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Playing with History: A *Black Camera* Interview with Kevin Willmott

DERRAIS CARTER

If you're going to tell people the truth, you better make them laugh; otherwise they'll kill you.

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

The George Bernard Shaw quotation in the epigraph is both a charge and a warning. Truth is a bitter pill best taken with syrup. Failure to comply could result in the truth-teller's figurative death. In the case of the black filmmaker, that death looks like empty theater seats. It is a film with no audience, no home. The Shaw quote opens Kevin Willmott's 2004 film *C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America*. The film is a mockumentary about what the United States would have become had the South won the Civil War. Using satire to poke fun at a seemingly ludicrous alternative history, *C.S.A.* eerily resembles a very tangible present. Amid a chorus of honeyed voices hanging on to claims about America's postracial moment, *C.S.A.* is an acerbic reminder that there is still a lot of work to do.

This interview with writer, director, and professor Kevin Willmott took place at the end of August 2013. It highlights the critical roles that race and satire play in two of his films: the aforementioned *C.S.A.* and *Destination: Planet Negro* (2013). Both films work to critically inform how we think about race, history, and (cinematic) freedom. In addition to discussing his artistic beginnings, this interview also weaves connections between black cinematic representation and American cultural attitudes about Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman. The conversation concludes with Willmott talking about his dual role as both a director and a college professor.

Derrais Carter (DC): *Could you talk about coming of age in Junction City, Kansas, during the era of the Civil Rights Movement?*

Kevin Willmott (KW): Well, Junction City was a great place to grow up because of the diversity. It was incredibly diverse because of the Buffalo Soldiers (9th Calvary and 10th Calvary) and the Big Red One.¹ These guys had wives from all over the world back home. So, my "black" was, you know, a

white and Japanese couple, a black and German couple, a black and Korean couple, a black and Italian couple, a black and Filipino couple, a black and Vietnamese couple, and a black and Mexican couple. That was only on one block of a small Kansas town. Everybody was in these relationships. So it was a unique place.

DC: *Because it was near Fort Riley, the military base?*

KW: Fort Riley, that's right. The problem was that we had all this beautiful diversity, but the city was kind of embarrassed by it all. So they never really celebrated it. We celebrated it ourselves.

DC: *And you went to college in Kansas as well?*

KW: Yeah, I went to Marymount College. It's a small college in Salina.

DC: *Is that where you picked up drama?*

KW: Yeah, I went there for drama. That's where I wrote my first plays and studied acting. That was really the first place where I got to do my thing.

DC: *You started in drama and playwriting, what got you into film?*

KW: Well, I always wanted to do film, but there was no place to do it. My goal was always to, you know, get to film somehow. This was before everybody had video cameras and stuff. So I just wrote plays and did plays in lieu of film. (laughs)

DC: *How was the transition from playwriting to film? Was it difficult or did it come with relative ease?*

KW: Well, the first one I did was my play *Ninth Street*. I turned it into a screenplay. Since I knew that material . . . It really helped to start with something that I knew pretty well, something I'd kind of always imagined as a film. But it wasn't until I really went to NYU that I got into screenwriting. I went to NYU's graduate school to learn how to write screenplays. That's really where I started writing movies.

DC: *There was a while after college where you did some activist work. Was that in Kansas or New York?*

KW: Well, it was between undergraduate and graduate school. When I graduated undergrad, I did some activist work back home. I worked with people who lobbied for low-income housing and created homeless shelters. The really heavy antinuclear thing was going on, too, so we did a lot of work with that as well. So it was kind of a unique time.

DC: *So, did you see a lot of direct links between your creative interests and political interventions?*

KW: Yeah, very much so. I think that I've always been an activist-oriented kind of guy and I've always been political, even as a kid. So for me, film was just another extension of that.

DC: *How old were you when you wrote your first screenplay?*

KW: Well, I was probably about twenty-seven. You know, I went to school late. I went to undergrad and after that I was an activist for three or four years. Then I went to grad school.

DC: *How would you describe the larger film climate, particularly with respect to black filmic representations during the time you worked on your first screenplay?*

KW: Well, it was a very interesting time. I was at NYU and so Spike Lee had just had his success, so the independent film thing was really hot. You know Jim Jarmusch and Spike were around and there was a lot of video money around, so it was a really good time to be an independent filmmaker. That's really what I wanted to capitalize on. It took me a while to get my film made. By the time I got my film made, the interest had waned. The spark had kind of gone out. But with *C.S.A.*, I was able to get one of the old independent film deals. You know it was a theatrical and DVD deal. All of that was a really great deal and that kind of arrangement is essentially gone now.

