



Dædalus

Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Winter 2011

Race in
the Age of
Obama,
volume 1

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|-----------------------|--|
| Gerald Early | The Two Worlds of Race Revisited: A Meditation on Race in the Age of Obama 11 |
| John Hope Franklin | The Two Worlds of Race: A Historical Perspective 28 |
| Jeffrey B. Ferguson | Freedom, Equality, Race 44 |
| Daniel Geary | Racial Liberalism, the Moynihan Report & “The Negro American” 53 |
| Waldo E. Martin, Jr. | Precious African American Memories, Post-Racial Dreams & the American Nation 67 |
| Glenda R. Carpio | Race & Inheritance in Barack Obama’s <i>Dreams from My Father</i> 79 |
| Amina Gautier | On Post-Racial America in the Age of Obama 90 |
| Tommie Shelby | Justice & Racial Conciliation: Two Visions 95 |
| Eric J. Sundquist | “We dreamed a dream”: Ralph Ellison, Martin Luther King, Jr. & Barack Obama 108 |
| Clarence E. Walker | Barack Obama, Race & the Tea Party 125 |
| Farah Jasmine Griffin | Michelle Obama, Beyoncé, Race & History 131 |
| Werner Sollors | “Obligations to Negroes who would be kin if they were not Negro” 142 |
| Korina Jocson | Poetry in a New Race Era 154 |
| Hua Hsu | Seeing Jay-Z in Taipei 163 |
| David A. Hollinger | The Concept of Post-Racial: How Its Easy Dismissal Obscures Important Questions 174 |
| James Alan McPherson | Pursuit of the <i>Pneuma</i> 183 |





Inside front cover: Mary Collie (left) of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) listens to a speaker at a rally calling for an end to predatory lending practices and home foreclosures outside the New York Stock Exchange, December 10, 2007. Photograph © Jeff Zelevansky/Reuters.

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Dædalus

Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences



The labyrinth designed by Daedalus for King Minos of Crete, on a silver tetradrachma from Cnossos, Crete, c. 350–300 B.C. (35 mm, Cabinet des Médailles, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris). “Such was the work, so intricate the place, / That scarce the workman all its turns cou’d trace; / And Daedalus was puzzled how to find / The secret ways of what himself design’d.” – Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 8)

Dædalus was founded in 1955 and established as a quarterly in 1958. The journal’s namesake was renowned in ancient Greece as an inventor, scientist, and unriddler of riddles. Its emblem, a maze seen from above, symbolizes the aspiration of its founders to “lift each of us above his cell in the labyrinth of learning in order that he may see the entire structure as if from above, where each separate part loses its comfortable separateness.”

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The Two Worlds of Race: A Historical View

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In this issue

The Two Worlds of Race Revisited: A Meditation on Race in the Age of Obama
by Gerald Early 11

Nearly fifty years ago, the American Academy organized a conference and two issues of its journal *Dædalus* on the topic of “The Negro American.” The project engaged top intellectuals and policy-makers around the conflicts and limitations of mid-1960s liberalism in dealing with race. Specifically, they grappled with the persistent question of how to integrate a forced-worker population that had been needed but that was socially undesirable once its original purpose no longer existed. Today, racism has been discredited as an idea and legally sanctioned segregation belongs to the past, yet the question the conference participants explored – in essence, how to make the unwanted wanted – still remains. Recent political developments and anticipated demographic shifts, however, have recast the terms of the debate. Gerald Early, guest editor for the present volume, uses Barack Obama’s election to the presidency as a pretext for returning to the central question of “The Negro American” project and, in turn, asking how white liberalism will fare in the context of a growing minority population in the United States. Placing his observations alongside those made by John Hope Franklin in 1965, Early positions his essay, and this issue overall, as a meditation on how far we have come in America to reach “the age of Obama” and at the same time how far we have to go before we can overcome “the two worlds of race.”

The Two Worlds of Race: A Historical View
by John Hope Franklin 28

Franklin’s essay traces the practices, policies, and laws that, from colonial times through the mid-1960s moment when he composed his essay, created and sustained the two worlds of race in America. He outlines the history of efforts from that period to alleviate racial distinctions and to foster a “world of equality and complete human fellowship.” Franklin cautions, however, that even certain well-intentioned efforts to extend services, opportunities, and rights to African Americans sometimes reinforced segregation and discrimination. He considers how key historical, legal, political, and social developments from the twentieth century – World War II, the growth of labor unions, the Great Migration, America’s ascendancy as a world power, among others – advanced racial equality in America while often intensifying the backlash from opponents to such equality. Still, Franklin concludes optimistically that however strident those opponents may be, they “have been significantly weakened by the very force of the numbers and elements now seeking to eliminate the two worlds of race.”

Freedom, Equality, Race

by Jeffrey B. Ferguson 44

This essay explores some of the reasons for the continuing power of racial categorization in our era, and thus offers some friendly amendments to the more optimistic renderings of the term *post-racial*. Focusing mainly on the relationship between black and white Americans, it argues that the widespread embrace of universal values of freedom and equality, which most regard as antidotes to racial exclusion, actually reinforce it. The internal logic of these categories requires the construction of the “other.” In America, where freedom and equality still stand at the contested center of collective identity, a history of racial oppression informs the very meaning of these terms. Thus the irony: much of the effort exerted to transcend race tends to fuel continuing division.

Racial Liberalism, the Moynihan Report & the *Dædalus* Project on “The Negro American”

by Daniel Geary 53

In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then an official in the Johnson administration, published *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, better known as the Moynihan Report. He was influenced by his participation in two conferences organized by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in the mid-1960s, as well as two issues of its journal *Dædalus*, on the topic of “The Negro American.” Arguing that the “damaged” family structure of African Americans would impede efforts to achieve full racial equality in the United States, the Moynihan Report launched an explosive debate that helped fracture a fragile liberal consensus on civil rights. Geary examines the report alongside the *Dædalus* project, establishing its roots in the racial liberalism of the mid-1960s and connecting it to efforts by liberals to address the socioeconomic dimensions of racial inequality. He considers the close relationship between scholarship and public policy that existed at the time and reflects on the ways liberal ideas about race have changed in the decades since.

Precious African American Memories, Post-Racial Dreams & the American Nation

by Waldo E. Martin, Jr. 67

This interdisciplinary essay explores a fundamental paradox at the heart of American race relations since the 1960s: “the changing same.” The more things change; the more they remain the same. Combining historical and social-scientific evidence with autobiographical reflections, this discussion critically probes the paradoxical decline and persistence of two dimensions of our enduring racial quagmire: racial inequality and white supremacy. The essay argues that these powerful and interrelated elements of America’s continuing racial dilemma demand a massive democratic movement to alleviate both at once. This wide-ranging struggle to realize the promise of American democracy requires more than just a revitalized African American Freedom Struggle that is both intraracial and interracial. Progress toward resolving the seemingly intractable problem of racial inequality in

the United States demands far more than intensified efforts to alleviate economic inequality; it requires alleviating white supremacy as well.

Race & Inheritance in Barack Obama’s *Dreams from My Father*

by *Glenda R. Carpio* 79

When and how did Barack Obama’s now well-known “hope” mantra take shape? Carpio’s essay explores this question through close readings of key passages from Obama’s autobiography. It is nearly three hundred pages into the autobiography before the phrase “the audacity of hope” appears, at the end of the “Chicago” section. Obama has just been accepted to Harvard Law School and has yet to take his first trip to Africa to find his paternal family when he hears the phrase from his infamous ex-pastor, Jeremiah Wright. The essay places this moment from the “Chicago” section in the context of the entire autobiography to illuminate why, for Obama, it takes audacity to hope that we can transcend America’s history of racial conflict. In the process, the essay reveals Obama’s dark view of race relations in America before he became the symbol of a supposedly post-racial America that he is now.

On Post-Racial America in the Age of Obama

by *Amina Gautier* 90

Amina Gautier reflects on her childhood tendency to ask when, not if, there would be a black president. Growing up in the post-civil rights era, she was influenced by knowledge of earlier presidential bids by African Americans as well as references to the idea of a black president in popular culture, including television programs of the 1970s and 1980s that often saw adult characters project the ability to run for office onto black youth. However, Gautier cautions against conflating Barack Obama’s historic election to president with the beginning of a “post-racial” era. She uses a personal experience of racial insensitivity to observe the distance we have yet to go before we are truly *post-* anything.

Justice & Racial Conciliation: Two Visions

by *Tommie Shelby* 95

As we attempt to measure racial progress in America today and chart a path toward further progress, we should look to the vision of Martin Luther King, Jr. Barack Obama has also offered an influential vision of race in America that is similar to and inspired by King’s. This essay compares King’s and Obama’s respective visions for race relations in U.S. society. Both men profess a commitment to racial equality and integration as fundamental ideals; and both provide an astute analysis of the racial realities of his day. However, Shelby’s comparison of their visions reveals moral deficiencies in Obama’s political philosophy, particularly with regard to the proposed way forward and the worthy principles that would have to be compromised on by following his path. Liberal pragmatism in matters of race may yield some social benefits, but not without moral costs.

“We dreamed a dream”: Ralph Ellison, Martin Luther King, Jr. & Barack Obama
by Eric J. Sundquist 108

In Spring 2010, a manuscript version of Ralph Ellison’s unfinished second novel, *Three Days before the Shooting*, was finally published. Written over the course of more than forty years and running to 1,100 pages, the novel not only has a great deal to tell us about Ellison’s craft and his approach to the civil rights movement; it also speaks eloquently to traditions of leadership on American race relations stretching from the days of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass through the rise of Martin Luther King, Jr., and, ultimately, Barack Obama.

“We’re losing our country”: Barack Obama, Race & the Tea Party
by Clarence E. Walker 125

This essay’s approach to race and the Tea Party is twofold: to consider the role race plays in Tea Partiers’ claim that they have “lost their country” and to question why blacks would be members of the Tea Party given its radically conservative views. To explore the latter, Walker looks to black and other minority conservatives from the past who embraced political conservatism as a means to escape stigmatization. Walker’s essay argues that America has become less racist than it used to be, but he resists characterizing the nation as “post-racial.” He uses examples of conflicts between Asians, blacks, and Mexicans to further his point.

At Last . . . ? : Michelle Obama, Beyoncé, Race & History
by Farah Jasmine Griffin 131

In this essay, Griffin brings to the fore two extraordinary black women of our age: First Lady Michelle Obama and entertainment mogul Beyoncé Knowles. Both women signify change in race relations in America, yet both reveal that the history of racial inequality in this country is far from over. As an Ivy League-educated descendent of slaves, Michelle Obama is not just unfamiliar to the mainstream media and the Washington political scene; during the 2008 presidential campaign, she was vilified as angry and unpatriotic. Beyoncé, who controls the direction of her career in a way that pioneering black women entertainers could not, has nonetheless styled herself in ways that recall the distinct racial history of the Creole South. Griffin considers how Michelle Obama’s and Beyoncé’s use of their respective family histories and ancestry has bolstered or diminished their popular appeal.

“Obligations to Negroes who would be kin if they were not Negro”
by Werner Sollors 142

The 1965/1966 *Dædalus* issues on “The Negro American” reveal how America’s racial future was imagined nearly a half-century ago, and at least one of the prophecies – voiced

by sociologist Everett C. Hughes – found its fulfillment in an unexpected way at President Obama’s inauguration in 2009. Short stories by Amina Gautier (“Been Meaning to Say” and “Pan is Dead”), Heidi Durrow’s novel *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, plays by Thomas Bradshaw (*Strom Thurmond Is Not a Racist and Cleansed*), and poems by Terrance Hayes (“For Brothers and the Dragon” and “The Avocado”) suggest trends in recent works by African American authors who began their publishing careers in the twenty-first century.

Poetry in a New Race Era

by *Korina Jocson* 154

A growing literary arts movement is shaping discourses about youth and youth culture. With the historic election of President Obama serving as a departure point, this essay calls attention to poetry and the *new race era* to offer insights into the power of writing. For many youth who write in their own contexts or compete in the Brave New Voices Poetry Slam Festival, for example, such themes as voice, identity, citizenship, and leadership in the twenty-first century reveal how language is used to expose social realities often steeped in the margins. What do these themes suggest about the possibilities of poetry in a new race era? Indeed, what do they convey about inhabiting a new race era? Examples that tackle these themes are included in the essay.

Seeing Jay-Z in Taipei

by *Hua Hsu* 163

How does the newly arrived immigrant respond to the news that an identity already awaits him? How does an African American hip-hop artist translate his struggles and triumphs across oceanic divides? What significance do American demographic shifts have in a global context? Hsu’s essay examines what happens once individuals or identities migrate beyond the contexts that first produced them. He explores a variety of circuits: the satellite communities of Asian immigrant students who arrived on American university campuses in the late 1960s; enduring debates about a “post-city” identity, spurred by advances in cheap, efficient, world-shrinking communication technologies; and the new affinities and categories of self-identification made possible by a present-day culture that prizes interactivity and participation.

The Concept of Post-Racial: How Its Easy Dismissal Obscures Important Questions

by *David A. Hollinger* 174

Nearly all of today’s confident dismissals of the notion of a “post-racial” America address the simple question, “Are we beyond racism or not?” But most of the writers who have used the terms *post-racial* or *post-ethnic* sympathetically have explored other questions: What is the significance of the blurring of ethnoracial lines through cross-group marriage and reproduction? How should we interpret the relatively greater ability of immigrant blacks as compared to standard “African Americans” to overcome racist barriers? What

do we make of increasing evidence that economic and educational conditions prior to immigration are more powerful determinants than “race” in affecting the destiny of population groups that have immigrated to the United States in recent decades? Rather than calling constant attention to the undoubted reality of racism, this essay asks scholars and anti-racist intellectuals more generally to think beyond “the problem of the color line” in order to focus on “the problem of solidarity.” The essay argues that the most easily answered questions are not those that most demand our attention.

Pursuit of the *Pneuma*

by James Alan McPherson 183

Inspired by a former colleague’s written remembrance of his tenure at the University of Iowa, McPherson looks back on the University’s historic receptiveness to non-white students and his own experience serving on the faculty of the Writers’ Workshop. He reflects on the attitudes and mores that create a sense of community before settling on the concept of the *pneuma*, Greek for “the vital spirit of life itself.” He contrasts the racially polarized South, where he grew up, began his writing career, and had his daughter, with Iowa City, where he and his daughter have formed lasting relationships with McPherson’s students and colleagues from a variety of ethnic and social backgrounds. A willingness to learn from cultural difference has guided McPherson as a teacher and a father, and it offers hope for the evolution of a more integrated American society.

The Two Worlds of Race Revisited: A Meditation on Race in the Age of Obama

Gerald Early

I think it can be said, and I think that most liberals would finally have to agree, that the presence of the Negro here is precisely what has allowed white people to say they were free; and it is what has allowed them to assume they were rich.

—James Baldwin, “Liberalism and the Negro” (1964)

I had to move without movin’.

—Trueblood, from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952)¹

A Rasmussen poll published in Fall 2010 reveals that only 36 percent of Americans think the relationship between blacks and whites is getting better. This number is down from 62 percent who, in July 2009, reported feeling that race relations are improving. That was the same month in which Cambridge, Massachusetts, police arrested Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, and at a news conference following the arrest, President Barack Obama criticized the police. He acknowledged that he did not know the full situation, “not having been there and not seeing the facts,” but nonetheless he said that the police had “acted stupidly.” He continued: “[T]here’s a long history in this country of African Americans and Latinos being stopped by law enforcement disproportionately. That’s just a fact.” For some people, this was just a half-fact, forcefully but inartfully expressed at that.

Obama’s response here may have been the beginning of a fracture along racial lines about pre-

GERALD EARLY, a Fellow of the American Academy since 1997 and Cochair of the Academy’s Council, is the Merle Kling Professor of Modern Letters and Director of the Center for the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis. His many publications include *The Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prizefighting, Literature, and Modern American Culture* (1994) and *This Is Where I Came In: Black America in the 1960s* (2003). He is the series editor for *Best African American Fiction* and *Best African American Essays*.

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cisely what Obama represents in “post-racial America.” For the man who, as Joe Klein put it for *Time* magazine in 2006, “transcends the racial divide so effortlessly,”² there was nothing post-racial in the president’s analysis of the Gates affair. For blacks, Obama spoke the pure and simple truth: blacks and Latinos are stopped – harassed, really – much more by the police than whites. Young black and Latino males in particular live in a virtual police and penal state, where they are under constant suspicion. Consider the killing of Oscar Grant by a BART police officer on January 1, 2009, in Oakland, California. Grant is just one example of the many unarmed blacks who have been assaulted or killed by the police. (On November 5, 2010, the officer was sentenced to two years in prison; many blacks in Oakland, feeling the sentence far too lenient, responded with protest demonstrations.) And to think that a black professor at Harvard would be arrested on the grounds of his own home! That he would be asked to produce identification and prove that he lived there! For blacks, Obama was right to side with “the brother,” despite not knowing the facts of the case. He was right to be skeptical of cops and the so-called justice bureaucracy they represent.³

Many whites, on the other hand – conservatives in many instances, but not exclusively or even mainly so – were appalled. How could the president adopt a stance on a case whose details were largely unknown to him? Why, indeed, was he even commenting on a case that involved local law enforcement? It was in no way a federal matter, and therefore the president, rightly, should have made no comment. To these white Americans, Obama’s response seemed as crazy as if Bill Clinton had commented on O. J. Simpson’s arrest in 1995 for the murder

of his wife. As defined by federalism, presidents should not talk about matters of state law enforcement unless some urgent federal interest compels it. Moreover, many whites were uncomfortable about the president’s rush to judgment of the Cambridge police. After all, it is true that blacks and Latinos are stopped disproportionately by the police, but it is also true that they commit a hugely disproportionate share of violent crime in America – the other half of the fact that Obama’s initial response seemed to elide. (Blacks and Latinos, for instance, committed 89 percent of all murders in New York City between 2003 and 2009.⁴ Eighty-eight percent of the victims were also blacks and Latinos, which is why, from the perspective of blacks and Latinos, so little is being done about crime in urban minority communities.⁵)

Blacks are generally proud that Obama openly took their side in this matter, that he understood, articulated, and, more important, legitimated their position. Many whites, however, were surprised that the president took any side at all, that he did not see the necessity as president to transcend such a matter. This was not Little Rock or Selma. The Cambridge police officer was not Bull Connor. (Indeed, the Cambridge Police Department is highly diverse, and its officers are given sensitivity training.) Henry Louis Gates is not an uneducated, unemployed black victim of the inner city but rather a man of considerable intellectual, financial, and institutional resources who can well take care of himself in his disputes with the city of Cambridge. The problem with African Americans (and their liberal left enablers and comrades), as many whites see it, is that they are constantly seeking to relive the days of grand martyrdom from the civil rights movement, recasting every racial disparity and every racial incident as a

sign that nothing has changed. Blacks feel that they must be forever vigilant lest things, in fact, do change for the worse. Yes, the Gates arrest and Obama's reaction may have marked the beginning of the end of the fragile racial unity and hope that Obama's presidency had inspired in many Americans. Put another way, it may have been the end of the beginning of a stage in America's relationship with its new president as we have come to know and understand him; it may have set in motion the work of unraveling a bit of the mystery of his political art and his extraordinarily packed persona.

Is Obama as emblem of post-racial America nothing more than the hopeful repository of all our racial desires? Is he the brave new world of American politics? Is he the representative, the embodiment of a new wave of post-American, minority-centered nationalism that will free us at last from a hegemonic white nationalist past? Is he the hero, the last grand martyr of a final American civil rights campaign? Is he the philosopher-king whose subjects are unworthy of him, a man who, as White House advisor Valerie Jarrett put it, "has never really been challenged intellectually"?⁶ Is he an abject failure, the affirmative action kid in over his head? Is he the confidence man in his ultimate masquerade, the king of bullshitters, the Ellisonian Rinehart, fooling both whites and blacks? Is he simply the confused, contradictory illusion of our collective – both black and white – racial hysteria and misperceptions? Who can say? What can be said is that for a time, Obama brought together, or possessed the promise of bringing together, what the late historian John Hope Franklin called "the two worlds of race."⁷ He brought together the privileged majority and the aggrieved minority in a new way:

instead of each complaining about how the other is dependent on it, each cooperated to achieve a common goal, electing Obama as a way to restart or redefine American history. Many hoped that Obama could permanently unify the two worlds of race: this was the prospect they found so exciting about his candidacy. Obama the bridge, the mixed-race messiah, Obama the blended beneficence. Alas, it is questionable if he can unify us. In the end, the two worlds of race demand that we be on either one side or the other.

In the Fall 2010 Rasmussen poll mentioned above, 27 percent of all respondents reported feeling that race relations are getting worse. Thirty-nine percent of whites think race relations are getting better compared to only 13 percent of blacks. The low percentage among blacks seems especially remarkable given we now have an African American president – or, more accurately, a president of American and African parentage whose ascent to the highest political office in the realm was meant to signal a remarkable coming of racial age in the United States, the proof of a new American exceptionalism. (Obama's story could only have happened here. What are the chances of a person from a historically despised and persecuted minority being elected leader of some other nation?) Indeed, the poll numbers show a disparity of sorts in black opinion: while few blacks think race relations are getting better, 59 percent of blacks think the United States is moving in the right direction, more than twice the percentage of whites who share that view (27 percent). These numbers invite several observations. First, the era of good racial feelings that Obama ushered in at the beginning of his term in 2009 has, at least for now,

ended, particularly as determined by African Americans themselves. In other words, African Americans generally are now both optimistic about Obama's policies but increasingly pessimistic about his fate as president, insofar as that fate is somehow contingent on the belief that he represents a giant step forward in race relations. But for many African Americans, a step forward in race relations directly depends on white America's belief in Obama's policies.

Second, as of Fall 2010, whites are giving up on Obama, while African Americans, by a large margin, are remaining steadfast in their loyalty, although there is a significant gap among blacks between their overall approval rating for Obama, ranging between 85 and 91 percent, and their support of his policies. The latter is still a solid, healthy majority but is nowhere near his overall approval rating among blacks. (The president's approval rating among whites, as of Fall 2010, is 38 percent. In the 2010 midterm elections, 90 percent of black voters voted for the Democratic Party, in support of President Obama's policies, whereas only 37 percent of whites voted Democratic.) This consistent support from blacks is not simply because Obama, too, is black. Electing just any black person president would not necessarily have warmed the cockles of the hearts of most blacks. In fact, one can imagine some blacks being elected president who would have been vehemently opposed by most blacks. (Consider someone along the lines of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas or political activist and businessman Ward Connerly or some other outspoken opponent of affirmative action, someone who believes in a color-blind America or espouses the view that racism is no longer a factor in American life.) Blacks remain loyal to Obama because he is

black *and* is pursuing policies that seem, contrarily, to place limits on American power abroad (or recognize the limits and abuses of that power) while at the same time expanding the reach of the federal government at home. Obama is not a quintessential liberal; he is a quintessential *black* liberal. Most blacks are comfortable with the way that he seems to represent the decline of an official American exceptionalism – an ideology born of the belief that America is blessed by providence to be the foremost power in white Western hegemony – and the concurrent rise of domestic federal power as an unabashed bulwark against markets and private wealth, against the provinces of white power and privilege. Since the days of slavery, blacks have sought protection from the federal government (frequently not receiving it), they have been skeptical of the old version of American exceptionalism, and they have despaired at being at the mercy of local or state power.

Third, blacks feel that moving the country in what they think is the right direction is jeopardizing the overall relationship between blacks and whites; however, they likely feel that this is a necessary price for seeing Obama succeed where change is needed. As much as blacks may feel that broad acceptance of Obama's policies and leadership among whites would be a major step forward in race relations, there is uncertainty about how strong the black support of Obama would remain if his approval numbers were high among whites. Many blacks still have the sneaking suspicion that any black leader or any leader who happens to be black, as in Obama's case, and who is making whites extraordinarily happy is probably doing it at the expense of blacks, selling them out or kowtowing to the white folk. In other words, blacks expect Oba-

ma to govern as a black or minority president, voicing a black or minority perspective, a black or minority consciousness, and redefining what it means to be an American. If whites oppose him, according to the view of many blacks, it is because many or most whites cannot abide having the minority perspective as the representative or standard interpretation of American experience.

What blacks and whites do have in common is a belief that race relations are somehow reflected as progress; either they are getting better or worse, improving or deteriorating. When race relations are framed in a larger narrative of progress, then some millennial aim or goal emerges: a moment to be reached when race relations or race itself shall be no more. For whites, this time could perhaps be when blacks no longer view themselves as a distinct grievance group, when they fit in, at last, no longer requiring special cheerleading and enabling, no longer making claims of exceptionalism as Americans because of their historical status as slaves. For blacks, perhaps it is when they have percentage representation in every profession and occupation, in every social and economic category, that is at least the equal of their percentage in the population; when their representation in negative categories, such as incarceration or single-parent households, aligns with their percentage in the population; when they cease to be a population defined by their pathologies, which they feel are not their fault. This moment will be the end of racism, and thus the end of race relations, which for blacks are just a calibration of the extent to which racism affects their lives at any given moment, as there would be no distortion in black American life.

But suppose race relations have nothing to do with progress, secular or provi-

dential. Suppose race relations do not get better or worse in a linear or statistical way but simply respond and adjust to the economic and technological features of any particular point in time. Suppose race relations have nothing to do with the will of either whites or blacks but rather react to the spasms of their nervous systems, to their co-constructed mythologies of reality. Suppose the relationship between blacks and whites is fixed as a continuous exercise in social experimentation, in which the power between the two sometimes pulsates in unexpected rhythm but never really changes. Suppose we have it completely backward. Suppose because it is whites who are the decided minority in the world that they will always be special. Suppose it is blacks who are the inadvertent enablers in the special status given to whites, who are themselves invested even against their will in this status as a form of chiliastic order in the world. Suppose one day leftist whites, who hate the idea of progress, particularly as embodied in the idea of economic growth, which they find to be an utterly destructive concept, can no longer square this view with racial progress, which in fact greatly depends on economic growth, as noted by Daniel Patrick Moynihan and other policy intellectuals in the 1960s when *Dædalus* published the first of two special issues on "The Negro American." (Whites, on the whole, are willing to make concessions to blacks when the overall economic pie is getting larger. In this way, blacks make progress relative to their status in the past but never make any real gains in relation to whites. Therefore, there is no progress: things change without changing.)

We are trapped, however, in seeing race relations as a yardstick of progress. (Jeffrey B. Ferguson has a brilliant take on this in his essay in this volume.) How else could we account for all the wealthy

black movie stars (Will Smith, Samuel L. Jackson, Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, Denzel Washington, and the rest) and athletes (Michael Jordan, LeBron James, Serena and Venus Williams, Tiger Woods) who have such huge crossover appeal? Today, blacks direct mainstream Hollywood movies, appear in mainstream advertising, are celebrated authors and public intellectuals; they lead major white institutions, and they are doctors, lawyers, and Indian chiefs. Booker T. Washington preached racial progress as he sought funds from wealthy whites to support Tuskegee Institute at the turn of the twentieth century. W.E.B. Du Bois had once believed in it when he was involved with the NAACP. The movers and shakers of the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s – Du Bois, Charles S. Johnson, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke – all believed in progress and patronage. Thurgood Marshall believed in it, as did Benjamin Mays and A. Philip Randolph and the late Dorothy Height. Martin Luther King, Jr., based his popular vision on assumptions of it. And one can believe in it only if there is irrefutable evidence that progress is actually occurring.

John Hope Franklin, in a tough-minded way, acknowledged progress in his *Dædalus* essay from 1965, featured in the first of the two issues on “The Negro American.” “By the middle of the eighteenth century,” Franklin wrote, “laws governing Negroes denied to them certain basic rights that were conceded to others. They were permitted no independence of thought, no opportunity to improve their minds or their talents or to worship freely, no right to marry and enjoy the conventional family relationships, no right to own or dispose of property, and no protection against miscarriages of justice or cruel and unreasonable punishments.”⁸ This was the origin of the two worlds of race. By 1965, with-

out question, things were better for blacks – much better. After all, they were no longer chattels! And Franklin’s beginning only underscored how far blacks had come by the 1950s and 1960s: civil rights commissions, civil rights laws, the beginning of the end of Jim Crow, and the promise of integration and equality. But the broad historical outline that Franklin’s essay provides showed how deeply entrenched the notion of two races was in structuring American reality and its historical self-understanding, how much both custom and convenience supported it, and how much power and pride were determined to maintain it.

Black nationalists, such as Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X, and black Marxists, as Du Bois became, never accepted the idea of racial progress. Nothing got better in any real sense as far as they were concerned. This view is not without its justifications. Blacks were at the bottom of the American social, political, and economic ladders in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and they remain there today. They are at the bottom of standardized test scores, at the bottom of accumulated or acquired wealth, at the bottom in life expectancy, at the bottom in marriage rates, at the top in single-mother birth rates, at the top in incarceration rates, and at the top for unemployment and high school dropout rates.⁹

What race relations so profoundly reflect in America is the complex nature of our social dynamic: how in this country, as Ralph Ellison brilliantly encapsulated in *Invisible Man*, one can move without moving. Many African American cynics ask, what has changed, except the façade that masks the great American racial leviathan, whose belly still contains the two worlds of race? What they may not appreciate is that for African Americans

to move without moving is, in a sense, a finely wrought art, a virtuosic pose of existentialism. Blacks have made their conditions into an attitude. The difficult craft of post-racial racialism requires buying into a belief that everything has changed in modern attitudes about race (why not let your daughter or son marry one and bring a bit of diversity into the family?) while at the same time recognizing that the problems that stigmatize black people and make them distinct in the body politic are as intractable now as ever. The dance of post-racial racialism is to move without moving. It is precisely what Obama is trying to do as president, don't you think? He is trying to be a black president without being a black president.

In a recent *Wall Street Journal* article headlined "The Alien in the White House," columnist Dorothy Rabinowitz wrote:

A great part of America now understands that this president's sense of identification lies elsewhere, and is in profound ways unlike theirs. He is hard put to sound convincingly like the leader of the nation, because he is, at heart and by instinct, the voice mainly of his ideological class. He is the alien in the White House, a matter having nothing to do with delusions about his birthplace cherished by the demented fringe.¹⁰

When Obama, during the 2008 campaign, jokingly referred to the fact that he does not look like the presidents on our currency, he was more right than he knew. According to his critics, he is far more different from them than he ever let on. Rabinowitz took special umbrage at Obama's returning a bust of Churchill that was given by Tony Blair as a gift. "The new administration had apparently found no place in our national house of many rooms for the British leader who lives on so vividly in the American

mind," she wrote. "Churchill, face of our shared wartime struggle, dauntless rallier of his nation who continues, so remarkably, to speak to ours. For a president to whom such associations are alien, ridding the White House of Churchill would, of course, have raised no second thoughts." Conservative commentator and writer Dinesh D'Souza, in his right-wing psychobiography *The Roots of Obama's Rage*, offers this interpretation of the return of the bust:

Obama probably remembers Churchill as an imperialist who soldiered for the empire in India and Africa. Churchill was opposed to India's independence movement. . . . Even as late as 1954, when President Eisenhower raised with Churchill the idea of granting self-government to all remaining British colonies in Africa, Churchill responded that he was "skeptical about universal suffrage for the Hottentots." In the 1950s, Churchill was prime minister during Britain's Fight against the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya, the native country of Obama's father.¹¹

D'Souza's view makes some sense. Obama's father was Kenyan. If the bust of Churchill was meant to symbolize some special relationship between America and Britain, returning the bust may have been meant to symbolize another sort of special relationship between former colonies and Britain. But why should anyone think returning the bust was necessarily an "alien" act, unless one assumes that the way whites see history is the only legitimate way to see it. Are whites somehow insulted that Obama, in returning the bust, was saying that Churchill was a white hero, if, indeed, that was what he was trying to say? They might respond by saying that the presidency is bigger than the race or religion of the occupant. In fact, the office has nothing to do with the race, religion, or gender of the occu-

pant, and the election should not be seen as “correcting” or “repudiating” the so-called whiteness of the office. But if that is the case, what then is Obama’s difference supposed to mean? Or put another way, what difference is racial difference supposed to make?

Was it the expectation of whites, both those who supported Obama in 2008 and those who did not, that he would serve as president in a way that would be indistinguishable from a white serving in the office? Would this outcome have been their ideal of the post-racial? Blacks, by and large, probably had no problem with Obama returning the bust, as it was most likely their expectation – certainly their hope – that he would serve as an active agent of their interests, avenger of their injuries and insults, restorer of their place of respect in the world. (This was probably the hope of the white Left, too, whose watchword, after all, is *transformative*, which so many have called the Obama presidency.) Is this black Americans’ idea of post-racial, when a black person would not be expected to be indistinguishable from his white predecessors but, in fact, would be expected to be very different, the deconstructive counterpoint, the legitimization of black reality meant to expose the fact that there is a “white” way of governing and, naturally, a “non-white” way? What many whites looked for in Obama was a Sidney Poitier character from the 1950s; many blacks wanted the hero of a 1970s blaxploitation film. Shelby Steele, in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed from October 28, 2010, warned against electing a redeemer rather than a steward because redeemers, by their very nature and mission, must be transformative. Stewards, conversely, simply wish to guard the values and principles, the institutions and wealth, of the republic. Perhaps. But that is probably too simple an explana-

tion of how blacks and whites see democracy. And was there not a time, during the post-World War II development of the American studies discipline, when Americans understood themselves historically as a redeemer nation?¹²

In a recent *Washington Post* article, columnist Eugene Robinson attempted to answer the question, “What’s Behind the Tea Party’s Ire?” The party, “overwhelmingly white and lavishly funded,” is more upset about Obama’s race than his policies, according to Robinson. He describes the rhetoric frequently used at Tea Party rallies and by Tea Party-endorsed candidates – calls for “taking the country back” and “returning the American government to the American people” – as implicitly racist. It disturbs him that many in the Tea Party see Obama as an elitist, “when he grew up in modest circumstances – his mother was on food stamps for a time – and paid for his fancy-pants education with student loans.”¹³ If anyone fits the bill as an elitist, Robinson suggests, it is George W. Bush, on the basis of his privileged background. Bush seems to have wrecked the budget with deficit spending before Obama entered the office, yet despite being widely unpopular, he does not seem to be blamed for these sins as Obama has been.¹⁴

Some of these same concerns and misgivings about the Tea Party are made (more compellingly) by historian Clarence E. Walker in his essay for this issue of *Dædalus*. But it is hard to judge precisely how racist the Tea Party may be. First, the environmental movement, the climate change movement, the animal rights movement, and the anti-war movement (its latest incarnation being in opposition to Iraq) all have an overwhelmingly white public face (at their public demonstrations, for example).



This political button shows how the Left has also embraced the rhetoric of “taking back the country.” It features Jerry Brown, who was running for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1992, and Jesse Jackson, whom Brown said he would select as his vice presidential running mate if he was nominated.

No one makes this point to discredit or criticize these movements. Why not, if lack of diversity is a serious shortcoming in a political movement? Tea Party rallies generally have gone to great lengths to include black conservative speakers, such as Angela McGlowan and Alfonzo Rachel, and the movement has endorsed non-white candidates comprising African Americans, Indian Americans, and Hispanic Americans.¹⁵ Second, both the Left and the Right have used the phrase “taking back the country.” For example, the Left used it in the political button pictured above, featuring Jerry Brown, who was running for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1992, and Jesse Jackson, whom Brown said he would select as his vice presidential running mate if he was nominated.¹⁶

The Washington Post recently revealed that only 5 percent of signs at a Tea Party rally mentioned either Obama’s race or religion.¹⁷ Whether Obama is an elitist is hard to say and, frankly, is irrelevant

to his abilities as a politician. But being an elitist – or some sort of social-status hound or cultural snob – is not at all contingent on the modesty of one’s background. A parvenu, which Obama and other highly educated black folk such as myself happen to be, can be the worst sort of snob, intensely elitist.¹⁸ It is arguable whether racism in the Tea Party movement even matters very much to black people’s interests. Black editorial writer Jason Riley, of *The Wall Street Journal*, made a point of criticizing the NAACP for issuing a report condemning the racism of the Tea Party; he called the report misguided and extraneous to the real issues and concerns facing black people in the United States.¹⁹

My point is not that Robinson’s column is superficial and poorly argued (hardly a novel or trenchant observation to make of an op-ed). I am not even trying to argue that the Tea Party movement isn’t racist. A book like political scientist Robert C. Smith’s *Conservatism and Rac-*

The Two Worlds of Race Revisited: A Meditation on Race in the Age of Obama

ism, and Why in America They Are the Same (2010) makes a provocative and sometimes compelling argument about the persistent historical connection between conservatism and its justification of white privilege or the status quo of white dominance. Rather, I am interested in how Robinson's column reveals two significant anxieties that many African Americans feel. The first anxiety derives from the fact that Barack Obama is, without question, the most criticized black man in the United States now, not a surprising fate given he is president. He is probably the most criticized black man in the history of the United States because, once again, being the president he is the most visible and most powerful black man in history. Blacks, on the whole, have always felt uncomfortable, if not outright defensive, whenever a black person is stridently and caustically criticized, especially when it is a black man and especially when criticized by whites. African Americans frequently fluctuate between defensive militancy and special pleading in response to criticism because, throughout their history, they have been unjustly, sometimes savagely and opportunistically, criticized by whites. The group may feel that attacks on Obama are onslaughts to the manhood virtue of the race itself, and manhood remains a sensitive and potent issue for blacks, who still generally feel that their men are more at risk than their women. As Obama is the first black president, and as blacks who overwhelmingly supported him are highly invested in his success, they are strongly inclined to be piqued by attacks, while also proud of his ability to withstand the attacks, proud of his being in the arena where such attacks are made. This is the tension of what I call post-racial racialism: blacks want Obama (or any prominent black person of achievement) to

receive special treatment because he is black, and they expect such achievement to be lionized not merely as exemplary but as heroic; on the other hand, they do not want the achievement of any prominent black to be diminished or dismissed, somehow qualified or patronized, because of race or any special consideration given to it. So the brutal give-and-take of partisan politics, which blacks know well enough, in this instance makes them uneasy. And they are not unjustified in their distrust of white motives: many blacks still remember the Republican Party's Nixonian Southern strategy of the late 1960s through the 1980s, making a coded appeal as it did to whites as whites; many still remember the successful Willie Horton ad campaign that George H.W. Bush used against Michael Dukakis in 1988; many remember the racist affirmative action ads Jesse Helms used against black challenger Harvey Gantt in North Carolina. Some will say that blacks cannot take the pressure of being in the political arena and overreact to criticism of Obama, that they are overly sensitive to whites' good or bad intentions. (Beating Hillary Clinton and John McCain, two highly experienced white politicians, in the arena of political debate and exchange was probably what made blacks feel most proud of Obama.) Others feel that the whites who do not like Obama use their harsh criticism of him to take racist potshots at the group as a whole through him. Besides, many blacks feel that they should defend Obama as vigorously as most conservatives defended Bush. If your opponents consider ideological loyalty a virtue for their side, why is it not a virtue for you as well?

The second anxiety is related to the group of whites with whom African Americans generally align themselves politically. This group usually comprises

educated, highly cultured, middle- and upper-class liberal whites – those who, back in the days of slavery and after, would have been referred to as “de quality.” Historically, blacks have had little truck with lower-class whites or with white ethnics (except Jews). This political alignment is one reason why whites who hate Obama call him elitist, because they feel that the group of whites who back him are, by and large, elitist; they also feel that whites who support Obama treat blacks as favored pets while disdain other whites who are not supporters. After all, these liberal, educated whites took to Obama largely because they felt they were dealing with one of their own: someone who went to their schools, read their kind of books, had their kind of habits, spoke their language. Obama impressed even upper-class conservatives such as David Brooks, Christopher Buckley, and Peggy Noonan for the same reasons. He is a black who did not, through his habits or inclinations, overly remind them that he is black: rather like the educated, deracinated “mulatto” colonial, in some respects. Lower-class whites have always been jealous of this alignment as a violation of white racial solidarity and because the blacks seemed to be rising at their expense.

One of the most remarkable racist allegories of this situation I describe is the series of Frankenstein movies made by Universal Studios in the 1930s and early 1940s. Doctor Frankenstein and his colleagues all represent the upper-class whites – scientific, rational, liberal, seeking new knowledge and wanting to overturn the old ways. The violent monster is the African American, the botched experiment of breathing new life into a dead people, of resurrecting them through science and rationality. Through the sheer will of a liberal

vision, Frankenstein thought that he could create a being equal to those around him, that he could fabricate or engineer an equal being from the bits and pieces of bodies. The villagers are the lower-class whites – superstitious, fearful, and jealous of the monster, resentful of the better-off whites who scorn them as backward simpletons. And in virtually every Frankenstein movie, the villagers, with their torches, shotguns, and pitchforks, destroy Frankenstein and his monster.

In this fevered vision, no one is admirable; no one has the moral high ground, although the monster, in its way, represents a form of innocence, pathos: the upper and lower classes are flawed, either arrogant in their intelligence or mob-like in their ignorance, and the monster is deformed. A twisted reading of the Obama presidency – and some white conservatives are reading it in just this way – makes it out to be a modern Frankenstein story, the hubris of the modern Prometheus – the hubris of liberalism. Perhaps it is a hubris to answer the hubris the Left saw in the conservative policies of Bush, the hubris the Left sees in the American empire – what might be called the hubris of neoliberalism.

I know that in the life styles of any number of groups in the nation, there are many things which Negroes would certainly reject, not because they hold them in contempt, but because they do not satisfy our way of doing things and our feeling about things.

–Ralph Ellison, from a transcript of the American Academy conference on “The Negro American,” May 14 – 15, 1965

This is why I say that in order for the Negro to become an American citizen, all American citizens will be forced to

*The Two
Worlds
of Race
Revisited: A
Meditation
on Race in
the Age of
Obama*

undergo a change, and all American institutions will be forced to undergo a change too.

–James Baldwin, “Liberalism and the Negro” (1964)

The Negroes are asking for unequal treatment.

–Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Memorandum for the Secretary (1964)²⁰

In 1964, *Commentary* magazine sponsored a roundtable on “Liberalism and the Negro,” moderated by Norman Podhoretz and including panelists James Baldwin, Sidney Hook, Gunnar Myrdal, and Nathan Glazer. Podhoretz, then-editor of the magazine, put it as well as anyone when he described the crisis in liberalism thus:

For the traditional liberal mentality conceives of society as being made up not of competing economic classes and ethnic groups, but rather of competing *individuals* who confront a neutral body of laws and a neutral institutional complex. . . . [T]he newer school of liberal thought on race relations maintains that the Negro community *as a whole* has been crippled by three hundred years of slavery and persecution and that the simple removal of legal and other barriers to the advancement of individual Negroes can therefore only result in what is derisively called “tokenism.” This school of thought insists that radical measures are now needed to overcome the Negro’s inherited disabilities.²¹

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences’ conferences on “The Negro American” in 1964 and 1965, as well as the resulting issues of *Dædalus* that published the conference papers and partial transcripts, reveal that nearly everyone was wrestling with this tension in liberalism,

this ideological division in dealing with African Americans, their status, and their claims for justice. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a key figure at the American Academy conferences and author of what would prove to be one of the most important and controversial documents about the status of blacks in the United States, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), was torn about the best way forward. Without some strong federal intervention to change hiring practices, the black male, who was the primary focus of Moynihan’s report, would never become the breadwinner and figure of stability that he needed to be if the black family was to cease being dysfunctional.

On the one hand, the idea of making race a permanent category in American politics by introducing preferential treatment for blacks was not simply distasteful but contrary to American ideology and the preferred aim of getting rid of racism by getting rid of race itself. Ultimately, liberalism essentially chose affirmative action under President Nixon and his Philadelphia Plan in 1969, and what emerged was the political fixture of racial categories in a scheme of preferred treatment, designed largely to stop the violent black rebellions in major American cities that had become commonplace by 1964 and horrendous by 1965 when the Watts section of Los Angeles exploded in racial violence that at times resembled out-and-out warfare. Instead of lasting only ten or twenty years – a kind of domestic Marshall Plan, as early advocates like Bayard Rustin and Whitney Young wanted – affirmative action has now lasted forty years and, despite challenges and changes, shows no sign of being abandoned as a policy position of blacks, white liberals, and the Left. Affirmative action is bolstered by a philosophy called multiculturalism, which

involves radicalizing the concept of pluralism and tolerance as the active destruction of all marginalization; by the slogan of diversity (a form of bureaucratic bean-counting for proper representation); and by a network of government-enforced or government-encouraged forms of solidarity. As a result, affirmative action as a remediation policy has widened its reach to include virtually anyone in the United States who is not an able-bodied, heterosexual white man. For some, this “inclusion industry” has hurt blacks, as the idea of preferential treatment was originally conceived to address the specific needs that arose from the historical fact – popularized by liberal historians and sociologists in the 1950s and 1960s – that blacks had been slaves in the United States, a unique form of political oppression and social ostracism. They had been placed in a position of government-approved powerlessness and total abjection and thus had been incomparably damaged as a people by that institution. According to this view, blacks were the only true caste victims in America. They were also the only people in this mythical land of the immigrant who came here against their will. (There are some exceptions to this, such as immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean.) They therefore required a remedy that was beyond the normal avenues of redress others could obtain through constitutional means or the regular political process, with its built-in mechanisms for reform.

