peoples and resources entailed forced labor, torture, murder, and even genocide. Whereas the slave trade had once linked the Eurocentric world in its relation to the African diaspora, now the new Darwinian concept of "race," as commodity and artifact, provided the common thread of moral ideology. According to King Leopold, H.M. Stanley, and other imperialist adventurers, the *tabula rasa* of African culture needed inscription by those who were wiser, more civilized, and more technologically advanced.



Today, we continue to live in the moral, spiritual, economic, and psychological shadows of these policies toward Africans and their descendants. Yet, next to nothing about these histories is known or considered relevant by Americans. Witness the thousands of black youth packing U.S. prisons. They are affected daily by this history, yet they know virtually nothing about it. How do I know they know virtually nothing about it? Because this aspect of our past is so deeply buried that almost no one except academics and serious aficionados of American history is in any position to know much about slavery and its aftermath. Such topics have little place in the curricula of our high schools or colleges, except perhaps in the romanticized and heroic terms of Black History Month. I respectfully submit that the problem here continues to be "race," that shadowy, nebulous concept that has so little empirical meaning, yet whose symbolism continues to tower over representation in the West. In recognizing the current political conflicts as a culture war of race, we must first acknowledge that African Americans have never had any kind of a chance to recover from the traumatic wounds of slavery. Nor has the African continent even begun to recover from European imperialism. Psychological trauma which remains unaddressed by the conscious mind does not just go away, it just hangs around, continually fucking up lives.

On the other hand, it is possible to cite a variety of starting points for our current stage of multiculturalism in the art world, the

Lorna Simpson, *Stereo Styles*, 1988, ten 20 x 24 in. Polaroid prints. Photo courtesy Josh Baer Gallery, New York. Art Matters grant recipient, 1991.

beginnings of an attempt to confront the syncretic cultures of the African diaspora in America. Some would begin this rather limited art history with the notorious *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition, held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1968. I remember attending this show more than once as a sixteen-year-old. The works of James Van Der Zee and other photographers of black subjects were a revelation to me. But there was little or nothing about black fine artists, painters, and sculptors, although the Metropolitan is ostensibly an art museum. Contemporary black artists, led by Benny Andrews and Romare Bearden, protested that the show was too sociological, that it was better suited to a natural history museum, and, worst of all, that it had failed to include or even consult the existing community of black artists. The show had made a lot of white midtown art patrons suddenly aware of the rich cultural past of black Harlem, had put black photography on the map, and had boosted the reception of black fine arts overall, but these "victories" were small consolation to the living African-American painters and sculptors who simply wanted in.

Next, black artists decided to focus on the issue of underrepresentation at the museum that claimed to represent the entire national spectrum of art: the Whitney Museum of American Art. My mother, Faith Ringgold, and I participated in a picket line there in 1970. At the same time, we were working with and involved with the struggles of the Art Workers' Coalition and the Art Strike, protesting the segregation and apartheid of the museums, as well as the war in Vietnam. There were weekly, riotous demonstrations at the museums, full of ad hoc street theater and bacchanalian shenanigans. Then, the rampant sexism of the male artists forced us to form a separate feminist organizing of women artists and their supporters, including WSABAL (Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation), Women Artists in Revolution, and Lucy Lippard's Ad Hoc Women Artist's Committee. The Ad Hoc Women organized a protest against the exclusion of women from the 1972 sculpture biennial. At the opening of the show, Lippard's group planted white eggs with "50%" written on them; the WSABAL planted cooked eggs, painted black.

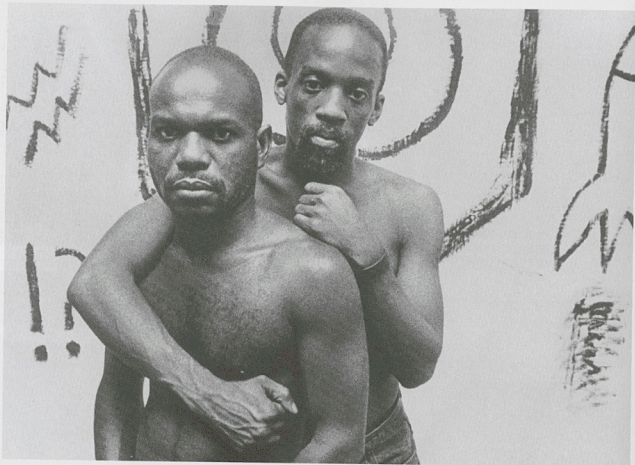
While the late 1960s and early '70s were colorful times, full of Panthers, Back to Africa Movements, Flag Shows, Carl Andres, Valerie Solanases, and other extremists, the conservative retrenchments of the 1980s led to some important things for multiculturalism in the arts, as well. I feel, for instance, that the "*Primitivism*" in 20th Century Art show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984 was a pivotal turning point in preparing the way for the consideration of artists of color in relation to the mainstream art world. Although