DC: *How did you come to film as your chief way to address key issues and ideas?*

KW: I grew up loving movies. I went to the movies pretty much every weekend. When I was a kid, Sidney Poitier was the guy. I was introduced to him through television and then in the movies. Those movies, at the time, were called "problem pictures." They dealt with social problems head-on. It's like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* [dir. Stanley Kramer, 1967] is about interracial marriage. There's no mistake about it. Seeing these films as a kid, I learned a lot about race through watching those movies. I learned a lot about society, and I thought it was just a genre of movie that Hollywood was interested in. Little did I know that that wasn't the case. (laughs)

DC: *In many ways, your response reminds me of my father. He's really into 1970s films. Growing up, I was surrounded by his massive record collection and VHS copies of blaxploitation films. So, films like *Sheba, Baby* [dir. William Girdler, 1975] and *The Mack* [dir. Michael Campus, 1973] are very familiar to me. I remain fascinated by blaxploitation. There's one thing that really gets me about film at that moment. There's a lot of talk about pitting the social problem film against the very capitalist-driven blaxploitation film. It's almost as though folks want to say that*

one type of film is more political than the other. When I think about the ways that you explore this dynamic in film, there seems to be a lot of gray area that you as a director navigate. In doing so, you uncover the truth value out of both.

KW: Yeah, that's exactly it. Just like your dad, I was able to see a lot of those blaxploitation films as a kid. We went to the movies every week. We saw a different black film every week. When I think about that now, it just amazes me. You can't even imagine that now. I mean, basically every weekend was a different black film. And in most cities in the country, these black theaters were kind of abandoned during white flight. So these blaxploitation movies were perfect because, sometimes, black people got the opportunity to manage these movie theaters and even own them. One of the things that I got from these films was the idea that I could be a filmmaker. I got to see Gordon Parks's *Learning Tree* [1969] in the theater. Then I found out that he was from Fort Scott, Kansas. As a black kid in Kansas, it was very important to know that I, too, could make a movie. It was all over after that. (laughs) I was taken away. All and all, it was a great time to watch black film as a teen. It was really empowering. There were a lot of bad films, but there were a lot of good movies, too.

DC: *Yes, absolutely. In addition to Parks, are there some directors or actors who motivated your decision to make films?*

KW: Well, yeah. Gordon Parks was big one. But the whole time I was growing up, I really wanted to be Richard Pryor. (laughs) Yeah, I was obsessed with Richard Pryor when I was in high school, and when I went to college I even did some stand-up comedy, you know, in that Richard Pryor kind of style. All of that definitely influences my movie style.

DC: *Yeah.*

KW: It's even a part of *Destination*. We get a bit of Pryor's style in there. The thing about Richard Pryor that I admire the most was that with his jokes, there was always some truth—a lesson in the joke. And that's kind of always been my goal, specifically with the satire movies I make, is that they have to be funny and smart. You want to show people something that they aren't already seeing there.

DC: *As soon as you said Pryor, I thought about Captain Race Johnson from your film Destination: Planet Negro. The Pryor connection makes sense. I'm really fascinated by how you use comedy in your work. With C.S.A., for instance, you begin the film with a George Bernard Shaw quote that says "If you're going to tell people the truth, you better make them laugh; otherwise they'll kill you." Could you talk about how you deploy that idea in C.S.A.?*

KW: I remember when I first started thinking about making the film, I would tell some of my friends, and they would warn me that people are going to hate me for that film. Some even said, “Man, you’re gonna have to watch out because somebody may try to kill you.” And so, because the Confederacy is still alive and well in America, I had to talk “cost” before making the film [fig. 1]. I knew that not only would Confederates be mad, but there were gonna be some black people that didn’t get the joke, either. Maybe because they didn’t know history enough or they think I’m making fun of black people or whatever the deal is. So, you kind of take a risk when you enter into that sort of satire. That’s one of the reasons why one of my criteria for making a film is try to make movies that Hollywood won’t make. I know I’m on the right track when I realize that they’ll never make this film. (laughs)

DC: *Makes sense.*

KW: With C.S.A. specifically, you’re going into some really dangerous waters. I got a lot of hate mail from that film. I also got love mail, but I got *a lot* of hate mail. You know the Civil War is still going on. People don’t really realize it, but I think Trayvon Martin’s death is proof. People ask me, “Well, why do you make these movies about race?” I mean black people, white people, and everybody. We’d all like to be able to let it go and make movies about romance or something, but the problem is that it just won’t go away. And so, when you read that stuff, I just try to accept it and embrace. So with C.S.A., I just decided to take it on. From a black point of view, I wanted to show how the Confederates *actually* won and that they’re still winning.