On the other hand, some have argued that affirmative action would never have endured as a policy had its client list not been widened in order to garner more political support. The country on the whole was not very interested in helping blacks overcome a socially imposed and politically managed inferiority status unless others who felt they had equally legitimate claims were also helped. In other

words, blacks needed “victim allies” in order for the policy to be accepted. Yet some argue that including these allies has caused the policy not to work very well for blacks, or at least not work as originally intended.

Conservatives today are fighting for the alternative liberalism, the original liberalism, if you will, of competing individuals, race-neutral laws and institutions, and an essentially race-neutral public square; they would have race become what religion or any other form of identification is: a private realm, unforced and unenabled by a system of governmental rewards and disincentives. For these conservatives (old-fashioned liberals), the government has no compelling interest in maintaining racial categories or helping people on the basis of race. The biggest mistake America ever made was to recognize race as a way of legitimatizing slavery; continuing to recognize race does not rectify that mistake. The affirmative action liberals retort by saying the government invented and sanctioned race as a legitimate category; it cannot blithely get out of the race business now by declaring that race, in effect, does not exist because we now find race a repugnant idea. In other words, for the affirmative action liberals, the so-called original liberalism never existed except in the American imagination, in America’s fantasy of itself.²²

The two worlds of race have produced two views of liberalism. And within blacks themselves the two worlds have produced two interpretations of America: one that reveals America as it really is, a view shaped by the special knowledge blacks have derived from their condition in America; and another view that denies them a true sense of what America is, shaped by the knowledge *kept from them* based

on their condition. Novelist James Baldwin said in 1964, "I have watched the way most white people in this country live. I have worked in their kitchens and I have served them their brandy, and I know what goes on in white living rooms better than white people know what goes on in mine."²³ Ralph Ellison made this observation in 1965: "There are many parts of this complex American society which Negroes have been kept away from. Even most of our novelists do not give enough of a report of how life is actually lived in the country for a Negro to pick up a novel and get some clues. The constrictions and the exclusiveness very often have gotten into our perception of social complexity."²⁴ The two worlds of race created in blacks a contrary sense of what they knew about the United States and the whites who ran it, blending into a self-aggrandized sense of isolation: both inside and outside at once.

The *Dædalus* issues on "The Negro American" grappled with the conflicting views of liberalism in dealing with race as well as liberalism's discontent with its own limitations at reforming a problem that has been at the crux of the American experiment: that is, how to integrate a forced-worker population that once was needed but is socially undesirable now that its original purpose for being here no longer exists; or, how to make the unwanted wanted. I thought that Obama's election as president could be a useful pretext to return to this question or issue – one that has been significantly recast and reformulated since the *Dædalus* issues on "The Negro American," now that we have lived for nearly fifty years with racism as a discredited idea, segregation as a thing of the past, and blacks as an officially sanctioned remedial caste. Having a president who is a black man, albeit one with a tangential

or more oblique American experience, calls for a consideration of this new age, the "age of Obama." A desire to explore the role of white liberalism in the context of a growing minority population in the United States – one that will, before mid-century, outnumber whites – also motivated my interest in revisiting "The Negro American" project of 1965. Our moment today is in every way as significant as that moment, following the passage of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act, when America seemed on the edge of a brave new world, poised for redefinition and ready to see itself anew.

The present volume is the humanist companion to the *Dædalus* issue (Spring 2011) that Harvard sociologist Lawrence Bobo is guest editing and that will more strongly feature the social sciences. The original *Dædalus* issues on "The Negro American" included only one essay by a true humanist, historian John Hope Franklin, a man I greatly admired. His essay is reprinted here, and my essay is meant in some ways, even with its title, to be a thematic continuation, a reimagining and reworking of the intellectual preoccupations in his essay, and a tribute to his work. I feel privileged to have the opportunity to be the guest editor of this issue, as I feel privileged to be in partnership with Bobo, another scholar I admire. I am extremely grateful to the brilliant contributors who wrote wonderfully thoughtful and engaging essays for this volume. I am glad the topic captured their imagination and that they had confidence in my skills as an editor. These are busy people, and I appreciate their taking the time. As Lou Gehrig said, "Today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth."

ENDNOTES

- ¹ “Liberalism and the Negro: A Round-Table Discussion,” *Commentary*, March 1964, 27. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 59; originally published in 1952.
- ² Joe Klein, “Why Barack Obama Could Be the Next President,” *Time*, October 23, 2006.
- ³ A 2005 Gallup poll showed that despite the fact that confidence in the police to protect citizens from crime had dropped across all demographics, a huge gulf still remained between blacks and whites: only 32 percent of blacks expressed confidence in the police compared to 57 percent of whites.
- ⁴ “Murder: New York City” (Murder Map), *The New York Times*, November 1, 2010.
- ⁵ The concern about crimes committed against members of the group might be best reflected in the numbers from a 2009 Gallup poll that showed only 42 percent of blacks thought their neighbor would return a lost wallet with whatever money it contained whereas 75 percent of whites thought their neighbor would.
- ⁶ Quoted in David Remnick, *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 274.
- ⁷ See John Hope Franklin, “The Two Worlds of Race: A Historical View,” *Dædalus* 94 (4) (Fall 1965), and reprinted in the present volume, pages 28 – 43.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 899; reference is to the 1965 publication.
- ⁹ Daniel Patrick Moynihan feared that integration done too rapidly – a policy that would, in effect, be tantamount to an aggressive affirmative action – would simply exacerbate racial relations by highlighting how blacks lagged far behind whites. For instance, consider this passage from a letter Moynihan wrote in 1963 to Labor Secretary W. Willard Wirtz: “For whatever it is worth, I am persuaded, and find others such as Phil Hauser completely agree, that it would be a serious mistake from the Negro point of view to integrate the Northern school system at this time. The present level of achievement and family support among most Negroes is so far behind that of most white that any *artificial* effort to integrate the schools can only have the effect of consigning almost the entire Negro student body to the bottom of the class, with all the psychic injury that results; Steven R. Weisman, ed., *Daniel Patrick Moynihan: A Portrait in Letters of an American Visionary* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2010), 60; italics in the original.
- ¹⁰ Dorothy Rabinowitz, “The Alien in the White House,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 9, 2010.
- ¹¹ Dinesh D’Souza, *The Roots of Obama’s Rage* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2010), 42. D’Souza fails to acknowledge anywhere in his book that his idea of understanding Obama as a disgruntled postcolonial was first posited by Nigerian writer L. E. Inkenga, in an article she wrote for the conservative website American Thinker; “Obama, the African Colonial,” June 25, 2009. Inkenga offers the same psychobiographical reading of Obama’s autobiography, *Dreams from My Father*.
- ¹² See, for instance, Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968). It would have been strange for the first black man to have been elected president, particularly with Obama’s configuration of characteristics and abilities, and not have been seen as a redeemer, as something providential. Literary scholar and social theorist Dana D. Nelson argues that redeemer presidents are hardly new, that “we expect the president to do the work of democracy” and to be “the leader of democracy and its central agent.” In this way, the public has come to believe that its sole political job is electing the “right” president, as if that is all we have to do to maintain democracy. As a “new,” “transformational” candidate, Obama brilliantly exploited this tendency among voters in order to win the office. Nelson’s main argument is that we need to be concerned about the presidency having too much power and sandbagging democracy, as the executive branch is the only one of the three branches of government that is run

and symbolized by an individual. See Dana D. Nelson, *Bad for Democracy: How the Presidency Undermines the Power of the People* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008; updated with a new preface, 2010), xiv.

- 13 Eugene Robinson, "What's Behind the Tea Party's Ire?" *The Washington Post*, November 2, 2010.
- 14 Historian and economist Bruce Bartlett did, in fact, blast Bush on these grounds in his book *Impostor: How George W. Bush Bankrupted America and Betrayed the Reagan Legacy* (New York: Doubleday, 2006). The book was well received by many on the Right.
- 15 It is pointless to call the black people who are part of the Tea Party "Uncle Toms," as it is impossible to say that they are selling anyone out or that their political stances are self-evidently detrimental to blacks. One can plausibly argue that their involvement with the Right is helpful to blacks as a group, providing them with a voice and influence in other political spheres. Michael Steele's leadership of the Republican National Committee may, in some respects, be as strategically important to African Americans as a group as the Congressional Black Caucus has been. It is equally pointless to call black conservatives opportunists, as anyone actively espousing a political cause or identifying with a political faction can be accused of opportunism. This is particularly true on the Left, as that is the most socially approved political position for a black person to take, the position judged as representing true solidarity.
- 16 John Hope Franklin notes in his *Dædalus* essay that the phrase "turning back the clock," popularly used by liberal and civil rights groups in opposition to conservative policies or conservative ideology, was used in the 1960s by Southern whites to describe how civil rights legislation would turn back the clock to the era of Reconstruction. See Franklin, "The Two Worlds of Race," 917.
- 17 Amy Gardner, "Few Signs at Tea Party Rally Expressed Racially Charged Anti-Obama Themes," *The Washington Post*, October 14, 2010.
- 18 Lawrence Otis Graham's *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999) remains an insightful look at elitism among blacks. It may be that some (perhaps many) in the Tea Party dislike Obama because of his race, but one could make an equally plausible argument that they don't like him because he is an intellectual. His admirers are convinced he is an intellectual and love to promote the idea, as the quotation above from Valerie Jarrett illustrates. Or consider this response from Vice President Joe Biden when he was asked why Obama is perceived as aloof: "I think what it is is he is so brilliant. He is an intellectual"; Lisa DePaulo, "\$#!% Joe Biden Says," *GQ*, December 2010; emphasis in the original. There has always been a large swath of the American public that distrusts and dislikes intellectuals, particularly in leadership positions, thinking them elitist, controlling, and too theoretical for their own or anyone else's good. George W. Bush, who developed the demeanor of the plainspoken, at times thick-tongued anti-intellectual, attended Yale University and Harvard Business School. During his presidency, it was commonly thought he was stupid and dogmatic, although many leftist critics tried to out him as an elitist with C grades playing the role of a good old boy. Karl Rove outed Bush as a voracious reader in his December 26, 2008, *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, "Bush is a Book Lover." Bush read anywhere from fifty to one hundred books a year while he was president. It seems more likely that both Obama and Bush, whatever the extent of their intellectual interests and skills, have developed personas – images – that they have found useful as politicians. Obama and his brain trust may greatly emphasize his intellect as a way of thwarting doubts about his mental abilities because he is a black man, as a way to redirect the aspirations of young blacks, for whom he could be a role model, away from popular culture, and as a way to make whites feel comfortable voting for him by convincing them they are voting for an "exceptional," not an "ordinary," Negro: voting for him was not an "affirmative action" vote but a "merit" vote. Bush may have downplayed his own intellectual pretensions as a way of reaching a large swath of the conservative Amer-

ican electorate that dislikes and distrusts intellectuals. It is interesting to note that both Bush and Obama are considered arrogant by their political enemies.

¹⁹ Jason Riley, “The NAACP’s Unhealthy Tea Party Obsession,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 25, 2010.

²⁰ “Transcript of the American Academy Conference on the Negro American – May 14 – 15, 1965,” *Dædalus* 95 (1) (Winter 1966): 408. “Liberalism and the Negro,” 41. Weisman, *Daniel Patrick Moynihan*, 79.

²¹ “Liberalism and the Negro”; emphasis in the original.

²² In a 1965 memo to presidential aide Harry McPherson, Daniel Patrick Moynihan sums up liberalism’s internal conflict thus: “American democracy is founded on the twin ideals of liberty and equality. . . . Liberty has been the American middle-class ideal par excellence. It has enjoyed the utmost social prestige. Not so equality. Men who would carelessly give their lives for Liberty, are appalled by equality.” Moynihan points out that equality movements in the United States have met with great opposition, far more than movements for liberty, that is, the right not to be denied civic access. Moynihan continues, in speaking about the anti-colonialism movement, “I sometimes have the feeling that part of the mutual incomprehension that is so evident in the encounter of Americans with that world [the Third World] is that we are talking liberty and they are talking equality.” See Weisman, *Daniel Patrick Moynihan*, 103 – 104.

²³ “Liberalism and the Negro,” 37 – 38.

²⁴ “Transcript of the American Academy Conference on the Negro American – May 14 – 15, 1965,” 436. During the Academy conference, Ellison reacted unfavorably to some of Nathan Glazer’s remarks from the “Liberalism and the Negro” roundtable; see page 408 in the transcript.

The Two Worlds of Race: A Historical View

John Hope Franklin

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN (1915 – 2009) was a prominent historian and ardent defender of civil rights. His numerous publications include the groundbreaking book *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of American Negroes* (1947), now in its eighth edition. He was elected a Fellow of the American Academy in 1964. The essay reprinted here originally appeared in *Dædalus* 94 (4) (Fall 1965); that volume was the first of two special issues on “The Negro American.”

Measured by universal standards the history of the United States is indeed brief. But during the brief span of three and one-half centuries of colonial and national history Americans developed traditions and prejudices which created the two worlds of race in modern America. From the time that Africans were brought as indentured servants to the mainland of English America in 1619, the enormous task of rationalizing and justifying the forced labor of peoples on the basis of racial differences was begun; and even after legal slavery was ended, the notion of racial differences persisted as a basis for maintaining segregation and discrimination. At the same time, the effort to establish a more healthy basis for the new world social order was begun, thus launching the continuing battle between the two worlds of race, on the one hand, and the world of equality and complete human fellowship, on the other.

For a century before the American Revolution the status of Negroes in the English colonies had become fixed at a low point that distinguished them from all other persons who had been held in temporary bondage. By the middle of the eighteenth century, laws governing Negroes denied to them certain basic rights that were conceded to others. They were permitted no independence of thought, no opportunity to improve their minds or their talents or to worship freely, no right to marry and enjoy the conventional family relationships, no right to own or dispose of property, and

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no protection against miscarriages of justice or cruel and unreasonable punishments. They were outside the pale of the laws that protected ordinary humans. In most places they were to be governed, as the South Carolina code of 1712 expressed it, by special laws “as may restrain the disorders, rapines, and inhumanity to which they are naturally prone and inclined.” A separate world for them had been established by law and custom. Its dimensions and the conduct of its inhabitants were determined by those living in a quite different world.

By the time that the colonists took up arms against their mother country in order to secure their independence, the world of Negro slavery had become deeply entrenched and the idea of Negro inferiority well established. But the dilemmas inherent in such a situation were a source of constant embarrassment. “It always appeared a most iniquitous scheme to me,” Mrs. John Adams wrote her husband in 1774, “to fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have.” There were others who shared her views, but they were unable to wield much influence. When the fighting began General George Washington issued an order to recruiting officers that they were not to enlist “any deserter from the ministerial army, nor any stroller, negro, or vagabond, or person suspected of being an enemy to the liberty of America nor any under eighteen years of age.” In classifying Negroes with the dregs of society, traitors, and children, Washington made it clear that Negroes, slave or free, were not to enjoy the high privilege of fighting for political independence. He would change that order later, but only after it became clear that Negroes were enlisting with the “ministerial army” in droves in order to secure their own free-

dom. In changing his policy if not his views, Washington availed himself of the services of more than 5,000 Negroes who took up arms against England.¹

Many Americans besides Mrs. Adams were struck by the inconsistency of their stand during the War for Independence, and they were not averse to making moves to emancipate the slaves. Quakers and other religious groups organized antislavery societies, while numerous individuals manumitted their slaves. In the years following the close of the war most of the states of the East made provisions for the gradual emancipation of slaves. In the South, meanwhile, the antislavery societies were unable to effect programs of state-wide emancipation. When the Southerners came to the Constitutional Convention in 1787 they succeeded in winning some representation on the basis of slavery, in securing federal support of the capture and rendition of fugitive slaves, and in preventing the closing of the slave trade before 1808.

Even where the sentiment favoring emancipation was pronounced, it was seldom accompanied by a view that Negroes were the equals of whites and should become a part of one family of Americans. Jefferson, for example, was opposed to slavery; and if he could have had his way, he would have condemned it in the Declaration of Independence. It did not follow, however, that he believed Negroes to be the equals of whites. He did not want to “degrade a whole race of men from the work in the scale of beings which their Creator may *perhaps* have given them. . . . I advance it therefore, as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstance, are inferior to the whites in the endowment both of body and mind.” It is entirely possible that Jef-

erson's later association with the extraordinarily able Negro astronomer and mathematician, Benjamin Banneker, resulted in some modification of his views. After reading a copy of Banneker's almanac, Jefferson told him that it was "a document to which your whole race had a right for its justifications against the doubts which have been entertained of them."²

In communities such as Philadelphia and New York, where the climate was more favorably disposed to the idea of Negro equality than in Jefferson's Virginia, few concessions were made, except by a limited number of Quakers and their associates. Indeed, the white citizens in the City of Brotherly Love contributed substantially to the perpetuation of two distinct worlds of race. In the 1780s, the white Methodists permitted Negroes to worship with them, provided the Negroes sat in a designated place in the balcony. On one occasion, when the Negro worshippers occupied the front rows of the balcony, from which they had been excluded, the officials pulled them from their knees during prayer and evicted them from the church. Thus, in the early days of the Republic and in the place where the Republic was founded, Negroes had a definite "place" in which they were expected at all times to remain. The white Methodists of New York had much the same attitude toward their Negro fellows. Soon, there were separate Negro churches in these and other communities. Baptists were very much the same. In 1809 thirteen Negro members of a white Baptist church in Philadelphia were dismissed, and they formed a church of their own. Thus, the earliest Negro religious institutions emerged as the result of the rejection by white communicants of their darker fellow worshippers. Soon there would be oth-

er institutions – schools, newspapers, benevolent societies – to serve those who lived in a world apart.

Those Americans who conceded the importance of education for Negroes tended to favor some particular type of education that would be in keeping with their lowly station in life. In 1794, for example, the American Convention of Abolition Societies recommended that Negroes be instructed in "those mechanic arts which will keep them most constantly employed and, of course, which will less subject them to idleness and debauchery, and thus prepare them for becoming good citizens of the United States." When Anthony Benezet, a dedicated Pennsylvania abolitionist, died in 1784 his will provided that on the death of his wife the proceeds of his estate should be used to assist in the establishment of a school for Negroes. In 1787 the school of which Benezet had dreamed was opened in Philadelphia, where the pupils studied reading, writing, arithmetic, plain accounts, and sewing.

Americans who were at all interested in the education of Negroes regarded it as both natural and normal that Negroes should receive their training in separate schools. As early as 1773 Newport, Rhode Island, had a colored school, maintained by a society of benevolent clergymen of the Anglican Church. In 1798 a separate private school for Negro children was established in Boston; and two decades later the city opened its first public primary school for the education of Negro children. Meanwhile, New York had established separate schools, the first one opening its doors in 1790. By 1814 there were several such institutions that were generally designated as the New York African Free Schools.³

Thus, in the most liberal section of the country, the general view was that Negroes should be kept out of the main

stream of American life. They were forced to establish and maintain their own religious institutions, which were frequently followed by the establishment of separate benevolent societies. Likewise, if Negroes were to receive any education, it should be special education provided in separate educational institutions. This principle prevailed in most places in the North throughout the period before the Civil War. In some Massachusetts towns, however, Negroes gained admission to schools that had been maintained for whites. But the School Committee of Boston refused to admit Negroes, arguing that the natural distinction of the races, which “no legislature, no social customs, can efface renders a promiscuous intermingling in the public schools disadvantageous both to them and to the whites.” Separate schools remained in Boston until the Massachusetts legislature in 1855 enacted a law providing that in determining the qualifications of students to be admitted to any public school no distinction should be made on account of the race, color, or religious opinion of the applicant.

Meanwhile, in the Southern states, where the vast majority of the Negroes lived, there were no concessions suggesting equal treatment, even among the most liberal elements. One group that would doubtless have regarded itself as liberal on the race question advocated the deportation of Negroes to Africa, especially those who had become free. Since free Negroes “neither enjoyed the immunities of freemen, nor were they subject to the incapacities of slaves,” their condition and “unconquerable prejudices” prevented amalgamation with whites, one colonization leader argued. There was, therefore, a “peculiar moral fitness” in restoring them to “the land of their fathers.” Men like Henry Clay, Judge Bushrod Wash-

ington, and President James Monroe thought that separation – expatriation – was the best thing for Negroes who were or who would become free.⁴

While the colonization scheme was primarily for Negroes who were already free, it won, for a time, a considerable number of sincere enemies of slavery. From the beginning Negroes were bitterly opposed to it, and only infrequently did certain Negro leaders, such as Dr. Martin Delany and the Reverend Henry M. Turner, support the idea. Colonization, however, retained considerable support in the most responsible quarters. As late as the Civil War, President Lincoln urged Congress to adopt a plan to colonize Negroes, as the only workable solution to the race problem in the United States. Whether the advocates of colonization wanted merely to prevent the contamination of slavery by free Negroes or whether they actually regarded it as the just and honorable thing to do, they represented an important element in the population that rejected the idea of the Negro’s assimilation into the main stream of American life.

Thus, within fifty years after the Declaration of Independence was written, the institution of slavery, which received only a temporary reversal during the Revolutionary era, contributed greatly to the emergence of the two worlds of race in the United States. The natural rights philosophy appeared to have little effect on those who became committed, more and more, to seeking a rationalization for slavery. The search was apparently so successful that even in areas where slavery was declining, the support for maintaining two worlds of race was strong. Since the Negro church and school emerged in Northern communities where slavery was dying, it may be said that the free society believed almost

as strongly in racial separation as it did in racial freedom.

The generation preceding the outbreak of the Civil War witnessed the development of a set of defenses of slavery that became the basis for much of the racist doctrine to which some Americans have subscribed from then to the present time. The idea of the inferiority of the Negro enjoyed wide acceptance among Southerners of all classes and among many Northerners. It was an important ingredient in the theory of society promulgated by Southern thinkers and leaders. It was organized into a body of systematic thought by the scientists and social scientists of the South, out of which emerged a doctrine of racial superiority that justified any kind of control over the slave. In 1826 Dr. Thomas Cooper said that he had not the slightest doubt that Negroes were an “inferior variety of the human species; and not capable of the same improvement as the whites.” Dr. S. C. Cartwright of the University of Louisiana insisted that the capacities of the Negro adult for learning were equal to those of a white infant; and the Negro could properly perform certain physiological functions only when under the control of white men. Because of the Negro’s inferiority, liberty and republican institutions were not only unsuited to his temperament, but actually inimical to his well-being and happiness.

Like racists in other parts of the world, Southerners sought support for their ideology by developing a common bond with the less privileged. The obvious basis was race; and outside the white race there was to be found no favor from God, no honor or respect from man. By the time that Europeans were reading Gobineau’s *Inequality of Races*, Southerners were reading Cartwright’s *Slavery in the Light of Ethnology*. In admitting all whites

into the pseudo-nobility of race, Cartwright won their enthusiastic support in the struggle to preserve the integrity and honor of *the* race. Professor Thomas R. Dew of the College of William and Mary comforted the lower-class whites by indicating that they could identify with the most privileged and affluent of the community. In the South, he said, “no white man feels such inferiority of rank as to be unworthy of association with those around him. Color alone is here the badge of distinction, the true mark of aristocracy, and all who are white are equal in spite of the variety of occupation.”⁵

Many Northerners were not without their own racist views and policies in the turbulent decades before the Civil War. Some, as Professor Louis Filler has observed, displayed a hatred of Negroes that gave them a sense of superiority and an outlet for their frustrations. Others cared nothing one way or the other about Negroes and demanded only that they be kept separate.⁶ Even some of the abolitionists themselves were ambivalent on the question of Negro equality. More than one antislavery society was agitated by the suggestion that Negroes be invited to join. Some members thought it reasonable for them to attend, but not to be put on an “equality with ourselves.” The New York abolitionist, Lewis Tappan, admitted “that when the subject of acting out our profound principles in treating men irrespective of color is discussed heat is always produced.”⁷

In the final years before the beginning of the Civil War, the view that the Negro was different, even inferior, was widely held in the United States. Leaders in both major parties subscribed to the view, while the more extreme racists deplored any suggestion that the Negro could ever prosper as a free man. At Peo-

ria, Illinois, in October 1854, Abraham Lincoln asked what stand the opponents of slavery should take regarding Negroes. "Free them, and make them politically and socially, our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not. Whether this feeling accords with justice and sound judgment, is not the sole question, if indeed, it is any part of it. A universal feeling, whether well or ill founded, cannot be safely disregarded. We cannot, then, make them equals."

The Lincoln statement was forthright, and it doubtless represented the views of most Americans in the 1850s. Most of those who heard him or read his speech were of the same opinion as he. In later years, the Peoria pronouncement would be used by those who sought to detract from Lincoln's reputation as a champion of the rights of the Negro. In 1964, the White Citizens' Councils reprinted portions of the speech in large advertisements in the daily press and insisted that Lincoln shared their views on the desirability of maintaining two distinct worlds of race.

Lincoln could not have overcome the nation's strong predisposition toward racial separation if he had tried. And he did not try very hard. When he called for the enlistment of Negro troops, after issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, he was content not only to set Negroes apart in a unit called "U.S. Colored Troops," but also to have Negro privates receive \$10 per month including clothing, while whites of the same rank received \$13 per month plus clothing. Only the stubborn refusal of many Negro troops to accept discriminatory pay finally forced Congress to equalize compensation for white and Negro soldiers.⁸ The fight for union that became also a fight for freedom never became a fight

for equality or for the creation of one racial world.

The Lincoln and Johnson plans for settling the problems of peace and freedom never seriously touched on the concomitant problem of equality. To be sure, in 1864 President Lincoln privately raised with the governor of Louisiana the question of the franchise for a limited number of Negroes, but when the governor ignored the question the President let the matter drop. Johnson raised a similar question in 1866, but he admitted that it was merely to frustrate the design of radical reformers who sought a wider franchise for Negroes. During the two years following Appomattox Southern leaders gave not the slightest consideration to permitting any Negroes, regardless of their service to the Union or their education or their property, to share in the political life of their communities. Not only did every Southern state refuse to permit Negroes to vote, but they also refused to provide Negroes with any of the educational opportunities that they were providing for the whites.

The early practice of political disfranchisement and of exclusion from public educational facilities helped to determine subsequent policies that the South adopted regarding Negroes. While a few leaders raised their voices against these policies and practices, it was Negroes themselves who made the most eloquent attacks on such discriminations. As early as May 1865, a group of North Carolina Negroes told President Johnson that some of them had been soldiers and were doing everything possible to learn how to discharge the higher duties of citizenship. "It seems to us that men who are willing on the field of battle to carry the muskets of the Republic, in the days of peace ought to be permitted to carry the ballots; and certainly we cannot understand the justice of denying the elective

franchise to men who have been fighting for the country, while it is freely given to men who have just returned from four years fighting against it.” Such pleas fell on deaf ears, however; and it was not until 1867, when Congress was sufficiently outraged by the inhuman black codes, widespread discriminations in the South, and unspeakable forms of violence against Negroes, that new federal legislation sought to correct the evils of the first period of Reconstruction.

The period that we know as Radical Reconstruction had no significant or permanent effect on the status of the Negro in American life. For a period of time, varying from one year to fifteen or twenty years, some Negroes enjoyed the privileges of voting. They gained political ascendancy in a very few communities only temporarily, and they never even began to achieve the status of a ruling class. They made no meaningful steps toward economic independence or even stability; and in no time at all, because of the pressures of the local community and the neglect of the federal government, they were brought under the complete economic subservience of the old ruling class. Organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan were committed to violent action to keep Negroes “in their place” and, having gained respectability through sponsorship by Confederate generals and the like, they proceeded to wreak havoc in the name of white supremacy and protection of white womanhood.⁹

Meanwhile, various forms of segregation and discrimination, developed in the years before the Civil War in order to degrade the half million free Negroes in the United States, were now applied to the four million Negroes who had become free in 1865. Already the churches and the military were completely segregated. For the most part the schools, even in the North, were separate. In the

South segregated schools persisted, even in the places where the radicals made a half-hearted attempt to desegregate them. In 1875 Congress enacted a Civil Rights Act to guarantee the enjoyment of equal rights in carriers and all places of public accommodation and amusement. Even before it became law Northern philanthropists succeeded in forcing the deletion of the provision calling for desegregated schools. Soon, because of the massive resistance in the North as well as in the South and the indifferent manner in which the federal government enforced the law, it soon became a dead letter everywhere. When it was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1883, there was universal rejoicing, except among the Negroes, one of whom declared that they had been “baptized in ice water.”

Neither the Civil War nor the era of Reconstruction made any significant step toward the permanent elimination of racial barriers. The radicals of the post-Civil War years came no closer to the creation of one racial world than the patriots of the Revolutionary years. When Negroes were, for the first time, enrolled in the standing army of the United States, they were placed in separate Negro units. Most of the liberals of the Reconstruction era called for and worked for separate schools for Negroes. Nowhere was there any extensive effort to involve Negroes in the churches and other social institutions of the dominant group. Whatever remained of the old abolitionist fervor, which can hardly be described as unequivocal on the question of true racial equality, was rapidly disappearing. In its place were the sentiments of the business men who wanted peace at any price. Those having common railroad interests or crop-marketing interests or investment interests could and did extend their hands across

sectional lines and joined in the task of working together for the common good. In such an atmosphere the practice was to accept the realities of two separate worlds of race. Some even subscribed to the view that there were significant economic advantages in maintaining the two worlds of race.

The post-Reconstruction years witnessed a steady deterioration in the status of Negro Americans. These were the years that Professor Rayford Logan has called the “nadir” of the Negro in American life and thought. They were the years when Americans, weary of the crusade that had, for the most part, ended with the outbreak of the Civil War, displayed almost no interest in helping the Negro to achieve equality. The social Darwinists decried the very notion of equality for Negroes, arguing that the lowly place they occupied was natural and normal. The leading literary journals vied with each other in describing Negroes as lazy, idle, improvident, immoral, and criminal.¹⁰ Thomas Dixon’s novels, *The Klansman* and *The Leopard’s Spots*, and D. W. Griffith’s motion picture, “The Birth of A Nation,” helped to give Americans a view of the Negro’s role in American history that “proved” that he was unfit for citizenship, to say nothing of equality. The dictum of William Graham Sumner and his followers that “stateways cannot change folkways” convinced many Americans that legislating equality and creating one great society where race was irrelevant was out of the question.

But many Americans believed that they *could* legislate inequality; and they proceeded to do precisely that. Beginning in 1890, one Southern state after another revised the suffrage provisions of its constitution in a manner that made it virtually impossible for Negroes to qual-

ify to vote. The new literacy and “understanding” provisions permitted local registrars to disqualify Negroes while permitting white citizens to qualify. Several states, including Louisiana, North Carolina, and Oklahoma, inserted “grandfather clauses” in their constitutions in order to permit persons, who could not otherwise qualify, to vote if their fathers or grandfathers could vote in 1866. (This was such a flagrant discrimination against Negroes, whose ancestors could not vote in 1866, that the United States Supreme Court in 1915 declared the “grandfather clause” unconstitutional.) Then came the Democratic white primary in 1900 that made it impossible for Negroes to participate in local elections in the South, where, by this time, only the Democratic party had any appreciable strength. (After more than a generation of assaults on it, the white primary was finally declared unconstitutional in 1944.)

Inequality was legislated in still another way. Beginning in the 1880s, many states, especially but not exclusively in the South, enacted statutes designed to separate the races. After the Civil Rights Act was declared unconstitutional in 1883 state legislatures were emboldened to enact numerous segregation statutes. When the United States Supreme Court, in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, set forth the “separate but equal” doctrine in 1896, the decision provided a new stimulus for laws to separate the races and, of course, to discriminate against Negroes. In time, Negroes and whites were separated in the use of schools, churches, cemeteries, drinking fountains, restaurants, and all places of public accommodation and amusement. One state enacted a law providing for the separate warehousing of books used by white and Negro children. Another required the telephone company to provide separate tele-

phone booths for white and Negro customers. In most communities housing was racially separated by law or practice.¹¹

Where there was no legislation requiring segregation, local practices filled the void. Contradictions and inconsistencies seemed not to disturb those who sought to maintain racial distinctions at all costs. It mattered not that one drive-in snack bar served Negroes only on the inside, while its competitor across the street served Negroes only on the outside. Both were committed to making racial distinctions; and in communities where practices and mores had the force of law, the distinction was everything. Such practices were greatly strengthened when, in 1913, the federal government adopted policies that segregated the races in its offices as well as in its eating and restroom facilities.

By the time of World War I, Negroes and whites in the South and in parts of the North lived in separate worlds, and the apparatus for keeping the worlds separate was elaborate and complex. Negroes were segregated by law in the public schools of the Southern states, while those in the Northern ghettos were sent to predominantly Negro schools, except where their numbers were insufficient. Scores of Negro newspapers sprang up to provide news of Negroes that the white press consistently ignored. Negroes were as unwanted in the white churches as they had been in the late eighteenth century; and Negro churches of virtually every denomination were the answer for a people who had accepted the white man's religion even as the white man rejected his religious fellowship.

Taking note of the fact that they had been omitted from any serious consideration by the white historians, Negroes began in earnest to write the history of their own experiences as Americans. There had been Negro historians before

the Civil War, but none of them had challenged the white historians' efforts to relegate Negroes to a separate, degraded world. In 1882, however, George Washington Williams published his *History of the Negro Race in America* in order to "give the world more correct ideas about the colored people." He wrote, he said, not "as a partisan apologist, but from a love for the truth of history."¹² Soon there were other historical works by Negroes describing their progress and their contributions and arguing that they deserved to be received into the full fellowship of American citizens.

It was in these post-Reconstruction years that some of the most vigorous efforts were made to destroy the two worlds of race. The desperate pleas of Negro historians were merely the more articulate attempts of Negroes to gain complete acceptance in American life. Scores of Negro organizations joined in the struggle to gain protection and recognition of their rights and to eliminate the more sordid practices that characterized the treatment of the Negro world by the white world. Unhappily, the small number of whites who were committed to racial equality dwindled in the post-Reconstruction years, while government at every level showed no interest in eliminating racial separatism. It seemed that Negro voices were indeed crying in the wilderness, but they carried on their attempts to be heard. In 1890 Negroes from twenty-one states and the District of Columbia met in Chicago and organized the Afro-American League of the United States. They called for more equitable distribution of school funds, fair and impartial trial for accused Negroes, resistance "by all legal and reasonable means" to mob and lynch law, and enjoyment of the franchise by all qualified voters. When a group of young Negro intellectuals,

led by W.E.B. Du Bois, met at Niagara Falls, Ontario, in 1905, they made a similar call as they launched their Niagara Movement.

However eloquent their pleas, Negroes alone could make no successful assault on the two worlds of race. They needed help – a great deal of help. It was the bloody race riots in the early years of the twentieth century that shocked civic minded and socially conscious whites into answering the Negro's pleas for support. Some whites began to take the view that the existence of two societies whose distinction was based solely on race was inimical to the best interests of the entire nation. Soon, they were taking the initiative and in 1909 organized the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. They assisted the following year in establishing the National Urban League. White attorneys began to stand with Negroes before the United States Supreme Court to challenge the "grandfather clause," local segregation ordinances, and flagrant miscarriages of justice in which Negroes were the victims. The patterns of attack developed during these years were to become invaluable later. Legal action was soon supplemented by picketing, demonstrating, and boycotting, with telling effect particularly in selected Northern communities.¹³

The two world wars had a profound effect on the status of Negroes in the United States and did much to mount the attack on the two worlds of race. The decade of World War I witnessed a very significant migration of Negroes. They went in large numbers – perhaps a half million – from the rural areas of the South to the towns and cities of the South and North. They were especially attracted to the industrial centers of the North. By the thousands they poured

into Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Chicago. Although many were unable to secure employment, others were successful and achieved a standard of living they could not have imagined only a few years earlier. Northern communities were not altogether friendly and hospitable to the newcomers, but the opportunities for education and the enjoyment of political self-respect were the greatest they had ever seen. Many of them felt that they were entirely justified in their renewed hope that the war would bring about a complete merger of the two worlds of race.

Those who held such high hopes, however, were naive in the extreme. Already the Ku Klux Klan was being revived – this time in the North as well as in the South. Its leaders were determined to develop a broad program to unite "native-born white Christians for concerted action in the preservation of American institutions and the supremacy of the white race." By the time that the war was over, the Klan was in a position to make capital of the racial animosities that had developed during the conflict itself. Racial conflicts had broken out in many places during the war; and before the conference at Versailles was over race riots in the United States had brought about what can accurately be described as the "long, hot summer" of 1919.

If anything, the military operations which aimed to save the world for democracy merely fixed more permanently the racial separation in the United States. Negro soldiers not only constituted entirely separate fighting units in the United States Army, but, once overseas, were assigned to fighting units with the French Army. Negroes who sought service with the United States Marines or the Air Force were rejected, while the Navy relegated them to menial duties. The reaction of many Negroes was bitter, but

*John Hope
Franklin*

most of the leaders, including Du Bois, counseled patience and loyalty. They continued to hope that their show of patriotism would win for them a secure place of acceptance as Americans.

Few Negro Americans could have anticipated the wholesale rejection they experienced at the conclusion of World War I. Returning Negro soldiers were lynched by hanging and burning, even while still in their military uniforms. The Klan warned Negroes that they must respect the rights of the white race "in whose country they are permitted to reside." Racial conflicts swept the country, and neither federal nor state governments seemed interested in effective intervention. The worlds of race were growing further apart in the postwar decade. Nothing indicated this more clearly than the growth of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, led by Marcus Garvey. From a mere handful of members at the end of the war, the Garvey movement rapidly became the largest secular Negro group ever organized in the United States. Although few Negroes were interested in settling in Africa – the expressed aim of Garvey – they joined the movement by the hundreds of thousands to indicate their resentment of the racial duality that seemed to them to be the central feature of the American social order.¹⁴

More realistic and hardheaded were the Negroes who were more determined than ever to engage in the most desperate fight of their lives to destroy racism in the United States. As the editor of the *Crisis* said in 1919, "We return from fighting. We return fighting. Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the U.S.A., or know the reason why." This was the spirit of what Alain Locke called "The New Negro." He fought the Democratic white primary, made war on

the whites who consigned him to the ghetto, attacked racial discrimination in employment, and pressed for legislation to protect his rights. If he was seldom successful during the postwar decade and the depression, he made it quite clear that he was unalterably opposed to the un-American character of the two worlds of race.

Hope for a new assault on racism was kindled by some of the New Deal policies of Franklin D. Roosevelt. As members of the economically disadvantaged group, Negroes benefited from relief and recovery legislation. Most of it, however, recognized the existence of the two worlds of race and accommodated itself to it. Frequently bread lines and soup kitchens were separated on the basis of race. There was segregation in the employment services, while many new agencies recognized and bowed to Jim Crow. Whenever agencies, such as the Farm Security Administration, fought segregation and sought to deal with people on the basis of their needs rather than race they came under the withering fire of the racist critics and seldom escaped alive. Winds of change, however slight, were discernible, and nowhere was this in greater evidence than in the new labor unions. Groups like the Congress of Industrial Organizations, encouraged by the support of the Wagner Labor Relations Act, began to look at manpower resources as a whole and to attack the old racial policies that viewed labor in terms of race.

As World War II approached, Negroes schooled in the experiences of the nineteen-twenties and thirties were unwilling to see the fight against Nazism carried on in the context of an American racist ideology. Some white Americans were likewise uncomfortable in the role of freeing Europe of a racism which still permeated the United States; but it was

the Negroes who dramatized American inconsistency by demanding an end to discrimination in employment in defense industries. By threatening to march on Washington in 1941 they forced the President to issue an order forbidding such discrimination. The opposition was loud and strong. Some state governors denounced the order, and some manufacturers skillfully evaded it. But it was a significant step toward the elimination of the two worlds.

During World War II the assault on racism continued. Negroes, more than a million of whom were enlisted in the armed services, bitterly fought discrimination and segregation. The armed services were, for the most part, two quite distinct racial worlds. Some Negro units had white officers, and much of the officer training was desegregated. But it was not until the final months of the war that a deliberate experiment was undertaken to involve Negro and white enlisted men in the same fighting unit. With the success of the experiment and with the warm glow of victory over Nazism as a backdrop, there was greater inclination to recognize the absurdity of maintaining a racially separate military force to protect the freedoms of the country.¹⁵

During the war there began the greatest migration in the history of Negro Americans. Hundreds of thousands left the South for the industrial centers of the North and West. In those places they met hostility, but they also secured employment in aviation plants, automobile factories, steel mills, and numerous other industries. Their difficulties persisted as they faced problems of housing and adjustment. But they continued to move out of the South in such large numbers that by 1965 one third of the twenty million Negroes in the United States lived in twelve metropolitan centers of the North and West. The ramifications of

such large-scale migration were numerous. The concentration of Negroes in communities where they suffered no political disabilities placed in their hands an enormous amount of political power. Consequently, some of them went to the legislatures, to Congress, and to positions on the judiciary. In turn, this won for them political respect as well as legislation that greatly strengthened their position as citizens.

Following World War II there was a marked acceleration in the war against the two worlds of race in the United States. In 1944 the Supreme Court ruled against segregation in interstate transportation, and three years later it wrote the final chapter in the war against the Democratic white primary. In 1947 the President's Committee on Civil Rights called for the "elimination of segregation, based on race, color, creed, or national origin, from American life."¹⁶ In the following year President Truman asked Congress to establish a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission. At the same time he took steps to eliminate segregation in the armed services. These moves on the part of the judicial and executive branches of the federal government by no means destroyed the two worlds of race, but they created a more healthy climate in which the government and others could launch an attack on racial separatism.

The attack was greatly strengthened by the new position of world leadership that the United States assumed at the close of the war. Critics of the United States were quick to point to the inconsistencies of an American position that spoke against racism abroad and countenanced it at home. New nations, brown and black, seemed reluctant to follow the lead of a country that adhered to its policy of maintaining two worlds of

race – the one identified with the old colonial ruling powers and the other with the colonies now emerging as independent nations. Responsible leaders in the United States saw the weakness of their position, and some of them made new moves to repair it.

Civic and religious groups, some labor organizations, and many individuals from the white community began to join in the effort to destroy segregation and discrimination in American life. There was no danger, after World War II, that Negroes would ever again stand alone in their fight. The older interracial organizations continued, but they were joined by new ones. In addition to the numerous groups that included racial equality in their overall programs, there were others that made the creation of one racial world their principal objective. Among them were the Congress of Racial Equality, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. Those in existence in the 1950s supported the court action that brought about the decision against segregated schools. The more recent ones have taken the lead in pressing for new legislation and in developing new techniques to be used in the war on segregation.

The most powerful direct force in the maintenance of the two worlds of race has been the state and its political subdivisions. In states and communities where racial separation and discrimination are basic to the way of life, the elected officials invariably pledge themselves to the perpetuation of the duality. Indeed, candidates frequently vie with one another in their effort to occupy the most extreme segregationist position possible on the race question. Appointed officials, including the constabulary

and, not infrequently, the teachers and school administrators, become auxiliary guardians of the system of racial separation. In such communities Negroes occupy no policy-making positions, exercise no influence over the determination of policy, and are seldom even on the police force. State and local resources, including tax funds, are at the disposal of those who guard the system of segregation and discrimination; and such funds are used to enforce customs as well as laws and to disseminate information in support of the system.

The white community itself acts as a guardian of the segregated system. Schooled in the specious arguments that assert the supremacy of the white race and fearful that a destruction of the system would be harmful to their own position, they not only “go along” with it but, in many cases, enthusiastically support it. Community sanctions are so powerful, moreover, that the independent citizen who would defy the established order would find himself not only ostracized but, worse, the target of economic and political reprisals.

Within the community many self-appointed guardians of white supremacy have emerged at various times. After the Civil War and after World War I it was the Ku Klux Klan, which has shown surprising strength in recent years. After the desegregation decision of the Supreme Court in 1954 it was the White Citizens’ Council, which one Southern editor has called the “uptown Ku Klux Klan.” From time to time since 1865, it has been the political demagogue, who has not only made capital by urging his election as a sure way to maintain the system but has also encouraged the less responsible elements of the community to take the law into their own hands.

Violence, so much a part of American history and particularly of Southern his-

tory, has been an important factor in maintaining the two worlds of race. Intimidation, terror, lynchings, and riots have, in succession, been the handmaidens of political entities whose officials have been unwilling or unable to put an end to it. Violence drove Negroes from the polls in the 1870s and has kept them away in droves since that time. Lynchings, the spectacular rope and faggot kind or the quiet kind of merely “doing away” with some insubordinate Negro, have served their special purpose in terrorizing whole communities of Negroes. Riots, confined to no section of the country, have demonstrated how explosive the racial situation can be in urban communities burdened with the strain of racial strife.

The heavy hand of history has been a powerful force in the maintenance of a segregated society and, conversely, in the resistance to change. Americans, especially Southerners whose devotion to the past is unmatched by that of any others, have summoned history to support their arguments that age-old practices and institutions cannot be changed overnight, that social practices cannot be changed by legislation. Southerners have argued that desegregation would break down long-established customs and bring instability to a social order that, if left alone, would have no serious racial or social disorders. After all, Southern whites “know” Negroes; and their knowledge has come from many generations of intimate association and observation, they insist.