the purpose of the stultifying double catalogue might have been otherwise, it does nevertheless serve to establish some important cross-influences between Native American, Oceanic, and African visual arts and modernist American and European art. In fact, this case is made so convincingly that it almost de-Europeanizes, or, at the very least, exoticizes modernism itself. The so-called primitive art, which supported and underwrote twentieth-century modern art, was generally exhibited at the Modern without acknowledgment of its authorship or its historical or cultural context. This gave the impression that much of it was produced by an ancient, distant, and inscrutable people. But the fact is that most of it was probably made by artists who were alive when Picasso painted his *Demoiselles d'Avignon*. In other words, many of these "primitive" artists were contemporaries of the European artists who were borrowing ideas from them. So, in effect, the only essential component of global multiculturalism that was missing was the bricolage art of the African diaspora itself. To do such a show would still be a wonderful idea.

Another prescient show, which corrected the art world's ethnic tunnel vision with great panache, was *The Decade Show*, which was jointly organized by the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Studio Museum

David Hammons, *How Ya Like Me Now?*, 1989, installation, dimensions variable. Commissioned by Washington Project for the Arts for the exhibition *The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism*. Photo courtesy of the Corcoran Museum of Art, Washington, D.C. Art Matters grant recipient, 1987.



Marlon Riggs, *Tongues Untied*, 1989. Pictured: Marlon Riggs and Essex Hemphill. Film still courtesy of Frameline.

in Harlem in 1990. This show openly addressed the issues of racial, ethnic, sexual, and even class identity that were then being explored by visual artists. But the translation of these issues across different cultural communities was not always smooth. Even in the catalogue's introductory dialogue between the three museums' directors, Studio Museum head Kinshasha Conwill openly conceded that none of the work addressing sexuality (one of the main themes of the show) would be welcome at her museum. She pointed out that works containing nudity, references to AIDS, and explicit sexuality would not raise an eyebrow in the downtown art world, but in Harlem would be intolerable. When performance artist Robbie McCauley, whose event was inadvertently scheduled for the Studio Museum, proceeded to take her clothes off in a reenactment of the ordeal of a black woman slave on the auction block, Conwill was reportedly outraged. In black communities, especially among mixed audiences, censorship of any kind of explicit display of sexuality—or even the naked body—goes without saying.

There is a great deal more than explicit sexuality that is automatically censored in the black community as a matter of course. As organizer of the Black Popular Culture Conference in 1991, I was told that it would be impossible to display the conference poster in Harlem. The Studio Museum, which helped to sponsor the conference, even tried to suppress the poster altogether on the slim pretext

that the conference was already sold out and that the poster would therefore constitute false advertising. The poster had no apparent or explicit sexual content but featured photographic images of Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas and his accuser Anita Hill in the act of testifying at Thomas's Senate confirmation hearings. The composition had been montaged by the designer to appear as though Thomas and Hill were directly arguing with one another. What the Studio Museum officials considered offensive about this image is difficult, perhaps impossible, to articulate, although I understand it on a gut level, and even, at the time, expected it.<sup>2</sup>

When all is said and done, black people just aren't suppose to raise such issues or to aspire to become masters of fine art. They just aren't. This was the major problem in the misinterpretation of the genius of Jean-Michel Basquiat as a painter, and the same problems plagued discussions of Bob Thompson's retrospective at the Whitney. What is more, the belief that blacks are not supposed to aspire to be master painters is as true now as it was in the 1920s or the 1960s. In fact, it is perhaps more so now, since the canon of modern art in the latter half of the twentieth century really has more (white) painters in good standing than it can ever possibly use. If Basquiat had been white—even with all his neuroses, drug use, and instability—his work, which is brilliant, would have been heralded as a critical turning point in high culture. But because he was black, Basquiat has to be constantly and ritualistically discredited by the likes of Morley Safer. As late as 1992, the proposed tour of Basquiat's Whitney retrospective was abruptly canceled when no other museums would take it, and the curator who was responsible for the show was immediately retired.