A while back, I was speaking at Purdue University and a student said to me, “C.S.A. seems kind of dated now that the president is black.” I’m like, “Not really.” If you see the kind of opposition that he has and think about the fact that he’s run into so much obstruction, we have to ask where the obstruction comes from. It comes from the old South, or what I call the “new South.” You know, like, Kansas is part of the new South. Oklahoma is part of the new South. So, having a black president doesn’t mean that the Civil War is over. In some ways it means that the Civil War is more dug-in.

DC: *It reminds me of that saying “the North won the Civil War, but the South won the American mind.”*

KW: That’s exactly right! We won the war, but we didn’t win the peace. If you look at the map and think about the states that Romney won, you know, there’s no peace. (laughs) So, it’s still a clear line drawn between everything. And people are still shocked when they see these incidents like the Trayvon case. That exposes all of this. It’s never gone away. You’ve got things that prove we have come a long way, but it doesn’t make it *all* the way. And that’s the thing that I think people don’t want to deal with. I’m sure you heard the whole



Figure 1. Still from *C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America*.



Figure 2. Still from *C.S.A.* equating the price of an enslaved field hand to the price of a new car.

postracial America stuff when Obama was elected

DC: Yep.

KW: And I think most of us knew that was kind of silly. Because, in the real world, we're far from postracial.

DC: *That's why watching C.S.A. makes it difficult to distance history from the current climate. One of the things I like about the film is that you make a very explicit connection between capitalist production, laboring black bodies in popular culture, and the American marketplace. So when there's a play on products like Nigger Hair cigarettes or the Coon*

Chicken Inn, it doesn't feel reminiscent of the past so much as it seems ever-present in this moment.

KW: I'm glad you caught all of that because that was an important part of why I wanted to make the film. I wanted to bring out the reasons why the war was fought, you know, because that's the big debate that still goes on in some circles. And you know, there are these people that don't want to admit that it was fought over slavery. So, it's important to show how valuable slaves were. I love that luxury car example that we used in the film [fig. 2]. And so, if you don't understand that part of slavery, I don't think you really understand how slavery functioned in America. With the products, I wanted to show how we still make money off the legacy of slavery [figs. 3 and 4].

DC: *Yes. That's spot-on. You also satirize television shows like Cops. I recall seeing a show called Runaways that features the Cops-like montage of black bodies running from the police, only to be captured on film. It reminds me of a line from KRS-One, "Officer, Officer, Officer, Officer, yeah, officer from overseer."*² KRS-One's

line and your scene show the cultural impact of the “over-seer to officer” trajectory. It especially highlights the continued harassment of black men through surveillance.

KW: Yeah, and I think the Trayvon thing is another example of that. Black people have always been monitored and patrolled by civilians. Since slavery, another master from across the road could say, “I saw your boy, Ben, and he was wandering off the road last night.” And so, we have always been patrolled by other people. Not just police, but other civilians have had the ability to patrol and monitor us. That’s what Zimmerman did. Zimmerman was trying to make points by monitoring Trayvon, and it eventually led to Zimmerman killing. And that’s such an old concept in black American life. And I think those kinds of things are what so many white people don’t realize. They don’t get why black people are upset. It’s the monitoring. I remember, as a kid, seeing people watching me. And I think most black people have experienced that in some form. In some areas, it’s still really bad. So yeah, I think that kind of Orwellian concept of “you’re always being watched” is always going to be a part of black life and new technology is making it easier.



Figure 3. Still from *C.S.A.* featuring Sambo motor oil.

DC: I’d like to transition now to one of your recent films titled *Destination: Planet Negro*. This film is a satire about a group of black scientists from the 1930s who, in collaboration with black leaders like W. E. B. Du Bois and Mary McLeod Bethune, decide that black people should leave America. Instead of immigrating to another country, they surmise that black people should leave Earth and go to Mars.

Could you talk about your treatment of what I would call the black leadership figures? By that I mean that your characters reflect black leadership ideologies more so than they reflect specific individuals. For example, what prompted you to use George Washington Carver as a character?

KW: I’m always been interested in how we can use history to ground us in reality. Thinking about the notion of black people leaving the planet, there was only one person who could have made that happen: George Washington Carver. (laughs) Of course, I have fun with him because he’s been treated



Figure 4. Still from *C.S.A.* featuring Darky toothpaste.

in the media as this meek, mild-mannered, flower-worshipping almost Uncle Tom kind of image. That's why I wanted to show that, secretly, George Washington Carver was a total badass.

DC: *He was potentially one of the most dangerous black men alive. (laughs)*

KW: Exactly! One of the most dangerous! He'll put on a

coon show for you and the next thing you know he's making plans to leave the whole damn planet! (laughs) But seriously, I often think about the frustrations that he probably felt. He strikes me as the kind of guy that was bigger than all of that. So, I get to satirize him as a character and have some fun with him. But there is a level of truth to it. You always think, well, with all the amazing things he invented, he never got the money, credit, or acknowledgment that he deserved at that time. So, in *Destination*, he gets to complain about shit. (laughs) He gets to be a version of himself around other black people that he couldn't be around white people.