White Southerners have also summoned history to support them in their resistance to federal legislation designed to secure the civil rights of Negroes. At every level – in local groups, state governments, and in Congress – white Southerners have asserted that federal civil rights legislation is an at-

tempt to turn back the clock to the Reconstruction era, when federal intervention, they claim, imposed a harsh and unjust peace.¹⁷ To make effective their argument, they use such emotion-laden phrases as “military occupation,” “Negro rule,” and “black-out of honest government.” Americans other than Southerners have been frightened by the Southerners’ claim that civil rights for Negroes would cause a return to the “evils” of Reconstruction. Insecure in their own knowledge of history, they have accepted the erroneous assertions about the “disaster” of radical rule after the Civil War and the vengeful punishment meted out to the South by the Negro and his white allies. Regardless of the merits of these arguments that seem specious on the face of them – to say nothing of their historical inaccuracy – they have served as effective brakes on the drive to destroy the two worlds of race.

One suspects, however, that racial bigotry has become more expensive in recent years. It is not so easy now as it once was to make political capital out of the race problem, even in the deep South. Local citizens – farmers, laborers, manufacturers – have become a bit weary of the promises of the demagogue that he will preserve the integrity of the races if he is, at the same time, unable to persuade investors to build factories and bring capital to their communities. Some Southerners, dependent on tourists, are not certain that their vaunted racial pride is so dear, if it keeps visitors away and brings depression to their economy. The cities that see themselves bypassed by a prospective manufacturer because of their reputation in the field of race relations might have some sober second thoughts about the importance of maintaining their two worlds. In a word, the eco-

nomics of segregation and discrimination is forcing, in some quarters, a reconsideration of the problem.

It must be added that the existence of the two worlds of race has created forces that cause some Negroes to seek its perpetuation. Some Negro institutions, the product of a dual society, have vested interests in the perpetuation of that society. And Negroes who fear the destruction of their own institutions by desegregation are encouraged by white racists to fight for their maintenance. Even where Negroes have a desire to maintain their institutions because of their honest commitment to the merits of cultural pluralism, the desire becomes a strident struggle for survival in the context of racist forces that seek with a vengeance to destroy such institutions. The firing of a few hundred Negro school teachers by a zealous, racially-oriented school board forces some second thoughts on the part of the Negroes regarding the merits of desegregation.

The drive to destroy the two worlds of race has reached a new, dramatic, and somewhat explosive stage in recent years. The forces arrayed in behalf of maintaining these two worlds have been subjected to ceaseless and powerful attacks by the increasing numbers committed to the elimination of racism in American life. Through techniques of demonstrating, picketing, sitting-in, and boycotting they have not only harassed their foes but marshaled their forces. Realizing that another ingredient was needed, they have pressed for new and better laws and the active support of government. At the local and state levels they began to secure legislation in the 1940s to guarantee the civil rights of all, eliminate discrimination in employment, and achieve decent public and private housing for all.

While it is not possible to measure the influence of public opinion in the drive for equality, it can hardly be denied that over the past five or six years public opinion has shown a marked shift toward vigorous support of the civil rights movement. This can be seen in the manner in which the mass-circulation magazines as well as influential newspapers, even in the South, have stepped up their support of specific measures that have as their objective the elimination of at least the worst features of racism. The discussion of the problem of race over radio and television and the use of these media in reporting newsworthy and dramatic events in the world of race undoubtedly have had some impact. If such activities have not brought about the enactment of civil rights legislation, they have doubtless stimulated the public discussion that culminated in such legislation.

The models of city ordinances and state laws and the increased political influence of civil rights advocates stimulated new action on the federal level. Civil rights acts were passed in 1957, 1960, and 1964 – after almost complete federal inactivity in this sphere for more than three quarters of a century. Strong leadership on the part of the executive and favorable judicial interpretations of old as well as new laws have made it clear that the war against the two worlds of race now enjoys the sanction of the law and its interpreters. In many respects this constitutes the most significant development in the struggle against racism in the present century.

The reading of American history over the past two centuries impresses one with the fact that ambivalence on the crucial question of equality has persisted almost from the beginning. If the term “equal rights for all” has not always meant what it appeared to mean, the inconsistencies and the paradoxes

have become increasingly apparent. This is not to say that the view that “equal rights for some” has disappeared or has even ceased to be a threat to the concept of real equality. It is to say, however, that

the voices supporting inequality, while no less strident, have been significantly weakened by the very force of the numbers and elements now seeking to eliminate the two worlds of race.

ENDNOTES

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- ³ Carter G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861: A History of the Education of the Colored People of the United States from the Beginning of Slavery to the Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1919), 93 – 97.
- ⁴ P. J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement, 1816 – 1865* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 22 – 32.
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- ⁹ John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction: After the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 154 – 158.
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- ¹¹ John Hope Franklin, “History of Racial Segregation in the United States,” *Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science* 304 (March 1956): 1 – 9.
- ¹² George W. Williams, *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880: Negroes as Slaves, as Soldiers and as Citizens, together with a Preliminary Consideration of the Unity of the Human Family, an Historical Sketch of Africa, and an Account of the Negro Governments of Sierra Leone and Liberia* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1882), x.
- ¹³ Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 437 – 443.
- ¹⁴ Edmund David Cronon, *Black Moses, The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1955), 202 – 206.
- ¹⁵ Lee Nichols, *Breakthrough on the Color Front* (New York: Random House, 1954), 221 – 226.
- ¹⁶ *To Secure These Rights, The Report of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 166.
- ¹⁷ John Hope Franklin, “As For Our History,” in *The Southerner as American*, ed. Charles G. Sellers (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 1 – 18.

Freedom, Equality, Race

Jeffrey B. Ferguson

Our current era of race relations in America maintains racial distinctions largely through the expectation that they will soon disappear. This stands in contrast with previous periods, in which such categories as black and white counted as durable facts of descent and destiny. One side of the current race debate plays up the disappearance of racial distinctions, sometimes by exaggerating the virtues of color blindness. The other side guards against the diminishment of such distinctions, at times going so far as to equate current racial problems with the dark and distant past of slavery and Jim Crow. For the first camp – what we might call a “party of hope” – current racial realities signal the promise of a raceless future where skin color may have no more societal import than does eye color. The second – a “party of memory” – aims for a similar goal, but it generally casts its ultimate purpose in more pluralistic terms. This party finds the waning of timeworn forms of racial identity, along with the deeply etched barriers that gave rise to them, threatening to the very political movements that might bring about lasting positive change. Ironically, the party of memory finds what the party of hope would call racial progress somewhat dangerous to ultimate racial justice. No less curious is the party of hope’s prevailing expectation that after more than two hundred years of constant racial strife, black and white identity in the United States will simply fade away.

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In some ways, the expectation that race will disappear seems particular to our era of race relations; but in other ways, the thought goes back quite far. Most Americans have always regarded the abiding values of our country as universal, and therefore raceless. Because they think of such principles as equality and freedom in this way, they believe that eventually, in an essentially good and fair country such as ours, these high ideals will prevail over the more parochial values that keep us apart. Historically, this progressive mindset has come with many good intentions on the race question but much less follow-up. For this and other reasons it has long been an object of attack for scholars of the African American experience. Those who believe that racial problems will go away on their own tend not to act directly to solve them, or they put forth half-stepping measures that address some issues but invent, reinvent, or exacerbate others. Over time, this tendency has contributed mightily to the cloud of betrayal that hangs constantly, and sometimes ominously, over the American racial discourse. At its worst, the seemingly benign idea of progress, which many still regard as the soul of the American dream, can serve as a mask for crass class interest, or can allow racists to “blame the victim” and thus to deny the cruel meaning of their anti-democratic views. Yet these consequences of progress do not contradict the meaning of such foundational values as freedom and equality so much as they manifest their inner logic.

It is worth remembering the uncomfortable and often repeated fact that our most cherished American principles have as one of their most important sources the minds of slavemasters and slave traders. Discerning observers of the American experience, such as the

historian Edmund Morgan, have demonstrated a necessary relationship between the freedom cries of slavemasters and their status as absolute rulers of stateless men and women who were regarded primarily as property and as human beings in a much less formal register. In *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975), Morgan argues that ruling-class Southerners at the time of the American Revolution – Patrick Henry, for example – tended to associate all subordination with the wretched condition of their slaves.¹ They employed this analogy in their idealistic insistence on freedom from the British. Henry’s famous eruption on the floor of the Continental Congress, “Give me liberty or give me death,” marked him as a radical republican, one ready to pay the highest price for independence. Nevertheless, the reverberant utterance of this slaveholding Virginian (and others like him) bequeathed a cruel legacy to generations of Americans. Unlike free white men, Henry’s slaves lived under the very condition that would presumably have driven their freedom-loving master to kill and to die. Henry’s formulation, oddly, justified the degradation of African Americans by the very condition that the degradation caused; in no small measure, it associated blackness with shame. Though they lived to guarantee the freedom of supposedly independent men, and yearned for freedom in their own terms despite their abasement, African Americans suffered for how starkly they symbolized what white men both feared and despised.

Many writers have observed that the Enlightenment, through its emphasis on human powers, gave freedom its modern meaning; but it also codified the modern idea of race as one way to distinguish those worthy of liberty from

the irrational, uncivilized, and superstitious “others” who supposedly lived in a perpetual past. In other words, this period handed down most of the reasons to believe in race along with the justifications for despising and resisting it. As the Enlightenment gave life to the modern concept of race, it created the conditions that force us to explain and theorize this category incessantly. In the hands of early race theorists such as Linnaeus, Blumenbach, and de Buffon, seemingly objective biological categories like skin color and skull size served as impartial measures that positioned man as a subject of his own scientific inquiry and thus as an object of new forms of power/knowledge that enabled the shaping and control of populations. Thus, human freedom in this era, and thereafter, depended crucially on a thoroughgoing form of subjection that created its own human hierarchies, which in some ways reinscribed ancient ideas of descent and inheritance but now with new and highly influential scientific imprimatur. As the modern concept of freedom carried with it the inclusive language of universalism, it also privileged certain human qualities: rationality, possession of nature or property, power, resistance, and autonomy, to name a few. Instead of membership in humanity as it is, freedom signified communion with humanity as it *ought to be*. Those who failed to qualify for this imagined ideal often faced terrible consequences, as the long history of slavery, imperialism, sexism, and class oppression demonstrates amply.

From their inception, the concepts of freedom and race have reinforced each other in the making of modernity; they continue to do so today, though the concept of race has shifted in its definitional grounding, from nature to culture. Despite the fact that some of the old bio-

logical valences remain active, the post-civil rights concept of race relies mainly on values, modes of signifying, and behavior. Rather than membership in a biological group, “whiteness” represents a cultural norm that non-whites may receive rewards for adopting – though acquiring the necessary cultural capital to do so can prove almost impossible for many. Here, as the social theorist Etienne Balibar points out, the work of exclusion occurs through the regulation of inclusion rather than forming an absolute line of demarcation between the races.² Those able to conform to the normalizing logic of post-civil rights “whiteness” live freer lives than those who cannot, as the dismal statistics showing racial disparities in wealth, health, education, and criminal justice reveal so evidently. Under this regime, the work of racial exclusion can occur quite efficiently but without overt racism. In contrast with the frontal assault of the pre-civil rights racial regime, which occurred more or less in the open, the new dispensation conducts most of its oppressive labor behind a smokescreen of elaborate racial etiquette and discursive deflection that communicates racial fear and aversion across an ever wider range of signification.

In its more recent cultural guise, race continues to play a strategic role on the exclusionary side of modern freedom; for the excluded, however, racial identity still has deep attractions, partly because the sheer existence of barriers to full social advancement provides a backdrop against which group solidarity might be perceived in moral terms: as part of a long and righteous struggle for freedom. This idea is well established among African Americans, who, out of the necessity of historic struggle, have formed an alternately heroic, sacrificial,

and sometimes melodramatic sense of group belonging laden with collective memories of struggle on the wrong side of the American color line. These struggles have served not only as ways of acquiring freedom, but also as a means of performing it culturally and politically across a great range that encompasses modes of self-fashioning, artistic styles, and direct forms of political resistance and protest. This tradition of performing freedom has helped raise African American identity above the level of mere external imposition as it has created a point of identification for those outside the group to symbolize their own freedom struggles.

As a dominant value in American life, freedom has always stood beside, and competed with, the idea of equality. Nowhere has the complex relationship between these two bedrock concepts had greater impact than in the history of race relations, and rarely has their mutual opposition and entanglement received more trenchant treatment than in the work of the nineteenth-century French aristocrat and social theorist Alexis de Tocqueville. In his classic *Democracy in America* (1840), he observed that in a country where all men are created equal, those not recognized as equals may not be regarded as men. Tocqueville's eminently logical formula sets out in elegant form the intimate connection between a high universal ideal and a foundational violence that it maintains through masking. Following Tocqueville's calculation, hierarchies of descent grow naturally from the inner tensions of democratic values, not out of a failure to attend to them. Americans constantly reinvent racial distinctions and invidious race theories in part to resolve the quandary of their national condition, which entails basic equality

on one side and a battle for individual distinction or status on the other.

Basing his observations on an extensive tour of the United States during the 1830s, Tocqueville regarded American society as a test case for the prospects of a new and inexorable world-historical process in which equality, individualism, and democracy would increasingly displace privilege based on birth and permanent class structures. He contemplated America at an early stage of its development with the chaos and despotism of post-revolutionary France, and the slipping grip of his own class, well in view. Though he recognized the positive potential of democracy, he remained equally cognizant of its constitutional flaws: its tendencies toward conformity, dictatorship of the people, corruption, greed, envy, moralism, intellectual shallowness, voluntary isolation of the individual from collective life, and many other weaknesses both large and small. For Tocqueville, American society in the 1830s represented a wonderful opportunity to observe whether such defective tendencies would prevail because it offered a perfect photo-negative of the European social picture: a place where sheer newness put immigrants and near-immigrants, strangers to the land with no permanent barrier between them, in a society where they might arrange life according to their tastes, talents, and desires. Many of the saving graces and sustaining patterns that Tocqueville recognized in American democracy – its local associations and communal public life, its ascetic faith in the value of work, its dynamic and expansive world-altering will – stand endangered in our own age; thus, we may still wonder about the ultimate survivability of our way of life. Or, in light of American race relations from slavery to the present, we might wonder whether Tocqueville understood entirely

the full array of forces that have made American democracy cohere. In the end, the stability of our democracy may depend as much on the maintenance of racial inequality, vouchsafed by the anxieties of equality, as it does on the values and structures that Tocqueville so famously cited.

Without “blackness,” or some such negative or countervailing category, “whiteness” would not have achieved its stability as the primary mode of identification in America. And without the stabilizing effect of “blackness,” one of the main justifications for the average white person to count himself a member of the same group as the richest would not exist. As several important scholars of whiteness studies, such as David Roediger, Noel Ignatiev, and Matthew Frye Jacobson, have shown, this formula has provided one of the greatest bulwarks against the formation of entrenched class identity, even as Americans of all colors and persuasions strive to climb the class ladder partly by blending in.³ Whiteness, with all its confused connotations of universality and particularity, of destiny and sheer emptiness, still prevails as a reason for some of the poorest Americans to tolerate their condition, even as demographers anticipate the day, not more than forty years from now, when the American majority will, in numbers, take on a darker hue.

In his famous section “On the Three Races that Currently Inhabit America,” Tocqueville contributed a foundational pillar to a long tradition of social analysis that would regard the problem of black and white as an aberration rather than a constitutive feature of American social and political life. Though he analyzes the slave South in detail, he treats it as the opposite of the industrial North, which for him represented the future of American democracy because of its bur-

geoning productivity, culture of equality, and the competitive anxiety of its citizens. In the South, he surmised, the existence of slavery retarded development. Rather than productive, the South was lazy; instead of progressive, it remained mired in the past. Lacking ingenuity, it depended on a narrow range of cash crops; lacking equality, it suffered from the absence of inner drive in its rank-and-file citizens, who depended on relatively unproductive slaves to do most of the work. None of these characteristics augured well for the survival of the South. Underdeveloped by its own economic and cultural commitments, faced with an expansive and dynamic sectional competitor, and threatened by the natural increase of its slave population, it faced an imminent crisis. In time, Tocqueville imagined, the South would lose its grip on its slaves, in part because these unfree people, as members of a society that prized equality, would never accept their unequal station, and thus could never embrace the spirit of European peasantry. Yet, he thought, whites would never admit blacks as equals. A racist himself, Tocqueville believed that whites everywhere in the United States would understandably continue to discriminate against an inferior people, and that blacks stood little chance beyond establishing their own state by conducting a war against indolent Southern whites. Given their numbers, and what he regarded as the decrepit moral state of their white enemies, he liked their chances in such a conflict.⁴

Tocqueville’s analysis of race in “On the Three Races that Currently Inhabit America” commands current interest much more for its connection to his larger theory than for its historical accuracy. Much of what he anticipated simply did not happen. Moreover, few current his-

torians of American slavery would take up his dichotomous view of North and South, his dim account of slavery's profitability, his unitary view of the slave system, or his somewhat mechanical rendering of the effects of the peculiar institution on the hearts, minds, and motivations of slaves and slaveholders. Nevertheless, Tocqueville's theoretical terms in *Democracy in America* do provide a good foundation for understanding how the value of equality helped reinforce the perennial American obsession with racial distinction.

Tocqueville believed that white Americans, beyond their motivations rooted in racism, would find black Americans hard to accept because of the radically unequal station from which they started. Locked in an absorbing competition with their peers and exceedingly nervous about the prospects of rising and falling in the game of distinction, white Americans would always feel compromised by their association with a degraded and inferior people; their anxiety derived in part from how perfectly the condition of congenital inferiority and social invisibility reflected their own worst fears. The promise of American life, rooted in the idea that no permanent social barrier stands between even the lowest white man and the very richest, comes with the devastating prospect of freefall: those who can rise infinitely can also fall into uncharted territory of vulnerability, invisibility, and loss. Cut off from strong claims to a primordial past, and staked on the prospect of ever better days to come, white Americans needed to invent the nigger – the nameless, faceless, incompetent who warranted no respect – in order to hide from the real prospect of becoming one. The “psychological wage” of whiteness, which W.E.B. Du Bois famously identified in *Black Reconstruction* (1935) to explain what kept the

white and black working classes apart, rested heavily on this formula, for no matter how far a white person fell in the competition with other whites, he could always look back and spot a dark face in his rearview mirror. Given the broad patterns of American politics since the late 1960s – from the success of the Republican “Southern Strategy,” to the disaffection of Northern working-class whites who abandoned the Democratic coalition in the 1970s and 1980s, to today's racially inflected Tea Party movement and paranoid fears concerning a “Marxist,” “Fascist,” “Muslim,” African American president – it would appear that an unfortunately high proportion of whites still subscribe to this way of thinking.

In his many essays on race and American identity, Ralph Ellison wrote artfully of what he called the democratic “chaos” that white Americans sought to avoid through their various projections onto African Americans. Today, this process might have more varied economic and social consequences than in the pre-civil rights era when Ellison gave it such eloquent codification, but the moral consequences have not changed very much at all. According to Ellison, these projections have at their root the cowardly avoidance of ethical responsibility to give shape to the self within a democratic culture. At its best, Ellison suggested, such a culture demands sincere engagement with diverse human possibility; at its worst, it cowers behind candy-coated fantasies of goodness already achieved and bounty with no consequence. As diligent and successful shapers of a way of life, African Americans have affirmed democratic possibility under the toughest circumstances by facing the ultimate threat of nothingness and bringing themselves into being, though they have also suc-

cumbed in countless ways to illusions stemming from the anger, despair, and resentment endemic to their social circumstance. Ellison's protagonist in the novel *Invisible Man* (1952) spends the larger part of the book living the false life of a black man on the make who takes his signals concerning who to be from whites, whose humanity he cannot clearly recognize for lack of facing his own. Just as whites project their desires onto him, he regards them as mere conduits to power, and thus as gods of a sort. His power fantasy engenders only weakness.⁵

The game of projection at the heart of race relations comes, according to Ellison, with a large portion of paranoia, as whites, subject to the identity confusion so basic to American life, know on some unconscious level that black skin forms the mystic writing pad of their own desires. Of course, blacks sense the same thing: that in important ways, white Americans, for all their apparent strength as a group, remain vulnerable and always a bit worried that the person behind the black mask must know their desires – and with that truth in hand, may well be putting one over on them. Today, in our post-civil rights period, a large part of this game occurs around the public drama of continuing black anger, the notion of “pulling the race card,” and the seemingly bottomless need from whites for confirmation from blacks that racism no longer exists, or at the very least that they as individuals bear no visible trace of the unspeakable sin.

To this observation some might answer that black people no longer suffer from invisibility in the same way they did when Ellison penned his famous works. Over the last thirty years, although large portions of the black lower and working classes have remained

poor – indeed, many have become even poorer – the black middle class has risen to unprecedented heights of professional achievement, inclusion in important institutions, and social exposure. Today, the appearance of black Americans in advertising and the media no longer surprises, nor do the images they portray necessarily reflect stereotypes. Some popular stars, such as Tiger Woods, whose multiracial background would not have spared him from being considered black in the pre-civil rights era, dwell in an apparent racial twilight zone that seems “neither black nor white, yet both.”⁶ Though the country remains highly segregated residentially and educationally, and intermarriage rates between blacks and whites show only incremental increases, surveys of white Americans reveal a continuing diminishment of overt racism rooted in ideas of biological inferiority. And the clincher of this case needs almost no mention: our president is an African American.

Yet these signs of progress seem to engender their opposite. The effort that our society has exerted to make advances in race relations has also served at times to reinforce the importance of race in our politics and to encourage new styles of racial identification. Nothing reflects this fact better than the effect of affirmative action policies, which have granted middle-class blacks unprecedented access to important institutions, but at the same time have led many whites to think in zero-sum terms about racial progress: a job given to a black American is one denied to a more qualified white. At times, even our celebrations of racial progress serve to reinforce boundaries between the races because they require us to reinscribe race discursively by employing it as a mode of classification. Recently, a reporter commented after a speech by

President Obama that, during the course of that address, he had forgotten Obama's race. No doubt his thought reflected that of many Americans of every description. Of course, this reporter's amazement at experiencing a supposedly raceless moment required him constantly to note, as Obama spoke, that he really was in the presence of the "other," but in a fashion both new and unapproachable because otherness itself was absent. In a sense, Obama had provided a moment for the reporter that exceeded the limits of his racial categories. But recognizing this fact required the evocation of a highly reified and essential form of blackness, a virtual thing in itself requiring almost no content. Though Obama did not "talk black" or "act black" – apparently he did not even "look black" to this reporter – somehow he was black, nonetheless.

Such are the confusions of our moment, emanations of an undigested past. In *Black Odyssey* (1977), a book that over the years has become a classic in black studies for its challenge to the progressive brand of American historiography, Nathan Huggins reaches back in his epilogue to wonder how the sprawling green visage of the new world first appeared to the twenty slaves aboard the fateful Dutch ship that lay off the shore of Jamestown in 1619.⁷ In making this gesture, he parodies (to some extent)

the final scene of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), which famously reflects on the beauty and tragedy of the American insistence on remaining forever new. Though he does not say so directly, Huggins suggests that the powerful effect of Fitzgerald's famous passage, in all its tragic wisdom, depends in part on the exclusion of those early black captives, who also brought dreams with them, however muted by misfortune. While these dreams, and the efforts they engendered, would over generations play a great role in constituting the American experience, so would the attempts to exclude them or to play down their importance. Our nation has certainly made some progress on this record, but it has not arrived at the new narrative of the American experience that Huggins thought necessary to align American dreams with the events that have made us who we are. Race has marked American culture trenchantly, as it has marked the basic principles that we regard as raceless. Recognizing the full meaning of this thought will require a new narrative, indeed. In his last sentence, both in homage and in mild derision, Huggins quotes the famous last line of *Gatsby*, which still merits our deepest reflection: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne ceaselessly into the past."

ENDNOTES

¹ On the connection between republicanism and slavery, see Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 363–390; also Edmund S. Morgan, "Slavery and Freedom: The American Paradox," *The Journal of American History* 59 (1) (June 1972): 5–29.

² Etienne Balibar, "Is There a 'Neo-Racism'?" in Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class* (London: Verso, 1991), 17–28.

³ See Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness* (New York: Verso, 2007); and Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

- ⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 302–391.
- ⁵ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1995); Ralph Ellison, “Twentieth Century Fiction and the Mask of Humanity,” *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1995), 24–29, 41; see also in the same volume, “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” 53.
- ⁶ This is the title of Werner Sollors’s authoritative account of interracial literature in America; see Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- ⁷ Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Black Odyssey: The Afro-American Ordeal in Slavery* (New York: Random House, 1990), 243–244.

Racial Liberalism, the Moynihan Report & the *Dædalus* Project on “The Negro American”

Daniel Geary

With the ultimate goal of “including [African Americans] in our society,” President Lyndon Johnson called on Americans to combat “the inter-locking effects of deprivation” that resulted from centuries of oppression.¹ Johnson delivered these words not in a political speech but in his 1965 foreword to a two-part issue of *Dædalus*. It is not often that presidents write introductions for scholarly journals. But, from its inception, the *Dædalus* project on “The Negro American” (including two conferences, two journal issues, and the 1966 book based on them) was linked to mid-1960s liberal political efforts to address long-standing racial inequalities in the United States.² The *Dædalus* project became entangled with one of the period’s most explosive liberal statements, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), better known as the Moynihan Report after its author, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then an Assistant Secretary of Labor, later a long-serving U.S. Senator from New York. The Moynihan Report argued that the damaged family structure of many poor African Americans would impede efforts to achieve economic equality between blacks and whites.

The Negro Family, written on Moynihan’s own initiative with the hope of influencing government policy, was a political document that drew heavily on social-scientific ideas; rarely have politics and scholarship come so closely together. *The Negro Family*’s lesser known scholarly twin was

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Moynihan’s contribution to the *Dædalus* special issue, “Employment, Income, and the Ordeal of the Negro Family,” an article that he prepared simultaneously with the report. In 1964, Moynihan attended the first of the two *Dædalus* conferences held at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, where he discovered an emerging social-scientific consensus on the need for new approaches to civil rights that focused on issues of socioeconomic equality. Conference participants agreed that black family structure formed a major part of this problem. At the 1965 *Dædalus* conference, Moynihan’s “Employment, Income, and the Ordeal of the Negro Family” won approval from many of the assembled social scientists and civil rights leaders. However, others present voiced some of the criticisms that would later be leveled against the Moynihan Report. Thus, the *Dædalus* project was a key conduit for introducing social-scientific knowledge into government policy-making and, ultimately, public controversy.

The Moynihan Report is sometimes understood as a conservative document that emphasized the need for African Americans to adopt white middle-class family values. It is better seen as the last great statement of the racial liberalism that had accompanied mid-twentieth-century struggles for black freedom and had defined intellectual and political policies among liberal elites.³ Moynihan and his interlocutors at the *Dædalus* conference held a set of assumptions common among mid-century liberals: that the main racial divide in the United States existed between whites and blacks, that the ultimate goal of racial policy was to integrate African Americans into American society, that this goal could be achieved within the established post-New Deal political and social order, and that social-scientific knowledge could enlighten the public and guide policy-

makers toward these ends. White liberals such as Moynihan viewed themselves as allies of the civil rights movement. But their commitment to racial liberalism had other roots as well, notably their concern for how racial strife undermined both domestic tranquillity and the image of the United States abroad. In his foreword, Johnson declared that “we must affect every dimension of the Negro’s life for the better” not only for “our country to live with its conscience” but also to secure “peace at home” and “to speak with one honest voice in the world.”⁴ In *The Negro Family*, Moynihan suggested more ominously that if the nation failed to address the problems of poor African Americans, “there will be no social peace in the United States for generations.”⁵

While the Moynihan Report emerged from an ideology of racial liberalism that had been well established for two decades, examining its origins in the *Dædalus* project reveals that the report developed during a particular mid-1960s moment in which liberals began to emphasize the socioeconomic dimensions of African American inequality. The often overlooked preface to the Moynihan Report declared that the civil rights movement was entering a new phase, one focused on achieving “equality of results.” A “new and special effort,” Moynihan contended, would be needed to secure this goal.⁶ Even before the Watts riots of August 1965 focused national media attention on poor urban African Americans, liberals recognized that dismantling the legal edifice of segregation and discrimination would not ensure racial equality. Accordingly, liberal social scientists sought to complement the legal, moral, and psychological approaches they had stressed in the decades after World War II by incorporating sociological and economic perspectives. At the *Dædalus* conferences, economists

and, especially, sociologists predominated. At the 1965 conference, Thomas Pettigrew, himself a psychologist, expressed dissatisfaction with the disproportionate influence of psychological approaches: “[O]ne of the greatest fallacies we have had in the field of race relations for many, many decades has been to worry about attitudes rather than conditions.”⁷

This intellectual shift toward socioeconomic perspectives paralleled political developments. The civil rights movement had long been a presence in Northern cities and had often drawn attention to economic issues; it had never defined equality solely in legal terms. Nevertheless, with the successes of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the movement shifted its focus away from fighting Southern segregation and legal discrimination and toward socioeconomic questions.⁸ In January 1964, Lyndon Johnson announced ambitious plans for a War on Poverty as part of a Great Society program that would see the largest expansion of the American welfare state since the New Deal. (The expansion also attempted to correct the racial imbalances in benefits that characterized earlier programs.) This new attempt to address racial inequalities in socioeconomic terms was memorably captured in Lyndon Johnson’s much-noted June 4, 1965, address at Howard University. Insisting that “freedom is not enough,” Johnson declared that “the next and more profound stage in the battle for civil rights” would seek “not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and a result.”⁹ That this speech was based in part on the Moynihan Report and coauthored by Moynihan following his attendance at the two *Dædalus* conferences indicates the direct connections between

the intellectual and political dimensions of racial liberalism’s socioeconomic turn in the mid-1960s.

Understanding this shift within racial liberalism helps contextualize the Moynihan Report’s emphasis on the “tangle of pathology” that he claimed afflicted poor African American communities. He borrowed this term from psychologist Kenneth Clark to refer to disproportionate levels among African Americans of female-headed households, out-of-wedlock births, juvenile delinquency, and school dropouts. Here, too, Moynihan adopted what had become a common strategy for liberals. As historian Daryl Scott has argued, post-World War II liberals often employed the “damage thesis,” an argument that black social life had been made pathological as a result of white oppression, in order to win sympathy for the broader cause of civil rights.¹⁰ However, reflecting its origins in racial liberalism’s socioeconomic turn, Moynihan’s version of the damage thesis differed in a key respect from earlier arguments about psychological damage, such as those used to complement the NAACP’s case in *Brown v. Board of Education*. While earlier arguments focused on individual psychological damage, Moynihan’s concentrated on families and communities. As an investigation into Moynihan’s role in the *Dædalus* project reveals, his approach was common among liberal social scientists of the mid-1960s.

Founded in 1780, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences had long functioned as an honorary society and intellectual center. In the post-World War II period, however, the Academy demonstrated a new ambition to shape public discourse on the national level. In an age of research specialization, Academy leaders believed they were particularly

well placed to bring scholars from different disciplines together with figures outside of academia to address contemporary problems. The Academy's direction was best represented by its new journal, *Dædalus*. Founded in 1955, *Dædalus* targeted not only Academy members, but also political decision-makers and a generally educated audience.¹¹

Given the Academy's desire to bring scholarship to bear on pressing issues of the day, it was hardly surprising that it focused attention on African Americans at a time when the civil rights movement had pushed the question of racial equality to the forefront of national discussion. Academy officials and members, led by *Dædalus* editor Stephen Graubard, aimed to create a definitive scholarly work on the topic. They concluded that research on African Americans had stagnated since the publication of Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944), the monumental study that, more than any other work, had defined racial liberalism in the postwar United States. Conference planners hoped they could do for their era what Myrdal had done for his. Indeed, the same organization that had sponsored Myrdal's study, the Carnegie Corporation, funded the Academy's project. Carnegie funds helped pay for a planning conference in 1964 as well as the 1965 conference that resulted in the two-part issue of *Dædalus*.¹²

The planning conference, held April 10 – 11, 1964, gathered some of the most prominent social scientists in the United States. Academy leaders invited the most distinguished scholars they could find, even though many were not known as experts on African Americans. Included among the seventeen participants were sociologists Daniel Bell, Everett Hughes, Robert Merton, and Talcott Parsons; psychologists Erik Erikson and Thomas Pettigrew; historian Oscar Handlin;

anthropologist Clifford Geertz; economists Rashi Fein and Carl Kaysen; and law professor Paul Freund. Remarkably, all participants were white.¹³ As the Assistant Secretary of Labor, Moynihan gave the Academy its closest link to the policy-making circles that it hoped to influence. Moynihan had a Ph.D. in political science but at this point had demonstrated little expertise in African American issues. He likely was invited on the basis of his reputation as the co-author (with Nathan Glazer) of a widely noted book on New York City's ethnoracial groups, *Beyond the Melting Pot*.¹⁴

The transcript of the two full days of freewheeling discussion offers rare insight into the state of mid-1960s racial liberalism from which the Moynihan Report emerged. Both in its general orientation toward American race relations and its specific focus on the issue of family structure, the conference discussion strongly anticipated the main themes of the report. Following the event, Moynihan wrote to other participants: "I hope you found our weekend half as stimulating as I did."¹⁵ Moynihan's participation in the 1964 conference strongly reinforced his belief that the civil rights movement was entering a new phase focused on issues of social and economic equality. Most of the social scientists present argued that both scholarship and politics needed to move beyond the moral, legal, and psychological aspects of African American equality to embrace socio-economic issues.

Summing up the discussion, Graubard noted that "the problem of jobs emerges as primary." The Academy, he concluded, should promote scholarship in the "study of indirect victimization, not simply the exercise of prejudice or discrimination, but the institutional processes, the changing social and economic structures which militate against equal treatment."¹⁶ Many

participants emphasized the economic obstacles to racial integration in the United States. Even Parsons, who was known for shifting postwar sociology away from economic issues and toward psychological and cultural ones, stressed the class dimensions of racial inequality. “I would even go so far as to suggest,” declared Parsons, “that perhaps a really radical solution of the race problem is not likely to occur until we can virtually eliminate . . . a lower class from our society, regardless of color.”¹⁷ Moynihan readily appreciated the policy implications of this discussion and sought to enlist the participants to provide ideological justification for new government policies. Raising the “question of unequal treatment,” Moynihan suggested that “[t]he Academy might do a great service if it . . . were to come to a conclusion that if you are ever going to have anything like an equal Negro community, you are for the next 30 years going to have to give them unequal treatment. I think the possibilities of thus legitimizing such treatment might have some relevance to public policy right now.”¹⁸

Conference participants discussed how a lack of economic opportunity for black men affected African American families. They also expressed concern about the extent to which “damaged” family structure would impede African Americans’ ability to take advantage of new opportunities. Geertz first raised the topic of family structure, but Moynihan quickly latched onto it. When Graubard asked Moynihan what kind of research would most aid the White House, he responded: “I think that the problem of the Negro family is practically the property of American government. . . . [I]f we knew something about the dynamics of that . . . then there is a possibility of public policy reacting to it.”¹⁹ Summarizing the conference,

Graubard concluded that “of first importance [is] a study of the family structure of the Negro, of what happens to urbanizing families, the peculiar nature of Negro family and kinship patterns, the sexual roles resulting from Negro matriarchalism, the psychological effects of father-absence, etc., etc.”²⁰ At the very least, attending the conference confirmed Moynihan’s sense that African American family structure was a central issue for racial liberals. Considering that prior to *The Negro Family* and his *Daedalus* article Moynihan had written little on African Americans, his attendance at the conference may have played an even greater role in the origins of the Moynihan Report.

Graubard invited Moynihan to write a paper for the 1965 conference that would consider “the Negro’s position in American society [and] the economic, social, and personal handicaps under which he presently lives” with specific reference to unemployment.²¹ Moynihan drafted the paper at the same time that he wrote *The Negro Family*, using many of the same ideas and facts. Meeting on May 14–15, 1965, the conference occurred just weeks before Johnson’s Howard University address. It would not be until the end of that summer that the Moynihan Report, originally intended as an internal policy document, was widely reported in the press. Therefore, the 1965 conference provided the first opportunity for discussion of Moynihan’s ideas outside of the White House.

The 1965 conference was approximately twice the size of the 1964 planning conference and had a broader range of participants, including several African Americans and many figures from outside academia. In addition to those who attended the 1964 planning conference, among those at the 1965 meeting were Edwin C.

Berry and John B. Turner of the National Urban League; psychologist Robert Coles; literary critic Saunders Redding; sociologists Philip Hauser, Lee Rainwater, and Peter Rossi; economist James Tobin; historian C. Vann Woodward; journalist Max Lerner; and writer Ralph Ellison. The conference was closed to the public; yet a full transcript was kept, and the Academy deemed the discussion to be so important that it published an edited version in *Dædalus*. Pre-circulated papers provided the basis for a wide-ranging and often contentious discussion. Just after the event, Moynihan reflected, "We all go to a lot of meetings, but this last one was worth it. I came away beat, but convinced we had got somewhere."²²

Lerner later reported that even among this prominent group of scholars, writers, and activists, Moynihan "stood out with his flair for a kindling persuasiveness."²³ Indeed, Moynihan's paper was among the first to be discussed, and it provoked some of the conference's most spirited exchanges. Like the Moynihan Report, "Employment, Income, and the Ordeal of the Negro Family" was premised on the assumption that the "civil rights revolution" was entering a new phase concerned with economic equality.²⁴ Drawing from the same data that he used in the report, Moynihan detailed the problem of black unemployment, which he traced to structural economic shifts. He identified unemployment as the "master problem" affecting African Americans and argued, "[T]he linkage between problems of employment and the range of social pathology that afflicts the Negro community is unmistakable."²⁵ He proceeded to detail the "social pathology" of the black community, focusing on the "ordeal of the Negro family" and drawing a link between unemployment and marital separation. Coming to the same

conclusion as he did in *The Negro Family*, Moynihan contended, "The fundamental problem is the position of the Negro male."²⁶

When Moynihan returned to the White House, he wrote a memorandum summarizing the conference to Bill Moyers, an advisor to President Johnson: "This past weekend we met to read and criticize our various papers. I was impressed to find out how much my conviction of the importance of family structure and the relation of unemployment to that problem was shared by the Negro participants. They did not have the data, but they knew all about the problem."²⁷ Indeed, at the conference, John B. Turner of the National Urban League agreed with Moynihan that a crucial issue was "whether or not [a] family is able to provide protection, able to provide the socialization functions, and able to provide the basic necessities of life which people need to cope with the system."²⁸

One of Moynihan's most emphatic supporters at the conference was Edwin C. Berry of the Chicago Urban League. Like Moynihan, Berry insisted that the United States would have to be "affirmatively color-conscious" in order to achieve the ultimate goal of a color-blind society.²⁹ Speaking directly in favor of Moynihan's thesis, Berry declared that "there is no way to strengthen family life among Negroes . . . until we find a way to give the father his rightful role as breadwinner and protector of his family. . . . We have a very strong matriarchal situation in the Negro community."³⁰ However, when Berry stated that black families would have to play by "the white middle-class rules" he also hinted at dissatisfaction with expectations that African Americans had to conform to white values.³¹ Furthermore, Berry remained skeptical that white Americans would accept the kinds of drastic measures needed to ad-

dress the social and economic inequalities of African Americans. He even implicated the conference's participants when he concluded that the success of any such program would require not only educating African Americans in marketable skills but also educating the "so-called white culturally overprivileged" group to committ to the extensive changes required to adequately redress racial inequalities.³²

Like Berry, most conference participants interpreted Moynihan's paper as an argument for new government policies that would advance the cause of racial liberalism by adopting race-conscious measures to address socioeconomic inequalities. Many attendees agreed with Moynihan that the central policy challenge was to find well-paying jobs for unemployed black men so that they could support their families. Clifford Geertz, for example, concurred with Moynihan that "[i]t is income that flows through the occupational system that will change the status of the family. . . . I can . . . think of no other way in which one could directly affect the family. . . . In the long run, unless the Negro male's position in the occupational structure changes, nothing much is going to change."³³

However, some aspects of the conference discussion anticipated later criticisms of the Moynihan Report and foreshadowed emerging criticisms of post-war racial liberalism. One challenge to racial liberalism came from a line of argument in Moynihan's own paper. Moynihan noted that in the early 1960s the number of welfare (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) cases continued to rise despite a drop in the unemployment of non-white men. Moynihan interpreted this evidence as an indication that improvements in black male unemployment might no longer be adequate to ensure family stability. Though

he noted this phenomenon in *The Negro Family*, he expanded on the finding in his *Dædalus* article, wondering "whether a reversal in the course of economic events will no longer produce the expected response in social areas" and questioning whether "measures which once would have worked will henceforth not work so well, or not at all."³⁴ This skeptical note undercut Moynihan's call for action by placing doubt on whether government economic policies could reverse the effects of damage to African American families; it implied that the problems Moynihan highlighted were either insoluble or could be addressed only by African Americans themselves. This line of argument threatened to undermine the entire project of racial liberalism by questioning not only whether government policy could sufficiently attenuate racial inequality but also whether social-scientific knowledge could effectively inform government policy. In this sense, it anticipated a neo-conservative critique of liberalism that would become associated with the journal *The Public Interest*, founded by Irving Kristol and Daniel Bell in 1965, to which Moynihan would frequently contribute. However, at the 1965 *Dædalus* conference, Moynihan's concerns were primarily interpreted in liberal terms, as a call for urgent action before the situation grew out of control.³⁵ Indeed, Moynihan concluded his article by declaring that a "crisis of commitment is at hand."³⁶

Some conference participants' challenges to Moynihan prefigured later criticisms of the Moynihan Report by liberals. One exchange characterized the internal policy disagreements in the Johnson White House over the direction of the War on Poverty. Moynihan and the Department of Labor had argued vigorously (and unsuccessfully) for direct job creation against others in the government who based their anti-poverty strat-

egies on promoting economic growth.³⁷ At the conference, when James Tobin, who served on the Council of Economic Advisors, upheld the latter argument, Moynihan forcefully disagreed, going so far as to state, "[Y]ou can blame Mr. Tobin for our present dilemma." For Moynihan, the government's sole focus on overall economic growth was inadequate to address the specific nature of black male unemployment.³⁸ Instead, he asserted, targeted measures were needed: "[I]n order to do anything about Negro Americans on the scale that our data would indicate, we have to declare that we are doing it for *everybody*. I think, however, that the problem of the Negro American *is* now a special one, and is not just an intense case of the problem of all poor people."³⁹

Other liberals at the conference questioned Moynihan's emphasis on black pathology. Howard University sociologist G. Franklin Edwards agreed that matriarchal family structure was a problem but felt that Moynihan overrated its significance since women headed only 21 percent of black families. Psychologist Robert Coles questioned Moynihan's undifferentiated depiction of black family structure. He also wondered whether poor African American families were truly "damaged" and questioned the assumption made by Moynihan and his supporters that middle-class values were superior in practice: "We tend to think of the Negro community at times as a kind of undifferentiated alternative to the white community; but I think there were possibilities within the hard-core, most-difficult-to-work-with groups that are perhaps more hopeful than the established Negro community."⁴⁰ Basing his comments on experience working with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in McComb, Mississippi, Coles maintained that involve-

ment in political activism was a crucial means for African Americans to attain psychological well-being. He thereby questioned the unstated assumption of Moynihan and other racial liberals that change could best be effected by social engineering from above. Similarly, historian C. Vann Woodward wondered whether the participation of so many African Americans in political action revealed that social scientists had overrated the extent to which they and their communities were truly damaged.⁴¹

While not directed specifically toward Moynihan's paper, Ralph Ellison's comments offered perhaps the most far-reaching criticism of the ideas Moynihan voiced at the conference. Ellison questioned the goal of assimilation, wondering why so many at the conference assumed that African Americans wanted to "lose our identity as quickly as possible."⁴² Ellison also challenged the unexamined value biases of social science itself, suggesting it could not truly understand African American culture: "The sociology is loaded. . . . The concepts which are brought to bear are usually based on those of white, middle-class, Protestant values and life style."⁴³ Though not addressing the question of family structure per se, Ellison's remarks anticipated an alternative interpretation of African American family structure that would be counterposed to Moynihan's: that matriarchal black families should be understood anthropologically rather than sociologically; they were not pathological variants of white norms, but the products of deliberate choices with inherent cultural value.

What would become one of the major criticisms of the Moynihan Report – the challenge to its patriarchal assumptions – was not voiced at the *Dædalus* conference. In part, the absence of this critique reflected the gender makeup of the group,

which was almost exclusively male. More important, as Ruth Feldstein has argued, many mid-century racial liberals shared what we would describe today as “conservative” gender norms that stressed the man’s role as family breadwinner and the woman’s role as mother.⁴⁴ In 1965, most liberals and many civil rights leaders still thought within a family-wage framework that had yet to meet major opposition from second-wave feminism. Indeed, discussion at the conference revolved almost entirely around what could be done for black *men*, who, because of their higher rate of unemployment and the difficulties many faced in supporting their families, were seen as suffering the brunt of economic and psychological oppression. Conference participants frequently used the pronoun “he” to refer to “the Negro.” When African American women were discussed, their relative economic success in comparison with black men was depicted as a threat to the restoration of black manhood and hence to progress toward racial equality. For example, Moynihan recounted that efforts to hire African Americans in his own government department in recent years had benefited black women to the detriment of black men: “You can stand in front of the Department of Labor any morning at eight-thirty, and it is a sight: spectacularly well-dressed, competent, beautiful [black] young women . . . spending the day on the phone with the Attorney General and seeing ambassadors, then coming home and asking the old man, what did you do today?”⁴⁵

The group that gathered at the Academy in May 1965 had much in common in terms of ideology and background. No conservatives or radicals were invited, only liberal social scientists and moderate civil rights leaders. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that for the most part they received Moynihan’s paper posi-

tively. Yet the fact that it also came under some heavy criticism even in this relatively sympathetic environment presaged the controversial reaction the report would receive when it became widely publicized later that year.