In those rare instances in which a black artist is positioned in an adversarial yet privileged position in relation to the dominant culture—such as Marlon Riggs, director of the controversial documentary film *Tongues Untied* (1989), or Cheryl Dunye, director and star of her first feature film, *Watermelon Woman* (1996)—fame and fortune are not the consequences, but silencing and near-total invisibility. After both films were denounced on the floor of the Senate and in the *Washington Times* for their NEA-sponsored queer content, *Tongues Untied* was withdrawn from showing in many PBS markets and Dunye's film was a commercial failure despite critical acclaim. Most blacks have never seen or heard of either of these films, and wouldn't like them if they had. As these works show,



Cheryl Dunye, *The Watermelon Woman*, 1996. Pictured: Guinevere Turner and Cheryl Dunye. Film still courtesy of First Run Features.



Kara Walker, *World's Exposition, 1997*, cut paper and adhesive on wall, 10 x 16 ft. Collection Jeanne Greenberg. Photo courtesy of Wooster Gardens Gallery, New York. Art Matters grant recipient, 1994.

homosexuality remains a conflicted topic among African Americans. I will never forget the occasion in 1988 when I accompanied black British filmmaker Isaac Julien to a screening of his *Passion of Remembrance* for a black Brooklyn audience. As I recall, there was no male nudity at all in this highly political indictment of Margaret Thatcher's racial policies. Yet, in the one scene in which two men briefly kiss, there were loud ejaculations from the audience, many of whom proceeded to walk out.

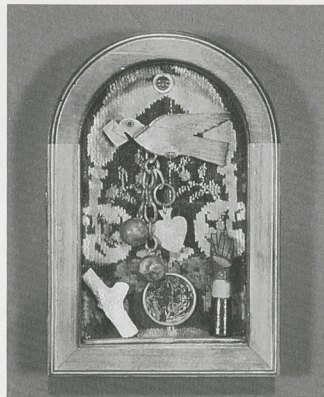
A more recent example of the same type of attempted censorship within the black community is the case of Kara Walker, a young African-American woman who recently won a MacArthur fellowship. Walker makes large-scale silhouettes that are sexually explicit and sadomasochistic. Often they portray masters and slaves in such a frenzy of comic sexual activity that they are almost attacking one another's bodies. Again, the controversy over this work is basically among black artists; in this instance, between two older black female artists, Howardina Pindell and Betye Saar. Pindell and Saar, whose own wonderful works have been unjustly neglected, were so offended by the attention being paid to Walker's work that they sent around a petition condemning it. They argued that her depictions of black women were demeaning and that that was in fact the reason for their celebration in the white male art world. Although I could never agree with censorship, particularly of work as delightful and diverting as Walker's, I have some sense of what Pindell and Saar are complaining about. As one woman artist suggested to me, if

Walker's work were more preoccupied with demeaning sexual relations between black men and white women, the art world might not be so enamored of her product.

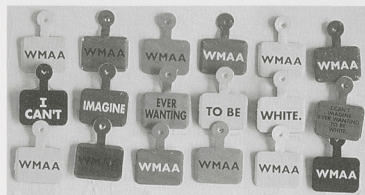
My point is that these debates over what is allowable in the form of public expression have a cultural specificity that is not often taken into account. What is unacceptable in the black community is not necessarily contested elsewhere. The culture wars are often seen as a universal struggle over censorship in the abstract, a boorish conservative attempt to limit the overall liberalization in civil society around issues of sexual preference, gender, race, and ethnicity. For visual artists, this means no explicit sex, no antisocial behavior, no "immoral" views or scenarios. And certainly I feel that such prohibitions, wherever they originate, should be opposed. But when we try to apply this opposition equally to all artists in all situations, we run up against some fundamental cultural differences that pertain to the very ethnic, sexual, gender, and class issues being struggled over.

Moreover, when we try to compare the censorship of artists to the kind of intolerance of multiculturalism and diversity that is so common among conservatives in this society, the comparison quickly becomes thin. There really isn't a lot of comparison. The culture wars over art are really battles that the dominant culture stages with itself, over which strain of the mainstream—the liberal bourgeoisie or the conservative yahoo "lumpen proletariat"—will have hegemony over contemporary values and mores. But the culture wars over race are more about whether former outsiders will ever be given a new status, either inside the mainstream or, at least, closer to the inside.