More than anything, I wanted to ground the film in the real problems black people were facing at the time and the real leadership options that were available. In the first scene, I try to lay out all of the basic concepts that were considered. Black leaders were asking if we were going to go to Europe, back to Africa, or something else. For each one, it was a huge issue. There was book called *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind*³ that talks about each philosophy that Dr. King looked at, embraced, or rejected. It is a really great book for understanding what he thought about each of the responses that these leaders proposed. It maps the talented-tenth approach and the Booker T. Washington stance. You know, all the different views. I wanted to hint at that, which is why I used W .E. B. Du Bois and Mary McLeod Bethune. I don't use them as real people so much as I do symbols because I wanted to hint at that real dilemma. Hopefully that sets up why my main characters want to leave.

DC: *Watching Destination reminded me of Sun Ra's film Space Is the Place and some other Afrofuturist texts. It also reminded me of some critical race theory work, particularly Derrick Bell's racial parable "Space Traders."⁴*

KW: I love that story!

DC: *Yeah, especially in Bell's racial parables, we are asked to consider how the proposed political strategies that you just outlined are still relevant. There's a lot to be said for how you're using film to create this bridge. Could you talk about why you chose to make the film?*

KW: My father was born in 1890 and he was sixty years old when I was born. So, I grew up around older people. My father was only thirty years removed from slavery when he was born, which reminds me that it wasn't long ago. So, I think a lot about time and how we make sense of the past, and how we allow the past to influence us and affect us. It's a really important thing. There's a section at the end of the film where Professor Wilborn is talking about how the Tea Party is against them. They talk about how they embrace Howard Horn but they dismiss other blacks.

When you look at the Trayvon discussion and you turn to Fox TV, or you look at the oppositional folks who believed the verdict was correct, they have divorced history from the whole thing. That is why, for them, it is never about race. They don't bring the legacy of all the stuff we are talking about to that incident. A friend of mine saw something online that said, "A brown man kills a black man and they blame a white man." To me that shows how they specifically divorce the past from the problems of today. And the past is critical to understanding every aspect of American life. But, it's especially critical for understanding African Americans. So all of these movies that I have been making, in some way or another, are about trying to get people to experience the past in some kind of way.

DC: *You're a writer, actor, director, and college professor. How do you navigate these various vantage points when you are exploring one script that you have just written?*

KW: Well, I was very fortunate that when I was hired at the University of Kansas [KU], I was already a filmmaker. Actually, at that time I was still working in Hollywood as a screenwriter. When they approached me to teach, I said that I can work in a specific set of parameters because I had to be able to get back to Hollywood and work on other projects. I was fortunate enough that they worked with my schedule. They liked me being a filmmaker. I know people think of me as a professor, but I was a filmmaker before I was a professor. KU has really been good to me in that sense. It's really given me freedom of expression because these movies *are* my academic research. They let me delve into these topics and incorporate students in my work. KU provides the means to be a truly independent filmmaker.

DC: *You're also in the unique position to incorporate students into many, if not all, of your projects. How does that strategy benefit your work?*

KW: I'm glad you see that. I have it say that it is a beautiful experience—especially with *Destination*, where I got to work with Tosin [Morohunfola], who plays Race, and Danielle [Cooper], who plays Denise in the film. Tosin had just graduated and Danielle was still in school. So, I'm using actors who were student or former students. Same thing for my crew. I have editors who are or were students. I have an ensemble of actors, especially black actors, that I always go to for my films. It allows us to be a big family, a real community. Sometimes I have money to pay them. Sometimes I don't. They are with me when I have resources and when I don't. We are all loyal to one another. It's a unique kind of way to make movies. I don't know if anybody else is doing it the way that we are doing it.

Students are getting real college credits and real “on the ground” work experience. One of my editors on *The Only Good Indian* [2009] graduated and got a job editing the TV show *The Bachelor*. I think that with film especially, a lot of the work is about getting hands-on experience. I think that's what you were getting at. You can study film and you can write about it, but it is not the same until you make one.

Notes

1. “The Big Red One” is the United States Army 1st Infantry Division located at Fort Riley, Kansas. During World War I, the unit became the first American division to open fire on German troops.

2. KRS-One, “Sound of the Police,” *Return of the Boom Bap*, Jive Records, 1993, CD.

3. John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (New York: Orbis Books, 1982).

4. “The Space Traders,” in which aliens offer the United States advanced technologies and clean energy in exchange for all of the country's black citizens, appears in Bell's *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).