President Johnson, in his Howard University speech of June 1965, called for a White House conference that would include movement leaders and top intellectuals in order to facilitate a transition to a new phase of civil rights, one that focused on socioeconomic topics including family structure. The very idea that such issues could best be solved by holding a conference fit nicely with the social engineering ideal of racial liberalism. Moynihan himself must have considered the Academy conference as a model for the one Johnson proposed; indeed, many of the figures who gathered at the Academy in May played a prominent role in planning the White House conference.⁴⁶ Johnson described essays from the *Dædalus* issue as “invaluable source materials for the White House Conference.”⁴⁷ Yet the White House conference, the planning for which was held in November, ultimately failed to establish any consensus on new policies, in large part because of the controversy surrounding the Moynihan Report, which was widely reported in the press following the Watts riot in August 1965.⁴⁸

Given the Moynihan Report’s origins in racial liberalism’s socioeconomic turn, it is ironic that its liberal critics often attacked it for shifting focus *away* from economic issues. Writing in *The Nation*, sociologist William Ryan famously accused Moynihan of blaming the victim – ignoring the effects of white racism and implying that African Americans were responsible for their own poverty.⁴⁹ This criticism gained currency from the manner in which the report became public,

as critics responded to distorted and sensationalist media descriptions rather than the report itself.⁵⁰ Yet it also resulted from Moynihan's attempt to address socioeconomic inequality primarily through family structure. Focusing on the family led many to conclude that Moynihan believed that the government could do little to resolve social inequalities and that solutions would have to come from African American themselves. This conclusion ran contrary to the main thrust of Moynihan's ideas and how they were understood throughout the *Dædalus* project. Yet it was hardly a complete misunderstanding, since Moynihan had hinted at the limitations of government policies in his contribution.

Most important, public criticism of the Moynihan Report emerged from an increasing disenchantment with the core assumptions of racial liberalism. In particular, along the lines of Ellison's comments at the conference, many critics came to reject the common sociological view that African American culture was a pathological distortion of white American culture and that blacks should have to conform to white values in order to achieve equality. Many critics also questioned the manner in which whites dominated the production of social-scientific ideas about African Americans. Moynihan drew on an interracial tradition of sociology; his most important influences were E. Franklin Frazier and Kenneth Clark. Nevertheless, the *Dædalus* project demonstrated that whites held positions of intellectual and political power that allowed them to control the formulation of social-scientific ideas about African Americans. Though Kenneth Clark ultimately coedited with Parsons the book based on the *Dædalus* issue, the project had been developed by an organization that was almost entirely white and included no African Americans in its ini-

tial planning conference. Finally, by the late 1960s, feminists, especially African American feminists, added to Moynihan's chorus of critics, questioning the report's patriarchal assumptions, which had been widely shared by racial liberals.

When Moynihan came under fire, the conference attendees and the Academy itself provided a crucial source of support. In 1966, James Q. Wilson stepped down as director of the Harvard-MIT Joint Center for Urban Studies so that Moynihan could fill the post. The Academy continued its project by funding an ongoing "Seminar on Race and Poverty" that Moynihan organized. The Academy took full advantage of the Moynihan controversy to promote the *Dædalus* issue and the book; it chose Moynihan's to be the lead article of the special issue. Writing in the *Afro-American*, conference participant Saunders Redding praised the *Dædalus* issue: "Not since the publication of [*An American Dilemma*] have so many knowledgeable men brought their combined intellects and experiences to bear on the American colored man. . . . [I]t is rumored that the papers are the source of certain government programs and plans."⁵¹ Yet the *Dædalus* project ultimately failed to match *An American Dilemma* in its influence on public opinion and government policy, largely because of the growing dissatisfaction with racial liberalism evident in the controversy over the Moynihan Report.

Racial discourse has changed considerably in the nearly half-century since the *Dædalus* project. After the mid-1960s, racial liberalism no longer defined a consensus shared by elite academics and national policy-makers. But it did not disappear. In the 1970s and beyond, a transformed racial liberalism was defined in large part by support for affirmative action and multiculturalism. The

Dædalus project of the mid-1960s laid the groundwork for a liberal defense of affirmative action by indicating the need for policies to move beyond a color-blind commitment to legal rights. Introduced by white elites in part as a way of restoring social order following a series of urban riots and the radicalization of the black freedom movement, affirmative action can also be viewed as a continuation of social engineering.⁵² However, affirmative action policies, as they took hold in the late 1960s – focusing on preferential hiring, college admissions, and set-aside contracts for minorities – were less far-reaching than the measures Moynihan and other participants in the American Academy project had considered, which had centered around providing full employment. Affirmative action benefited middle-class and working-class African Americans more than the group racial liberals such as Moynihan were most worried about: unemployed black men. Moreover, as it developed, affirmative action was applied not just to African Americans but also to white women and other ethnoracial minorities, including many new immigrants. As a result, it lost its specificity as a measure for redressing African American inequality.⁵³

After it was established, affirmative action was often defended as a means to enhance cultural diversity. Indeed, the rise of multiculturalism, anticipated by Ellison's comments at the 1965 *Dædalus* conference, indicated another transition in racial liberalism. Racial discourse in the United States shifted from questions of law, economics, and society and toward ones of culture and identity. Culture is now understood as fundamental to racial questions in a way that it was not in the mid-1960s. Ellison aside, most participants at the *Dædalus* conference viewed African American culture much

as Myrdal had two decades earlier: as a pathological variant of white middle-class culture. By the 1970s, most liberals accepted that there are distinctive African American cultures of inherent value. However, to the extent that racial liberals came to emphasize cultural issues at the expense of socioeconomic ones, they neglected questions about the persistent structural inequalities faced by African Americans.⁵⁴ Such questions were increasingly silenced as Great Society liberalism gave way to a new market fundamentalism that shifted the entire American political spectrum to the right.

The issue of *Dædalus* in which this essay appears treats race in very different terms than did the issues whose history I have discussed above. Ellison's argument about the value and autonomy of African American cultures is now widely accepted by liberals. (It is striking to note the differences between the contributors to the 1965 and 1966 issues of *Dædalus* devoted to "The Negro American" and the contributors for this present issue: whereas all contributors to the earlier issues were social scientists, this issue has significant contributions from scholars whose expertise lies in the domain of culture, most notably literary scholars.) Scholars today resist seeing American race relations as simply a black-white problem and stand wary of assimilationist assumptions lurking behind calls for racial integration. They are skeptical that centuries of racism can easily be overcome within the existing social structure and doubt that social science has all the solutions. Feminism's influence has led them to question the patriarchal assumptions once shared by Moynihan and other liberals. However, the once-close connection between academic work and policy-making, evident in the earlier *Dædalus* project, no longer exists. At present, it seems incredible

that an academic conference could be so closely connected to government policy discussions at the highest level. Perhaps most remarkable, the Moynihan Report and the *Dædalus* project marked a moment when American elites considered extensive measures to redress the social and economic inequalities produced by the historic and ongoing oppression of African Americans. That they addressed such issues more seriously than most mainstream liberals in our own time hardly means that intel-

lectuals today should seek to recuperate mid-1960s racial liberalism. The solutions Moynihan and others involved with the *Dædalus* project offered were flawed by patriarchal assumptions, a misinterpretation of African American culture as pathological, and an overemphasis on family structure as central to social inequality. Nevertheless, the questions they raised about the socioeconomic dimensions of racial inequality remain to be answered.

ENDNOTES

¹ Lyndon Johnson, “Foreword to the Issue,” *Dædalus* 94 (Fall 1965): 744.

² Talcott Parsons and Kenneth B. Clark, *The Negro American* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966).

³ Most historians of the subject now consider the Moynihan Report a liberal document, at least by the standards of its time. See James Patterson, *Freedom is Not Enough: The Moynihan Report and Black Family Life from LBJ to Obama* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); a special issue of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, “The Moynihan Report Revisited: Lessons and Reflections after Four Decades” 621 (2009); and Daryl Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 137–159. For an alternate reading, see Alice O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 203–210. On racial liberalism generally, see Richard H. King, *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals, 1940–1970* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004) and Walter A. Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America’s Conscience: Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938–1987* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

⁴ Johnson, “Foreword,” 744.

⁵ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, 1965), 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, unpaginated introduction.

⁷ “Transcript of the American Academy Conference on the Negro American – May 14–15, 1965,” *Dædalus* 95 (Winter 1966): 312.

⁸ Dona C. Hamilton and Charles V. Hamilton, *The Dual Agenda: Race and Social Welfare Policies of Civil Rights Organizations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). The Civil Rights Act was enacted in July 1964; the Voting Rights Act in August 1965. However, by early 1964, their enactment was anticipated by many within and outside the movement and taken for granted by the participants in the *Dædalus* project.

⁹ For a recent account of the politics of this period that complements my account of its intellectual developments, see David C. Carter, *The Music Has Gone Out of the Movement: Civil Rights and the Johnson Administration, 1965–1968* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Scott, *Contempt and Pity*.

- ¹¹ Stephen Graubard, "'Dædalus': Forty Years On," *Dædalus* 128 (1999): 1–12. *Dædalus* was founded in 1955, when the Academy renamed its *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, but it was not until 1958 that it adopted a quarterly format and aimed to reach an audience outside its own membership.
- ¹² While research on the psychology of white prejudice thrived in the postwar period, the very success of Myrdal's statement had discouraged scholars and foundations from pursuing further research on African American topics. On this point, see Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience*, 231–271. For a reappraisal of *An American Dilemma*, see the special issue of *Dædalus*, "An American Dilemma Revisited" 124 (Winter 1995), especially the preface by Stephen Graubard, which includes his recollections of how the mid-1960s *Dædalus* project on "The Negro American" compared to Myrdal's effort.
- ¹³ Graubard had invited three African American scholars: Allison Davis, John Hope Franklin, and Whitney Young.
- ¹⁴ Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1963). Glazer was the lead author and wrote the chapter on African Americans.
- ¹⁵ See, for example, Moynihan to Everett Hughes, April 16, 1964, Part I: Box 27, Daniel P. Moynihan Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
- ¹⁶ "Transcript of *The Negro in America* Planning Committee," Part I: Box 38, Moynihan Papers, ii, iii.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 114.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, iii.
- ²¹ Graubard to Moynihan, December 10, 1964, Part I: Box 38, Moynihan Papers.
- ²² Moynihan to Hughes, May 25, 1965, Box 42, Everett Cherrington Hughes Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
- ²³ Max Lerner, "Moynihan," *New York Post*, July 25, 1965.
- ²⁴ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "Employment, Income, and the Ordeal of the Negro Family," *Dædalus* 94 (Fall 1965): 745.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 746.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 760.
- ²⁷ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "Memorandum to Mr. Bill Moyers," May 19, 1965, Part I: Box 38, Moynihan Papers.
- ²⁸ "Transcript of the American Academy Conference on the Negro American," 303.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 351.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 291.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 300.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 351.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 304.
- ³⁴ Moynihan, "Employment, Income, and the Ordeal of the Negro Family," 755.
- ³⁵ The only conference participant who subjected Moynihan's ideas to this more conservative interpretation was James Q. Wilson, who commented: "[O]ne of the crucial aspects of the gap . . . is the nature of the family. This I take it to be the reason that Mr. Moynihan suggests pessimistically – and I think with good reason – that poverty may be feeding on

- itself; in some sense it may be a cultural, as well as economic, phenomenon and a cultural phenomenon that can be inherited to a very depressing degree"; "Transcript of the American Academy Conference on the Negro American," 289.
- 36 Moynihan, "Employment, Income, and the Ordeal of the Negro Family," 769.
- 37 See Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Welfare to the War on Poverty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 93–94.
- 38 "Transcript of the American Academy Conference on the Negro American," 308.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 288.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 318.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 366.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 308.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 438. Ellison's comments echoed his famous criticisms of Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* in a review he wrote in 1944 but did not publish until 1964. See Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 303–317.
- 44 Ruth Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930–1965* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000).
- 45 "Transcript of the American Academy Conference on the Negro American," 295.
- 46 The July meetings held to plan the White House conference included Parsons, Erikson, Clark, Coles, Pettigrew, and Wilson. See Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1967), 33.
- 47 Johnson, "Foreword," 744.
- 48 Carter, *The Music Has Gone Out of the Movement*, 75–101; Kevin L. Yuill, "The 1966 White House Conference on Civil Rights," *The Historical Journal* 41 (March 1998): 259–282.
- 49 The actual phrase "blaming the victim" comes from Ryan's 1971 book of the same name, but he first put forth his critique of the Moynihan Report in a 1965 article in *The Nation*, based on an influential unpublished memorandum that he circulated to civil rights organizations in October 1965.
- 50 Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*.
- 51 Saunders Redding, "Review of *The Negro American*," *Afro-American*, February 26, 1966.
- 52 John David Skrentny, *The Ironies of Affirmative Action: Politics, Culture, and Justice in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- 53 Hugh Davis Graham, *Collision Course: The Strange Convergence of Affirmative Action and Immigration Policy in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 54 This cultural shift in racial discourse is noted by King, *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals* and David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

Precious African American Memories, Post-Racial Dreams & the American Nation

Waldo E. Martin, Jr.

Precious memories, how they linger
How they ever flood my soul
In the stillness of the midnight
Precious, sacred scenes unfold.

—From “Precious Memories,” composed by
Willie Nelson and performed by Aretha
Franklin and James Cleveland¹

Where are the nametags? Throughout the weekend’s activities, this question overwhelmed me. We had gathered to celebrate our fortieth high school reunion, having proudly graduated from James B. Dudley High School in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1969. Yet I barely recognized many of my former high school classmates. Those willing and able to be a part of the festivities were looking good, of course. Most of us had put on a few pounds, showed gray, thinning, or no hair, and moved less vigorously now, notably on the dance floor. If I squinted hard, the shock of recognition sometimes emerged. More often than not, though, I was quizzical, asking myself and anyone who would listen, “Whose idea was it to ignore nametags?”

One thing remained clear: we all were still solidly black. In 1969, Dudley remained an all-black institution. School desegregation came several years later. For those of us fortunate enough to attend the reunion in 2009, the anniversary brought back a flood of memories and sparked innumerable conversations about the courses

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and meanings of our lives. One fact was inescapable and palpable: blackness and its recent history have profoundly shaped who we have become and how we see the world.

In the last fifty years, notwithstanding significant evidence of black progress, race and anti-black racism have, paradoxically, declined yet endured. In 2010, distressing patterns of racial inequality rooted in racism and discrimination stubbornly persist. As symbolized by Dudley's all-black fortieth high school reunion in 2009 and represented powerfully in deeply entrenched patterns of residential segregation, racial segregation endures. The memories of African Americans who lived through the Jim Crow era, as well as the stories they passed down to subsequent generations, have helped shape African American views of African American progress since the triumphs of the civil rights revolution. Like vast numbers of African Americans, the post-graduation journeys of Dudley's all-black class of 1969 continue to be rich and resilient, in spite of anti-black racism. Unfortunately, persistent patterns of racial inequality, in part shaped by enduring patterns of racial segregation, likewise afflict both my graduating class and African Americans nationwide.

Born around 1951, the members of Dudley's 1969 graduating class came of age in the world of late Jim Crow. We witnessed the civil rights insurgency and subsequent collapse of the Southern racial caste system. Given the African American Freedom Struggle's stunning victories over legalized Jim Crow and formal disenfranchisement, like most of our generation – white and non-white – we envisioned a new yet uncharted world: a racially desegregated, or integrated, society. In that soci-

ety, the public and private barriers to African American progress would continue to be defeated, or so we believed.

My classmates at Dudley, like our racial cohort throughout the nation, began the 1960s as Negroes and entered the 1970s as blacks. On February 1, 1960, before many of us had turned nine years old, Ezell A. Blair, Jr., David L. Richmond, Joseph A. McNeil, and Franklin E. McCain, four students at the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College for Negroes in Greensboro sat down at the local Woolworth's lunch counter, initiating the sit-in phase of the civil rights insurgency. Our segregated world soon turned upside down. Formerly all-white restaurants, stores, movie houses, theaters, motels and hotels, parks, community centers, and YMCA and YWCA branches began to open their doors to Negroes. Interracial councils among youth and adults proliferated. Interracial barriers seemed to tumble. But were they indeed tumbling?

Around 1965 and 1966, the revolution in racial, political, and cultural consciousness known as Black Power struck like a thunderbolt. At the Democratic Party's 1964 presidential nominating convention, the Party had refused to unseat the all-white Mississippi State delegation in favor of the integrated Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Clearly, the Old South still exerted national political sway. When the Watts riot exploded in August 1965, simmering Negro anger erupted over ongoing patterns of police brutality in particular and racial injustice and inequality in general. When juxtaposed with the lack of short-term progress in alleviating galling patterns of racist oppression, the escalation of Negro expectations for immediate progress fed growing disillusionment with the civil rights movement. Malcolm X's power-

ful calls for Negro nationalism and self-determination, which he vividly expressed in his highly influential autobiography, found an increasing Negro audience, especially among the youth.²

Soon, those incited by Malcolm X's call to action were everywhere, their numbers growing rapidly. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (1960 – 1968), the influential student wing of the civil rights insurgency founded in the wake of the sit-ins, began calling for Black Power in 1966. When the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense followed suit shortly thereafter, the shift toward blackness, or varieties of Black Nationalism, as well as Black Power, escalated. By 1970, as the Black Freedom Struggle grew in militant intensity, expanding beyond civil rights and integrationist demands to encompass Black Power and demands for self-determination, Negroes had by and large adopted the self-referential term *blacks* to denote the pivotal shift.

During our senior year (1968 – 1969) at Dudley High, we embraced the highly charged air of impending revolution that pervaded the globe as well as the American nation. That year featured a series of rebellions on campus as we fought back against the school board's efforts to resist the changes wrought by the blossoming of Black Power. We demanded the right to elect our own student leaders, to wear Afros, and, like the predominantly white public high schools, to be able to leave the campus for lunch.³ We were no longer, if we had ever been, integrationist, nonviolent Negroes committed to civil disobedience. While we admired Martin Luther King, Jr., and respected his leadership, he no longer spoke as pointedly for us. Malcolm X and his radical, nationalist, separatist vision spoke far more meaningfully to our innermost

longings and militant politics. We were now Malcolm's children.

The belief that revolution was imminent animated radicals and progressives everywhere. As the Chicana feminist and writer Cherrie L. Moraga recently recalled, "Forty years ago, there were true activist visionaries and mass movements to enact those visions. . . . Forty years ago, revolution was on the mind of all Americans, even the most timid and conservative."⁴ After our Dudley years, we entered adulthood in the early 1970s, gyrating wildly between the intoxicating allure of racial integration and the romance of the coming black revolution.

The privileged among us who attended formerly all-white colleges and universities, as I did, constituted an intrepid subset of the elite, college-bound minority in our high school. We quickly lunged into a deeply paradoxical, at times quixotic, struggle. How does one foment black revolution within the privileged confines of an elite, overwhelmingly white university? Others, no less intrepid but committed to a more explicit form of racial solidarity, enrolled at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), as had a very small but special group of racial exemplars: our college-educated ancestors. Even at HBCUs, however, advocates of black revolution met a wall of resistance.

Whether at HBCUs or predominantly white colleges and universities, most of us were the first in our families to go on to post-secondary education. For us, the revolution meant in part reforming the colleges and universities we attended. The creation of Black Studies as a discipline, leading to the formation of Black Studies Departments, was an important achievement. Equally significant was the fact that a generation of black college students had struggled successfully to

Waldo E.
Martin, Jr.

help expand exponentially the number of black students at both HBCUs and formerly all-white institutions.

Another strong commitment for this cohort of black college students was a socialist-inspired solidarity with workers, which demanded active support for campus and local workers' struggles. Black student solidarity with the working class often had a racial inflection: many of the students were from the working class, and many of the workers on campus and in the community were black.

The vision of the impending revolution for this cohort of students also included solidarity with the struggles for liberation and democracy of oppressed peoples globally, notably in Africa and throughout the African diaspora. In addition to a vital pan-African front, this internationalist camaraderie extended to the liberation struggles in nations of color, notably Viet Nam, and revolutionary regimes in China and Cuba. Black students in the United States increasingly saw themselves as part of an international Third World.

While dreams of revolution and its various commitments beckoned, the hard, cold realities of the domestic and global situations dashed those aspirations. Official and unofficial repression devastated radical movements. In particular, the extreme backlash against Black Power helped defeat the impending revolution. The internal fissures within the movements themselves also contributed to their undoing. Combined with the severe domestic shock waves of the mid-1970s oil crisis, the revolution proved stillborn.

My fellow graduates and I had been raised to be strivers, to be respectable, even exemplary, Negroes. Very few of us, college-educated or not, ever really understood "revolution." Most of my graduating class of 1969, like the previ-

ous generations of graduating classes, went to work locally and assumed a variety of solid working-class, blue-collar, and white-collar jobs. Many fought the good fight. But when revolutionary fervor waned and mundane reality beckoned, they, like their classmates who chased the American dream elsewhere, embraced mainstream jobs. The imperative of making a living played a significant role in the ultimate defeat of the black revolution.

Co-optation likewise undercut the revolution. Affirmative action bought off many of us, enabling us to assume novel jobs and realize the American dream. As partners in formerly all-white law firms, M.B.A.s working for Fortune 500 companies, doctors, medical specialists and researchers, independent entrepreneurs, and professors at formerly all-white colleges and universities, we became racial exemplars in our own right. What about the impending revolution? Had it all been a dream, an illusion, or perhaps a delusion? The Last Poets offered an especially caustic critique, harsh yet revealing: "Niggers," they observed, "are scared of revolution."⁵

In the late 1960s and 1970s, we envisioned a very different world: more egalitarian, more democratic, more ethical – certainly less white supremacist. Events such as South Africa's late-twentieth-century abolition of racial apartheid suggests some progress toward this better world. Yet racial oppression in South Africa and elsewhere as well as the inevitable struggles to defeat it continue. Indeed, the battles to create that better world have floundered, at times miserably; but they persist. Moraga recently captured this deep disappointment over the stalled revolution: "Like so many of my generation," she admitted, "I had imagined that by 2009 the seeds of radical transformation

that had been sown in the fields of . . . struggle would have by now sprouted into fully coalesced people of color self-sustaining communities . . . throughout the country.”⁶

While far more desegregated than the lives of our ancestors, our worlds – family, home, church, school, and social and cultural life – have remained preeminently black. Forty years later, racial segregation has lessened but endured. Not surprisingly, therefore, when we came together in Summer 2009, the events constituted an emotionally charged re-creation of black consciousness and black community, a series of powerful “precious memories” and revitalized connections. It was at once a resounding “call to home” – a black homecoming; a deeply spiritual moment – a joy-filled and enthusiastic Southern black Baptist worship service; and, no less important, it was a down-home, exuberant black house party. Far more than moments of sentimentality and nostalgia, these experiences necessarily revitalized an affirmative and empowering black consciousness.

Regrettably, the persistence of racial segregation has an extremely negative side as well. The exclusion of African Americans from private pathways of upward mobility and power has seriously undermined African American progress. Sociologist Orlando Patterson recently assessed the “profound paradox” of African American inclusion in the public sphere and exclusion from the private sphere. On one hand, the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States, Patterson observes, signifies the relatively successful integration of African Americans into the “political, cultural and civic fabric” of America’s public sphere. On the other hand, Patterson notes, “Outside elite circles blacks are as segregated today

from the private domain of white lives – their neighborhoods, schools, churches, clubs and other associations, friendship networks, marriage markets and families – as they were fifty years ago.” He cogently concludes that for middle-class as well as working-class and underclass African Americans, this segregation, plainly evident in hyper-segregated metropolitan areas and resegregated schools, remains “a primary cause of the ongoing inequality of black Americans.”⁷

As one who is profoundly shaped by the radical Black Power ferment of the late 1960s and early 1970s, I view the late twentieth century as a variation on the theme of “the changing same.” Put another way, as a product of the radical Black Freedom movement, when I look at the period from 1970 to the present, I see a complex mix of progress (moving forward); standing in place (marking time); and regression (moving backward). I see more fundamental continuity than real change in the status of African Americans in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

As a product of the world I have described, I was not at all prepared for Barack Obama’s extraordinary success. Like millions of others from similar and different backgrounds alike, I suffered a dramatic and telling failure of hope and imagination. Given my personal history, as both a citizen and a historian, I could not possibly have imagined that in my lifetime our nation would elect an African American president. Not surprisingly, the dominant topic of conversation during my fortieth high school reunion was Obama’s election. No one with whom I spoke that weekend confessed to believing at the outset that Obama had a real chance to win. Most expected a far better run than those undertaken by Jesse Jackson in 1984 and 1988,

Waldo E.
Martin, Jr.

but not victory. In my lifetime, the intractability of white racism,⁸ I believed, rendered impossible the election of an African American president.

On some level it is intensely gratifying that a majority of the voting electorate, including a broad swath of the white electorate, could recognize and opt for the clearly superior presidential candidate in 2008, regardless of race. This outcome strikes me as compelling evidence that anti-black prejudice is diminishing in our time. Far less clear is whether Obama's election and early presidency signal a comparable lessening of anti-black discrimination. A deeply troubling aspect of white supremacy has been the inability and refusal of white Americans to take African Americans and people of color seriously. In the past, a by-product of this racism has been the inability and refusal of white Americans to listen to and follow black leaders like Barack Obama. I hope that his presidency will demonstrate considerable white American progress in overcoming these discriminatory tendencies.

Viewing Barack Obama's political ascent through the lens of the enduring African American Freedom Struggle leads me in two conflicting directions: renewed hope and persistent frustration. The hope is real and palpable. This energizing hope comes from the fact that Obama's success within the political mainstream signals that as a nation we have made some racial progress. Patterson's observation that President Obama's election exemplifies the relatively successful integration of African Americans into American public life (as against the ongoing segregation of African Americans in private life) certainly confirms as much.

The frustration is no less real and no less palpable. This bitter disappointment

derives from the fact that the election of the first African American president is being used by many to diminish the enduring and determinative impact of white supremacy in the United States: the persistent and crippling reality of macro-level institutional racism and micro-level anti-black prejudice and discrimination. The authors of *White-washing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* persuasively demonstrate the historic and contemporary persistence of what they term "durable racial inequality." Across the domains of status and privilege, employment, education, criminal justice, voting rights, political power, and wealth accumulation, the authors cogently demonstrate the stubborn intractability of white racial privilege and benefits, a key component of white supremacy.⁹

Historically speaking, racial progress for African Americans has occurred not at the expense of white power and privilege, but in spite of and alongside it. African American progress has been permitted to occur as long as that progress does not substantially challenge economic inequality and the white supremacy that directs and shapes that inequality. The two moments in our nation's history in which white racism, and to a lesser extent economic inequality, were challenged head on include nineteenth-century Reconstruction following the Civil War and the civil rights–Black Power moment of the mid-twentieth century, another kind of reconstruction experiment. Both white racism and racialized economic inequality easily survived the two challenges; indeed, they rebounded quite robustly.

President Obama's ascent and election certainly do not illustrate or prove that the structures of white power and privilege in this nation have in any substantive way been minimized or challenged,

even rhetorically.¹⁰ Similarly, his rise does not have any real and immediate impact on the deep-seated and enduring material and structural inequalities that disproportionately afflict African Americans and other communities of color. President Obama himself has observed that “nobody should have ever been under the illusion – certainly I wasn’t, and I was explicit about this when I campaigned – that by virtue of my election suddenly race problems would be solved.” In *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama*, David Remnick explains that President Obama’s election has in no way settled “the most painful of all American struggles.” The very idea that the event signifies as much, according to Remnick, is not only “sentimental,” but also “misleading” – in effect, dead wrong. “Nothing has ended, of course,” notes Remnick, “and questions of race – cultural, legal, penal, educational, social – remain despite all the evident progress and promise since the civil-rights movement.”¹¹

There is one aspect of the hope that the Obama presidency represents that I enthusiastically endorse. As a nation under President Obama, I hope we can truly begin to attack and alleviate not only the historic and enduring national disgrace of economic and material inequity. I also hope that we can truly begin to attack and alleviate the white power and racial privilege that help structure that economic and material inequity. According to the Institute on Assets and Social Policy, in the last thirty years African American median family wealth has remained roughly the same. In 2007, white family wealth was \$100,000; for African American families, it was \$5,000. By almost any measure – educational attainment, employment, income, wealth, homeownership – the current Great Recession has fur-

ther eroded recent declines in the socioeconomic status of African Americans relative to that of whites.¹²

A recent report by the Center for Responsible Lending confirms that the current home foreclosure crisis has hit Latinos and blacks especially hard. Since 2007, 17 percent of Latino homeowners, 11 percent of black homeowners, and 7 percent of white homeowners have suffered home foreclosures or have homes that “are at imminent risk.” A black family home is 76 percent more likely to be foreclosed on than a white family home. The Center’s report concludes that the foreclosure crisis “will be particularly devastating to African-American and Latino families, who already lag their white counterparts in terms of income, wealth and educational attainment.” Furthermore, the report strongly suggests that the foreclosure crisis will not only undermine the fiscal strength of Latino and African American communities, but that the crisis will also expand the increasing income and wealth disparities between non-whites and whites.¹³

To talk of the “Obama moment” as a post-racial or even post-ethnic moment is disingenuous and wrongheaded. I am never quite sure what those terms even mean. The views expressed by my colleague, historian David Hollinger, in his essay “Obama, the Instability of Color Lines, and the Promise of a Postethnic Future,” are at times compelling. Hollinger maintains that Obama’s presidency represents “a far-reaching challenge to identity politics . . . [a] gradually spreading uncertainty about the significance of color lines, especially the significance of blackness itself.”¹⁴ Although persuasive in some respects, ultimately, I find this line of argument unconvincing.

As I survey today’s historical landscape, from popular culture to elector-

al politics, from hip-hop to opera, from domestic to international politics, I recognize that race, blackness, and, indeed, identity politics still matter, and matter profoundly. Late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century developments have altered and complicated, even challenged, blackness, identity politics, and notions of race more generally. Nevertheless, all three have persisted and, from where I sit, show little evidence of real decline. The multiple ways in which African Americans, like other groups, identify – whether by class, work or profession, gender, sexuality, generation, and place – certainly crosscut and complicate notions of African American racial identity. Identities, notably racial identities, are complex and situational. Different aspects of individual and collective identities assume greater or lesser significance depending on the context in which they appear. African American fraternity and sorority events might easily call forth a different set of identifications than, say, an interracial work setting.

To the degree that anti-black racism has declined though persisted, the nature of racial identification has done the same. African American identity politics remain pivotal precisely because of the ongoing oppression of African Americans and the continuing depth and power of white supremacy. Consequently, we need a revitalized Black Freedom Struggle, one that is particularly attuned to this historical moment; we need comparable race-based struggles among other communities of color as well. These efforts must be sensitive to and work in concert with related economic, class, and gender struggles.

Foundational black civil rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League had

trouble adapting to the imperatives of the Black Freedom Struggle over time while remaining true to their core mission: to achieve black civil, political, and economic uplift. Still, these organizations remain vital. Similarly, in 2010, advancing and protecting the rights and status of blacks continue to necessitate the work of the Congressional Black Caucus as well as analogous state and local caucuses throughout the country.

Black-identified institutions continue to be necessary, though not sufficient, to meet the enormity of the challenges of the ongoing Black Freedom Struggle. Historically black colleges and universities as well as the United Negro College Fund are more important than ever, given pervasive and ongoing private segregation in America, the resegregation of American public schools, and the widening achievement gap between black and white students. The extraordinary contributions of African American studies to intellectual life and scholarship in the United States and beyond have cemented the enduring importance of this transformative body of knowledge. Furthermore, certain cultural institutions continue to be important for their emphasis on African American voices and talent. The Dance Theater of Harlem, for example, is significant for its encouragement of African Americans, notably African American women, in ballet.

I should emphasize that the dominant tradition in African American identity politics has been inclusive; it has welcomed non-blacks into organizations like the NAACP and has encouraged work with non-black allies in any number of coalitions. Exclusive, narrow, sectarian – particularly separatist-nationalist – positions have always been minority ones among blacks, even during the height of the Black Power insurgency. For all its radicalism, the Black Panther Party

was more democratic socialist than racial nationalist. The party certainly was not anti-white; it simply opposed white supremacy. As a result, the party organized and mobilized around various issues with a variety of non-black groups and institutions domestically and globally.

Historically speaking, race has changed in some ways and remained the same in others. In spite of important shifts and challenges, identity politics – especially blackness – retain their force and viability because race continues to convulse the American nation in so many ways, large and small, witting and unwitting. Race today is certainly not race as it existed in 1950, nor even as it existed in 1970 or 1990. Changes in racial consciousness, racial status, and race relations have occurred. My point is that the evident range and depth of continuities and stagnation in racial status and race relations – what has stayed the same or even worsened – are as important and as revealing as what has changed.

Obama's election as president must be understood as historical evidence of a powerful barrier-breaking measure of racial progress, especially (as noted above) in terms of the expanding integration of African Americans into American public life. From another angle, his election must be viewed as evidence of growing racial tolerance and acceptance. It can – and I believe must – be read as a hopeful sign for America's long-term racial future. While it is far too early to take the full measure of the meaning of this moment, it would appear to augur bigger dreams and brighter futures for President Obama's "children."

My intention here is to analyze this moment soberly, critically, and cautiously, not to deny its historic and thrilling dimensions. Perhaps this is a transition-

al racial moment, one in which meanings of race are shifting. Perhaps we are moving inexorably in the direction of a society where race matters less: where opportunity and upward mobility are increasingly less determined by race; where class-based economic initiatives will alleviate not only the national scandal of economic and material inequality but also the no less dreadful and related disgrace of racial inequality. Perhaps by achieving economic equality, we will achieve racial equality.

I am not convinced that white supremacy is subordinate to economic forces. The historical mutability and persistence of white racism suggests otherwise. History shows the singularity and power of white racism, however one views the relationship of racism to political economy. From the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries in America, racism and capitalism helped create and sustain one another as separate yet interactive forces. From the fifteenth century forward, the anti-African attitudes and practices that dehumanized African peoples and that evolved into white supremacy have flowed from social and cultural factors, such as Western European notions of African mental inferiority and hypersexuality, as well as economic and material factors associated with the development of slavery and capitalism. Similarly, enduring racial segregation, like that of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century Jim Crow, is as much psychological and ideological as it is material and economic. White supremacy, then, is as much psychic as it is systemic.¹⁵

In the early 1980s, sociologist William Julius Wilson created a stir with his argument on the "declining significance of race" for African Americans. Class, not race, Wilson argued, was the key determinant shaping black lives and destinies

in the age of Reagan.¹⁶ Similarly, Hollinger roused audiences in the late 1990s with his vision of a post-ethnic America, a nation where we reject the notion, as he has recently framed it, that “descent is destiny.”¹⁷

With Obama’s stunning election, the dream of a post-racial future, a post-ethnic future – a future where we can truly declare “the declining significance of race” – has been invigorated. Dreams can be hopeful, instructive, and inspiring, but they must not distract us from historical and contemporary reality or from the immediate future. Post-racial dreams notwithstanding, our present and foreseeable future is intensely and fundamentally racial. Barack Obama’s rich autobiography, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, reveals as much. As a coming-of-age story and a search for racial identification in a highly racialized world, Obama’s carefully crafted, self-constructed life narrative fits well within the African American autobiographical tradition.¹⁸

At present, the significance of race paradoxically persists even as it recedes. Obama’s election and his early presidency showcase the continuing viability and significance of identity politics. His election and presidency illustrate that notions of blackness in particular persist and, in important ways, have deepened, but also that they have diminished. Racial politics have shaped both Obama’s campaign and his early presidency, in spite of omnipresent efforts to deny and avoid them. From the controversy over Reverend Jeremiah Wright during the campaign, which forced Obama to sever his ties with his pastor of twenty years, to the racism coursing through the Tea Party and Republican Party opposition to his presidential leadership, race matters profoundly.

Reflecting on my fortieth high school reunion, where the all-black class of 1969 from James B. Dudley High in Greensboro, North Carolina, reconnected and talked about the meanings we attach to our lives, is bittersweet. Like black America generally, we fully expected that as blacks and Americans, we would be much farther along the road to true racial equality. We expected a more racially integrated nation in the private as well as the public realm. With the distance afforded by the last half-century, it is clear that African Americans have indeed come “a mighty long way.” It is equally apparent that they have a mighty long way to go. The struggle continues. Perhaps we can benefit from insight the venerable Frederick Douglass provided during a far worse moment in our nation’s history of race relations, a moment that we have progressed beyond.

In 1894, the year before he died, Douglass critically assessed the dreadful state of race relations in the United States. Outraged by the rampant racial terrorism – an increasing number of anti-black Jim Crow restrictions, disenfranchisement campaigns, and white supremacy nationally and globally – the grand “Old Lion” rediscovered his mighty roar. In particular, the unconscionable rise in lynchings of black bodies moved him to thunderous denunciation recalling the moral authority and piercing insight that had guided his days as one of America’s leading abolitionists – certainly the leading African American abolitionist.

On the cusp of the twentieth century, Douglass trumpeted that we ignore the fundamental problem of white supremacy at our peril: “this so-called but mis-called Negro problem” was an American problem, indeed a global problem.¹⁹ He castigated the transparently evil trick of racial scapegoating: a diversionary analysis in which powerful whites label

oppressed blacks as the problem, sidestepping the critical issue of white complicity in the structures of white power and white racial privilege. This racial scapegoating

springs out of a desire to throw off just responsibility and to evade the performance of disagreeable but manifest duty. Its natural effect and purpose is to divert attention from the true issue now before the American people. It does this by holding up and pre-occupying the public mind with an issue entirely different from the real one in question.²⁰

To wit, the real issue is white supremacy and the material and structural inequalities that create and sustain it. Ungrounded in historical and contemporary realities, claims of the post-racial and the post-ethnic are misguided and potentially dangerous.

Douglass cautioned that seeing something more benign, even hopeful, in the

horror of white racism is not new. Similarly, blaming the victim, or racial scapegoating, is a time-honored ruse:

Waldo E.
Martin, Jr.

The device is not new. It is an old trick. It has been oft repeated and with a similar purpose and effect. For truth, it gives us falsehood. For innocence, it gives us guilt. It removes the burden of proof from the old master class and imposes it upon the Negro. It puts upon the race a work which belongs to the nation. It belongs to that craftiness often displayed by disputants who aim to make the worse appear the better reason. It gives bad names to good things and good names to bad things.²¹

Almost 120 years later, the struggle against white supremacy continues. Until white America, and by extension the “white world,” helps bring about the destruction of white supremacy and the realization of human equality, “everywhere,” as Bob Marley cautioned, “is war.”²²

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The recording of “Precious Memories” is available on Aretha Franklin, *Amazing Grace* (Atlantic Records, 1972).
- ² *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, as told to Alex Haley (New York: Grove Press, 1965).
- ³ William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 172 – 202.
- ⁴ Cherrie L. Moraga, “Si Fuera Posible: Upon the Fortieth Anniversary of Ethnic Studies,” *La Voz De Berkeley* (Spring 2010): 5.
- ⁵ The Last Poets, “Niggers Are Scared of Revolution,” *The Last Poets* (Varese Sarande, 1970; reissued, 2002).
- ⁶ Moraga, “Si Fuera Posible,” 5.
- ⁷ Orlando Patterson, “For African-Americans, A Virtual Depression – Why?” in “Inequality in America and What to Do About It,” a forum, *The Nation* 29 (3 and 4) (July 19 and 26, 2010): 20.
- ⁸ The notion of “the permanence of racism” has perhaps best been articulated in the work of Derrick Bell. See Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).
- ⁹ Michael K. Brown, Martin Conroy, Elliott Currie, Troy Duster, David B. Oppenheimer, Marjorie M. Shultz, and David Wellman, *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

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- ¹⁰ George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005).
- ¹¹ Barack Obama, as quoted in David Remnick, *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 584; Remnick, *The Bridge*, 587.
- ¹² Institute on Assets and Social Policy study (2007), as cited in Patterson, "Inequality in America," 18.
- ¹³ Center for Responsible Lending report, as quoted in Annie Lowrey, "Race and the Foreclosure Crisis," *The Washington Independent*, June 18, 2010.
- ¹⁴ David Hollinger, "Obama, the Instability of Color Lines, and the Promise of a Postethnic Future," *Callaloo* 31 (4) (2008): 1033.
- ¹⁵ Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550 – 1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968); George Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).
- ¹⁶ William J. Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
- ¹⁷ David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Hollinger, "Obama, the Instability of Color Lines, and the Promise of a Post-ethnic Future," 1034.
- ¹⁸ Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995); William L. Andrews, ed., *African-American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1992).
- ¹⁹ Frederick Douglass, *The Lesson of the Hour: "Why is the Negro Lynched?"* (1894). See Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, vol. 4 (1950; repr., New York: International Publishers, 1975), 491, 517.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Bob Marley and the Wailers, "War," *Rastaman Vibration* (Island Records, 1976). Marley's words draw upon a famous speech by Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie. The speech is quoted in Gladstone Wilson, "Reggae as a Medium of Political Communication," in *Mass Media and the Caribbean*, ed. Stuart H. Surlin and Walter C. Soderlund (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1990), 439.

Race & Inheritance in Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*

Glenda R. Carpio

There is no getting over race – at least according to the Barack Obama of *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995). The Obama that emerged during the primaries and through the 2008 presidential election tells a different story, both because Obama had to change his position in the decade between the publication of his autobiography and his remarkable rise in politics and because his “hope” mantra has been diluted and taken out of the context in which it first appeared. Obama’s now infamous ex-pastor, Jeremiah Wright, is the source of the phrase, “the audacity of hope.” In *Dreams*, the Wright sermon in which Obama first hears the phrase comes at the very end of the long third section, “Chicago,” just after Obama has been accepted to Harvard Law School and before he takes his first trip to Africa to find his paternal family.¹ We are nearly three hundred pages into the text at this point, having been presented with plenty of evidence for Obama’s dark view of race relations in America. Only in this context can one understand why, for Obama, it takes *audacity* to hope that they will change for the better.

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Writing for the *National Review*, Michael Gledhill also notes the difference between the Obama of *Dreams* and of the presidential race; however, he makes a number of facile conclusions. He writes that, while “Obama is touted as a post-racial statesman who sees beyond the narrow issue of white versus black,” in his autobiography he is, “to the

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contrary, obsessed with race: almost all of *Dreams* is about race and race conflict." The Obama of *Dreams* does focus on race conflict, but this fact should not lead us to repudiate him as "a racially obsessed man who regards most whites as oppressors," and "who sees U.S. history as a narrow, bitter tale of race and class victimization."² Instead, it should allow us a better appreciation of the gravitas of Obama's audacity of hope.

In *Dreams*, Obama presents his life, from his parents' courtship through to his birth, childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, in terms of racial conflict. He portrays the conflict with such intensity that one marvels at how young Obama not only survived but also *thrived*. Of his white mother's attraction for his father, an older black, African man (she was eighteen and he in his mid-twenties when they met), Obama writes that it was probably "a reflection of the simple fantasies that had been forbidden to a white middle-class girl from Kansas, the promise of another life: warm, sensual, exotic, different."³ These thoughts are prompted when, as an adult, Obama accompanies his mother to a screening of *Black Orpheus* and is made uncomfortable by the romantic racialism that she reveals in her love of the movie. He turns away from her and the screen, concluding that the "emotions between races could never be pure, even love was tarnished by the desire to find in the other some element that was missing in ourselves. Whether we sought out our demons or salvation, the other race would always remain just that: menacing, alien, and apart."⁴ Obama offers no theory for his father's attraction to his mother but suggests that he enjoyed the attention and kept secret the fact that he was already married when he met his mother, with

his first wife safely tucked away in far-off Africa.

Obama believes that his mother came to love his father despite the racial romanticism that first attracted her to him. But he adds that the love she had for him, a transformative love that allowed her to see Obama's father as "everyone hopes at least one other person might see him," is the kind of love most Americans do not believe really exists "between black and white: the love of someone who knows your life round, a love that will survive disappointment." And according to Obama, this is because interracial love has been tabooed and outlawed so intensely and for so long in the United States that Americans can hardly be "expected" to believe in it.⁵ Early in the autobiography Obama frames the interracial identity his parents bequeath him in the following terms:

Miscegenation. The word is humpbacked, ugly, portending a monstrous outcome: like *antebellum* or *octoroon*, it evokes images of another era, a distant world of horsewhips and flames, dead magnolias and crumbling porticos. And yet it wasn't until 1967 – the year I celebrated my sixth birthday and Jimi Hendrix performed at Monterey, three years after Dr. King received the Nobel Peace Prize, a time when America had already begun to weary of black demands for equality, the problem of discrimination presumably resolved – that the Supreme Court of the United States would get around to telling the state of Virginia that its ban on interracial marriages violated the Constitution.⁶

The gothic images in this passage, which comes after a narrative break and begins in italics, therefore standing out even typographically, emphasize the distorting and consuming violence of a racial

obsession. Meanwhile, the temporal shifts highlight the stubborn resistance against racial progress: Obama's birth is barely legal (in 1960, when his parents were married, "*miscegenation* still described a felony in over half the states in the Union"), while he celebrates his sixth birthday amid a political climate in which African Americans are accepted, even celebrated, at certain registers (popular culture, global public space) yet still denied equality in their own country. (The irony of Dr. King's receiving the Nobel Peace Prize is particularly piercing in this context.)⁷ Unlike the "post-race" president some tout him to be, Obama in *Dreams* is acutely aware of not only the long history of racial strife in America but also the fact that the gains resulting from the civil rights movement have not rid America of its cancerous racist past. He dryly notes that, instead of resolving the problem of discrimination, America, at the time of his birth, "had already begun to weary of black demands for equality," suggesting that this weariness is as much a significant part of the legacy of the civil rights movement, albeit indirectly, as the legislation it fought to pass.