I would say that the censorship of an artist's free expression poses precisely the same threat to the bourgeoisie that religious blasphemy poses to religious fundamentalism. Modern art and high culture long ago became a kind of secular religion for the white liberal bourgeoisie, a sacred sphere in which their most exalted values are trotted out. To tamper with this realm, to artificially limit its aspirations to the incommensurable, through censorship or any other means, is to engage in the ultimate immorality. White bourgeois liberalism, especially in its appeals to the aesthetic, provides what is in effect a kind of demilitarized zone, where it is possible to invoke all kinds of otherwise reprehensible or visionary behavior without



Betye Saar, *Sojourn*, multimedia assemblage, 1995, 12 x 8 1/4 x 2 1/4 in. Courtesy of the artist. Art Matters grant recipient 1995.



Daniel Martinez, *Untitled* (Whitney Biennial), 1993, metal lapel pins. Photo courtesy of the artist. Art Matters grant recipient, 1990.

Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings in the fall of 1991. The key event was when Thomas described himself as the victim of a “high-tech lynching.” This succinct phrase (undoubtedly suggested to Thomas by one of his many media advisors) telegraphed through the media a complex racial image. And, predictably, it raised the most complicated attitudes about “race” for all the ideological factions among progressives; between left, right, and liberal feminists; between people of color of various hues and classes; and for the various socioeconomic divisions among blacks themselves. Of course, as a black man, Thomas was a prime example of the successes of affirmative action, a poor boy who went to Yale Law School and grew up to become a Supreme Court nominee. On the other hand, he was also an arch-conservative and a strong supporter of the right wing in Congress. So, when his former employee, Anita Hill, a black woman, hit him in his weakest spot—sexual harassment—it was to be expected that he would invoke the history of black men being lynched, ostensibly for raping or expressing sexual intentions towards women. Except that in this case, the woman wasn’t white, she was black, a point that proved intensely confusing for feminists.

Being white and conservative, the right is hugely invested in challenging both blacks and feminists, the two groups that pose the greatest threat to their hegemony. In the Thomas-Hill case, the white media fell all over itself trying to point up the contradictions. They provided a mouthpiece for every antipornography feminist they could find, which stirred confusion in both black and white feminist circles. Which side were you supposed to be on? Who was the enemy? Some black women, a fair number of them academics and intellectuals, hastily organized themselves into a group called “Black Women in Defense of Ourselves,” and took out an ad in the *New York Times* supporting Anita Hill’s right to publicly declaim her harassment. But the ad was also meant to let it be known that no matter what some white feminists said, large numbers of black women did not support Thomas’s nomination. Suddenly, progressives were pitted against one another in an endless series of irresolvable quandaries, revolving around the definition of sexual harassment

judgment or censure. Thus, pieties about freedom of expression coexist with unremarked yet systematic racial exclusions.

I can pinpoint the exact moment when I first became aware of the intersection of the culture war of race and culture war of representation. It was linked again to the contentious

and how much should be tolerated. These debates bumped up against similar quandaries having to do with freedom of expression, namely, is sexual harassment more akin to pornography (which involves a consensual freedom of expression) or more like rape (that is, a form of violence)? In a kind of reversal that the right wing has perfected, the debate over Clarence Thomas was turned on its head, and once-progressive issues about sexuality and representation were appropriated to divide and confuse the left.

The real deal, though, is that the shift taking place in my mind did not happen all at once with Thomas whining about being strung up by the media. It had been happening gradually all along, perhaps consistently since the demise of Black Power, through the emergence of black feminism, and especially under the crushing social and cultural consequences of the Reagan revolution. It is just that it was only then, in the midst of the Thomas hearings, that I began to see something of a pattern. Other events, before and since, have featured a similar sort of cannibalism, in which progressives of different stripes and colors attack one another, while ceding the field to the right. One such event was the response to the trial of the white Los Angeles policemen beating black motorist Rodney King in 1992. The televised trial, in which the police were acquitted by a nearly all-white Simi Valley jury, was followed closely by the first major multicultural riot in Los Angeles. And, of course, the super-event in this category was the year-long O.J. Simpson trial, starting with the car chase, followed by the doctored (darkened) mugshot of O.J. on the cover of *Time*, extending through the televised trial with its celebrity lawyers, and ending, more or less, with the much-awaited verdict. The critical moment for me was the response to the verdict as portrayed by the media: black women celebrating O.J.’s acquittal while white women wept. Such occasions demonstrate vividly how much the dominant media suffers from a lack of “approved” black female voices. Virtually no one spoke up for the thousands of prominent black women who weren’t overjoyed over O.J.’s acquittal and were deeply distressed over his possible guilt.