Having established the near miracle of his birth – a gesture that could be faulted as histrionic were it not for the fact that Obama grounds it in history and makes it emblematic of a larger set of experiences – he details the "fitful inter- or struggle" of raising himself "to be a black man in America," without the aid of familial models.⁸ By the time Obama is a young adolescent, he is living with his white grandparents, his father having gone to Africa, leaving him with only "a poet named Frank," a nearly eighty-year-old black male friend of his grandfather, as a guide. Obama is eager for other sources, and with a satiric edge, he considers how he turned to pop cul-

ture. "TV, movies, the radio; those were the places to start," he writes:

Pop culture was color-coded, after all, an arcade of images from which you could cop a walk, a talk, a step, a style. I couldn't croon like Marvin Gaye, but I could learn to dance all of the *Soul Train* steps. I couldn't pack a gun like Shaft or Superfly, but I could sure enough curse like Richard Pryor.⁹

Like Gunnar Kaufman, the protagonist of Paul Beatty's satirical novel, *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), Obama must learn to be "black," though apparently he does not suffer from Gunnar's rhythm problems (signaled by Beatty's title) since he has the aid of *Soul Train*.¹⁰ The connection to Beatty is not superficial, however: Obama heightens the satiric subtones of the opening chapters in part to mock his adolescent trials and tribulations (and thereby measure the height of his success, in the style of Ben Franklin and, later, Booker T. Washington) but also, like Beatty, to control the rage he feels against both his particular predicament (his fatherless and guideless journey) and the fact that black life can still be caged centuries after slavery. Like other members of the "post-soul" generation, Obama is keen to the "changing same" (to quote LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka) of American race relations in the post-civil rights era, in which essentialist notions of race have been questioned, further exposing the fiction of race, but racism has been increasingly institutionalized and made less visible, therefore also making it harder to combat.¹¹

Again, like Beatty's Gunnar, Obama takes up basketball as his ticket into black culture but quickly acknowledges that, in doing so, he "was living out a caricature of black male adolescence, itself a caricature of swaggering American manhood."¹² And yet it is on the

basketball court, partly through his friendship with a young black man named Ray, that he begins meditating on the "maddening" racial distortions he must sift through in the process of becoming an adult. Obama observes, almost bitterly, that black selfhood seems prefabricated by a racist and racially obsessed machinery with a long past. He writes, "[Y]ou couldn't even be sure that everything you had assumed was to be an expression of your black unfettered self – the humor, the song, the behind-the-back pass – had been freely chosen by you." He concludes:

Following this maddening logic, the only thing you could choose as your own was withdrawal into a smaller and smaller coil of rage, until being black meant only the knowledge of your own powerlessness, of your own defeat. And the final irony: Should you refuse this defeat and lash out at your captors, they would have a name for that, too, a name that could cage you just as good. Paranoid. Militant. Violent. Nigger.¹³

By the time he arrives in Chicago to do community work, Obama has realized that even black rage can be part of the prefabricated machinery; he is aware that "like sex or violence on TV, black rage always [finds] a ready market."¹⁴ Ultimately, by stepping outside the bounds of his own struggle with race in America, and by stepping outside of America altogether, as seen in the passages on Indonesia and, in particular, the long section dedicated to Kenya, Obama saves himself from following the "maddening logic" he outlines here. His stepping out does not necessarily free him from a dark view of racial conflict, however. In the section of *Dreams* dedicated to his Chicago experiences, Obama writes of "the knots of young men, fifteen or sixteen," hanging out in

ghetto corners, "their hoods up, their sneakers unlaced, stomping the ground in a delusory rhythm." He notes that these young men inherit prison records across generations.¹⁵ Here, the subtitle of *Dreams*, "A Story of Race and Inheritance," takes on darker tones than it might first suggest. As an individual, Obama may have survived the obstacles to black self-realization, but throughout his autobiography, he is acutely aware of the gap between him and other young black men who start as "boys with no margin for error." Obama realizes that they live in environments far less "forgiving" than the one that was available to him.¹⁶ In Chicago, he looks "into the eyes of the young men in wheelchairs," victims of gang warfare, "boys crippled before their prime, their eyes without a trace of self-pity, eyes so composed, already so hardened, that they served to frighten rather than to inspire." And here, as throughout the autobiography, Obama recognizes that the crippled and caged have inherited their predicament in ways that may be measured through the "hard statistics" of prison records, unemployment, and health and housing disparities that have come down generations but that also include the more imperceptible "internal struggles" that can lead to self-destruction.¹⁷

If Obama survives his internal struggles by stepping out of his own confines and even those of his country, the question remains: what propels this movement out? Family does not seem, at least at first glance, to provide a source of inspiration. His father, as I have noted, is absent, while his mother's notion of what it takes to raise a black man leaves much to be desired. Obama notes that, for his mother, "to be black was to be beneficiary of a great inheritance, a special destiny, glorious burdens that only we were

strong enough to bear ... [b]urdens we were to carry with style." While in Indonesia, she makes a concerted effort to acquaint young Obama with the history and culture of African Americans by showing him, in postcard-like fashion, "books on the civil rights movement, the recordings of Mahalia Jackson, the speeches of Dr. King."¹⁸ This kind of education leaves him wholly unprepared to face his maternal grandmother, who sends Obama deeper into a crisis when, after being harassed on different occasions at her bus stop, she refuses to take the bus to work because one of her harassers is black. Obama notes sadly that, while he never had a reason to doubt his grandmother's love, her "rawest fears" could be stoked by "men who could have easily been [his] brothers."¹⁹

If family does not provide inspiration for Obama, books seem to fare no better. Before the incident with his grandmother, Obama turns to W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison "to try to reconcile the world as I'd found it with the terms of my birth," but finds no solace. Instead, he finds that, despite valiant efforts, each author ultimately falls prey to the "anguish," "doubt," and "self-contempt" generated by racism. "Even DuBois's [*sic*] learning and Baldwin's love and Langston's humor eventually succumbed to its corrosive force," he writes, "each man finally forced to doubt art's redemptive power, each man finally forced to withdraw, one to Africa, one to Europe, one deeper into the bowels of Harlem, but all of them in the same weary flight, all of them exhausted, bitter men, the devil at their heels." Only Malcolm X's autobiography, with its "repeated acts of self-creation" and expressions of "sheer will" and "martial discipline," provides a vision of possibility.²⁰ Yet reading

Dreams, one can easily see how the very books Obama finds wanting help shape his own acts of self-creation.

In "Invisible Man: How Ralph Ellison Explains Barack Obama," writer and journalist David Samuels rightly argues that the structure of *Dreams*

loosely but deliberately mirrors the structure of Ellison's novel – a picaresque, which shows an intelligent and bookish young black man's struggle with internal and external definitions of self as he moves through a series of institutional settings and self-defining impulses cloaked in the garb of communal politics or culture: the campus anti-apartheid movement, black and anti-colonialist literature, community organizing, the black church.²¹

Unlike Ellison's novel, however, *Dreams* also takes into account what Samuels calls the "global dimension of the color line," a consequence that is, ironically, the effect of his parents' ineffectual efforts to raise him. For it is his mother who, despite her shortcomings, takes young Obama to Indonesia, where he begins to see, especially through his relationship to his stepfather Lolo, "the poverty, the corruption, the constant scramble for security" that people of color suffer in other countries.²² Later, and in the style of the African American literary tradition that he so consciously invokes, Obama orders the lessons he gathers not only in Indonesia but also in Kenya, where he goes in search of his African heritage, propelled by the silence and absence of his father.

In Kenya, Obama observes the world around him through a comparative lens. For example, an incident at a hotel, where African waiters rush to tend to American and European tourists, inspires a long meditation on old and new forms of colonialism and their similarities to American apartheid. The waiters ignore Oba-

ma, his sister Auma, and other Africans in favor of the tourists, prompting his sister to voice her bitterness but Obama to imagine their position. "Did our waiter know that black rule had come?" he wonders. "Did it mean anything to him?" Perhaps he has "learned that the same people who controlled the land before independence still control the same land, that he still cannot eat in the restaurants or stay in the hotels that the white man has built." Still, considers Obama, if "he's ambitious he will do his best to learn the white man's language and use the white man's machines, the same way the computer repairman in Newark or the bus driver back in Chicago does, with alternating spurts of enthusiasm or frustration but mostly with resignation." The comparison here, as elsewhere, is striking for its linkage of experiences spanning continents and centuries under the common sign of black struggle against the effects of racism. Obama notes that the waiter is old enough to remember the independence brought about by the Mau-Mau rebellion and that "a part of him may still cling" to its memory. Yet earlier he also notes, in another striking instance of comparison, that the Mau-Mau fighters, who at some point "played on all the fears of the colonial West, the same sort of fear that Nat Turner had once evoked in the antebellum South and coke-crazed muggers now evoked in the minds of whites in Chicago," did not leave a significant legacy, as evidenced by the signs of neocolonialism to which he pays witness. In the end, Obama imagines the waiter straddling "two worlds," between resignation and anger, "always off balance, playing whichever game staves off the bottomless poverty, careful to let his anger vent itself only on those with the same condition."²³

In the Chicago section of *Dreams*, Obama repeatedly shows that poor African

Americans straddle similar worlds and for similar reasons. Yet in the comparison he makes between the fear that the Mau-Mau rebels inspired and that inspired by Nat Turner and "coke-crazed muggers," he suggests that their straddling may be more precarious. It is curious in this respect that Obama did not choose a more recent figure to invoke uprising within the U.S. context. (He might have chosen Malcolm X or any major Black Panther figure.) He may have wanted to emphasize the distance between moments of black insurgency and disillusionment or to suggest the difficulty of maintaining the "balance" between anger and resignation (one thinks of Obama's own flirtation with drugs and the despondency that fuels it, at least as he represents it early in the autobiography). Perhaps more urgently, he may have wanted to offer a vision of what happens when you cannot sustain that balance. You become trapped by the very categories that you want to strike against: "Militant. Violent. Nigger." Taking into account the global dimensions of the color line reveals a world many times as troubled as the one Obama observes in America; at times it allows him to see, in even sharper focus, how dire and persistent the problem is both at home and abroad.

Obama's personal search for his inheritance in his paternal home yields similar results. Upon arriving in Africa, he enjoys the freedom that black Americans often feel when they first visit a predominantly black country. "You could see a man talking to himself as just plain crazy," he writes, "or read about the criminal on the front page of the daily paper and ponder the corruption of the human heart, without having to think about whether the criminal or lunatic said something about your own fate. Here the world was black, and you were

just you.”²⁴ He also enjoys what most black Americans *cannot* enjoy when they visit Africa: he is greeted by an extended family, one that he hardly knows. Yet as he searches for a way to understand the mystery of his father, he finds only the tragic story of his father’s self-destruction. Obama learns how, as David Samuels puts it, his father became “a scary polygamist who abused his wives and children and drank away his intellectual promise, then crippled himself in a car accident,” and finally killed himself in another one. Obama also re-creates the long story he hears from his grandmother (amounting to twenty-eight pages of embedded text) through which he learns the story of his grandfather, an intense and proud man who worked as a servant for a colonial family and whose troubled relationship with Obama’s father in many ways led to the latter’s self-destruction. At the end of the grandmother’s long story, Obama re-creates an entry from a book that his sister Auma gives him, a *Domestic Servant’s Pocket Register* in which his grandfather’s identity as a colonial servant is included:

Name: Hussein II Onyango
 Native Registration No. *Rwl A NBI 0976717*
 Race or Tribe: *Ja’Luo*
 Usual Place of Residence When Not Employed: *Kisumu*.
 Sex: M.
 Age: 35.
 Height and Build: 6’0” Medium.
 Complexion: Dark.
 Nose: Flat.
 Mouth: Large.
 Hair: Curly.
 Teeth: Six Missing.
 Scars, Tribal Marks, or Other Peculiarities: None.

In the context of *Dreams*, it is impossible not to think of bills of sale advertising chattel slaves in antebellum America when reading this entry, particularly the categories emphasizing phenotypic traits. Obama reproduces the entry along with reviews of his grandfather’s performance as a servant (one states that he “*performed his duties as a personal boy with admirable diligence*,” another that he “*was not worth 60 shillings per month*”), letters of inquiry to American colleges written by Obama’s father, and letters of recommendation written by an American in support of his application (“*given Mr. O’bama’s [sic] desire to serve his country, he should be given a chance, perhaps on a one-year basis*”). Reviewing this material at the end of his long narrative, Obama declares: “That was it, I thought to myself. My inheritance.”²⁵ The journey on which Obama has taken the reader ends not with a resolution of the mystery surrounding the father figure that opens the autobiography and haunts the text. Instead, we are left with Obama imagining the lives of his male ancestors in the same way that he imagines the life of the waiter who ignores him, using the little evidence he has.

Writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, Gregory Rodriguez called *Dreams* “lyrical yet interminable,” and, indeed, at times it feels as if Obama gathered every piece of evidence that there is no getting over race, in the United States as in the rest of world, and interweaved this evidence with his own struggle.²⁶ Yet the autobiography is decidedly not bleak or bitter. Rather, it offers Obama’s own version of the image that purportedly inspired the “audacity of hope” sermon that he hears in Chicago shortly before he leaves for Kenya. It is the image of a woman “atop a great mountain,” over which she sees a “fallen world” but still has the “audaci-

ty" to hope for its deliverance.²⁷ Obama gives us an expansive vision of our fallen world, but he leaves ambiguous what fuels his own sense of hope. It is hard to imagine Jeremiah Wright as the ultimate source of Obama's hope (though he coined the phrase). As David Samuels notes, Wright is a "religious con man who spread racist and anti-Semitic poison while having an alleged sexual affair with a white church secretary and milking his congregation for millions and a house in a gated community whose residents are overwhelmingly rich and white." And it is hard to imagine astute Obama falling for his charisma.

This is why it pays to read *Dreams* carefully, for while the text may not reveal what ultimately fuels Obama's hope, it does make clear that it is founded in a man's hard look at his life and the world around him. At best, the text offers possible sources for Obama's audacity. His peculiar inheritance may be one such source, even if, as a result of his parents' marriage and their own struggles in life, it turns out to be a dare to fashion a self through the "sheer will" and "martial discipline" that Obama admires in Malcolm X's autobiography. Curiously, he imagines his paternal grandfather's fate to have been similar. "He will have to reinvent himself," Obama thinks of the African grandfather who leaves the farms of his youth to work for white people. "Through force of will, he will create a life out of the scraps of an unknown world, and the memories of a world rendered obsolete."²⁸ From the retrospective viewpoint of writing, Obama projects his own experience onto a figure whose life he hardly knows but whose legacy is to push him to search beyond his own narrow struggles.

Dreams reveals that, beyond circumstance, it is love – the kind of transfor-

mative love that he imagines existed between his parents – that arguably sustains Obama's audacity to hope that the fallen world he sees can and will be changed for the better. It would seem then that despite Obama's early rejection of Baldwin as a source of guidance, the latter's belief in the redemptive power of love resonates in Obama's adult life. For however alienated he feels from his family, Obama repeatedly emphasizes the love that he receives from both his black *and* white relatives. And although he does not discuss his relationship with his wife, he ends his autobiography with his marriage. But Obama is also no sentimentalist. Much has been made (and certainly by Obama himself) of the fusion he represents as the product of an interracial and transnational family. But at least in *Dreams*, the effort to embody this fusion nearly tears him asunder. Love is there, like faith, as a force that goes beyond the sheer will and martial discipline that he can depend on; but neither faith nor love alone can provide transcendence. Listening to Jeremiah Wright's sermon on hope, Obama notes: "part of me continued to feel that this Sunday communion sometimes simplified our condition, that it could sometimes disguise or suppress the very real conflicts among us and would fulfill its promise only through action"; yet "I also felt for the first time how that spirit carried within it, nascent, incomplete, the possibility of moving beyond our narrow dreams."²⁹

Again and again, Obama seeks what will move him out beyond his "narrow dreams," though what propels him arguably remains a mystery, despite the possibilities that I have here entertained. And this is because *Dreams*, like the books by Wright, Du Bois, Hughes, Baldwin, and Ellison that Obama turns to for answers, emphasizes the struggle to face

the doubt, anger, and self-contempt produced by racism, although Obama's text only partially sheds light on what transcendence really entails. In the years since the original publication of *Dreams* and, especially, since the publication of the second edition in 2004,³⁰ the complex vision of race that the autobiography offers has been watered down and marketed as slogans, its starker aspects de-emphasized in order not to alienate readers like Michael Gledhill (of the *National Review*). Certainly, *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) has gone a long way toward achieving these goals (although

that book is not entirely devoid of the piercing honesty so fundamental to the autobiography).³¹ If, as David Samuels notes, Obama could not use the identity that he "so painstakingly created for himself" in *Dreams* once he became a presidential candidate, then the "price of his political success is that he is forced to sublimate the material he had so painfully excavated." And yet the existence of *Dreams* ensures that there is a record of Obama's experiences and beliefs before he became the political machine and the symbol of a supposedly post-racial America that he is now.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ In the sermon, Wright uses the phrase "the audacity to hope," which Obama later changes to "the audacity of hope."
- ² Michael Gledhill, "Who is Barack Obama?" *National Review* 60 (16) (September 1, 2008): 37 – 40.
- ³ Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 124.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 11 – 12; bold emphasis added.
- ⁷ Of course, one might argue that anti-miscegenation laws worked both ways: whites were equally prohibited from interracial marriage as were blacks. Moreover, during the civil rights struggle, blacks strove to make the point that they were not mainly after marriage with whites, which is what many whites persistently claimed. Whites could say that there was no law prohibiting blacks from marrying other blacks or even people of certain other races, only laws that prohibited them from marrying whites. Finally, blacks themselves generally had complex feelings about interracial marriage: most black women bitterly resented black men marrying white women, and interracial marriages on the whole were condemned as a sign of lack of race pride. It is thus interesting that Obama avoids the very charged issue of what attracted his black father to his white mother.
- ⁸ Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, 76.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.
- ¹⁰ Beatty's novel takes place in the late twentieth century and follows Gunnar, the "only cool black guy at Mestizo Mulatto Mongrel Elementary," the "all-white multicultural school" that he attends in Santa Monica. When his mother moves him and his family to a black and Latino ghetto in West Los Angeles, Gunnar undergoes a peculiar education: he must learn to transform from a slacker surfer, whose cultural associations are almost exclusively white, to a fast-talking street-smart ghetto kid who can hang with hard-core ballplayers and gangbangers. In other words, he must learn how to be "black." Paul Beatty, *The White Boy Shuffle* (New York: Picador, 1996); quote above appears on page 28.

- ¹¹ Author, critic, and filmmaker Nelson George defines the members of this generation as those born roughly between the March on Washington in 1963 and the landmark case, *The Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), which imposed limitations on affirmative action. See Nelson George, *Post-Soul Nation: The Explosive, Contradictory, Triumphant, and Tragic 1980s as Experienced by African Americans (Previously Known as Blacks and Before that Negroes)* (New York: Viking Adult, 2004). One might also consider expanding the "post-soul" era to include the period immediately preceding it (1953 to 1964, or, the period between the end of the Korean War and the beginning of the Vietnam War and the War on Poverty). People born during that period would also have been too young to have directly participated in much of the civil rights movement.
- ¹² Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, 79.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 85.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 252.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 270.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 252.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 50 – 51.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 85 – 86.
- ²¹ The fact that the nameless protagonist of Ellison's novel is a powerful orator, though not always in control of his own gifts, may have resonated with Obama, whose own capacity for oratory has carried him far but has also placed a certain uncanny burden on him. See David Samuels, "Invisible Man: How Ralph Ellison Explains Barack Obama," *The New Republic*, October 22, 2008, <http://www.tnr.com/article/invisible-man>.
- ²² Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, 50.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 311 – 312, 315.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 311.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 425 – 427.
- ²⁶ Gregory Rodriguez, "Is Obama the New 'Black'?" *Los Angeles Times*, December 17, 2006, <http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/opinion/la-op-rodriguez17dec17,0,7336980.column>.
- ²⁷ Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, 294.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 427.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 294.
- ³⁰ The 2004 edition includes a new preface written by Obama as well as the Democratic National Convention keynote speech that he delivered in July 2004.
- ³¹ As Michiko Kikutani puts it, *The Audacity of Hope* is "much more of a political document" than is *Dreams*. "Portions of the volume read like outtakes from a stump speech, and the bulk of it is devoted to laying out Mr. Obama's policy positions on a host of issues, from education to health care to the war in Iraq"; Michiko Kikutani, "Obama's Foursquare Politics, with a Dab of Dijon," *The New York Times*, October 17, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/17/books/17kaku.html>. At the same time, an Ellisonian sensibility underwrites parts of the new book. David Samuels notes that the "tragic thrust of Ellison's novel is often reduced to the banality that black people are invisible to white people." Yet "Ellison's deeper point is that the symbolic and actual baggage of race makes it difficult if not impossible for a black man to ever realize his full humanity in the eyes of anyone – white, black, communist, capitalist, or himself." This insight echoes through-

out *Dreams* and resonates powerfully in passages of *The Audacity of Hope*, such as when Obama writes, “I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views.” As Samuels argues, here “Obama seems to agree with Ellison about the effect of the racial baggage that people bring to his public performance as a politician. The black candidate is rendered invisible to his white audience, a fact that would appear to leave him with little choice but to use that blindness in a strategic way if he wishes to lead.” See Samuels, “Invisible Man.”

Glenda R.
Carpio

On Post-Racial America in the Age of Obama

Amina Gautier

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I had the chance to travel to Washington, D.C., to witness the moment when U.S. Senator Barack Obama became President Barack Obama. Regrettably, I passed up that opportunity to attend the inauguration of our forty-fourth president, a chance many I know would have immediately leaped upon. The offer to attend dropped into my lap at almost the ninth hour and was tenuous at best, resting on the whims of three people (only one of whom I knew) and on a road trip from the Midwest to the East Coast. Furthermore, my native New Yorker's sensibility – ever-present despite having lived away from home and in numerous other cities for more than a decade – argued against the idea of joining record-breaking numbers in a D.C. crowd. Real New Yorkers leave the crowds, parades, and New Year's Eve ball-drop to tourists and New York transplants, knowing that monumental events lose nothing by virtue of being televised and that watching a televised parade or national observance is much safer than subjecting oneself to a crowd's trampers and snipers. Indeed, despite being the nation's capital, Washington, D.C., has never struck me as particularly safe. (There is, after all, a reason the Washington Bullets changed their name to the Washington Wizards.)

I did not share with many others I knew the same level of enthusiasm that would have compelled me to ride halfway across the country in a car with one friend and two strangers only to arrive and stand outside for hours on a blustery cold day. I would

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be huddled among strangers, blocked by much taller people in front of me, all to see something I would almost certainly be standing too far away from to see in the first place. Unlike the dignitaries, I would not have heating devices sewn into my clothing (as Michelle Obama did) to keep me warm while I kept vigil. Therefore, I reasoned that if I had to watch the event on a screen, I might as well watch it on television from the safety of my own home, surrounded by such creature comforts as food, heat, and an easily accessible restroom.

So, on January 20, 2009, I sat in my living room in my small apartment in St. Louis for most of the morning and watched the inaugural proceedings while preparing the class I was to teach later that day. In the middle of the afternoon, I went to the university (Washington University in St. Louis, where I was on a temporary postdoctoral fellowship) to teach my class on African American literature written after the Reconstruction. I returned home afterward to watch more inaugural proceedings.

My lack of enthusiasm to stand in the crowd on Inauguration Day in no way reflected a lack of enthusiasm for the incoming president. More important than the thoughts of inconvenience and potential danger to my person were other thoughts, deeply embedded in my subconscious that encouraged my refusal to attend and, ultimately, led to the missed opportunity. Unlike many white Americans, I had not been surprised by Obama's candidacy or election to the presidency (nor would I have been surprised by any other black person's election). I was, however, at turns fearful that the inauguration would go wrong and the new president would be the victim of a violent melee. My sense of being both nonplussed and fearful derived from one source: the cultural memory

that has been bandying about the idea of black presidency for more than thirty years.

For African Americans of my generation (those born in the late 1970s), having a black president signifies something entirely different than it does for African Americans born earlier. On the night of his presidential election, Barack Obama spoke anecdotally about Ann Nixon Cooper in his acceptance speech. One hundred and six years old at the time she cast her vote in the 2008 election, Ann Nixon Cooper was used to symbolize the idea of change. Having lived more than one hundred years, Cooper exemplified the scope and nature of change in our nation. She represented how much can change in one's lifetime, how one can be born into a certain kind of life, molded and influenced by the policies of the day, and yet live through them to see change that heretofore had been unimaginable. Ann Nixon Cooper lived to see something my great-grandmother could not fathom. A woman who marveled at the new "trend" of babies being born with their eyes open, who was warily perplexed and distrustful of the invention of Pampers in the 1970s, my great-grandmother lived long enough to hear only the rumor of black presidential candidacy.

In April 1984, when I was seven years old and in second grade, my great-grandmother lay dying in a Brooklyn hospital. While visiting there, my mother told her the news she had recently read in the newspaper.

"Mama," my mother said to her, using the endearment by which we all called her. "Guess what?"

"What?" my great-grandmother asked, dispirited, weary, and in incurable pain.

"A black man is going to run for president!"

“Really? He is?” my great-grandmother asked in a voice filled with wonder, her pain momentarily gone.

My great-grandmother died on Easter Sunday in 1984. She did not live to see the Reverend Jesse Jackson run for president, but she died in awe of the imminent possibility.

I knew of many stories like the one that occurred in my family, of African Americans who held out hope for a black president, yet who did not expect ever to see such a momentous event occur within their own lifetimes.

I was not one of those folks. Unlike those born before the 1970s, I never asked *if* I would be so lucky as to live long enough to see the first black president in my country. Instead, the way playmates and classmates of mine calculated how old we would be when the millennium came, I asked myself how old I would be *when* my country inaugurated our first black president. What existed as possibility in the eyes of my ancestors was an inevitability in mine. I did not take the occasion for granted, however. I fully understood that the moment, when it came, would not have materialized out of thin air. Indeed, the idea of a black president is one that has been circulating in popular culture since the beginning of the post-civil rights era, of which I am a product.

The idea that a black president was on the way had been planted – undoubtedly – by the seeds of the civil rights era, nourished in American popular culture of the 1980s and 1990s, and watered to grow tall and willowy in African American cultural memory. We (black Americans) had spoken about the idea for quite some time. Whether in seriousness or jest, we knew it to be a real possibility.

On the political front, three black Americans paved the way. Dick Gregory’s 1968

campaign as a write-in for the Freedom and Peace Party, the 1972 bid by Shirley Chisholm – the first black woman elected to Congress – for the Democratic presidential nomination, and Jesse Jackson’s 1984 and 1988 bids for the Democratic presidential nomination accustomed America to the idea of a black president in the post-civil rights era. Media and popular culture went one step further, embedding the idea of a black president in the consciousness of African Americans. On the airwaves, hip hop verses testified to rappers voting for Shirley Chisholm (Biz Markie and LL Cool J, among others, have lyrics that directly refer to Chisholm’s candidacy), and running commentary on black presidential candidates loomed large on the silver screen.

As early as 1974, the pilot episode of *Good Times* mentions such a possibility. When the Evans family must raise the rent money necessary to prevent them from being evicted, all the Evans children offer to contribute their meager savings. The youngest, Michael (Ralph Carter), tells his father, “I’ll give you two dollars I’ve been saving up for law school.” Although grateful and humbled, James Evans (John Amos) refuses his children’s money. In response to Michael’s dream, James pushes him further: “Boy, I believe you can skip lawyer and go right on to president!” On August 17, 1983, clad in a red leather jacket and matching pants, Eddie Murphy delivered his *Delirious* comedy routine at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. In his performance, he referred to Jesse Jackson’s presidential campaign: “Jesse knows that it can happen. I see him running around the track – I said ‘why are you getting in shape?’ He said ‘Because I’m about to be the first black president. I’ll have to give my speeches like this. My fellow

Americans, as your president I feel” Impersonating Jackson, Murphy runs back and forth across the stage, pivoting several times, making quick reverses, revealing quick and fancy footwork. He then switches characters and, holding an imaginary firearm in his hands, squints one eye shut and cries, “He won’t stand still” – an impersonation of a white sniper attempting to target Jackson and assassinate the first black president.

In 1989, an episode of *A Different World* titled “Citizen Dwayne” (the show was a spinoff of *The Cosby Show*) juxtaposed Dwayne Wayne’s (Kadeem Hardison) run for student body president with the Reverend Jesse Jackson’s unsuccessful presidential bid. Running on a campaign devoted to such issues as the need to charge admission to student dances in order to fund scholarships and maintain the campus paper and film society – to “party with a purpose,” as he puts it – Dwayne is smeared by his opponent Teresa, who warns students, “Don’t vote for Dwayne; he’s a wallet drain!” Appearing as himself, the Reverend Jesse Jackson tells Dwayne not to withdraw his name from the race, despite Dwayne’s belief that “no one on this campus cares about the issues. This is the ME generation.” Jackson relates his own unsuccessful first campaign, reminding Dwayne that the only reason people listen to him when he speaks is because “I wouldn’t give up.” He tells Dwayne, “You must stand up if you want to be a leader. You can’t cook with cold grease. A man can’t be heard if he stops talking.” Dwayne doubts the effectuality of just one individual, but Jackson assures him, “[I]t was always started by some young person who thought they could make a difference. One person can make a difference. Hands that picked cotton can now pick presidents.” Jackson leaves Dwayne with a message about the power

resulting when hope and determination are forged together – a combination called change.

As a child, I grew up with the understanding that a black American, male or female, could indeed become the president of the United States. It was not a hope as it was for my great-grandmother born in the early twentieth century. It was not a wish and the punch line of a joke as it was for those – like my mother – who matured in an era of war, national crisis, and the seemingly never-ending assassinations of civil rights leaders. It was a reality, a truth, a part of my life, something I understood would happen just as I understood that I would attend college upon graduating from high school. Because I had internalized this expectation, I understand the 2008 election as the start of a new discussion on race relations in America rather than the end of a discussion that has only ever been had in whispers and hushes and not full voices, through monologue and soliloquy rather than dialogue, through allegory, metaphor, and figurative language rather than direct speech. Therefore, I must admit to being utterly confounded by the claims that President Obama’s election signifies the beginning of a “post-racial” America.

I find the term *post-racial* to be not only problematic and disconcerting, but grammatically incorrect. As elementary school students learn in language arts classes across the country, *post-* is a Latin prefix meaning “after”; it is the opposite of the Latin prefix *ante-*, which means “before.” In order for something to come “after,” something else must have come “before.” Thus, *post-* always has something previous in mind. As a professor of African American literature and, by extension, a student of history, when I hear the term *post-racial* I am immediately reminded of

other terms that invoke the prefix: post-Reconstruction, post-feminism, post-colonialism, post-World War, post-Cold War, post-civil rights. As becomes quickly apparent, all other *post-* designations follow the rules. They are temporal and finite, referring to a clearly defined movement or historical era by which they were preceded. For example, the post-Reconstruction era is easily definable as the period after Reconstruction, ushered in by the Compromise of 1877, which secured the presidency of Rutherford B. Hayes and saw the removal of remaining federal troops from Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina.

The term *post-racial* seems an errant phrase. In order for there to be a “post-racial” America, there must previously have been a “racial America.” To affix the prefix *post-* to a word implies a completion, hence the strident debates over the use of the term *post-feminism*, which many have argued diminishes the importance of feminism by implying that the movement is over, though its goals have not been met. As history will attest, the freedmen suffered terribly in the “post-Reconstruction” era, left as they were for another one hundred years without any real enforcement of the civil rights that would have given meaning to the word *freedom*. Indeed, reformers (convinced that the good fight was over now that the slave was free) turned their focus to other projects, and the freedmen’s rights were repealed and repressed during “Bourbon-led Redemption.”

One recent experience brought home to me very clearly the fact that we are not actually “post-” anything. At the beginning of the Fall 2009 semester at the small liberal arts college where I was then teaching, students clamored to join clubs and recruit members for their organizations. They turned to advertising and marketing strategies to

distinguish themselves and attract members, using the usual methods of offering T-shirts and free food. Nearly every flyer I saw plastered to a pole or posted on a corkboard promised free pizza and soda for all who came. One student group, however, did not use free goodies to tempt the masses. A poster for the College Republicans depicted President Obama as the Joker from *Dark Knight*, the 2008 film that is part of the Batman film series.

Arriving early to teach my class, I overheard one student discussing the poster with another classmate. “It’s just the Joker,” she said. “It’s no big deal. It’s not even racial.” Her willful resistance to consider what the Joker represents in the film struck me as particularly ignorant and deliberately naive. The poster was – and is – as undoubtedly “racial” as any picture of a black man in whiteface must be. The wide red lips and greasepaint recall minstrelsy, and invoking the Joker as he appears in *Dark Knight* is an allusion to terrorism. The Joker of the *Dark Knight* is not the joker of a deck of playing cards: not the prank-playing court-jester type of joker, but unquestionably a terrorist; a man who disguises his face while he commits acts of robbery, burglary, and murder, a man who attacks agents of law enforcement, assaults innocent men and women, partners with crime lords, and prefers anarchy to democracy. That the white students could design and defend the poster seems not only racial, but treasonous. The use of the poster to attract students, the approval of the poster by residential life staff, and the denial of the poster’s inappropriateness and offensive nature assure me that – even if the rules of grammar would sustain the terminology – the age of Obama is not a “post-racial” age by any definition whatsoever.

Justice & Racial Conciliation: Two Visions

Tommie Shelby

Many Americans, from all racial backgrounds, are rightly proud that their nation has elected its first black president.¹ In a society long weary of its race problem, such a momentous event has led some to assert that we have, definitively, realized Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream. King, though still reviled in some quarters, is widely regarded as one of the founders of our new post-segregation republic. His interpretation of the American dream is a touchstone for measuring racial progress in the post-civil rights era. It is therefore an appropriate time to revisit Dr. King's vision for race relations in U.S. society.

Indeed, Obama is frequently compared to King. Some of the comparisons flatter the president; others do not. However, I will not weigh side by side the personal character or practical achievements of the two men. Clearly, both leaders are highly educated and charismatic; both have a gift for oratory and the ability to inspire; and both have made indelible marks on U.S. history. But because of differences in their respective vocations – mass movement leader and minister, on the one hand; Democratic Party politician and elected official, on the other – and because Obama is operating within a very different historical context than did King, any such comparison is likely to be misleading and unfair. Yet we can reflect on, and learn from, these figures' respective visions for American race relations. With this purpose in mind, I focus on *ideas*, on the philosophy that

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should underpin political practice. My primary concern is the mounting influence of a particular vision of race in the United States, one that I believe deserves more skepticism, or at least much less enthusiasm, than it is currently receiving.

Any vision for race relations in America should first be rooted in an honest and historically informed assessment of existing racial realities. Second, it should outline basic ideals, the intermediate and ultimate goals for which we ought to strive. Finally, the vision should specify the means by which we are to realize its stated ideals *given* prevailing racial realities. I am not interested in utopian fantasies but in realistic ideas. Though they often speak of their “dreams” and “hopes,” King and Obama are both practical thinkers. Their writings and speeches on race explain where we are (including how we got here), where we should be going, and how we can get there. Their visions have much in common. But Obama’s vision, politically shrewd and pragmatic though it may be, is marred by its defective moral content. Comparing his vision with King’s reveals this deficiency.

In his famous “I Have a Dream” speech (1963), King described the racial realities of his day.² He emphasized that although slavery in the United States had ended one hundred years before, black Americans were still not free. Life chances for blacks were severely diminished, “crippled” by racial segregation and widespread discrimination. Blacks were mostly poor despite living in a society with tremendous wealth. A great many were socially marginalized and isolated in slums. Blacks did not have equal citizenship because they were denied the rights to vote and hold public office. They were victims of police brutality and vicious acts of domestic terrorism. Under constant assault by racist ideology, blacks

struggled to maintain self-respect and self-esteem.

The Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965) helped to break through the legal barriers to black inclusion in American social life, to curb discrimination, and to empower blacks politically. King thus proclaimed in *Where Do We Go from Here?* (1967) that many whites had come to accept racial equality, at least in principle, and to reject de jure segregation and discrimination. Nevertheless, troubling racial disparities – in income, education, wealth, employment, health, and poverty – caused by continuing discrimination and centuries of gross mistreatment and abuse, remained unaddressed. He argued that racist opposition was not the only reason these disparities had yet to be met with an adequate response. An equally if not more difficult obstacle was that most whites, even many who rejected racism, resisted racial justice measures that might have a personal cost. As King wrote, “The great majority of Americans . . . are uneasy with injustice but unwilling yet to pay a significant price to eradicate it.”³ In response to this resistance, King reminded us that meaningful attempts to bring about a just society have unavoidable costs. Quality education for all children, decent and well-paying jobs for adults, and the eradication of slums for the benefit of the poor require great resources.

King was committed to the fundamental ideals of racial equality and integration. He understood the former as a demand of social justice that could be described in terms of two principles. First, each citizen, regardless of his or her race, should enjoy equal civic standing and the equal protection of the law. Justice does not permit second-class citizenship on the basis of race. Second, government should ensure that no one’s basic rights are curtailed or general life prospects

reduced because of the racial prejudice of others. It is not enough that the *state* refrain from treating some citizens as if they were civic inferiors unworthy of equal concern and respect. Private individuals and associations must be made to follow suit, at least when individuals' basic liberties or vital socioeconomic opportunities are at issue.

Moving toward racial equality required a concrete policy of desegregation. The primary goal of desegregation was to abolish the unfair exclusions and prohibitions of Jim Crow, a social system that gave whites privileges and advantages they did not merit, deprived blacks of rights and opportunities they deserved, and generally stigmatized black people as inferior. To end discrimination in housing, education, employment, and lending, nondiscrimination laws needed to be enacted and scrupulously enforced. In the political sphere, achieving racial equality meant granting blacks the unfettered right to vote and hold political office.

The civil rights movement, through litigation and persistent pressure on Congress and several presidents, abolished a hideous and terrifying race-based regime. Previously, the subordination of blacks was the law of the land in the South, and discrimination against blacks was widespread throughout the country. Many, then and now, see this tremendous victory as the end of the struggle for racial equality. King did not share this view. He recognized that the many decades of slavery and Jim Crow had severely disadvantaged blacks (especially in education, employment, wealth, and housing) and had injured their self-respect and psychological well-being. Even if the new civil rights laws were impartially and effectively enforced, the damage inflicted by the long reign of white supremacy would remain. Repairing it was an urgent issue

of racial justice. Certainly, in a market society, where competition determines most people's life prospects, "the pursuit of happiness" as an equal right of all citizens would not be guaranteed until blacks were no longer handicapped by the legacy of white domination.

According to King, justice, in its most basic sense, means giving persons what they are due. Fulfilling this demand often means treating everyone the same. But sometimes it calls for treating people *differently*. This point has particular relevance with regard to serious injustices, whereby a certain class of persons has suffered mistreatment and is disadvantaged as a result. As King says in *Why We Can't Wait* (1963), "[O]ur society has been doing something special *against* the Negro for hundreds of years. How then can he be absorbed into the mainstream of American life if we do not do something special *for* him now, in order to balance the equation and equip him to compete on a just and equal basis?"⁴ Many people – perhaps relying on the familiar line about being judged by the content of one's character rather than by one's skin color – wrongly believe that King rejected reparations and all other race-targeted, compensatory measures for black Americans. In fact, he supported such recompense:

Few people consider the fact that, in addition to being enslaved for two centuries, the Negro was, during all those years, robbed of the wages of his toil. No amount of gold could provide an adequate compensation for the exploitation and humiliation of the Negro in America down through the centuries. Not all the wealth of this affluent society could meet the bill. Yet a price can be placed on unpaid wages. The ancient common law has always provided a remedy for the appropriation of the labor of

one human being by another. This law should be made to apply for American Negroes. The payment should be in the form of a massive program by the government of special, compensatory measures which could be regarded as a settlement in accordance with the accepted practice of common law.⁵

In addition to the ideal of racial equality, King advocated integration. From a *political* perspective, integration is linked to the requirements of justice. Certainly, blacks and other racial minorities should not be formally excluded from participating in the social, economic, and political life of the nation. But these previously excluded groups should also be actively included as equal and indispensable participants. Such inclusion should not amount to tokenism, in which a small non-white elite is created, integrated, and made to represent symbolically the “progress” of their respective groups, leaving most in those factions still socially marginalized and politically powerless. Justice requires that whites fully share power and decision-making with non-whites, erasing all signs of white domination. The members of different racial groups must ultimately recognize their mutual dependence and equal status; they must solve their problems together. Integration, in this sense, is the realization of the republican ideal of collective self-determination in a multi-racial society.

King was also intensely concerned with the *ethical* side of integration. In “The Ethical Demands for Integration” (1962), he explained that our goal should not be mere desegregation and nondiscrimination.⁶ Rather, we must aim to build a society in which the members of different races have a sense of goodwill toward one another and think of themselves as collectively constituting one people. We

should not be content with interracial détente; we should strive for interracial civic friendship – that is, fraternity in a multi-racial society of equals. This unity should be founded on mutual respect and understanding. King evokes the ethical dimension of integration in his memorable line, “I have a dream that one day on the hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.”⁷

The goal of mere desegregation is deficient in part because it suggests that we should be satisfied if nondiscrimination laws are obeyed out of prudence (to avoid legal sanctions, for example) or out of general respect for the law. For King, it was crucial that we obey these laws not simply because we fear punishment or recognize the authority of law, but because such laws are morally right: because they embody the worthy ideal of integration.

Racial equality and political integration, King insisted, were pressing matters of justice and thus enforceable through law. On the other hand, he did not believe that the ethical ideal of interracial unity could be enforced. Implementing legislation, along with its steadfast enforcement, is definitely essential to regulating the behavior of those who refuse to respect the demands of justice. Furthermore, a racially just polity is a necessary condition for genuine interracial fraternity. However, trust, respect, and mutual concern cannot be achieved through law enforcement. A complete resolution of the race problem in America therefore requires that each individual willingly commits to integration.

To achieve his stated ends, King supported militant mass protest. He believed in uncompromising dissent from and active agitation against racial injustice. This resistance should take the form of

organized boycotts, civil disobedience, and public demonstrations. These tactics sought to highlight egregious wrongs and expose hypocrisy, to awaken and motivate the morally complacent majority, and to put economic and political pressure on those with the power to change conditions. King is part of a long and venerable tradition of freedom fighters who fervently believe that injustices are never corrected without the determination and hard work of individuals openly fighting together for what is right.

King held central the precept that in the struggle to achieve racial equality and integration, we must use means that are as pure as the ends we seek. The principle “by any means necessary” was not to his mind a morally permissible stance, even for a severely oppressed people. Moreover, he was convinced that morally suspect measures could never realize our ideals; the ethical means available were sufficient. King further cautioned against destroying our chances of reaching our ultimate goals by using means designed to secure short-term or intermediate ends.

For these reasons, King believed that the fight for racial justice and integration must be nonviolent. He frequently admonished blacks to reject political violence and not to succumb to hatred and blanket mistrust of whites. To be sure, violent resistance would be ineffective: blacks lacked the resources and tactical means to win a confrontation with white racists; black aggression would give white supremacists an excuse to slaughter blacks not in the movement, thus undermining black communal support; and violence would alienate needed white allies and obscure the moral issues the struggle meant to highlight. King also objected to political violence on moral principle. Such tactics were simply wrong, regardless of whether they could secure concessions from those in power. Even if

political violence could achieve some intermediate goals – such as curbing police brutality and discouraging white terrorism – it would undermine the ultimate goal of interracial fraternity.

King also rejected black separatism, not only as an ideal but as a means to black liberation. Undertaking the struggle for racial equality and integration demanded interracial cooperation. Beyond the pragmatic point that blacks could not succeed alone, King objected to racial separatism on moral grounds. Not all whites are untrustworthy or malicious, he contended, and blacks should not treat them as if they were. To reject white participants in the movement would dishonor those whites who made great sacrifices – including the ultimate sacrifice – in the pursuit of racial justice. Moreover, interracial fraternity will arrive only after the various racial groups in America recognize that they have a “common destiny”: to live together as one people. Such mutual understanding and respect between the races can come about only through frequent contact and cooperation. In *Where Do We Go from Here?* King makes this point forcefully and eloquently: “Since we [black people] are Americans the solution to our problem will not come through seeking to build a separate black nation within a nation, but by finding that creative minority of the concerned from the oft-times apathetic majority, and together moving toward that colorless power that we all need for security and justice.”⁸

In his books and speeches (especially those focused on race), Obama frequently invokes, explicitly and implicitly, King’s dream for America.⁹ He endorses King’s ideals of racial equality and integration, regarding an end to discrimination and prejudice, the elimination of racial disparities, and interracial unity as ultimate

goals. Though many of his supporters – and detractors, for that matter – view his ascent to the presidency as confirmation that the bounced check King lamented has finally been cashed, and that we now live in a “post-racial” society, Obama has consistently cautioned against this interpretation of current racial realities. In *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), for example, he writes, “[T]o say that we are one people is not to suggest that race no longer matters – that the fight for equality has been won, or that the problems that minorities face in this country today are largely self-inflicted.”¹⁰

In “A More Perfect Union” (2008), the famous speech Obama delivered in Philadelphia (“the city of brotherly love”), he forthrightly stated that, while we have made undeniable progress, the problem of race has not been solved.¹¹ Existing racial disparities – in education, wealth, and income – are, he claims, in part the debilitating consequences of slavery and Jim Crow. Pervasive discrimination in the past – in housing, employment, and lending – explains the current racial disparities in wealth and income. The fact that blacks were prevented from amassing assets they might pass on to their children largely accounts for urban and rural poverty. As he observed in his remarks at the 2009 NAACP Centennial Convention, the highest barriers to racial equality today are the structural inequalities that are the legacy of racial injustice in the United States.¹²

Indeed, while Obama often emphasizes how the injustices of the past still shape our present, he also highlights current racial injustices. In *The Audacity of Hope*, he explains how degrading racial stereotypes and unconscious bias lead to discrimination in employment and law enforcement. In his controversial statements about the arrest of Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. – remarks

that, in his haste to quell the controversy, he did not retract – Obama made it clear that he believes racial profiling of blacks and Latinos remains a serious problem. He has publicly registered his opposition to a recent immigration law, passed in Arizona in April 2010, on the grounds that it will invite racial profiling and harassment of Latinos. In his Philadelphia speech on race, he called the racial achievement gap a result of the segregated and inferior public schools that serve minorities. Black families are often weak or broken not just because of irresponsible fathers, but because black men have been denied equal economic opportunity. He claimed that a lack of basic public services in poor black neighborhoods (effective law enforcement, parks, regular garbage pick-up, and building-code enforcement, for example) has fostered urban violence and blight. Though some blacks, he noted, have heroically triumphed over many obstacles to succeed (sometimes aided by affirmative action policies), others have been unable to defeat these unfair odds. Instead, they often dwell in our deteriorated urban centers or languish in our prisons without hope or prospects.

What is to be done? As Obama said on the one hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the oldest civil rights organization in America, “[T]he first thing we need to do is make real the words of the NAACP charter and eradicate prejudice, bigotry, and discrimination among citizens of the United States.” He has also consistently made clear the need to vigorously enforce nondiscrimination and civil rights laws. In other words, a person’s ability to acquire a stable and well-paying job, decent and affordable housing, credit at fair interest rates, or quality education should not be hampered by the racial prejudice and bias of others. Moreover, it is the responsibility of gov-

ernment to ensure that this principle is realized; market forces are not sufficient. Obama also believes that we must guarantee fairness and impartiality in our criminal justice system. Due process is a basic civil right, and racism, whether conscious or not, must not be allowed to abridge this fundamental liberty.

How are we to respond to the racial disparities and inherited disadvantages caused by historical injustices? Obama does not support reparations for the descendants of slaves or the victims of the segregation regime, though he concedes that affirmative action in higher education can be a useful, if limited, tool to expand opportunity for under-represented racial minorities. Instead, he favors universal programs that aim to help all who are disadvantaged, regardless of race, over policies that aim to compensate or aid specific racial groups. Because racial minorities are disproportionately disadvantaged, he reasons, they will reap a large share of the benefits of such policies.

In *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama offers two reasons to explain why an emphasis on universal programs over race-specific ones makes good political sense. The first is that white guilt has run out. White Americans now resent blacks' continuing grievances and sense of victimhood. Thus, they do not support policies that grant the legitimacy of black claims of injustice. Second, whites perceive that spending our limited public resources on further attempts to create racial equality or end ghetto poverty runs contrary to their self-interest. Such efforts not only mean higher taxes; they mean fewer public resources to aid whites. Obama concludes that policies to help all in need – which would, in theory, disproportionately aid racial minorities – should be favored in the current context. He believes universal policies will more likely

garner multiracial support, including white support. Like King, Obama is convinced that we cannot establish a just society without interracial cooperation. Thus, we must chart a course to bridge the racial divide and foster racial conciliation.

But there are further obstacles to the realization of this vision, and Obama is keenly aware of them. In “A More Perfect Union,” he explained that as a result of our history of racism and the pain it has caused, many blacks remain angry – at times, bitter. Though sometimes justified, anger can be counterproductive. Not only can it blind blacks to their responsibility to improve their own condition, but it can prevent the formation of interracial alliances essential for real social change. Obama noted that some working- and middle-class whites are angry, too. They do not believe they are privileged by their race; they believe they have earned everything they have. They were not the ones who committed the injustices against blacks and thus feel no obligation to correct historical wrongs. Besides, they face serious economic challenges of their own, challenges that threaten their hopes and dreams. They resent when desegregation efforts mean their children are bused to schools outside their neighborhoods; when affirmative action allows racial minorities to gain advantages in employment and education; and when they are accused of racism for expressing fears about black crime.

As with black anger, Obama insists that white resentment toward racial minorities is often counterproductive. It distracts, he said, from the “real culprits” behind the economic insecurity that all working- and middle-class people experience: namely, a corporate culture of greed, a government that answers to corporate interests but is unresponsive to the needs of ordinary citizens, and eco-

conomic policies that favor the wealthy. At times, Obama seems committed to an underlying social theory that considers it counterproductive to challenge whites directly for clinging to racist ideologies. These ideologies, so the theory goes, are ultimately rooted in a widespread sense of economic insecurity and political powerlessness among whites. It is better to attack the roots of the problem – corporate dominance over our lives and our democracy – without condemning whites for harboring racist attitudes and accepting racial stereotypes. If, through interracial cooperation and collective resolve, we fix these underlying problems, then this kind of racism should, more or less, take care of itself. In the meantime, we shore up enforcement of nondiscrimination laws so that blacks and Latinos are protected from the most serious consequences of white racism.

Obama thinks we can, or at least should, set aside old racial divisions and work together to achieve common goals. For blacks, such cooperation is not possible without equal citizenship and just treatment in all dimensions of American life. But blacks should not insist that their particular grievances be addressed independently of measures designed to ensure justice and opportunity for all. There are non-blacks, including whites, who also need government to protect them and provide economic opportunity. He calls on the white community to acknowledge that black disadvantage is caused in part by discrimination, past and present. Nonetheless, he thinks we should address these inequities not through race-specific policies but through enforcement of nondiscrimination laws and universal policies that create more opportunity for all.

The famous Philadelphia speech on race ends with an anecdote about two campaign workers, one white and one black, a story Obama says he first told

on King's birthday at Ebenezer Baptist Church, where both King and his father had served as pastor. The lessons we are to take from the story are, I believe, these: whites who lack economic security should not blame blacks and Latinos but, rather, should seek them out as allies against the injustices caused by corporate greed, corrupt political leadership, and the super-wealthy who want to keep all benefits of economic growth for themselves and their progeny; blacks and Latinos, in turn, should not allow their racial grievances and sense of victimhood to prevent them from forming productive alliances with whites who have similar problems.

Obama's fundamental goals of racial equality and integration are worthy. Moreover, his assessment of current racial realities and their historical roots is, I believe, accurate. However, I am troubled by his proposed way forward. I see four related problems, all of which stem from Obama's failure to heed King's precept: to use means as pure as our ends. First, Obama asks blacks to shoulder too much of the burden of racial conciliation and demands too little of whites. Indeed, in the name of interracial unity, his approach would actually reward white resistance to racial-justice measures. Second, Obama's vision would require that we use morally suspect tactics, including compromising with, and remaining silent in the face of, injustice and racial prejudice. Third, setting aside their questionable moral standing, the means Obama advocates are not aligned with his stated ends of racial equality and interracial fraternity, appearances notwithstanding. Finally, his strategy, though perhaps it would secure some intermediate and worthwhile goals, might inhibit our ability to reach the ultimate objectives of racial justice and interracial comity.

Obama has consistently stated that both current discrimination and the legacy of past discrimination help explain existing racial inequalities and black disadvantage, and he believes these injustices have not been adequately addressed. If this interpretation is correct, then blacks' sense of grievance – their continuing anger – is warranted. Of course, when this anger becomes rage and thus leads to cathartic violence or irrational hatred of all whites, which it sometimes has, it is not just counterproductive but abhorrent. It is not hard to see why whites would be put off by such anger, especially those with a demonstrated commitment to racial justice. But when properly targeted and proportionate to the wrong that has elicited it, anger can be politically constructive and a healthy sign of self-respect. It can open one's eyes to similar injustices suffered by others; it can inspire one to take action; and, when understood to be widely shared, it can lead to collective mobilization. Indeed, a lack of anger among persons unfairly treated and burdened by injustice would be disquieting, suggesting that the afflicted had either given up hope or lacked self-respect, that they had succumbed to cynicism or surrendered to injustice, and that they had ceased to put up a fight. Justified indignation should not alienate whites. And if whites respond to this kind of anger with resentment toward racial minorities, dismissing their just claims for redress as a desire for handouts or excuses for their own failings, then the darker races should be angry about this reaction, too, and deeply suspicious.

I suspect that some of the opposition to racial justice measures runs deeper than the desire of economically vulnerable whites not to lose further ground in an economy that no longer satisfactorily rewards their hard work. It also springs from their desire to keep racial minori-

ties in a subordinate or disadvantaged position in relation to whites as a group. Though they are reluctant to admit it publicly (and maybe even to themselves), some whites seem determined to hold on to their comparative advantages; they view policies that promote the cause of racial justice as threats to white dominance.¹³ On grounds of self-respect, blacks should not seek a political solution to the problem of racial inequality that compromises with or yields ground to this sentiment. This attitude must not be accommodated, worked around, or ignored.

In both "A More Perfect Union" and *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama rightly points out that Republican politicians and right-wing demagogues have long exploited white anger over welfare and affirmative action and white fear of black crime. Where he falters is in failing to hold accountable working-class whites who scapegoat blacks and Latinos for problems caused by corporate and political elites. He might believe such scapegoating is racist; *calling it* racist, however, might seem unwise or divisive. Perhaps he is simply counseling disadvantaged racial minorities to swallow their anger, bite their tongues, and console themselves with the thought that economic causes underlie resentment toward non-whites. He wants racial minorities to recognize what they share with low- to moderate-income whites: a common interest in altering these damaging economic forces.

However, it is unreasonable and impractical to expect racial minorities simply to overlook or excuse such racist attitudes. How can they regard reactionary whites as allies if these whites will not confront their own racism? How can people of color work together with whites who believe that blacks and Latinos have caused the economic problems that the

white working class faces? Whites who scapegoat darker peoples do not yet see who the common enemy is; therefore, they cannot be relied on as allies in the fight against that enemy. In this way, Obama's compromise with white racial resentment cannot achieve his stated aim of interracial unity.

But let us suppose that this kind of racism is a minor problem, one that can be adequately contained with vigorous enforcement of civil rights laws. The real problem, Obama might argue, is that many whites believe that policies aimed at correcting racial injustices are contrary to their economic self-interest. They harbor no ill will toward racial minorities; nor are they attracted to white nationalist ideas. They simply do not want to pay the costs associated with fighting or correcting racial injustice.

As King emphasized, we cannot possibly realize our ultimate ideals if we allow this stance to reign unchallenged. We all must accept that justice, including the correction of *injustice*, comes at a cost – though one well worth paying. Any effort to respond effectively to racial injustice will inevitably cost whites something. Indeed, it will cost many racial minorities as well. For example, given residential segregation patterns, there is no way to abolish de facto segregated schools without either integrating neighborhoods or busing some students to schools outside their neighborhoods. Why should all the kids who are bused be racial minorities? Though it would mean abandoning King's ethical ideal of integration, we could try to improve urban public schools without regard to their racial makeup, but that would take a lot of resources, which means higher taxes, including higher taxes for whites.

Many whites dislike affirmative action policies because such measures offend their sense of fairness.¹⁴ But if we aban-

don that set of policies (which some states already have), then any serious effort to deal with black educational and employment disadvantages will require us to devote more resources to the task, which again means higher taxes, including higher taxes for whites. These costs cannot be escaped – at least not if we intend to take racial justice seriously. One response, not without merit, is to insist that the wealthy should bear these financial burdens; those who are themselves struggling economically should not. This tactic would mean collectively pushing for a more progressive tax scheme and higher estate taxes. But many middle-class and working-class whites do not favor this approach either; presumably, they doubt they would benefit from such efforts – though some might say it has more to do with their legitimate opposition to “big government.”

Obama's response to this political reality is to combat the legacy of racial injustice by advocating universal measures that aim to help the members of all racial groups, including whites. The idea is that if whites will benefit, and the policies are not explicitly tailored to aid or appease “angry” racial minorities, we can gain greater support for progressive goals. But even with backing from a number of whites, this strategy would intentionally obscure the morally important difference between creating more opportunity for all and remedying the effects of past racial injustices. From a moral point of view, these are not the same goals, even though they are compatible and might both be furthered by the same policy. Obama advocates universal policies that he believes would, *as a by-product*, reduce glaring racial disparities. But he purposefully refrains from construing these policies as racial redress. Therefore, whites are not required to concede the legitimacy of

blacks' grievances. To establish genuine racial conciliation, though, whites must willingly support policies that reduce racial inequality *because doing so is what racial justice demands*.

Some would reply that if universal policies will reduce racial disparities and improve the lives of minorities, there is no good reason to insist that race-specific policies be used instead. But the question is not which policies will most effectively reduce racial inequality; rather, it is *why* race-targeted policies are off the table. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with policies designed to help specific groups of people rather than everyone. From the standpoint of justice, we should not have to conceal the intent behind the implementation of such policies. Sometimes specific classes of persons (women, disabled persons, immigrants, rural residents, victims of natural disasters, and so on) have needs that require specially tailored remedies. Indeed, so-called universal policies are not really universal since they are not meant to help everyone, just those who have been socioeconomically disadvantaged by recent government action and changes in the structure of the economy. It is at least *possible* that the black urban poor is another group in need of special intervention. Again, it seems that the only reason to *preemptively* rule out such remedies is that they would arouse the *unjustified* hostility of many whites.

Nor is the issue whether specific policies should be unmistakably labeled "for poor black people" or "to reduce racial disparities." Policies designed to help all those who are unfairly disadvantaged, regardless of race, are also justified and, given the overlapping interests involved, no doubt easier to enact. In our determination to heal black wounds, we must not ignore the fact that others are suffering, too. As King reminds us: "As we

[black people] work to get rid of the economic strangulation that we face as a result of poverty, we must not overlook the fact that millions of Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, Indians and Appalachian whites are also poverty-stricken. Any serious war against poverty must of necessity include them."¹⁵ Rather, the issue is whether we can *openly defend* a policy on the grounds that it is, at least in part, *a response to racial injustice* and still garner wide support for it. If we cannot generate such support, especially among whites, what does such an outcome say about the state of race relations and the possibility for further racial progress in this society? If we have good reason to suspect that a significant number of whites seek to hold on to their advantages – *despite the fact that some of these have been gained because of a history of racial injustice* – or, worse, that a significant number of whites want to keep racial minorities trapped in an inferior social position, then people of color have reason to resent this lack of support and to withhold solidarity from those who would deny them what they are due.

Moreover, we should not have to pay off – in essence, to bribe – the white majority in order to secure justice for racial minorities. Already, many whites refuse to accept the costs associated with achieving racial justice. Now, in order to reduce racial inequalities caused by nearly four centuries of injustice, we must adopt only those measures that provide whites with material benefits? The moral perversity of this approach should be readily apparent. Blacks ought to demand that their fellow citizens not only *acknowledge* that black disadvantages are caused, at least in part, by past and ongoing injustices – a position that Obama himself articulates – but they should also continue to insist that their fellow citizens *demonstrate a commitment* to remedying these

disadvantages, even if the necessary remedies do not benefit these citizens directly. This admittedly difficult route is the only path to true racial conciliation. There is no bypass.

If, despite his lofty rhetoric, Obama's vision is less about achieving racial justice and interracial fraternity than simply making disadvantaged racial minorities somewhat better-off materially – using whatever means, morally tainted or not, that are available – his vision has obvious merit. It offers a pragmatic strategy for navigating hazardous racial waters in a way that could improve the socioeconomic circumstances of disadvantaged racial groups. If this political maneuver works, numerous people, including many members of racial minority groups, will receive much-needed help.

However, if Obama's racial philosophy is to be understood as an updated version of King's vision – a recalibration to fit the racial realities of our time – then it leaves much to be desired. Judged alongside King's transformative vision of racial equality and integration, Obama's philosophy is morally deficient and uninspiring. Relying as it does on dissimulation and subtle bribes, it does not keep faith with King's precept: to use means as pure as our ends. Obama's vision would ask racial minorities to give up on true racial equality and to form bonds of solidarity with whites who refuse to recognize blacks' legitimate demands for redress. It fails to insist that whites carry

their fair share of the burden to end racial inequality. And it tries, futilely, to build interracial fraternity on the basis of overlapping material interests rather than on a shared commitment to justice.

Perhaps we should not expect Obama to be a moral leader on issues of race. After all, he is a black elected official who largely depends on other elected officials to enact domestic policy. He is therefore constrained by a sometimes recalcitrant and racially divided populace. It is no doubt difficult to insist that one's fellow citizens rise above their unjustified anger, prejudices, and selfishness if, to get their votes and campaign donations, one must remain silent in the face of, or even reward, these very attitudes. That Obama has not openly defended the need to reduce racial inequality and ghetto poverty on grounds of justice but has instead relied on stealth methods and "universal" policies is revealing. It shows that he believes he must accommodate race-based hostility and illegitimate white group interests to make modest improvements in the lives of disadvantaged racial minorities. Regrettable and distasteful as it is, perhaps this is the price that must be paid to protect the weak and vulnerable from grave harm. But such actions should be seen for what they are: moral compromises necessitated by the imperative to meet urgent needs. They should not be cast or interpreted as rectifications of racial injustice or stepping-stones to interracial fraternity.

ENDNOTES

¹ For helpful feedback on earlier drafts, I thank Lawrence Blum, Gerald Early, Andrew Fine, Lani Guinier, Randall Kennedy, Lionel McPherson, and Jessie Scanlon.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper-Collins, 1991), 217–220.

- ³ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 11.
- ⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet Classic, 2000), 124; emphasis in the original.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 127–128.
- ⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Ethical Demands for Integration,” in *A Testament of Hope*, ed. Washington, 117–125.
- ⁷ King, “I Have a Dream,” in *A Testament of Hope*, ed. Washington, 219.
- ⁸ King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 54.
- ⁹ I should clarify my interpretive method used in analyzing Obama’s vision. It is generally understood that in order to be elected and stay in office, politicians often use deceit; sometimes they lie. For the purposes of this essay, I take Obama’s considered public statements at face value. I assess the vision itself, a vision that many, including many racial minorities, support or find attractive. I make no claims about whether the vision is offered in good faith, about the authenticity of Obama himself, or about the extent to which his actual policy choices and political tactics square with his stated vision.
- ¹⁰ Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown, 2006), 232.
- ¹¹ The speech, both in transcript and video form, can be found at <http://www.barackobama.com/speeches/>.
- ¹² An official transcript of the speech can be found at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-to-the-NAACP-Centennial-Convention-07/16/2009/.
- ¹³ This claim is not uncontroversial, but it does have substantial empirical support. See Donald R. Kinder and Lynn M. Sanders, *Divided By Color: Racial Politics and Democratic Ideals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto, *Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); David O. Sears, Jim Sidanius, and Lawrence D. Bobo, eds., *Racialized Politics: The Debate about Racism in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Lawrence D. Bobo and Mia Tuan, *Prejudice in Politics: Group Position, Public Opinion, and the Wisconsin Treaty Rights Dispute* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).
- ¹⁴ The case that affirmative action is not unfair is forcefully made in Bernard R. Boxill, *Blacks and Social Justice*, rev. ed. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992), chap. 7; and Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), chaps. 11–12.
- ¹⁵ King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 132.

“We dreamed a dream”: Ralph Ellison, Martin Luther King, Jr. & Barack Obama

Eric J. Sundquist

When he spoke at the May 1965 conference organized by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences on the topic of “The Negro American,” Ralph Ellison found himself at odds with fellow participants. Although the proceedings took up a variety of interlocking issues – Was desegregation alone sufficient to bring about racial justice? Would true integration require racial balancing? Was the goal cultural pluralism or a surrender of black identity to the melting pot? – much of the discussion was predicated on the idea that there were “two Americas.” That concept was reinforced three years later in the 1968 *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, which was published the same month that Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated and warned that the nation was moving toward “two societies, one black and one white – separate and unequal.”¹

Ellison, however, strenuously resisted the idea of two societies, two Americas – or “two worlds of race,” to borrow the title that historian John Hope Franklin chose for his contribution to the American Academy conference.² Ellison did not deny that, by law and custom, the color line divided the nation in hundreds of ways both tragic and petty; nonetheless, he insisted that this view was myopic and counterproductive to understanding American culture, for blacks and whites alike. “One concept that I wish we would get rid of,” he argued, “is the

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concept of a main stream of American culture – which is an exact mirroring of segregation and second-class citizenship.” He asserted his allegiance to a form of pluralism in which the “right to discover what one wanted on the outside and what one could conveniently get rid of on the inside” was an essential means of negotiating American identity shared by all ethnoracial groups. Ellison went on to reject cultural Jim Crow in terms specific to his craft: “I wish that we would dispense with this idea that we [Negroes] are begging to get *in* somewhere. The main stream is in oneself. The main stream of American literature is in me, even though I am a Negro, because I possess more of Mark Twain than many white writers do.”³

The year 1965 was momentous for the civil rights movement. In March, the tumultuous, bloody voting-rights march from Selma to Montgomery concluded with King standing in the shadow of Jefferson Davis, where his declamatory call-and-response reached backward to a crusading hymn of Union soldiers and forward to a day of redemption:

How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.

How long? Not long, because “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

In his own speech about Selma, President Lyndon Johnson made the movement’s anthem, “We Shall Overcome,” into a national pledge to end “the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice.” And by August 1965, he signed the Voting Rights Act.

It was a good year for Ralph Ellison, too. A *Book Week* poll of two hundred prominent writers, editors, and critics named *Invisible Man*, his esteemed 1952

novel, the work of fiction from that era most likely to endure. His masterful collection of essays, *Shadow and Act*, was enjoying wide praise following its publication a year earlier, and although only his panel comments appeared in the issues of *Dædalus* that grew out of the American Academy conference, *The Nation* published “Tell It Like It Is, Baby,” a surreal essay that had its origins in Ellison’s response a decade earlier to the Southern Manifesto, the states-rights declaration of war on *Brown v. Board of Education* signed by more than 90 percent of Southern congressmen. Refusing to join Robert Lowell and others who disdained an invitation to the White House Festival of the Arts and Humanities in protest of the war in Vietnam, Ellison welcomed President Johnson’s recognition. In 1965, he also published the short story “Juneteenth,” a beautifully modulated antiphonal dialogue between a black preacher and his child protégé. The story turned a vernacular rendition of Ezekiel’s prophecy in the Valley of Dry Bones into a rousing allegory of the black nation Israel raised up from captivity in the Babylon of America and America itself reborn in justice.

“Juneteenth” was the fourth of eight excerpts, published between 1960 and 1977, from Ellison’s novel-in-progress. It showed him at the height of his powers, poised to make good on the great promise of his first novel. At the time of his death in 1994, however, Ellison left behind twenty-seven boxes of manuscript materials, including some three thousand pages in computer files he had obsessively revised starting in 1982, when he purchased one of the first Osborne computers – but he left no second novel. With the publication of *Three Days before the Shooting . . .*,⁴ a 1,100-page compilation of manuscript drafts dating back as far as the early 1950s (some of which appeared

Ralph
Ellison,
Martin
Luther
King, Jr.
& Barack
Obama

in truncated form in 1999 under the title *Juneteenth*), readers may ponder anew the prolonged creative indecision that has made Ralph Ellison the most highly regarded disappointment in the history of American literature.

Although critical assessment of *Three Days*, as well as the Ellison archive at the Library of Congress, will take years, what immediately becomes clear is the fact that the novel was visibly, vibrantly responsive to the question of “the Negro American.” Ellison composed *Invisible Man*, which led its nameless protagonist through a sequence of episodes that symbolically replicated the past century of African American life, from slavery through Jim Crow, at a time when the end of segregation could not have been predicted with any confidence. *Three Days*, in turn, was meant to measure the political and social turmoil unleashed by *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. “Eyeballs were peeled, nerves were laid bare, and private sensibilities were subjected to public laceration,” Ellison would later say of the Supreme Court’s decision. Life became “so theatrical (not to say nightmarish),” he observed, “that even Dostoevsky’s smoking imagination” could have stayed barely a step ahead of what was happening in the streets.⁵

The present-day action of *Three Days*, which revolves around the attempted assassination of Adam Sunraider, a race-baiting New England senator, occurs sometime during the years 1954 to 1957. Ellison once calculated the date with precision, fixing the action in 1955: the year of *Brown*’s decree of implementation, with its notorious concession that desegregation was to be undertaken “with all deliberate speed”; the year Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white man; the year an unknown minister named Martin Luther King, Jr., was elected president of the Montgomery

Improvement Association; the year Emmett Till was lynched in Mississippi.⁶

But Adam Sunraider is a man of masks. He is born to a white woman who was raped, but not by the black man lynched for the crime, and is midwifed by the dead man’s brother, the one-time jazz trombonist Alonzo “Daddy” Hickman, who christens the boy Bliss and raises him, despite his white skin, to be a Negro preacher like himself. Hickman accepts the convoluted grounds of atonement that Bliss’s birth mother offers up as a salve for the boy’s likely bitterness – “let him learn to share the forgiveness your life has taught you,” she says – and he believes he can instill in this “*marvelous child of Ishmaelian origin and pariah’s caste*” the African American’s “*stubborn vision and blues-tempered acceptance of this country’s turbulent reality.*” He hopes to turn Bliss first into a spellbinding man of the gospel and then into a new Abraham Lincoln, through whom “*the combined promises of Scripture and this land’s Constitution would be at last fulfilled and made manifest.*”⁷

As a child preacher, Bliss is trained to rise from a small coffin on the cue, “Lord, why hast Thou forsaken me?” He acts out this mock resurrection to dramatize, as Ellison explained in an interview with writer and journalist John Hersey, “the significance of being a Negro in America” in relation to “the problem of our democratic faith as a whole.”⁸ After he is traumatized by a demented white woman’s attempt to claim him as her son, however, Bliss nurses the delusion that the screen star Mary Pickford is his mother and eventually escapes into the world of whiteness where, for reasons only hinted at, he becomes Adam Sunraider. But first he reappears as an itinerant filmmaker who, while traveling through Oklahoma circa 1930, seduces a young woman named Lavatrice, who is

part black, part white, and part American Indian. He leaves her pregnant with a boy who will be named Severen, who will grow up hating the father he never knew, and who will, at length, attempt to kill him as he is making an impassioned speech on the floor of the Senate, an event witnessed by Reverend Hickman and members of his congregation who have come to Washington, D.C., to warn the senator. This is the point at which *Three Days* begins.

Attempting to solve the riddle of Bliss's life and death, more than one character asks, "What's the plot of this thing?" In several instances, the question is patently self-referential, effectively Ellison's own admission that, after forty years of writing, he had produced, as another character puts it, only a "mare's-nest, jumble-riot of loose ends."⁹

Having started with the premise of Sunraider's attempted assassination, Ellison may have been ambushed by current events. As he remarked in 1974, the "eruption of assassinations" during the 1960s – John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, King, and Robert F. Kennedy – disoriented his work on a book whose prevailing mood he had intended to be comic.¹⁰ It may also be that he could not settle on a way to connect the Western and Southern imaginative geography of the book he considered his "Oklahoma novel," rich in the kind of African American lore and autobiographical underpinning that prompted *Invisible Man*, with the political action unfolding in Washington. In his working notes, Ellison characterized the city as "a place of power and mystery, frustration and possibility,"¹¹ and it was also, of course, a place where King, on August 28, 1963, had seized the national stage and come closer than anyone since Lincoln to making manifest the "combined promises of Scripture and this land's Constitution."

Three Days was conceived before King became a national figure, as Ellison was constrained to point out when work on the novel stretched into its fourth decade; but the promise that King stood for animates the novel. Although Ellison thought the national adulation subsequent to King's assassination was a case of "martyrdom endowing the martyr with a hell of a lot more following than he had during his struggles,"¹² his judgment was directed not at King but at the nation. He was intrigued, too, by the fact that King had effectively entered "the realm of politics while trying to stay outside of it,"¹³ which may have been Ellison's way of reflecting not just on his character Hickman but also on his own role in the civil rights movement. Ellison's refusal to be enlisted as a spokesman for black activism and his impatience with race nationalists, whether black or white, are legendary.¹⁴ He was not, however, entirely aloof from the political arena. He appeared at a 1964 conference organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and in 1965 at an event staged by the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund, where he spoke on the meaning of Selma. Still, his art was his voice, and if he granted in 1963 that King's Birmingham campaign proved that "marching barehanded before police dogs and cattle prods" expressed moral and physical courage of the highest order, it was neither disingenuous nor uncourageous for him to say that he could best serve his people "by trying to write as well as I can."¹⁵

Ellison's true purpose in *Three Days* may well remain elusive, but the manuscripts contain daring writing whose eloquence and invention rival, and sometimes surpass, the best parts of *Invisible Man*. It is possible, moreover, to discern a story that responds to the hard questions confronted, but by no means solved, in *Brown* – questions thrown into high relief once

Ralph
Ellison,
Martin
Luther
King, Jr.
& Barack
Obama

again by the presidential campaign and election of Barack Obama.

The “action takes place on the eve of the [Civil] Rights movement but it forecasts the chaos which would come later,” Ellison remarked in a working note apparently meant to turn the temporal fractures and anachronisms introduced by his protracted composition into a virtue rather than a liability.¹⁶ “Chaos” was a recurrent, almost totemic term in Ellison’s vocabulary. It spoke first to the obligations of the writer, whose role, he said, was to reduce “the chaos of human experience to artistic form.”¹⁷ But it spoke also to the debilitating conditions of African American life and to transfiguring moments of national crisis when hierarchies are toppled and the social order wrenched apart. Through King, he believed, the black church had made itself visible in the political life of the nation and counteracted the “imposed chaos which has been the Negro American experience.”¹⁸ In an essay on Lyndon Johnson, Ellison called Abraham Lincoln an embodiment of “democratic grandeur and political sainthood,” yet he reminded us that Lincoln was an unpopular and “troubled man who rode the whirlwind of national chaos until released by death.” A great president, he said admiringly of Johnson, is “one through whom the essential conflicts of democracy . . . are brought into the most intense and creative focus. He is the one who releases chaos and he creates order.”¹⁹ Ellison did not live long enough to witness the rise of Barack Obama, who self-consciously unites the combined promise of King and socially transformative presidents like Lincoln and Johnson, and whose degree of “blackness” has produced its own riddles. Where others have been inclined to see Obama as the fulfillment of King’s dream, however,

Ellison would more likely have seen him as an agent of historical chaos.

Reflecting on Ellison’s failure to complete his second novel, Toni Morrison told literary scholar Arnold Rampersad that Ellison was trying to revive the “senile ‘tragic mulatto’ genre,” which Faulkner had mastered in novels such as *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, and which might have served Ellison well had his novel appeared soon after *Invisible Man* but was of no use after the civil rights revolution. By then, she said, “the story was dead.”²⁰ Ellison was clearly alert to the destructive logic of the one-drop rule that governed most American discourse about race until well after the 1967 Supreme Court decision in *Loving v. Virginia* overthrew anti-miscegenation laws still in force in more than twenty states. Even as he passes with seeming ease, Ellison’s character Bliss may also share the combined rage, guilt, and desperate confusion of Joe Christmas, Faulkner’s white Negro. But Morrison’s inference misconceives Ellison’s purpose, which is only tangentially concerned with race-mixing as such. (“We are all mongrels in America,”²¹ he once observed.) Rather, the burden of the book was spelled out in a letter Ellison wrote his former Tuskegee professor Morteza Sprague two days after *Brown* was handed down:

So now the Court found in our favor and recognized our human psychological complexity and citizenship and another battle of the Civil War has been won. The rest is up to us and I’m very glad. . . . Now I’m writing about the evasion of identity which is another characteristically American problem which must be about to change. I hope so, it’s giving me enough trouble. Anyway, here’s to integration, the only integration that counts: that of the personality.²²

An arch-segregationist, Adam Sunraider seems to stand in stark contrast to figures such as Lincoln, King, and Johnson, not to mention Obama. It is the preacher Hickman, Ellison once noted to himself, who foreshadows King, while Sunraider represents “the betrayals of the past.”²³ When he first took shape as a character in the mid-1950s, however, Bliss derived directly from Bliss Proteus Rinehart, the con man and trickster of *Invisible Man* whom Ellison considered the “personification of chaos.”²⁴ A political and cultural hybrid of uncertain progeny, Bliss/Sunraider is a variation on the mythic Icarus, who perishes when he flies too close to the sun after escaping the Minotaur labyrinth on waxen wings fashioned by his father, Daedalus; and he is also, as Hickman thinks of him, a “mammy-made American Adam shaped out of this terrible confusion. Neither black nor white but as much a mystery as when some folks hear thick lips give voice to Shakespeare, Lincoln, or the Word.”²⁵ As a trickster in whom lethal contrary impulses are united, he embodies the “whirlwind of national chaos” set loose by the nation’s long-delayed attempt to end its own evasion of identity.

Hickman’s congregation expected that Bliss would dispel the shadow of slavery and Jim Crow and hoped that “a little gifted child would speak for our condition from inside the only acceptable mask,” the mask of whiteness. More succinctly, Hickman recalls, “we dreamed a dream,”²⁶ a tautological formulation with a resonant African American typology.

“Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed,” wrote Langston Hughes in his 1936 poem “Let America Be America Again,”²⁷ a lyrical redundancy with biblical overtones: consider, for instance, Genesis 37:5, “And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it [to] his brethren: and they hated him yet the more”; or Deuteronomy 13:1, “If there arise among

you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder.” King took up this language on a number of occasions, including his 1960 address “The Negro and the American Dream.” “In a real sense,” King argued on that occasion, “America is essentially a dream – a dream yet unfulfilled.” The sublime promise of the Declaration of Independence was an “eloquent and unequivocal expression of the dignity and worth of all human personality.” And yet ever since “the founding fathers of our nation dreamed this dream,” he continued, stating a familiar idea that dates to the first abolitionists, the nation had manifested “a schizophrenic personality,” professing liberty to all and paradoxically denying it at the same time.²⁸

This conception of the Founders’ dream as a kind of self-verifying truth that makes the nation and the dream one and the same, reiterated in our own day from King’s speeches through Barack Obama’s repeated appeals to the Constitution’s promise to “form a more perfect union,” might be dismissed as so much beguiling rhetoric – the province of “I have a dream” and “Yes we can.” As Ellison asked at the American Academy conference, “[W]hy do we demand that terrible, encyclopedic nuances be found in the slogans of the civil rights movement? No slogans have ever had that kind of complexity.”²⁹ Ellison was, however, keenly interested in the strange tautology of the “dream the dreamers dreamed.” For him, as for King and Obama, the instrumental figure was Abraham Lincoln, whose “great soul” and “perfect capacity for sacrifice,” as W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, derived not only from his self-schooling and his integrity but also from “his dreaming.”³⁰

When Senator Barack Obama announced his presidential candidacy in

Ralph
Ellison,
Martin
Luther
King, Jr.
& Barack
Obama

Springfield, Illinois, he challenged his supporters to “take up the unfinished business of perfecting our union” and prepare to “usher in a new birth of freedom on this earth.”³¹ These Lincolnian aspirations, borrowed from the Gettysburg Address, became a staple of Obama’s campaign rhetoric, but they were inevitably filtered – both in the words he spoke and in the very fact of his candidacy – through the image and language of King. Although Obama often used King instrumentally, linking him to past leaders of civil rights organizations whose support he courted, his allusions were just as often oblique. Examples include Obama’s frequent borrowing of King’s phrase about “the arc of the moral universe” bending toward justice (which King had borrowed from the abolitionist Theodore Parker) and his nomination acceptance speech, delivered on the forty-fifth anniversary of the March on Washington, when he identified King only as “a young preacher from Georgia” whose interracial message gave the nation hope that “together, our dreams can be one.” By the night of November 4, 2008, when the president-elect declared that “we as a people will get there” – namely, to the Promised Land that King had envisioned on the eve of his assassination in Memphis – and that “this is our time . . . to reclaim the American dream,” Obama’s election was bound to be perceived as the prophesied fulfillment of the dream “deeply rooted in the American dream” made famous by King in 1963.

Obama’s allusions to Lincoln and King were a carefully tuned means to acquire the aura of their authority, much as King himself had done with Lincoln in his opening words at the March on Washington. More than clichés, however, they also seemed to portend the triumphant end of a political age that started with *Brown*, when, as Ellison put it, the nation

had at last begun to proceed “according to the original script – by which I mean the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.”³² The extent to which Obama’s election signals the conclusion of the post-*Brown* age can be clarified if we turn to the more complex ways in which King and Ellison used Lincoln.

At a 1961 White House luncheon for civil rights leaders, King noticed an engraving of the Emancipation Proclamation in the Lincoln Room. He challenged President Kennedy to “stand in this room and sign a Second Emancipation Proclamation outlawing segregation, one hundred years after Lincoln’s.”³³ Fearful of alienating Southern Democrats, the president limited his recognition of the centennial to a banal prerecorded message played at the Lincoln Memorial on September 22, 1962 (the centennial of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation) and a reception for black leaders to commemorate Lincoln’s birthday in February 1963. Ellison gladly accepted Kennedy’s invitation to the reception and refused to add his name to a letter calling on the president to take a tougher stand on civil rights. King signed the letter and declined the invitation, electing instead to issue his own Second Emancipation Proclamation at the March on Washington.

King’s commemoration of Lincoln’s “momentous decree” in his “I Have a Dream” speech was captivating not only for its cascading rhetoric – the Proclamation, he said, came as “a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice . . . as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity” – but also for what it assumed about the deeper significance of Lincoln’s dry military order. In his opening words, “Fivescore years ago,” so antique and magical, King evoked Lincoln before not

quite naming him in the remainder of his sentence: “a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation.”³⁴ Insofar as King’s purpose, as he immediately stated, was to address the meaning of the Proclamation in its centennial year, his allusion to Lincoln’s best-known speech, the Gettysburg Address, might at first seem a rhetorical trick. After all, how many people would recognize “Whereas on the twentysecond day of September,” the Proclamation’s opening words? In his subtle merging of the two documents, however, King underlined his belief that the salvation of the Union, Lincoln’s topic in the Gettysburg Address, depended on the emancipation Lincoln had proclaimed one year earlier.

King’s emulation of Lincoln was even more explicit in “The Death of Evil upon the Seashore,” a sermon he first preached on the second anniversary of *Brown* and then revised for inclusion in *Strength to Love* (1963) and also in *Where Do We Go from Here?* (1967). Adapting the story of the biblical Exodus to the century-long struggle for black freedom, King located the “moral foundation” of the Emancipation Proclamation in the explanation Lincoln offered to Congress on December 1, 1862: “In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free, – honorable alike in what we give and what we preserve.” The South had once again risen up in rebellion against federal authority, King argued, and a Second Emancipation Proclamation was needed to redeem the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. He buttressed his argument by quoting Frederick Douglass’s commentary on the Day of Jubilee: “The Fourth of July was great,” said Douglass, but January 1, 1863, “when we consider it in all its relationships and bearings, is incomparably greater. The one had respect to the mere

political birth of a nation,” Douglass contended, but the other date will determine whether the nation’s “life and character shall be radiantly glorious with all high and noble virtues, or infamously blackened, forevermore.”³⁵

The Emancipation Proclamation, like Lincoln, became the stuff of myth among African Americans, whether in the tall tales that “Father Abraham” himself had appeared at Southern plantations to announce freedom or in the legend that news of emancipation reached slaves in Texas only on June 19, 1865, thus leading to the black folk holiday of Juneteenth. Ellison celebrated the centennial of Juneteenth first by publishing his 1965 short story of the same name and then, as though in tribute to Douglass, by setting an incident critical to the plot of *Three Days before the Shooting* on an Oklahoma Juneteenth observed on the Fourth of July. “By celebrating Independence and Emancipation on the same day,” he writes of the revelers, “they were making the Fourth of July both more glorious *and* more American.”³⁶

In his book on the Emancipation Proclamation, written for its centennial, John Hope Franklin lamented that this “great American document of freedom” had long been unjustly neglected.³⁷ But in Ellison’s post-*Brown* imagination, no less than King’s, Lincoln and his decree had very much come to life. His essay “Tell It Like It Is, Baby” recounted a personal nightmare provoked by the Southern campaign of massive resistance against *Brown*. In the dream, Ellison’s dead father turned into the body of Lincoln in its funeral cortege, and Ellison, “fallen out of time into chaos,” took on the role of a young slave powerless to stop a white mob’s rowdy desecration of the corpse of the president, “the old coon.”³⁸ The racial ambiguity sarcastically attributed to Lincoln in Ellison’s nightmare re-

Ralph
Ellison,
Martin
Luther
King, Jr.
& Barack
Obama

appears in *Three Days*, though with a different tenor, when Hickman and his congregants interrupt their search for Senator Sunraider to make a pilgrimage to the Lincoln Memorial. Contemplating the “mystery being cast by the great sculptural form before him,” Hickman falls into a long meditation on Lincoln’s inscrutable motives and his transfixing gaze, its “shadowed lids [open] toward some vista of perpetual dawn that lay far beyond infinity.” Regardless of the combination of political calculation, military necessity, and idealism that drove him, Hickman decides, it is enough to know only that Lincoln “signed the papers that set us free” and “dealt us into the game.”³⁹

More intriguing, however, is Hickman’s reflection on the possibility that it was Lincoln’s brooding expression, not “*the darkness of his flesh, the cast of his features, or what he did on our behalf*” that made his enemies accuse him of “*being one of us.*” Ellison’s interest here lies less in Lincoln’s repeated need to insist, as in his debates with Stephen Douglas, that he did not wish to marry a black woman, in lampoons of his “Miscegenation Proclamation,” or in charges that he was secretly black.⁴⁰ Ellison meant to answer not the racists of Lincoln’s day but later segregationists who had reclaimed Lincoln as a friend of the South, among them Thomas Dixon, whose novels *The Leopard’s Spots* and *The Clansman* inspired D. W. Griffith’s infamous 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, as well as the dignitaries overseeing the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial in 1922, when black guests were seated in a segregated section and Robert Russa Moton, successor to Booker T. Washington as head of the Tuskegee Institute during Ellison’s student days, had his speech censored by those determined to erase any hint of racial or sectional conflict.⁴¹ Ellison likewise meant to answer

segregationists of his own day who featured Lincoln’s opposition to intermarriage in speeches and publications, such as Tom Brady’s 1955 broadside *Black Monday*, so named for the day on which Brown was handed down and subtitled *Segregation or Amalgamation . . . America Has Its Choice*. What Hickman sees in Lincoln’s “*sorrowful eyes*” – what all African Americans who brought their protests to the Lincoln Memorial, from Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson to King and the Black Panthers, saw in them – is a man who struggled “*to reconcile all of the contending forces of his country*” and point the way “*for all who are willing to pay the hard price of true freedom.*” “*So yes,*” Hickman concludes, “*he’s one of us.*”⁴²

Along with his identification of Abraham Lincoln as the first “black” president, Ellison’s rendition of the Emancipation Proclamation in the raucous Juneteenth sermon relived by Bliss/Sunraider and Hickman, as Sunraider lies gravely wounded and delirious in the hospital and Hickman keeps vigil at his bedside, is a vernacular expression of his deep conviction that only when emancipation has been completed through the dismantling of segregation can the dream the dreamers dreamed begin to become a reality.

The sermon proceeds through a long exposition of exile and dispossession derived from Ezekiel’s Valley of Dry Bones (Ezekiel 37:1–14) in which the Negro people, reborn into a new sense of nation time, a new cadence of history and culture, are raised up from captivity: “We lay scattered in the ground for a long dry season. And the winds blew and the sun blazed down and the rains came and went and we were dead. Lord, we were dead!” But at last “the nerves of organs and limbs are joined together, one by one, and the body of the dead Negro people is resurrected,” until “we

sprang together and walked around. All clacking together and clicking into place. All moving in time!"⁴³ In the rhythmic idioms of the black gospel, the sermon magnifies the down-home delight Ellison took in writing to his friend Albert Murray about *Brown* in 1956. "Mose," he said, collectively naming black people by the colloquial rendering of Moses, a wily visionary forever bound for the Promised Land, "is fighting and . . . he's turned the Supreme Court into the forum of liberty it was intended to be, and the Constitution of the United States into a briarpatch in which the nimble people, the willing people, have a chance."⁴⁴

Read in the context of the attempted assassination of Sunraider, however, the Juneteenth sermon's baroque mixture of holiness and theatricality seems more foreboding: "*the celebration of a gaudy illusion*,"⁴⁵ as the delusional Sunraider thinks of it. We are led to the same conclusion from the fact that Ellison chose a Juneteenth holiday celebrated on the Fourth of July as the occasion on which Bliss, returning to Oklahoma as a white filmmaker known only as Mister Movie-Man, dresses the black townspeople appearing in his film in garish Halloween costumes and seduces the young mixed-race woman who gives birth to the son who will attempt to kill him.