At the center of each of these conflicts was debate about the nature of “race,” whether or not it exists, what its essential meaning or significance might be, and how it is constructed or shaped by visual representations. In fact, there isn’t anything about “race” in the progressive agenda that isn’t open to debate and interrogation. Public show trials, like the Thomas-Hill one or the O.J. one, merely serve as persistent demonstrations of the potential incoherence of various once-conventional legal, moral, and aesthetic codes. All such occasions are invariably played out in cultural productions that range far beyond the hallowed precincts of the art world into

popular cinema, television, music, theater, literature. At the same time, however, the art world serves a particularly important function within this constellation, which is why it has so often been a favorite target of the right. The artist's insistent claim to an absolute right to freedom of expression, which underwrites the authority of the entire mainstream of liberal cultural production in the United States, obviously sticks in the craw of the right. It is an ongoing sign of the conservative's fundamental impotency at a time when the racist right appears to believe that no one should ever be entirely free to do or say anything.

And, as far as artworks themselves go, the right appears to view them as merely pedagogical and instrumental, a mode of rote instruction. So, when it comes to public funding for art, the right is trapped in a losing battle of having to articulate publicly its outmoded notions of aesthetic quality, which rely upon limitations, such as "realism," "commonsense," and "decency," that have no real currency in any segment of the art world or art-viewing public. Anyone who knows anything about art knows that the object hasn't been the primary thing in visual culture for some time, even in the most substantial and concrete artwork being done today. Since we globally oriented cultural workers have become, in a sense, both churchless and stateless, we look to art for its transient, ephemeral, and even transcendent qualities. I am, therefore, not opposed to the idea of art as the new religion, except that if it is to be the new object of faith and spirit, its magic can't be how high its price is. Rather, art needs to take us on a journey, and almost often enough, it does—although the institutionalized factions of the (white) art world tend to serve more as obstacles than aids.

Still, the right-wing challenge to define art's "values" suitably confused many progressive artists' notions of purpose and commitment. This confusion briefly bolstered the faltering struggle of the right, and allowed them to connect their moral crusade with the long-standing suppression of nonwhite cultural expressions. The clear goal of the conservative movement is to discredit progressive reform on all fronts and shore up a hopelessly obsolete "white" patriarchal status quo against the tide of demographic changes in U.S. populations. Meanwhile, those of us who think of ourselves as progressive are stuck in a process of becoming, because, unlike the right, we don't see where we would like to end up as a fixed point.

1. I call it the "so-called black community" because it is largely a virtual phenomenon at this point, marked as much by its indigenous media (black magazines such as *Emerge*, *Jet*, *Ebony*, and *Essence*; black newspapers such as the *Amsterdam News* and the *Sun*; and even Black Entertainment TV [BET]) as by ostensible black working-class enclaves in urban centers or black middle-class pockets in the suburbs. Also, I specify "black artists and cultural workers" separately from the "so-called black community" because there is little, if any, relation between the two. Black artists, in general, either depend for their livelihood on the corporate sector or the public sector, as defined by the parameters of the culture wars. In either case, the black audience is secondary to their survival, which is quite a problem actually. It is not the case, however, that only black visual artists are not essentially linked with the "black community." This is also a problem for commercial rap, reggae, jazz,

and blues artists. There are some signs of potential change occurring in the field, however. The two that I have noticed are: 1) Prince's successful struggle to regain economic control over his product, and his inroads into producing black talent on his own label; and 2) the new young female music stars, like Lauryn Hill, who, by writing, performing, and producing their own material and by developing black audiences, are making definite moves toward economic autonomy. 2. On a previous occasion, I related the sort of primal scene that this poster depicted to conflicts over changing perceptions of the traditional family, traditional gender relations, and patriarchy itself. See my "Afterword: 'Why Are There No Great Black Artists?': The Problem of Visibility in African-American Culture," in Gina Dent, ed., *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), pp. 336-46.



Kara Walker, *Presenting Negro Scenes Drawn Upon My Passage Through the South and Reconfigured for the Benefit of Enlightened Audiences Wherever Such May Be Found, By Myself*, Missus K.E.B. Walker, Colored, (detail), 1997, cut paper and adhesive on wall, approximately 12 x 155 ft. Photo courtesy of Wooster Gardens Gallery, New York. Art Matters grant recipient, 1994.