How Ellison ultimately intended to orchestrate all these symbolically charged elements of his story we may never know. In the grandiloquent speech Sunraider is making when Severen rises in the Senate gallery and brings him down in a hail of bullets, however, we can identify a further point of contact for reading *Three Days* as Ellison's meditation on the turbulent confusions of the post-*Brown* world.

Full of wild rhetorical flights, but nothing resembling the Southern Manifesto or the states-rights oratory of a George Wallace or a Ross Barnett, Sunraider's

speech seems mainly a paean to the glorious ideals of the Founders. "It is our nature to soar and by following the courses mapped through the adventurous efforts of our fathers we affirm and revitalize their awesome vision," he declares. Although "our sublime and cornucopian dream" will be fulfilled only at great anguish and cost, it is the challenge of a "rash dream" to which "only a great and unified nation, a nation conditioned to riding out the chaos of history as the eagle rides out the whirlwind, can arise." As overwrought as it is opaque, Sunraider's barnstorming dream speech appears to have little to do with race until he drifts into a metaphoric illustration of the power of "the dark side" to offer a "corrective to the bedazzlement fostered by the brightness of our ideals and our history." Who can doubt our future, he exclaims, suddenly veering into a parable, when

even the wildest black man rampaging the streets of our cities in a Fleetwood [Cadillac] knows that it is not our fate to be mere victims of history but to be courageous and insightful before its assaults and riddles. Let us keep an eye on the outrages committed by the citizens I've just described, for perhaps therein lies a secret brightness, a clue. Perhaps the essence of his untamed and assertive willfulness, his crass and jazzy defiance of good taste and the harsh, immutable laws of economics, lies [in] his faith in the flexible soundness of the nation.

"Much mystery here," Sunraider goes on to say, a comment we are apparently meant to connect to his counsel earlier in the speech that "great nations shall not, *must* not, *dare* not evade their own mysteries but must grapple with them and live them out."⁴⁶

Sunraider's seemingly incongruous parable refers to a chronologically prior

Ralph
Ellison,
Martin
Luther
King, Jr.
& Barack
Obama

episode of *Three Days* (one Ellison published in 1973 as the short story “Cadillac Flambe”) in which the character LeeWillie Minifees protests Sunraider’s radio speech denouncing the African American penchant for stylish Cadillacs by ostentatiously setting his own Cadillac ablaze on the senator’s lawn. By itself, the episode is an extravagant tour de force, one of several in the novel, but it is Sunraider’s recurrence to the mysteries of identity that the nation “dare not evade” – Ellison’s premise for the novel – that should catch our attention here.

In his notes for *Three Days*, Ellison presented conflicting motives for Sunraider’s racist demagoguery, speculating, on the one hand, that he sees himself as “putting pressure on Negroes to become more powerful through political action” and yet, on the other, that he feels humiliated by his own racial ambiguity and thus uses the “agency of racism to punish Negroes for being weak, and to achieve power of his own.” At the same time, Ellison surmised that Sunraider is to be killed by way of proving that Severen, the “unexpected emotional agent of chaos,” was “free of [the] acceptance of whiteness which was [the] source of Bliss’s confusion.”⁴⁷ Whereas Sunraider wrestled with the demon of his own belief in the superiority of whiteness, that is to say, Severen, for filial as well as allegorical reasons, was destined to slay the father who remained tragically shackled to the racial dichotomies of Jim Crow. “If you accept the fact that you’re neither black nor white, Gentile nor Jew, Rebel-bred nor Yankee-born,” Severen is told by a black American Indian shaman who seems to be glossing the conclusion of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, “you have the freedom to be *truly* free.”⁴⁸

Reflecting on his prodigal son in the hours leading up to the shooting, Hick-

man remembers that when Bliss “seceded by losing himself in the black-denying world of skin whiteness,” once again, “as in the days of our fathers, we were left puzzled by the wreck of our dreaming. For in the mysterious spell of our yearning our little orphan of mixed identity had become one of us” – the new Lincoln who would redeem the nation’s betrayal of blacks after the first Reconstruction by leading the way to the second Reconstruction. Hickman hopes that Bliss, by “devious scheming” in the guise of Senator Sunraider, is playing a part through which “the child’s promise will be made manifest in the present – here in the District of Columbia!”; yet he is left to conclude ruefully that he and his congregation will probably have to leave “the Founding Fathers’ dream of eternal bliss to the future.”⁴⁹

“There lies the nation groaning on its bed,”⁵⁰ Ellison writes of Sunraider after the shooting, as though to say that the generation still beholden to the mythologies of white supremacy is in its death throes, slain by the generation that has transcended racialized identity. In Sunraider’s parable of the Cadillac, however, Ellison appears to offer “a secret brightness, a clue,” in the senator himself. Small hint though it may be, Sunraider’s assertion that the Cadillac driver’s “crass and jazzy defiance” is evidence of “his faith in the soundness of the nation” suggests that Sunraider may indeed have been scheming to speak for his people, Hickman’s people, from behind the mask of whiteness. As a new and more cunning invisible man, he may even have been preparing to divulge his racial secret, his own evasion of identity, when he is cut down by his son the assassin. Whether or not it foreshadows the revelation of a new Lincoln from within the trickster’s racist disguise, Sunraider’s parable illustrates, as Ellison said in nearly countless formulations stretching from the early 1950s to the end of his life, that the Negro,

both morally and linguistically, had entered “the deepest recesses of the American psyche,” there becoming “the keeper of the nation’s sense of democratic achievement, and the human scale by which would be measured its painfully slow advance toward true equality.”⁵¹

Whatever *Three Days* may say indirectly about the dream dreamed by Martin Luther King, Jr., it can, of course, in no way refer to Barack Obama, except by the happenstance of its publication in 2010. It is useful to note, however, that Obama’s casting back to Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass by way of King’s belief that the Declaration of Independence and the Preamble to the Constitution formed a long-standing and still valid “promissory note” was not only a political strategy for which he was especially well suited. It was also a means of demonstrating, as he wrote in *Dreams from My Father*, that the law is the record of “a nation arguing with its conscience” – or, as Ellison put it, a means of playing out the “nation’s drama of conscience.”⁵² As Obama explained it in his March 2008 speech on race, entitled “A More Perfect Union” and designed to counter attacks provoked by his association with the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, “the answer to the slavery question was already embedded within our Constitution,” which promises “liberty, and justice, and a union that could be and should be perfected over time.”

Whereas Obama’s election itself may seem to meet the requirements of the “American Creed” set forth in economist and sociologist Gunnar Myrdal’s 1944 study *An American Dilemma* – faith in “the essential dignity of the individual human being, of the fundamental equality of all men, and of certain inalienable rights to freedom, justice, and a fair opportunity”⁵³ – his Lincolnian language, ameliorative to the point of being utopian, may

also put him in strange company. Having denounced the Supreme Court’s decision in the Dred Scott case as doing violence to “the plain unmistakable language” of the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln was quick to add in a well-known passage that the Founding Fathers had not created the conditions of equality; rather, they set forth “a standard maxim for free society . . . constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.” In a 1987 lecture, none other than future Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas embraced the need “to recover the moral horizons” of Lincoln’s views, as stated in this passage.⁵⁴

Having set forth in quest of the presidency when contention over affirmative action had somewhat receded from public consciousness, Obama had the luxury of returning to perspectives on equal opportunity that often sounded less like King and Johnson and more like Kennedy.⁵⁵ In his nomination acceptance speech, for example, he defined the American “promise” as one based on the ideal that “each of us has the freedom to make of our own lives what we will,” a principle he reaffirmed in his inaugural speech, calling it “the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.” It may be that only an avowedly biracial candidate who styled himself a “citizen of the world,” as Obama did in a July 2008 speech in Berlin, and who put immigrants who “traveled across oceans in search of a new life” on the same plane as slaves who “endured the lash of the

Ralph
Ellison,
Martin
Luther
King, Jr.
& Barack
Obama

whip and plowed the hard earth,” as he did in his inauguration speech, could finally hope to escape stalemated arguments about the “two worlds of race” and the color blindness of the Constitution.

Questions that have reached a stalemate, however, are questions that have yet to be answered. For all that Obama’s diffusing the issue of race might seem to imply about an end to the post-*Brown* age, his choice to designate himself “black” – and black alone – in the 2010 Census acknowledged that a national dilemma centuries in the making could not be resolved by one exceptional man’s life story and aspirations, still less by one campaign-saving speech.

After he recalled Reverend Wright’s many good works in his Philadelphia speech, Obama attributed Wright’s incendiary language about racial and economic injustice at home and abroad – language that had much in common with King’s later jeremiads – to Wright’s outdated, “distorted view of this country – a view that sees white racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America.” Obama emphasized that he had “brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents,” but he also strove to recognize the racial grievances of whites and recall that the old poison of Jim Crow lingered in his own white grandmother no less than in Jeremiah Wright. Having made himself a “racial Everyman,” to use writer and editor David Remnick’s phrase,⁵⁶ he chose once more to stand in the mythic shadows of King and Lincoln, and through them the Founders themselves. “This union may never be perfect,” he conceded, but continuing on the path toward a more perfect union, the only option for a great nation,

“requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams.”

Infelicitously, we might say that Obama took the part of the trans-racial Severn, slaying the father who, like Adam Sun-raider, was unable to overcome “the betrayals of the past.” Or did candidate Obama more resemble Hickman’s fantasy of Bliss the redeemer? “*We saw in him an answer to our hopes that this divided land with its diversity of people would at last be made whole,*” Hickman remembers, “*a means of breaking the slavery-forged chains which still bind our country.*”⁵⁷ If Barack Obama’s election fulfilled King’s dream as it has been distilled in popular iconography, however, the notion that he could heal the divided land and usher in a post-racial age was bound to be revealed as a fantasy in its own right.

Ellison, no doubt, would be appalled by such a naked attempt to discover analogues to his novel in quotidian politics. Politicians are not preachers, and novelists are neither. Yet what he seems to have been after in *Three Days before the Shooting*... – what apparently eluded his agonized, decades-long effort to capture it to his own satisfaction – was a way to portray in novelistic fashion his belief that political integration and cultural integration, even if they carried with them distinct histories and proceeded by differing logics, were intimately entangled in the nation’s long effort to form a more perfect union. As he wrote in “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks,” a 1970 *Time* magazine essay that returned to Ezekiel’s prophecy, the “jazz-shaped” history of black Americans had enlivened the “dry bones of the nation” with a “tragic knowledge we try ceaselessly to evade: that the true subject of democracy is not simply material well-being but the extension of the democratic process in the direction of perfecting itself.”⁵⁸

Ellison's curiously but appropriately distended syntax suggested a project without end – a project, perhaps, not unlike his novel. As Barack Obama rides his own whirlwind of national chaos, we

can only wonder how his words and deeds, like those of Lincoln and King, would have registered in Ralph Ellison's imagination.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), 1, 236.
- ² John Hope Franklin, "The Two Worlds of Race: A Historical View," *Dædalus* 94 (4) (Fall 1965): 899 – 920.
- ³ Ralph Ellison, "Transcript of the American Academy Conference on the Negro American – May 14 – 15, 1965," *Dædalus* 95 (1) (Winter 1966): 414, 409, 437.
- ⁴ Ralph Ellison, *Three Days before the Shooting . . . : The Unfinished Second Novel*, ed. John F. Callahan and Adam Bradley (New York: Random House, 2010). The ellipsis in the title was devised by the editors to indicate the unfinished nature of the novel. The editors provide a fair amount of information about the state of Ellison's manuscripts and his process of composition, but I have also benefited from Adam Bradley's book *Ralph Ellison in Progress* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010) and, for additional biographical information, from Arnold Rampersad's *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007).
- ⁵ John Hersey and Ralph Ellison, "'A Completion of Personality': A Talk with Ralph Ellison" (1974), in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 803.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 814; Bradley, *Ralph Ellison in Progress*, 88.
- ⁷ Ellison, *Three Days before the Shooting . . .*, 526 – 527. Passages in italics represent Hickman's interior monologue, which at times seems as much an authorial assessment as a character's meditation.
- ⁸ Hersey and Ellison, "'A Completion of Personality,'" in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. Callahan, 791.
- ⁹ Ellison, *Three Days before the Shooting . . .*, 85, 74. The editors have organized the materials into three "books." A long sequence designated as Book I traces the steps of Hickman and members of his congregation after they are rebuffed at Senator Sunraider's Washington, D.C., office and try to track him down before at last witnessing his attempted murder from their seats in the gallery of the Senate. Other scenes, presented as Book II and built on a dialogue between Hickman and Sunraider as he lies dying in the hospital – most of which were published in a somewhat different sequence as *Juneteenth* – are a kaleidoscopic improvisational assemblage of conversation, memory, and hallucination reaching back to Hickman's life before and after Bliss's birth, and dwelling on their evangelical tent show, Bliss's trauma, and events surrounding the affair that leads to the birth of the son he abandons. Still other scenes comprise the shooting and its immediate aftermath, narrated largely from the perspective of a white reporter named Welborn McIntyre, or follow Hickman on a picaresque journey through Georgia and Oklahoma as he attempts to unravel the mystery of Bliss's transformation into Adam Sunraider and at the same time discover enough about Severen to warn the senator of the plot against his life.
- ¹⁰ Hersey and Ellison, "'A Completion of Personality,'" in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. Callahan, 791.

- Ralph
Ellison,
Martin
Luther
King, Jr.
& Barack
Obama
- ¹¹ Ellison, *Three Days before the Shooting . . .*, 972.
- ¹² Hollie West, “Ellison: Exploring the Life of a Not So Visible Man” (1973), in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, ed. Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 243.
- ¹³ Hersey and Ellison, “‘A Completion of Personality,’” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. Callahan, 814.
- ¹⁴ Take, for example, Ellison’s response to Irving Howe, who had championed Richard Wright’s politicized naturalism as the only authentic black aesthetic in the essay “Black Boys and Native Sons.” Ellison famously took Howe to task for assuming that black art could be nothing but the “abstract embodiment of living hell” and charged him with practicing his own brand of segregation: “I found it far less painful to have to move to the back of a Southern bus . . . than to tolerate concepts which distorted the actual reality of my situation or my reactions to it”; Ralph Ellison, “The World and the Jug” (1963), *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 112, 122.
- ¹⁵ Allen Geller, “An Interview with Ralph Ellison” (1963), in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, ed. Graham and Singh, 82.
- ¹⁶ Ellison, *Three Days before the Shooting . . .*, 972.
- ¹⁷ Richard Kostelanetz, “An Interview with Ralph Ellison” (1965), in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, ed. Graham and Singh, 97.
- ¹⁸ Hersey and Ellison, “‘A Completion of Personality,’” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. Callahan, 813.
- ¹⁹ Ralph Ellison, “The Myth of the Flawed Southerner” (1968), *Going to the Territory* (New York: Random House, 1986), 82, 84. Ellison concluded his essay by saying that Johnson would be recognized “as the greatest American President for the poor and for the Negroes”; see page 87. In a 1965 interview, Ellison had argued that Johnson’s famous commencement speech at Howard University – arguably the era’s most forceful statement that compensatory treatment was needed to bring about racial justice – spelled out “the meaning of full integration” in a way that neither Lincoln nor Franklin Roosevelt had ever done: “There was no hedging in it, no escape clauses.” Johnson reiterated the essential points from that speech in the Foreword he provided for the first of the two *Dædalus* issues on “The Negro American.” See Ralph Ellison, “A Very Stern Discipline” (1965), *Going to the Territory*, 291.
- ²⁰ Toni Morrison, quoted in Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison*, 359.
- ²¹ David L. Carson, “Ralph Ellison: Twenty Years After” (1971), in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, ed. Graham and Singh, 198.
- ²² Ralph Ellison, letter to Morteza Sprague, May 19, 1954, in John F. Callahan, “‘American Culture is of a Whole’: From the Letters of Ralph Ellison,” *The New Republic*, March 1, 1999, 38 – 39.
- ²³ Ralph Ellison, *Juneteenth*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Random House, 1999), 356.
- ²⁴ Ralph Ellison, “The Art of Fiction: An Interview” (1955), *Shadow and Act*, 181.
- ²⁵ Ellison, *Three Days before the Shooting . . .*, 741. In one Washington scene, Hickman muses on a tapestry of Brueghel’s painting *Landscape and the Fall of Icarus* and associates it with, among other things, Bliss’s self-destruction as Adam Sunraider; see 592 – 599. Cf. Bradley, *Ralph Ellison in Progress*, 49 – 50.
- ²⁶ Ellison, *Three Days before the Shooting . . .*, 271.
- ²⁷ Langston Hughes, “Let America Be America Again” (1935), in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 189.

- ²⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Negro and the American Dream,” September 25, 1960, in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson et al., 6 vols. to date (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992–), vol. V, 508.
- ²⁹ Ellison, “Transcript of the American Academy Conference on the Negro American,” 409.
- ³⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Abraham Lincoln” (1907), in *The Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois Reader*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 249, 252.
- ³¹ For all quotations from the speeches of Barack Obama as a presidential candidate (including his inaugural speech), see <http://www.barackobama.com/speeches>.
- ³² Ralph Ellison, “Address to the Harvard Alumni, Class of 1949” (1974), in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. Callahan, 423.
- ³³ Martin Luther King, Jr., quoted in Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 518.
- ³⁴ All quotations from King’s “I Have a Dream” speech follow the text reprinted in Eric J. Sundquist, *King’s Dream* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), from which some of the ideas in this essay are drawn.
- ³⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Death of Evil upon the Seashore,” in *Strength to Love* (1963; repr., Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 77–86. See also Frederick Douglass, “January First, 1863” (January 1863), in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Philip S. Foner, 5 vols. (New York: International Publishers, 1950), vol. III, 306.
- ³⁶ Ellison, *Three Days before the Shooting...*, 896.
- ³⁷ John Hope Franklin, *The Emancipation Proclamation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1963), vi.
- ³⁸ Ralph Ellison, “Tell It Like It Is, Baby” (1965), in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. Callahan, 36–37.
- ³⁹ Ellison, *Three Days before the Shooting...*, 575–576, 609–610.
- ⁴⁰ On the racist responses to Lincoln, see Forrest G. Wood, *Black Scare: The Racist Response to Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 53–79.
- ⁴¹ See Adam Fairclough, “Civil Rights and the Lincoln Memorial: The Censored Speeches of Robert R. Moton (1922) and John Lewis (1963),” *The Journal of Negro History* 82 (Autumn 1997): 408–416.
- ⁴² Ellison, *Three Days before the Shooting...*, 575–576.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 320–321.
- ⁴⁴ Ralph Ellison, letter to Albert Murray, March 16, 1956, in *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 117.
- ⁴⁵ Ellison, *Three Days before the Shooting...*, 314.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 238–243.
- ⁴⁷ Ellison, *Juneteenth*, 360; Ellison, *Three Days before the Shooting...*, 974–976.
- ⁴⁸ Ellison, *Three Days before the Shooting...*, 850. When we let freedom ring, said King in the memorable ending of his speech, “we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”
- ⁴⁹ Ellison, *Three Days before the Shooting...*, 527–529.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 316.

- Ralph Ellison, Martin Luther King, Jr. & Barack Obama
- ⁵¹ Ralph Ellison, "Perspective of Literature" (1976), *Going to the Territory*, 335.
- ⁵² Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995; repr., New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004), 437; Ellison, "Perspective of Literature," *Going to the Territory*, 335.
- ⁵³ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, 2 vols. (1944; repr., New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1996), vol. I, 4.
- ⁵⁴ Abraham Lincoln, "Speech at Springfield, Illinois," June 26, 1857, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), vol. II, 405–406; Clarence Thomas, "Why Black Americans Should Look to Conservative Policies," *The Heritage Lectures* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 1987), 8. "Equality of rights, not of possessions or entitlements, offered the opportunity to be free, and self-governing," argued Thomas. He contended that the last prominent American to appeal to this "natural law," which "both transcends and underlies time and place, race and custom," was Martin Luther King, Jr.
- ⁵⁵ See, for example, President Kennedy's televised speech of June 11, 1963, on civil rights; he said that blacks had a right to expect that "the Constitution will be color blind" and insisted, therefore, that all children must have an "equal right to develop their talent and their ability and their motivation, to make something of themselves." John F. Kennedy, "Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights," June 11, 1963, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States 1963* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964), 471.
- ⁵⁶ David Remnick, *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 524. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., went further, telling Remnick that Obama, in his Philadelphia speech, had become a "post-modern Frederick Douglass," a trickster capable of mediating seemingly irreconcilable positions.
- ⁵⁷ Ellison, *Three Days before the Shooting . . .*, 526–527.
- ⁵⁸ Ralph Ellison, "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks" (1970), *Going to the Territory*, 110–111.

“We’re losing our country”: Barack Obama, Race & the Tea Party

Clarence E. Walker

The United States is not as racist as it was when I was born in 1941. Asians have become citizens, blacks can vote in Southern elections, and interracial marriage is now legal nationwide. However, these advances in racial justice do not mean that racism is dead in the United States; indeed, it continues to exercise a powerful hold on the American imagination. How could it be otherwise? American democracy was created on a racial foundation, and although the election of a black president represents a historic step in the nation’s racial modernization, it does not signal “the end of white America.” Even if it did, this development would not mean that Asians, blacks, Mexicans, and other Spanish speakers would get along with each other.¹ Race will continue to plague American politics even as the demographic composition of the nation changes. The idea that the death of whiteness might usher in racial nirvana rests on a demographic determinism that the history of the American Republic renders problematic.

If we take a long view of race and politics, the demise of white hegemony is an interesting but premature notion suggesting that contemporary American racial liberalism, like the Garrisonian abolitionists in the nineteenth century, has been swept up in a moment of self-congratulatory wishful thinking. Both the end of slavery and the election of Barack Obama constitute important turning points in the history of race in America. And both events shed light on the Republican Party. I

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refer to the Republicans not because I think the Democrats have wonderful racial politics but because the GOP has become the voice of white victimology in a supposedly post-racial and multi-cultural world.

Contemporary Republican victimology expresses itself in the Tea Party movement. The Tea Party is the latest phase of a transformation that has been taking place in the Republican Party since 1968, when the Nixon administration began pursuing its “Southern Strategy” to woo the South. The issues that galvanized the Republicans to court white Southerners in the 1960s were the civil rights movement and the expansion of federal power; today, according to intellectual historian Mark Lilla, three issues energize the contemporary Tea Party: “A financial crisis that robbed millions of their homes, jobs, and savings; the Obama administration’s decision to pursue health care reform despite the crisis; and personal animosity toward the president himself (racially tinged in some regions) stoked by the right-wing media.”² The Tea Party, then, is an extreme right-wing or conservative outgrowth of the Republican Party. Not all conservatives are Tea Partiers, but Tea Partiers are radical conservatives. Some of the party’s spokespeople have called for the elimination of government agencies such as the Departments of Education, Energy, and Environmental Protection and the Federal Reserve and for either abolition or privatization of Social Security and Medicare. Several of these programs have benefited blacks in the United States because the post-World War II bureaucratic state has been central to leveling the so-called playing field between blacks and whites. So what role does race play in the Tea Party members’ claim that they have lost their country?

Race is never absent from American politics, and this is no less true of the Tea Party movement, though it claims not to be racist and has some black members. Yet according to a recent CBS/*New York Times* poll, white Tea Party members think “too much has been made of race in America and that the policies pursued by the Obama administration promote the interests of poor blacks over those of the white middle class.”³ Given these attitudes, why would blacks be members of the Tea Party?

The answer to this question is not to be found solely in the history of black people but of minorities in general. The desire to be accepted cuts across lines of ethnicity, race, and sexual preference, and thus is not limited to black people. The quest for acceptance can be seen in the history of court and assimilated Jews in Central and Western Europe, in Booker T. Washington’s program of cultural rehabilitation during the last quarter of the nineteenth century in the American South, and in the careers of gay men like Roy Cohn and David Brock. Cohn denied he was gay and actively persecuted gays during the Army-McCarthy hearings. Brock, like Cohn, was a closeted gay conservative activist who made a reputation smearing liberal politicians and black women. Brock came out of the closet after he found the conservative movement’s homophobia intolerable. It would be easy to call these people opportunists, but to do so would be an overstatement and would simplify the complicated history of minorities generally and black people in the United States specifically.

What we have here are groups and individuals who want to normalize their history and escape the stigma of being thought of as outsiders. In the case of black Tea Partiers, this effort means disassociating oneself from the history of

black welfare dependence, crime, and racial militance. Charles Butler, a black Tea Partier, told a Chicago radio station that “the Democratic social welfare policies of Roosevelt and Kennedy negatively affected Black people then and continue to affect Blacks today.”⁴ Butler is not alone in thinking the government is the enemy of black people. Lloyd Marcus, another black member of the Tea Party, has been quoted as saying that “the Democrats are focused on keeping Blacks thinking they are victims and dependent on social welfare.”⁵ To escape the stigma of welfare, if you are black, you have to be baptized in the cult of individualism and self-help to overcome the notion that your color marks you as a victim; you must be reborn as a tax-producing rather than tax-consuming citizen.

Instead of viewing these black conservatives as race traitors or individuals with false consciousness, they should be placed in the context of a black conservatism that predates the accommodationist policies of Booker T. Washington. Frederick Douglass, the Civil War champion of black equality, delivered a speech in 1862 that answered the question, “What shall we do with the Negro?” Douglass replied, “Do nothing with them, but leave them like you have left other men, to do with themselves.”⁶ He went on to say that “the bitterness of the black man’s fortune is the fact that he is everywhere regarded and treated as an exception to the principles and maxims which apply to other men.”⁷ Later on, Douglass changed his mind about government aid for the freed men. My point here is that black hostility to government programs designed to aid black people is not new and, in fact, has a distinguished genealogy.

Membership in the Tea Party situates black conservatives, as it does white ones, in a libertarian enthusiasm centered on the idea of an autonomous self. Tea Partiers view government as the enemy of freedom, and Obama, who they call a proponent of big government and socialism, is likewise an enemy of freedom. Tea Party opposition to Obama is religious in its intensity. I say this because when I see Tea Party rallies on television, they remind me of the revivals I attended as a child in Texas. At these camp meetings, the faithful, shouting and in the grip of religious ecstasy, would be rendered unconscious at the altar by the power of the holy ghost. A similar enthusiasm characterizes Tea Party gatherings, where a version of Greta Garbo’s mantra, “I want to be left alone,” activates the crowd and works it up into a frenzied state reminiscent of religious possession. Inspired by right-wing saint Margaret Thatcher, the former prime minister of Great Britain, the Tea Party grounds its faith in the belief that “there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first.”⁸ Thatcher’s comment is highly seductive if you have, as black Americans do, a history of being thought of as losers in a nation whose “national imaginary” is based on ideas of individual achievement and success.⁹

I use the term “national imaginary” here to mean “a system of cultural representations that makes the contours of the nation-state emotionally plausible.”¹⁰ In the United States, people, regardless of their color and whether their ancestors came from Asia, Africa, Europe, or Latin America, are bound together by the myth of individual success that sits at the center of the American “national imaginary.” It is the power of this idea that may have

Clarence E.
Walker

erased racial divisions in the Tea Party. Religious movements and political parties create their own realities; in the case of the black and white Tea Partiers, that reality is a shared sense of persecution by government. Combining both cultural politics and economic interests, the Tea Partiers have created a new political phalanx.

What unites black and white Tea Partiers is not social class but the Marxian concept of “political class.”¹¹ The black economist and historical sociologist Oliver Cox wrote, “[P]olitical class is a power group . . . organized for conflict.”¹² The recent history of the Tea Party in Massachusetts, South Carolina, and Utah suggests that Cox’s estimation is true. The Tea Party in those states has factionalized and disrupted the Republican Party operating as a “political class.” In South Carolina, for example, a woman of Asian descent, Nikki Haley, will become that state’s next Republican governor. As winner of that contest, Haley corroborates Cox’s claim that “political class . . . may include persons from every position.”¹³ Cox does not use the word *race*, but I think the phrase “persons from every position” may be interpreted as suggesting that a “political class” does not have to have a singular racial subjectivity. “Political class” can thus unite black and white conservatives against a black president deemed to be an enemy of individual freedom.

But this alliance of black and white conservatives rests on an imagined past. Like the Afrocentrists and Neo-Confederates, the Tea Partiers want to create a history that is a fiction. To say that “too much has been made of race” is delusional because it erases both slavery and Jim Crow from the master narrative of American history. The idea that blacks from the seventeenth century to the present were perceived and treated as individu-

als constitutes an imagining of black and American history as fanciful as Walt Disney’s *Song of the South*. Hard though they may try, conservatives cannot rewrite the American past to elide the fact that both slavery and Jim Crow oppressed blacks as a group and not as individuals. Racism, as I noted earlier, has diminished in American society but not disappeared.

Racism reared its head during Obama’s election campaign in a variety of venues, including newspapers, the Web, and public discourse. One white supremacist website expressed a crude form of racial animus that most blacks of my generation associate with an earlier period of American history. The site called Obama a “subhuman-black-supremeist[sic]-shit-skin beast.”¹⁴ This was not an isolated expression of hate. In Florida, for example, a seventh-grade school teacher told her students that Obama’s campaign slogan “CHANGE” meant “Come Help a Nigger Get Elected.”¹⁵ These two examples of racial antipathy indicate that America is not a post-racial society and that Obama is not perceived with equanimity by a segment of the country’s white populace. For these people, the election of a black president was unthinkable. Obama is their worst nightmare because his presidency may be the gateway to the establishment of an interracial democracy and a departure from the norm of an America ruled by white men.

Because conservatives, like the Tea Partiers, seem incapable of accepting a number of the changes that have overtaken the nation since the 1950s, it is, as I observed at the beginning of this essay, premature to proclaim “the end of white America.” This notion assumes too much and ignores a recurring reality in American history, namely, the ability of segments of the American populace to be-

lieve things that are not true: that Japanese Americans were disloyal during World War II, for example, or that fluoridation of municipal water supplies is a threat to public health. Both of these ideas were harmful and fallacious but also powerful and seductive. Similarly, the Tea Party's assault on Obama is disturbing and based on untruths. What this means is that even though the nation's white majority is going to decline in numbers, the future of race relations in the United States is not unproblematic. Further, conservatives may even profit from that contested future.

Conservatives have already shown that they can use race as a wedge issue in their appeals to Mexicans in the West and Southwest and their construction of Asians as a "model minority." At some time in the future, both of these groups could, as a segment of black America has, decide it is in their best interest to ally themselves with a party that conceives of itself as the agent of traditional American values. What if whiteness is constructed as a culture rather than color?

The idea of some unified coalition of the so-called people of color is a doubtful proposition. The history of American racism has never been a single "invariant [process] but a number of *racisms*, forming a broad open spectrum of situations."¹⁶ In the United States, this va-

riety has led to the dispossession and genocide of Native Americans, the enslavement of blacks and their subsequent suffering under Jim Crow, the invasion of Mexico and colonization of Mexicans, and the exclusion of Asians. Because each of these groups occupies a particular space in the structure of American racism, each is open to the blandishments of a reconfigured racism based on culture. In the West and Southwest, this process can be seen in the hostility between blacks and Mexicans over contests for political office, competition for jobs, race riots in the high schools of Los Angeles involving black and Mexican students, and prison disturbances such as the recent one at the detention center in Chino, California. These conflicts point not to a post-racial America but to a country riven by racism.

Finally, although Obama was able to put together a coalition comprising Asians, blacks, and Mexicans, this alliance rests on a precarious foundation. If the economy continues to be depressed, the Tea Partiers have an opening to intensify their attacks on the nation's first black president by emphasizing his unsuitability for the job. It would be a mistake to say that Obama's election reignited racial conflict in the United States, but, sadly, his ascendancy does not prove that those divisions are a thing of the past.

ENDNOTES

¹ Hua Hsu, "The End of White America?" *The Atlantic*, January/February 2009.

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- 6 Frederick Douglass, "Free the Slaves, Then Leave Them Alone," in *Afro-American History: Primary Sources*, ed. Thomas R. Frazier, 2nd ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing, 1988).
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- 9 The phrase "national imaginary" is found in Katherine Pratt Ewing, *Stolen Honor: Stigmatizing Muslim Men in Berlin* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008), "Introduction," 2.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Oliver Cromwell Cox, *Caste, Class & Race: A Study in Social Dynamics* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1959), 154.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Quoted in Clarence E. Walker and Gregory D. Smithers, *The Preacher and the Politician: Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama, and Race in America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), "Introduction," 3.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 40.

At Last . . . ? : Michelle Obama, Beyoncé, Race & History

Farah Jasmine Griffin

Late in the evening on January 20, 2009, newly sworn-in President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama made an appearance at The Neighborhood Ball. One of ten balls they would attend that night, The Neighborhood Ball was the first of its kind. Conceived as a “people’s ball,” a celebration for ordinary citizens and the residents of Washington, D.C., it launched the administration’s efforts to establish a relationship with the city and to make the White House itself more accessible to the broader public. The ball featured such popular music entertainers as Shakira, Alicia Keys, will.i.am, Mary J. Blige, and Stevie Wonder.

In the most memorable part of the evening, superstar Beyoncé Knowles serenaded the first couple during the ceremonial “first” dance. Because the event was televised live on ABC, the staging was dramatic. The first lady and president stood alone on a circular stage. Cued by the lush instrumental introduction to the R&B classic “At Last,” the couple began to dance atop the presidential seal that had been painted on the stage floor. Across from them, on a stage in the middle of the audience, the elegantly clad Beyoncé began to sing Etta James’s timeless song. Smiling sweetly at the couple like Lena Horne’s gorgeous Good Witch Glenda in *The Wiz*, Beyoncé began her performance in a stately manner. Mid-song, she reached into the guttural depths of her range to pull from the deep traditions of Black American music and, in doing so, expressed a range of emotions, from celebra-

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tion to defiance. By the song's end, she was lyrically soaring. The Obamas applauded her; she bowed to them, overcome with emotion, before leaving the stage.

The moment was memorable for a number of reasons. The romance of the president and first lady, which had captivated many during the campaign, was now on full display. Mrs. Obama, dressed in a floating, feminine white gown that offset her brown complexion, was dancing to the same song the president had selected for the first dance at their wedding. Here, they seemed to re-create that moment, as if renewing their vows before a nation of witnesses. But even more significant, because this was the inauguration of America's first black president, because "At Last" is an R&B song, and because Beyoncé sang it in a style most often associated with soul and gospel, the song signified the triumphant culmination of what had long been a rather one-sided romance between black Americans and their nation. The fulfillment of our democratic principles? The achievement of a color-blind, post-racial America?

The performance of both the dance and the song struck a chord across race and generation. For the enthusiastic young people in the audience that night, it represented the promise of youth, of their own experience of race as something significant – important, even – though not limiting or constrictive. This was the hip-hop generation, after all. For old-timers, particularly black old-timers, the performance may have represented a bitter-sweet sense of victory. As witnesses of the painful struggles that produced this moment, they watched it in memory of the many thousands gone – and with some continued trepidation and fear. They wondered, "Have we come this far? Really?" For my generation of middle-aged black professionals, educated

at elite institutions during the Reagan 1980s, we saw ourselves: our generation's response to the difficult struggle that had made our ascension possible. We saw ourselves and thought: "At last."

All these perspectives represent a tension that has and will characterize the Obama years. Conflicting viewpoints are not evenly divided between generations. Instead, each generation has its share of those, on the one hand, who are eager to get over "race" – to put it behind us, to regard it as a relic of a past for which we have little use. On the other side are those who are often cast as so pessimistic about our nation they believe it incapable of change; they are considered too invested, either in their identities or their livelihoods – in their "narratives of victimization" – to accept the reality of our post-racial present. Somewhere in between are the pragmatists, who believe, "We've come a long way, baby, but we still got a long way to go."

We do not live in a post-racial time. In fact, to use that term is lazy. *We do* occupy a historical moment in which race and racism operate differently than they have in the past. Our society has removed all race-based legal barriers to equality. To claim things have not changed is wrong-headed; to claim that struggles for racial equality are behind us, or that they can be taken care of solely by attention to class, is equally so. *We are* witnessing the death of an epoch of white supremacy. All around us we experience its dying gasp – a desperate, dangerous gasp. But white supremacy is an old man who will not go gently into that good night. He will continue to find breath in elements of the Far Right, in the thinking of many mainstream white Americans, in other racial and ethnic groups, and, unfortunately, in far too many black people around the world. Nor are we at the

“end of the African American narrative”; there has never been just one such narrative anyway. And, as with all narratives, those that deal with the black experience in the United States have always been constructed to meet the contemporary needs, desires, and aspirations of black people in a constantly shifting racial terrain.

A nation without racism is not an impossible achievement. Also, there are other forms of oppression and exploitation that act powerfully in the lives of black people. However, it is indeed premature to claim that we need no longer be aware of the existence of white supremacy and racism. The baleful racism that has been unleashed since the election of our first black president should be sufficient evidence of this reality. That large numbers of white Americans voted for a qualified, intelligent black candidate certainly is evidence of progress. It is proof that large portions of white America are becoming less racist. But “less racist” does not mean “post-racial.” (Civil rights activist and scholar Cornel West, among others, has also made this distinction.) Too often in public discourse the phrase “post-racial” is used to suggest that black people and their allies should cease raising concerns about continued racial inequality.

Legal theorist Roy L. Brooks notes that “the problem of race in the Age of Obama is not racism but racial inequality.” For Brooks, racial inequality can be found not only in differences in financial resources but also in “human (education and skills) and social (public respect, racial stigma, the ability to get things done in society)” resources as well.¹

The major problem with the stance of post-raciality *and* with refusals to admit substantive change is that both are ahistorical and shortsighted. Let us return to The Neighborhood Ball and the women

who shared the spotlight: First Lady Michelle Obama and the multitalented Beyoncé Knowles. What might we learn about the relationship between history and the ongoing significance of race by attending to their images and their cultural impact? Both Knowles and Obama occupy a space unimagined by earlier generations. A singing, dancing, acting black woman, who is also an entertainment mogul, and an Ivy League-educated, Harvard-trained lawyer-cum-first lady clearly herald something new (the latter even more so than the former). Yet these extraordinary women each represent something profoundly American, something deeply rooted in America’s racial past, and something familiar but outwardly unrecognized by much of their public. Each has chosen to reveal and/or hide particular aspects of that history in order to move more easily into the American mainstream. By focusing on these women – their relationship to a particular aspect of America’s racial history and how they mobilize it – we may reach a better understanding of the place of race in the contemporary historical moment.

I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave owners.

–Barack Obama, Philadelphia, 2008

Our first glimpse of Michelle Obama was at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston. Along with two small daughters, she joined her husband onstage following his triumphant and inspiring convention address, his historic introduction to the nation. Tall and trim, dressed elegantly in a white skirt suit with fashionable three-quarter-length sleeves, hair conservatively coiffed, she looked polished, poised,

professional. She was very much like any number of black women in any major American city, but there was something striking and unexpected about seeing her on that stage. Black communities were abuzz. They not only wanted to know more about *him*, but just as often they asked, “Did you see his wife?” Observing her in the role of political spouse struck a chord. And, because people almost immediately began to talk about *him* as a future president, many black Americans began to imagine *her* as a first lady.

It was difficult to imagine any black woman in that role, but Mrs. Obama’s unmistakable “blackness” made it an especially amusing possibility. Once Senator Obama announced his candidacy, Michelle Obama authenticated his blackness for many African Americans. He was not the descendant of enslaved ancestors; he had not grown up in a black community. But she was, and she had. The phrase, “He married her,” was stated as proof that he made a conscious choice to identify with black people and to raise his children as African Americans. While she legitimated his racial authenticity for many African Americans, for some whites she became the lightning rod, the persistent reminder of his race. His opponents sought to paint her as the “angry,” unpatriotic black woman. After all, she was the one who brought him into Pastor Jeremiah Wright’s orbit. And then, in February 2008, she made the comment: “For the first time in my adult lifetime, I am really proud of my country.” More precisely, she said:

What we have learned over this year is that hope is making a comeback. It is making a comeback. And let me tell you something – for the first time in my adult lifetime, I am really proud of my country.

And not just because Barack has done well, but because I think people are hungry for change. And I have been desperate to see our country moving in that direction and just not feeling so alone in my frustration and disappointment. I’ve seen people who are hungry to be unified around some basic common issues, and it’s made me proud.

This was a simple statement of a feeling shared by many for whom the Obama campaign gave a sense of hope, a sense of national belonging, a sense of purpose. To be proud of one’s country should be seen as something good. It is a step in a process. Mrs. Obama was suggesting that people like her gain a sense of pride through working to make their nation better. In the words of James Baldwin via Richard Rorty, this is the work of “achieving” our country. Rorty writes of a national pride that induces us to act on a vision of our country and the possibility that we may perfect it. This kind of pride encourages us to think of our citizenship “as an opportunity for action.”² The vision Michelle Obama, the descendant of slaves, put forth is one in which Americans of every race and ethnicity can take part in making our country even better. In so doing, she seemed to build on the contention James Baldwin made at the end of *The Fire Next Time*:

If we – and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others – do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare and achieve our country and change the world.³

Cindy McCain, wife of Barack Obama’s opponent, said she was genuinely offended by Michelle Obama’s remarks. She began to pepper her own campaign speeches

with, “I have *always* been proud of my country.” What she and the press failed to state is that the two women claimed significantly different historical relationships to their nation. Cindy McCain is a wealthy blonde heiress of a beer distributorship. Michelle Obama is the daughter of working-class African Americans and the descendant of slaves. Barack Obama’s political opponents seized on Michelle Obama’s statement as yet another example of her husband’s lack of patriotism – an opportunity to question his relationship to America. Later, John McCain and Sarah Palin would pursue this path until it unleashed some of the most hateful and frightening instances of racism in recent memory. If Ivy League-educated, upper-middle-class professional Michelle Obama could ever have appeared militant or “threatening,” then, indeed, we are far from a post-racial society.

It may not be surprising that many white people in the small towns and rural areas of so-called middle America had never encountered someone like Michelle Obama. What is stunning is how unfamiliar she appeared to mainstream media and to many of her peers. Michelle Obama and her white female counterparts had attended similar colleges, worked in similar environments, and shopped in the same stores. Perhaps this lack of familiarity is simply evidence of just how segregated our generation remains in spite of the proximity in which we live our lives. As was the case with Mrs. Obama, few of us continued to room with our freshman roommates after our first year of college. We chose instead to live with people of the same race. For the most part, we attended different parties and listened to different music. After graduation, we most likely attended different churches and con-

tinued to socialize in largely same-race groups.

Michelle Obama’s story is more extreme than what most of us experienced. When Obama, then Michelle Robinson, arrived on Princeton’s campus in Fall 1981, she met one of her freshman roommates, Catherine Donnelly, a native of New Orleans who was shocked to learn that her roommate was black. Donnelly’s mother, Alice Brown, who had driven her daughter to campus, was “horrified.” She went to the campus housing office and demanded that her daughter be moved to another room. “I told them we weren’t used to living with black people,” Brown recalled in 2008 to *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.⁴ There is no evidence that Obama was aware of Brown’s reaction; nonetheless, her college thesis focused on racial issues at Princeton. The thesis itself would become the subject of controversy in campaign press coverage. In it, Obama had written, “No matter how liberal and open-minded some of my White professors and classmates try to be toward me, I sometimes feel like a visitor on campus; as if I really don’t belong. . . . Regardless of the circumstances under which I interact with Whites at Princeton, it often seems as if, to them, I will always be Black first and a student second.” Right-wing pundits used the thesis as fodder to accuse Obama of lacking gratitude and engaging in identity politics. They suggested she was ungrateful for the opportunities America had afforded her.

As the press pursued stories about Michelle Obama’s days as a college student, the campaign commissioned genealogical research as well. With the assistance of the Obama campaign, *The Washington Post* reported Mrs. Obama’s paternal family tree, while *The New York Times* covered the history on her mother’s side. Obama’s lineage demonstrated a trajec-

tory familiar to the descendants of U.S.-born slaves: enslavement, Reconstruction, and the Great Migration. On both sides, researchers uncovered ancestors who had been enslaved as well as evidence of anonymous white ancestry. They found evidence of each generation's efforts to provide its children with education and opportunity. They found family members who escaped the strictures of the Jim Crow South by migrating to Chicago.

Two ancestors in particular stand out: the one-armed boy, Fraser Robinson, and the five-year-old slave girl Melvinia. Fraser Robinson, Michelle Obama's paternal great-grandfather, was born in 1884 to a former slave. When Fraser was ten years old his arm was amputated because it had been broken by a tree limb. Francis Nesmith, the white son of an overseer, became fond of the young boy and employed him as a live-in servant. The one-armed young man taught himself to read and write and became a shoemaker and a newspaper salesman. Less is known about Obama's maternal ancestor, Melvinia. She appears in the will of her master as a "6 year old Negro girl" who would be bequeathed to his daughter. By the time she turned fifteen she gave birth to a child, the son of an unknown white father. Melvinia and the anonymous white man are the maternal great-great-grandparents of Michelle Obama.

From its construction to the servants who worked there, the history of the White House has always been intertwined with that of slavery. For the first time, a descendant of the enslaved lives there as first lady. Michelle Obama sought to present her family tree as evidence of a painful period of our nation's past, a history with which we should be familiar so that we can move beyond it. She told the *Post*:

It's good to be a part of playing out history in this way. . . . It could be anybody. But it's

us, it's our family, it's that story, that's going to play a part in telling a bigger story. . . . [It is a process of] uncovering the shame, digging out the pride that is part of that story – so that other folks feel comfortable about embracing the beauty and the tangled nature of the history of this country.⁵

Significantly, the *Post* reported that some of Obama's relatives were reluctant to talk too much about or "delve too deep" into the family's past for fear "of stoking racial tensions and damaging"⁶ Barack Obama's chances of winning the election. Their fears were not unwarranted.

Michelle Obama's ancestry may have been a cause for an honest discussion about our nation's painful but inspiring history. Instead, for much of the campaign, she was consistently criticized from a number of quarters. She was too aggressive, too angry; she was not sufficiently demure and adoring. Throughout the campaign she was caricatured as a Sapphire-like loud-mouth matriarch. *The National Review* published a cover story calling her "Mrs. Grievance." The opposition website *TheObamaFile.com* seemed dedicated to portraying her as a gun-wielding black militant. It wasn't just right-wing bloggers who portrayed her this way. The liberal *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd launched a continuous diatribe against her that continues to the present. In fact, it was Dowd who unearthed the old problematic adjective *emasculating* in her description of Michelle Obama. Other outlets reported the existence of a mysterious recording of Obama using the epithet "whitey" in a talk she gave at Trinity United Church of Christ, in Chicago. When asked about these charges, she is reported to have denied ever using the phrase, remarking, "It's such a dated word. I'm much cooler than that."⁷

When she and her husband celebrated a primary victory with a fist-bump, a Fox News anchor called the gesture “a terrorist fist jab.”⁸

Focus groups run by the Obama campaign found that, among white Americans, Michelle Obama was perceived as “unpatriotic,” “entitled,” and “angry.” In the weeks leading up to the 2008 Democratic National Convention in Denver, the campaign worked hard to transform her image. The culmination of these efforts was her speech before the convention on August 25, 2008. The speech was preceded by a video, *South Side Girl*, which documented her “American” story, followed by a loving introduction by her brother. During her speech, she was articulate and empathetic, patriotic and visionary. She stressed education without referring to her own elite educational pedigree. She acknowledged her debt to the civil rights and women’s movements without lingering on these subjects for too long. She was neither threatening nor loud. She was soft and feminine. She said, “I love this country.” By the end of her speech, when she was joined by her daughters, she had won over a large number of Americans. Her approval ratings soared.

As first lady she is the most popular member of the Obama administration. She is Mom-in-Chief, the fashion plate whose every sartorial choice is scrutinized, and she has chosen a meaningful and necessary cause: the fight against childhood obesity. The minute she steps out of this safe zone, however, charges of “entitlement” return. Thus, she suffers the fate of many of her forbearers, from Jacqueline Kennedy to Nancy Reagan. However unlike them, she has been very careful not to do anything that might portray her as the “black” first lady.

Beyoncé Giselle Knowles first emerged as the lead singer of the successful 1990s girl group Destiny’s Child. From the beginning, it was evident that she had been groomed as the group’s star and was poised to break out as a solo act. Her father, Matthew Knowles, was the group’s manager; her mother, Tina Knowles, their designer and fashion and hair stylist. Beyoncé’s first solo effort, *Dangerously In Love*, released in 2003, earned five Grammy Awards. Since Destiny’s Child disbanded in 2005, Knowles has released two other solo albums, *B’day* in 2006 and *I Am . . . Sasha Fierce* in 2008. Each album has been a commercial and critical success. In addition, she has starred in a number of films, most notably *Dream Girls*, in which she played Deena Jones, a character inspired by Diana Ross, and *Cadillac Records*, in which she played a young Etta James. Knowles has also launched her own clothing line, House of Déreon, as well as a fragrance line. She has endorsement deals with L’Oréal, Tommy Hilfiger, Pepsi, and Emporio Armani. In 2008, she earned more than \$87 million. In the course of her career, she has sold more than 400 million records.

Knowles’s father is African American; her mother is black Creole. Tina Knowles was born in Galveston, Texas, to Agnes DeRouen, originally of Delcambre, Louisiana, and Lumis Albert Beyince of Abbeville, Louisiana. After marrying, the couple moved to Galveston. Both were mixed race French-speaking Creoles claiming African, French, and Native American heritage. While Beyoncé identifies as African American, she has always claimed her Creole heritage, which has been central to how she markets herself and her music.

Beyoncé follows in a long line of talented and beautiful black women enter-

Farah
Jasmine
Griffin

tainers such as Josephine Baker, Lena Horne, and Dorothy Dandridge. Diana Ross and Tina Turner have also been inspirations. A powerful singer and equally dynamic dancer, Beyoncé has cultivated an image that alternates between the good Southern girl; the couture glamour of Baker, Horne, and Ross; and the highly sexualized, near-athletic dancing ability of Turner and, to a lesser degree, the young Josephine Baker. Though she played Etta James, she shares little with the more “tragic” heroines of the tradition: James or James’s idol, Billie Holiday. Nor does she share their artistry.

Beyoncé occupies the status she does because these pioneers carved a place for her in American popular culture. Like them, she can sing, dance, and act, but she is also able to reap the full rewards of her labor and to control fully the direction of her career. She writes most of her own songs and has served as executive producer or co-producer for a number of her films. Unlike her predecessors, she has not been forced to choose between “respectable lady” and “bombshell.” She comfortably occupies both spaces, having selected the alter ego Sasha Fierce to express the latter. However, that she has chosen two public personas to separately convey her respectable and sexual selves suggests that black women have yet to be granted the full privilege of expressing their sexual agency without paying a price. On the other hand, Beyoncé’s two personas signify an intelligent career choice; she may be able to age gracefully into the more elegant persona. The men behind Knowles – her father Matthew Knowles and her husband Jay-Z – are powerful, successful black men, but the degree to which they manage her career is minimal; and she appears to have escaped the need for white-male sponsorship. Billie Holiday and Sarah Vaughan were both managed by black husbands;

Diana Ross is perhaps one of the first black women whose involvement with a black male entrepreneur, Berry Gordy, resulted in full-scale superstardom. Furthermore, Beyoncé’s music is not relegated to urban radio. She can pack stadiums. She brings different kinds of audiences to the movie theaters. She is beloved, and imitated, across race, class, sexuality, generation, and national borders.

Beyoncé fits within the niche of the fair-skinned, possibly mixed race, sexual beauty: a category that was born in the New World centuries ago. That she seems neither angry nor tragic, that she did not rise from material poverty, that she is never heard lamenting the lack of options available to her because of her race: all make her a pop diva of and for our times. She represents a new America. She is not of the Obama era; she helped usher it in.

And yet Beyoncé is also deeply rooted in aspects of American history. She calls on and mobilizes both a personal and collective racial past to market herself to contemporary audiences worldwide. Beyoncé’s very specific mixed race identity is entangled within the histories of New World racial slavery and the racial hierarchies that the institution bore. In short, Beyoncé builds on the fantasy of the mulatta temptress, which has origins in New World cultures from Brazil to Cuba to the American South, especially New Orleans. By highlighting her Louisiana Creole ancestry, her fair skin, blond weave, and hyper-sexualized performance style, she has parlayed a centuries-old stereotype into a lucrative and dynamic career. (She has done so without the highly public meltdowns of stars such as Whitney Houston and Britney Spears.) Thus, she has opened doors for other artists while reinforcing certain notions – sometimes destructive – of what is desirable and beautiful.

The mixed race or ethnically ambiguous woman is considered at once beautiful because of her proximity to whiteness and sexual because of her black “blood.” Historically, she was portrayed as a temptress or a seductress in order to justify her sexual exploitation. Over time she has been the object of fantasy for both black and white men, from the slave South to contemporary Brazil. She has even found her way into the pantheon of new world deities in the forms of Erzulie in Haiti and New Orleans, Oshun in Cuba, and Oxun in Brazil, all of whom manifest as La Mulatta, a deity of beauty, creativity, and all things sensual.

Either Beyoncé herself or those who have styled her visual image are fully aware of this legacy. In early campaigns for her clothing line, in photographs that accompany *B'day*, and in the video for “Déjà Vu,” the first single released from that album, Beyoncé is portrayed as a figure in two separate but related narratives that derive from specific aspects of the histories cited above: the “fancy girl” trade of antebellum New Orleans, which morphed into the Storyville Brothels featuring “quadroon” and “octoroon” women in the late nineteenth century; and free women of color in Louisiana involved with the institution of *plaçage*, a form of concubinage. New Orleans has long been known for its permissive interracial sexual culture. The city’s slave market was among the nation’s largest and was characterized by its fancy girl trade, which sold mixed race women into various forms of sex slavery. Historian Alecia P. Long notes that following the Civil War, “[t]he city ceased to be the nation’s largest slave market and most permissive port. Instead, it became a tourist destination that encouraged and facilitated indulgence, especially in prostitution and sex across the color line.”⁹

By 1897, the city had established two vice districts, the most famous of which was Storyville. The fancy girl slave trade and the brothels were only two aspects of what Long refers to as “the commercial sexual culture of New Orleans.” The institution of *plaçage* was not a form of prostitution but represented “the formal and sometimes even contractual arrangements between white men and women of color . . . which spelled out the financial terms of the relationships.” These relationships and the terms by which they were governed were often negotiated by the young women’s mothers, who presented their daughters at the famous octoroon or quadroon balls.

Beyoncé has presented an image that signifies both the brothel and *plaçage* traditions. In 2005, she and her mother launched their clothing line, House of Déreon, inspired by her seamstress grandmother, Agnes DeRouen. In the advertising campaign, Beyoncé was featured, with her mother in a supporting role as either a seamstress providing alterations or a beloved mother who offers an admiring glance or affectionate touch. In a few ads, Tina Knowles appears literally to present her daughter for the viewer’s admiration and consumption. In one, both women wear evening gowns. In another, Beyoncé stands in front of a full length mirror in satin and lace lingerie, or in a slip or slip-dress, while her mother can be seen in the mirror’s reflection. All photographs are set in a boudoir or a lushly designed seamstress studio, and each has a photograph of the Creole matriarch in gilded frame. The ad campaign for Spring 2010 featured a portrait of Beyoncé, bare shouldered and with her head wrapped elaborately in blue and green silk. The head wrap was adorned with a huge broach made of green stones, an image that recalled the tignons worn

by Creoles of color in New Orleans. The head wrap, which resembles a West African gele, was worn by free women of color in New Orleans during the Spanish colonial period and later. In 1785, tignon laws were passed to enforce a dress code for *gens de couleur*, especially women, as a means of distinguishing them from white women. The women of color rivaled white women in fashion, style, and beauty. Once the laws forced women of color and black women to cover their heads, the Creoles created highly stylized head wraps, decorating their tignons with jewels, feathers, ribbons, and other embellishments in order to distinguish their class standing.

If the ads for House of Déreon suggest plaçage, then the photos that accompany *B'day* and the video for “Déjà Vu” are more explicit in their association. In them Beyoncé wears a series of costumes, almost all of which resemble sexual costumes – from dominatrix to French maid. The most obvious finds her walking down a railroad track clad in a ruffled white cotton romper: a combination of blues singer Robert Johnson at the crossroad and photographer E. J. Bellocq’s Storyville whores. Bellocq was best known for his images of Storyville’s octoroon prostitutes. His photos inspired the 1978 film about child prostitution in New Orleans, *Pretty Baby*, starring Brooke Shields, as well as Michael Ondaatje’s 1976 novel about mythical New Orleans trumpeter Buddy Bolden, *Coming through Slaughter*. The “Déjà Vu” video features Beyoncé as a sex-crazed woman, dancing in the wilderness or alternately lying seductively across velvet couches. At one point she appears poised to perform fellatio on her partner, Jay-Z.

What is important here is the way that Beyoncé’s image is grounded at the nexus of race, sex, and commerce. Significantly, New Orleans history boasts a

number of mixed race women who parlayed both concubinage and prostitution into economic independence, property ownership, and entrepreneurship. A select few became highly successful madams, and an even greater number were successful seamstresses and hairdressers. The high degree of black property ownership in New Orleans has been attributed to the estates left by mixed race foremothers. Certainly, Beyoncé earned her wealth with hard work and virtuosic talent. Nonetheless, the marketing of that talent via a visual vocabulary that references commercial sexual culture has helped ensure her success. Most of Beyoncé’s audience, consumers of her clothing and music, are unaware of the history behind the images. For her stylists, that particular history may be part of an endless source of cultural references that they can refer to for inspiration. What is significant is the way that this particular set of images resonates with an important part of our nation’s past. While any number of young women performers may choose to market themselves in similarly sexualized roles, Beyoncé’s lineage signifies a particular kind of relationship to the images of herself that she projects.

Beyoncé’s enormous success heralds an America where race no longer necessarily bars achievement but where old mythologies continue to resonate and sell. Furthermore, if she signals the dawn of a new day in which mixed race heritage is valorized, a notion of a post-racial culture does not necessarily follow. The veneration of mixed race identity may challenge white supremacist hierarchies, but it can also accommodate a continued degradation of blackness. One need only study the history of mixed race societies such as Brazil and the Dominican Republic, where black people still sit at the bottom of the racial hierar-

chy. Within the boundaries of the United States, we continue to live in a culture that devalues blackness, as is evident in a variety of contexts, from children's preference for white dolls, to the value placed on white and mixed race adoptees versus that placed on black children, to the profound racial disparities that continue to plague black communities nationwide.

The emergence and acceptance of Michelle Obama and Beyoncé as embodiments of American womanhood indeed signal a new racial era for our nation. Beyoncé has been easier for the public to accept because she is an entertainer, a long-accepted role for black women. As a sex symbol, moreover, she does not present a threat to established categories. However, Obama's accept-

ance is more tenuous. She occupies a thoroughly new role for black women and thus walks a very fine line; she must exercise discretion lest she express too firm an opinion or appear too confident. The mainstream acceptance of talented black individuals is not without significance. That blackness is relegated to the superficial or the sexual suggests a continued devaluation of black people, their history, and their experiences. Nevertheless, images of Michelle Obama and Beyoncé are available to all our nation's girls; that they may now aspire to the previously unimagined heights occupied by their idols is perhaps the greatest indication of our nation's progress. Unfettered access to these heights will be the true test of our post-racial future.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Roy L. Brooks, *Racial Justice in the Age of Obama* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), 12.
- ² Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 11.
- ³ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 105.
- ⁴ Brian Feagans, "Georgian Recalls Rooming with Michelle Obama," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 13, 2008.
- ⁵ Shailagh Murray, "A Family Tree Rooted in American Soil: Michelle Obama Learns About Her Slave Ancestors, Herself and Her Country," *The Washington Post*, October 2, 2008.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ John Heilemann and Mark Halperin, *Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime* (New York: Harper, 2010), 253.
- ⁸ "Fox Anchor Calls Obama Fist Pound A 'Terrorist Fist Jab,'" The Huffington Post, June 9, 2008, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/06/09/fox-anchor-calls-obama-fi_n_106027.html.
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“Obligations to Negroes who would be kin if they were not Negro”

Werner Sollors

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At the present moment there is no one dominant note in Negro literary expression. As the Negro merges into the main stream of American life, there might result actually a disappearance of Negro literature as such. If that happens, it will mean that those conditions of life that formerly defined what was “Negro” have ceased to exist, and it implies that Negroes are Negroes because they are treated as Negroes.

[...]

If the expression of the American Negro should take a sharp turn toward strictly racial themes, then you will know by that token that we are suffering our old and ancient agonies at the hands of our white American neighbors. If, however, our expression broadens, assumes the common themes and burdens of literary expression which are the heritage of all men, then by that token you will know that a humane attitude prevails in America towards us. And a gain in humaneness in America is a gain in humaneness for us all. When that day comes, there will exist one more proof of the oneness of man, of the basic unity of human life on this earth.

–Richard Wright, “The Literature of the Negro in the United States” (1957)¹

Richard Wright, who died in Paris in 1960, was not quoted or mentioned in the special issues of *Dædalus* on “The Negro American” in 1965 and

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1966. However, many contributors to the issues shared Wright's interest in confronting the conditions that have defined the lives of American Negroes and have caused them to suffer agonies at the hands of their white neighbors.² Wright's forward-looking comment, his imagining of a different and perhaps better future, anticipated a possible exhaustion of the African American narrative,³ and the *Dædalus* contributors likewise made cautious predictions for the future. Returning to those prophecies from several decades ago makes for a fascinating enterprise.

The most intriguing prophet from the *Dædalus* issues was Everett C. Hughes, whose essay "Anomalies and Projections" focused on the disturbance that racial distinctions have created in the American kinship system.⁴ At the time Hughes was writing, people from other races could not be or become white people's kinfolk, and the proverbial Negro who married a white man's sister would not only sever the kin relationship between brother and sister, but would also bring shame upon the white man that would justify violence, even to the point of killing the Negro. As Hughes explained, "there is a great moral fault – in the geological sense, and let us not quibble about the other sense – in American society when it comes to obligations to Negroes who would be kin if they were not Negro." Hence, *race* could "mean the difference between friend and enemy, one's own to be trusted or outsider to be feared, between life and death."⁵ No wonder the white eye was trained to detect racial difference, though its ability to do so could vary in certain circumstances.

Hughes wrote his essay in 1965, but his examples surprise the reader still today:

If the Negro does not wear one of the many uniforms of deference or of poverty or play some role in which we expect Negroes to appear, the Negro-ness might not be noticed. On the other hand, there might be situations in which it would be doubly noticed. Imagine a handsomely purple-black Negro woman in a décolleté white gown at the ball celebrating her husband's inauguration as President of the United States.⁶

Hughes thought about Negroes "in prestigious positions" in order to contemplate such questions as "does the office outshine race or does race dim the luster of the office?" He imagined the broader possibility that in the future there might be "the full extension of the American bilateral kinship system to include mixed couples and their in-laws on both sides." Although Hughes was writing two years before *Loving v. Virginia*, he ventured the claim, "Perhaps there will come to be cases where mixed couples and their children will be able to lead normal lives, with real uncles and aunts and cousins on both sides."⁷

The parallel between Hughes's hypothetical scenario and Barack Obama's presidential campaign, election, inauguration, and family history is difficult to ignore. In his famous "race" speech, delivered in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008, then-candidate Obama reiterated his place within a multigenerational family network:

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leav-

“Obligations to Negroes who would be kin if they were not Negro”

enworth while he was overseas. I’ve gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world’s poorest nations.

Positioning himself as an ideal mediator between races, continents, and classes precisely because of his interracial family background, he added his marriage to the story: “I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave owners – an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters.” Obama employed his complex family story not only to suggest harmonious American fusion (“it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts – that out of many, we are truly one”) but also to stress that having both black and white relatives gives him a more sober perspective on what is secretly felt on both sides of the color line. He pledged that his presidency would help overcome this racial “stalemate,” and he offered unusually candid critical comments to both blacks and whites in an effort to reach for this goal and heal old racial wounds.⁸

After the inauguration, *The New York Times* (with the help of genealogist Megan Smolenyak) researched Michelle Obama’s ancestry, following up on Obama’s hint that his wife carries “the blood of slaves and slave owners.” Illustrated with an interactive family tree,⁹ the *Times* story mentions a “union, consummated some two years before the Civil War,” representing “the origins of a family line that would extend from rural Georgia, to Birmingham, Ala., to Chicago and, finally, to the White House. Melvinia Shields, the enslaved and illiterate young girl [‘perhaps as young as 15,’ we are told elsewhere in the story], and the unknown white man who impregnated her are the great-great-great-grandparents of Michelle

Obama, the first lady.” The article concludes that this genealogy “for the first time fully connects the first African-American first lady to the history of slavery, tracing their five-generation journey from bondage to a front-row seat to the presidency.”¹⁰ Hughes’s observations about American society and its “obligations to Negroes who would be kin if they were not Negro” would seem to apply very directly to the white and the non-white branches of the first lady’s family.

Of course, it was the inauguration ball that offered the uncannily literal fulfillment of Hughes’s prophecy. Michelle Obama’s white dress received much media attention on its own: *New York Times* fashion critic Cathy Horyn even called it “a bit revealing.”¹¹

Though it lacks an inaugural ball scene, best-selling writer Irving Wallace’s 1964 novel *The Man*, which imagines the first black president, perhaps inspired Hughes. (When Obama was inaugurated, Wallace’s son David Wallechinsky reminded the public of his father’s novel, the first American novel about a black president; however, the book seems to have been largely forgotten.¹²) In *The Man*, President Douglass Dilman is not elected but ascends to his office as *pro tempore* Senate leader after the president and vice president die in an accident abroad. Wallace calls attention to the significance of Dilman’s first name with an epigraph by Frederick Douglass.¹³ Dilman’s late-night swearing-in ceremony inspires newspaper headlines ranging from sensationalism to segregationism to racial pride:

NATION GASPS! A NEGRO IS PRESIDENT OF THE USA!

...

NEGRO SENATOR MADE CHIEF EXECUTIVE BY FLUKE; JUDICIARY COMMITTEE MEETS TO DEBATE

CONSTITUTIONALITY; CITIZENS
PROTEST “UNFAIR” RULE OF MAJOR-
ITY BY MINORITY; REPRESENTATIVE
MILLER PREDICTS “DISSENSION,
DISUNITY, VIOLENCE”

...

HALLELUJAH! EQUAL RIGHTS
AT LAST! COLORED PRESIDENT OF
SENATE BECOMES PRESIDENT OF US
ALL! WORLD APPLAUDS TRUE
DEMOCRACY!

Wallace’s narrator mediates these varied reactions; he comments: “Several things were evident at once. To no one would he be simply a public servant who, by the law of succession, had become President of the United States. To both sides, and the middle, too, he would be the ‘Negro’ who had become President.”¹⁴

Wallace’s narrator reminds us of the question Hughes raises in his *Dædalus* essay, as well as how it might apply to the present: that is, does President Obama’s office outshine race, or is the country divided between people who think it does and others still preoccupied with his ancestry? Contemporary responses to this question vary from high optimism to deep skepticism. In “Our Man Obama: The Post-Imperial Presidency,” the Vietnamese American essayist Andrew Lam views Obama’s election as a boost for a multicultural America because it symbolically strengthened the culturally subservient role Friday plays to Robinson Crusoe. The victory opened “the door wider to that growing public space in which Americans with mixed background and complicated biographies – Latino Muslims, black Buddhists, gay Korean Jews, mixed race children – can celebrate and embrace their multiple narratives with audacity.”¹⁵ Lam tempers his enthusiasm when he adds that, with the election, America has not moved

into a utopia; that bigotry, racism, and struggles over resources and for power will remain with us. Yet he concludes on the hopeful note that Friday’s/Obama’s “talent is the ability to overcome the paralysis induced by multiple conflicting narratives and selves by finding and inventing new connections between them.”¹⁶ Ishmael Reed, who commented critically on the public responses “to the election of the first Celtic-African-American president,” saw a sharp contrast between a celebratory façade and the media’s continued practice of ignoring black voices: “On the day after the election the *New York Times* announced in its headline that Obama’s election had broken a barrier, yet on the editorial page all of the poets who were invited to chime in were white. Some barriers remain.”¹⁷

What relevance does Richard Wright’s “The Literature of the Negro in the United States” have for contemporary African American literature?¹⁸ What themes emerge in literary works by young authors who achieved first recognition in the twenty-first century, who have Facebook sites and are Internet savvy? Do their works conform to one or the other of Wright’s choices? Do poetry, drama, and fiction in “the age of Obama” engage with some semblance of Everett Hughes’s notion of extended kinship?

Younger contemporary African American writers address race in many different ways in their works. Amina Gautier, a fiction writer in her early thirties, uses the thwarted fantasy of a happy extended family gathering for Thanksgiving to explore themes that transcend race. In her melancholy short story “Been Meaning to Say” (2008),¹⁹ she follows the recently widowed grandfather Leslie Singleton, his surname a signal of his loneliness. His younger white neighbor, Joey

“Obligations to Negroes who would be kin if they were not Negro”

Leibert, is about to sell his house, which is semi-attached to Leslie’s but which Leslie has never seen from the inside. And though Leslie tells Joey that his daughter, Carole, his son-in-law, Martin, and his eight-year-old grandson, Amir, are all coming for Thanksgiving, his false hope becomes excruciatingly evident. Carole, an assistant professor whom the reader encounters only through cell phone calls, seems distant from her father. Leslie, exhibiting the first signs of senility, desperately misses his late wife, Iphigenia, and does not seem to want to pronounce his grandson’s Arabic name: Leslie thinks of it as “mumbo jumbo.” When a black family arrives on Thanksgiving to look at the Leiberts’ house, Leslie feels strongly that they should not buy a house for their children: “They will grow up and they will leave it. They will leave you,” he feels like saying to them.²⁰ The turkey is in the oven, underdone, but Mr. Singleton spends the holiday alone seated in front of the television with his remote control.

“Been Meaning to Say” is a short story of manners in which race plays no dominant or plot-constitutive role. Perhaps it does explain why Singleton has never seen his closest neighbor’s house from the inside, but that might also be due to Singleton’s character. While Joey is described as a “lanky white man,” and the Leiberts are identified as “the last white family to move off the block,” Singleton is never given a racial label.²¹ There are specific references to African American naming practices from the generation of Eunettas and Anna Maes to that of Singleton’s grandson, whose Arabic name means prince or ruler, as Carole tells her father on the phone. Yet the themes of intergenerational and neighborly alienation, of an aging man’s grief and loneliness, belong to Richard Wright’s “common themes and burdens of literary expression which are the heritage of all

men.” Narrative subtlety and the full development of Leslie Singleton’s character carry the story, but there is little external action, no dramatic turning point or conflict, no epiphany.

The same is true of Gautier’s “Pan is Dead” (2006), a short story about Blue, a runaway dad who comes back to his wife, son, and stepdaughter (who narrates the story) after a long absence. Blue is still charismatic, but he is *also* still a junkie and before long he leaves the family once again. Though published two years before Obama’s election, one moment in the story looks different now from the way it might have in 2006. The narrator’s brother says to her, “I don’t want to be a doctor. [...] But I could be a lawyer. Most presidents are lawyers first.” She responds: “‘Boy, you can’t be president.’ This much I knew. Everyone knew that the president was always white and never from Brooklyn.”²² Four years later, Gautier’s Facebook profile lists her as a member of the “We Love Michelle Obama!!!!” group.²³

A tragic moment of high tension is the background to Heidi W. Durrow’s first novel, *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* (2010).²⁴ Durrow, born in 1969, was inspired by Nella Larsen, whose words serve as an epigraph for the novel. Like Larsen, both Durrow and her protagonist, Rachel, are biracial Danish-African American figures.²⁵ Rachel’s mother Nella, whom she calls “Mor,” is Danish; Rachel’s grandmother is black; her father Roger is a black GI (her parents met at an army base in Germany); and Rachel is biracial. At one point in the novel, Rachel, who now lives with her paternal grandmother, receives a package with two books that symbolize her situation: Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* and Hans Christian Ander-

sen's fairy tales. As the form of the novel indicates, William Faulkner's experiments with point of view in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930), as well as Toni Morrison's reconstruction of a traumatic moment of flying in *Song of Solomon* (1977), undoubtedly also influenced Durrow. The two-part novel is divided into forty-four sections, nineteen of which are told in the first-person present tense by Rachel, seven in a more staccato first-person present by her mother Nella, two in the third-person past tense from her father Roger's point of view, and the others by friends and neighbors, also in the third-person past tense. This chorus of voices surrounding the central presence of Rachel and her mother slowly reveals and offers various attempts to understand, from different points of view, the terrible moment that is the core of the novel: when the deeply depressed Nella takes her three children, Robbie, Ariel, and Rachel, and jumps off the rooftop with them in an act of utter despair. Only Rachel survives. A first glimpse of the story comes through the eyes of a little boy, Jamie, who loves bird-watching and thinks at first that he sees birds when he witnesses the event:

When he finally reached the courtyard, he saw that his bird was not a bird at all. His bird was a boy and a girl and a mother and a child.

The mother, the girl, the child. They looked like they were sleeping, eyes closed, listless. The baby was still in her mother's arms, a gray sticky porridge pouring from the underside of her head. The girl was heaped on top of the boy's body, a bloody helpless pillow. And yet there was an old mattress, doughy from rain, just ten feet from the bird-boy's right arm, which was folded like a wing beneath him.²⁶

The novel moves on to other external perspectives and glimpses of the more distant past (there was an earlier child, Charles, who died; Rachel knew nothing of him) and the later present (Rachel is becoming a woman). Finally, Durrow confronts the event through Nella's and Rachel's own voices. Nella claims the children as her own against other people's (and especially her white boyfriend Doug's) racist perceptions: "They're mine. If people can't see it – how can I keep them safe? . . . They will go where I go." Rachel recounts the jump from the rooftop more fully: "*I saw above me and around, beyond the day's fog. I felt my cells expanding into space and felt larger than ever before. And then I met the ground.*"²⁷

In a *Readers' Guide* found on her website, Durrow raises the question, "Do you think that in the age of Obama, biracial/bicultural people will continue to experience the same kinds of stereotypes and stigma that Rachel did?"²⁸ *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* thematizes not only the still common misperception that a white mother of mixed-race children must be an adoptive parent, but also Rachel's sense of biracial and semi-Danish estrangement in her grandmother's black world. Though the novel may ultimately find its source of horror in a good mother's growing mental disturbance more than in social conditions or race relations, there is little hope here that Hughes's American problem of those "who would be kin if they were not Negro" has reached a happy resolution in 2010. Yet the horrifying maternal act that has defined Rachel's life has also given her – she who was not meant to have a future – a new life in which she finally is able to express understanding and love of her mother.

Among young playwrights who emerged in the first decade of the

“Obligations to Negroes who would be kin if they were not Negro”

twenty-first century, Thomas Bradshaw stands out for his satirical edge and his broad, poster-like employment of the repertoire of American racial histories and sexual fantasies in an aggressive black-humor mode that makes audiences initially think they are watching a comedy.²⁹ Born in 1980 in New Jersey, Bradshaw wanted to go beyond the mid-century protest tradition:

There’s the black literature of the ’40s, ’50s and ’60s – white oppression is bad, reparations, apologizing. It was awareness building, really. That work was really necessary and important. . . . But there hasn’t been much work done since then. What is a modern presentation of race? What kind of issues do upper middle class blacks have to deal with? After you assimilate into the mainstream, what are the issues?³⁰

His ironically titled play *Strom Thurmond Is Not a Racist* (2007)³¹ addresses the paradox that, at the core of racial segregation, there was also miscegenation. The thinly veiled hypocrisy in the case of South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond’s lifelong but secretive support for his and Carrie Butler’s illegitimate biracial daughter, Essie Mae Washington-Williams, provides the source material for the play. Bradshaw follows the story chronologically, from Thurmond’s seduction of the sixteen-year-old Carrie to the spiriting away of their child through various encounters he has with his daughter later on, all while his political career as a segregationist and opponent of civil rights unfolds. This path gives Bradshaw the opportunity to contrast Thurmond’s infatuation – he recites Wordsworth’s “Daffodils” to Carrie – with his prayers for purity and his wish to please his excessively racist father, who says such things as, “We had to lynch a thousand Niggers before

they learned their place in the South again!” Later, the play juxtaposes Thurmond’s own segregationist statements – “We have segregation because God doesn’t want blacks and whites to mix” – with his daughter’s sad and critical observation:

You become a different person when you stand in front of cheering crowds giving campaign speeches. You’re unrecognizable to me. You act and speak completely different from the man I know. The man I know is loving and wonderful to me, the man on stage speaks venomously of my kind. It makes me wonder which is the real you or [if] there’s a real you.³²

In a conversation between Strom and his father, Bradshaw reveals how the public rhetoric against “nigger-loving” (a phrase employed by both men) is only the flipside of what Strom’s father calls “a right of passage for most southern gentlemen.” His father says: “We learn about women from the promiscuous niggers. They tantalize us. There’s something irresistible about them. We demonize them by day and crawl into their beds at night.” Strom responds: “But we never let the truth be known. It’s our open secret.” The play ends with Essie Mae’s funeral eulogy for her father, which she concludes with, “I’m going to miss you daddy.”³³ In explicitly naming the open secret and ending with the word “daddy,” *Strom Thurmond Is Not a Racist* crisply illuminates Everett Hughes’s notion of unmet white American “obligations to Negroes who would be kin if they were not Negro.”

Racist obstacles to public recognition and acceptance of interracial kinship take center stage as well in Bradshaw’s lurid play *Cleansed*. While wearing a Klan mask her white grandmother gave her, Lauraul, a mixed-race daughter who

wishes to be white, kills her black father, a heart surgeon, for having contaminated her white blood. This play is a ritual-like revision of black political drama in the wake of the 1960s, in which a daughter might kill her father for being a sell-out Negro according to her newly acquired revolutionary black nationalist views (as was the case with M'Balía in Richard Wesley's *Black Terror* of 1971). But in the twenty-first century of *Cleansed*, the confused biracial daughter is accepted into a white supremacist group because she hates Negroes even more than the whites do.

In Bradshaw's theatrical world, an extended interracial family sitting down to a happy Thanksgiving dinner in a post-racial setting seems unthinkable. In a *New Yorker* review, Hilton Als confirms the sense that Bradshaw's plays "take a sharp turn toward strictly racial themes" (in Richard Wright's formula). "It's fairly easy to get beyond Bradshaw's purposefully thin surfaces," Als writes, "unless, of course, you're unwilling to look at what contorts all America: racism, and the bullshit notion that it doesn't affect our view of sex and love in a so-called post-racial country."³⁴

Born in South Carolina in 1971, the poet Terrance Hayes engages obliquely and self-reflexively with the past as shaped by the civil rights movement, and he does so while experimenting in new poetic forms and with an impressive cultural openness. In his collection of poems *Lighthouse* (2010), he finds inspiration in a *mélange* of greats: from David Bowie, Fela Kuti, and Etta James to Gwendolyn Brooks, Wallace Stevens, and Elizabeth Alexander (who received broader international attention for her inauguration poem for Barack Obama) to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.³⁵

Hayes likes to compose *pecha kucha* poems, a word he explains as "a Japanese adaptation/loanword of the word *picture*, pronounced in three syllables, like 'pe-chack-cha.'"³⁶ This format, Hayes writes, is derived from Japanese business presentations of twenty connected images of twenty seconds each. Perfect for polished cycles or sequences of poems, the PowerPoint model has inspired a highly contemporary, non-traditional poetic genre that is technology-based and removed from any claims of American or African American authenticity. In one twenty-slide poetic sequence, titled "For Brothers of the Dragon," Hayes imagined Malcolm X's brothers on the day Malcolm was buried; he includes such self-reflexive slides as:

[HOW FICTION FUNCTIONS]

However else fiction functions, it fills
you with the sound
of crows chirping, *alive alive alive*. But
that's temporary too.
Tell my story, begs the past, as if it was
a prayer
for an imagined life or a life that's better
than the life you live.³⁷

"What if blackness is a fad?" Hayes asks in "[MALEDICTION]," a slide of another *pecha kucha* with the general title, "Arbor for Butch." It is inspired by the African American artist Martin Puryear, the titles of whose works serve as headings for each one of the *pecha kucha*. Hayes suggests readers search online for these headings and look at the related images. A photograph of Puryear's sculpture *Malediction*³⁸ is thus to be imagined as the inter-artistic background of Hayes's quatrain that continues, after his opening question, with "Dear Negritude, I live as you live, / waiting to be better than I am."³⁹

“Obligations to Negroes who would be kin if they were not Negro”

Self-reflexive and ironic uneasiness also characterizes his poem “The Avocado,” a sustained conceit on the legacy of civil rights and black nationalist actions. The poem casts the avocado as the ideal emblem for a hypothetical abolitionist flag:

“In 1971, drunk on the sweet, sweet juice of revolution, a crew of us marched into the president’s office with a list of demands,” the black man tells us at the February luncheon, and I’m pretending I haven’t heard this one before as I eye black tortillas on a red plate beside a big green bowl of guacamole made from the whipped, battered remains of several harmless former avocados.⁴⁰

Hayes articulates the distance between the red, black, and green of the black nationalist flag and the commodification of that historical moment, with its sense of political advocacy (a word related to *avocado*) for such goals as reparations, into the “money-colored flesh of the avocado.” The transformation of the avocado into guacamole provides a visual analogy to a recounting of the past that is so palatable and trite that the listener has to pretend not to have heard the story before.

“At the present moment there is no one dominant note in Negro literary expression”: Richard Wright’s comment from 1957 echoes still today. Reading Amina Gautier, Heidi Durrow, Thomas Bradshaw, and Terrance Hayes, one encounters rather heterogeneous suggestions about possible story lines for African American literature, as well as diverse approaches to the question whether the country is moving toward a post-racial

world in the age of Obama. Yet perhaps there never was only one dominant African American narrative, for writers from Phillis Wheatley and Frank Webb to Albert Murray and Andrea Lee have written about many themes besides race – though racial themes may have been what their readers were looking for most often.

Ironically, no writer makes that more apparent than Richard Wright. Although his most frequently read and taught works emphasize the prototypical African American narrative of victimization, from the legacy of slavery to the ethics of living Jim Crow, he turned away from writing such black proletarian protest poems as “I have seen black hands” and instead experimented with free-floating and untitled haikus that might be of interest to Terrance Hayes: for example, “Crying and crying, / Melodious strings of geese / Passing a graveyard” or “Holding too much rain, / The tulip stoops and spills it, / Then straightens again.” Wright also shifted from imagining socially determined and constrained black characters, as in *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Native Son*, to focusing on a much broader range of human motivation and psychology in *The Outsider* and *Savage Holiday*; he expanded from the legacy of American history in *12 Million Black Voices* to take on truly global concerns with tradition and modernity, decolonization, and the emergence of a Third World voice in *Pagan Spain*, *Black Power*, and *The Color Curtain*.⁴¹ Wright’s own willingness to address “strictly racial themes” while also searching for “the common themes and burdens of literary expression which are the heritage of all” is worth remembering, for writers and readers alike, in a world that seems to be post-racial and racial at the same time.⁴²

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Richard Wright, *White Man, Listen!* (1957; repr., Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1964), 104–105.
- ² Wright's spirit surely was present in the *Dædalus* issues – in comments on Negroes and Communism in the 1930s; in discussions of the importance of decolonization in the Third World for African American civil rights in the 1950s; and in an essay by St. Clair Drake and references to Horace Cayton, whose joint study *Black Metropolis* Wright had written an introduction for in 1945. Furthermore, the African American writers who were cited in the issues, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, started their careers under the wings of the older Wright.
- ³ See Charles Johnson, "The End of the Black American Narrative," *American Scholar* 77 (3) (Summer 2008); <http://www.theamericanscholar.org/the-end-of-the-black-american-narrative/> (accessed March 24, 2009).
- ⁴ The essay was originally published in *Dædalus* 94 (4) (Fall 1965): 1133–1147. I quote from the expanded paperback reprint, *The Negro American*, ed. Talcott Parsons and Kenneth B. Clark (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967). Hughes also reprinted his essay in *The Sociological Eye: Selected Papers* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1971).
- ⁵ *The Negro American*, ed. Parsons and Clark, 698, 700.
- ⁶ Skeptics may wish to consult the original passage in the *Dædalus* issue, at page 1139; quote here taken from *The Negro American*, ed. Parsons and Clark, 700. See also Hughes's interventions in the discussions of the papers included in *Dædalus* 95 (1) (Winter 1966): 287–441. No one seems to have asked a question about this passage in Hughes's essay from the first *Dædalus* issue, though Hughes reiterated his reflections on American kinship in the second issue; see page 352.
- ⁷ *The Negro American*, ed. Parsons and Clark, 700, 705–706.
- ⁸ <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88478467> (accessed February 28, 2010).
- ⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2009/10/08/us/politics/20091008-obama-family-tree.html> (accessed February 28, 2010).
- ¹⁰ http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/08/us/politics/08genealogy.html?_r=1 (accessed February 28, 2010).
- ¹¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2009/01/21/us/politics/20090121-michelle-audioss/index.html> (accessed February 28, 2010).
- ¹² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-wallechinsky/flashback-the-first-black_b_159301.html (accessed May 7, 2010).
- ¹³ Irving Wallace, *The Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), unpaginated front matter. I do not know of a novel by an African American author that anticipated the emergence of a black president.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 62–63.
- ¹⁵ Andrew Lam, *East Eats West: Writing in Two Hemispheres* (Berkeley, Calif.: Heyday Books, 2010), 115; a slightly different version of the essay is available at http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=e96674231b31155c9ae5adeca7c1ec08 (accessed October 24, 2010).
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.
- ¹⁷ Ishmael Reed, *Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media: The Return of the Nigger Breakers* (Montreal, Québec: Baraka Books, 2010), 75, 80; cited from page proofs.

“Obligations to Negroes who would be kin if they were not Negro”

- ¹⁸ Two first novels from the twenty-first century should also be mentioned. Edward P. Jones’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Known World* (New York: Amistad, 2003) is a sweeping historical novel set in slavery-time Virginia that untypically represents slaveholding blacks. Michael Thomas’s *Man Gone Down* (New York: Black Cat, 2007), the winner of the International Dublin/IMPAC Literary Award and one of *The New York Times*’s “Top Ten Best Books of 2007,” is a breezy first-person singular account narrated by an interracial married black father living in Brooklyn who confronts his crisis-ridden past and present in four intense days.
- ¹⁹ Originally published in the *Southwest Review* (2008): 287–297, “Been Meaning to Say” was included in Gerald Early and Nikki Giovanni, eds., *Best African American Fiction 2010* (New York: One World, 2010), 106–116, which is the source used for the quotations here.
- ²⁰ Gautier, “Been Meaning to Say,” in *Best African American Fiction 2010*, ed. Early and Giovanni, 109, 115.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 106, 110.
- ²² Amina Gautier, “Pan is Dead,” *Chattahoochie Review* (Fall 2006): 6; <http://www.gpc.edu/~gpcrc/gautier.php> (accessed February 26, 2010).
- ²³ <http://www.facebook.com/people/Amina-Gautier/1339033752> (accessed May 15, 2010).
- ²⁴ Heidi W. Durrow, *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2010).
- ²⁵ Heidi W. Durrow, “Dear Ms. Larsen, There’s a Mirror Looking Back,” *PMS – poem – memory – story* 8 (2008): 101–109.
- ²⁶ Durrow, *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, 19–20.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 247, 238.
- ²⁸ <http://heidiwdurrow.com/readers-guide/> (accessed May 10, 2010).
- ²⁹ This aspect of Bradshaw’s work has affinities with the raucously irreverent tradition Glenda R. Carpio has delineated and analyzed in her book *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- ³⁰ <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2006/12/theater/pushing-buttons-an> (accessed May 14, 2010).
- ³¹ Thomas Bradshaw, *Strom Thurmond Is Not a Racist and Cleansed* (New York: Samuel French, 2007).
- ³² *Ibid.*, 20, 26, 29.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 32, 39.
- ³⁴ http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/notebook/2009/09/28/090928gonb_GOAT_notebook_als#ixzz001GF6dV6 (accessed May 15, 2010).
- ³⁵ Terrance Hayes, *Lighthouse* (New York: Penguin, 2010). See also <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/video/module.html?mod=0&pkg=24042008&seg=4> (accessed May 12, 2010).
- ³⁶ Hayes, *Lighthouse*, 94.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.
- ³⁸ <http://updateslive.blogspot.com/2008/06/martin-puryear-exhibition-at-national.html> (accessed May 10, 2010).
- ³⁹ Hayes, *Lighthouse*, 18.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.
- ⁴¹ Because Wright included observations about the Western dress of Eurasian elites in *The Color Curtain*, one is tempted to imagine how he might have reacted to Michelle Obama’s

dress at the inauguration ball. The fact that her white gown was designed by Asian American Jason Wu might have added a mediating or “third” dimension to the black-white divide that had dominated the discussion of race at a time when the new Asian immigration wave had not yet started – all the more so since Wu commented on the color choice by saying, “White is the most powerful non-color.” See http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/01/20/jason-wu-michelle-obamas_n_159519.html (accessed February 28, 2010).

⁴² I am grateful to Kelsey LeBuffe for research assistance, to Stephen Burt, Gerald Early, Glenda Carpio, and Sara Sollors for helpful comments, to Jennifer Kurdyla and Suzanna Bobadilla for proofreading this essay and suggesting revisions, and to Micah Buis for copyediting it.

Poetry in a New Race Era

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The buzz is on. It is the beginning of summer and the anticipation is thicker than the layer of smog above the skyline. More than five hundred youth poets from across the United States and around the world are gearing up for the 13th Annual Brave New Voices (BNV) International Youth Poetry Slam Festival, to be held in Los Angeles, California, in July 2010. I can feel the excitement in the city. I imagine intimate words bouncing off the walls inside the Saban Theater on a night co-hosted by rapper and actor Common and actress Rosario Dawson. Who knew the convening power of poetry could reach so far? I remember my days as a novice educator, when poetry was confined to classrooms and, during open mic nights, to select cafés and clubs.

More than fifty thousand youth poets converged in local and regional competitions to determine who would constitute the representative teams that moved on to the July nationals. Once in Los Angeles, these teams faced rounds of competition during the weeklong BNV festival to narrow the field even further. In the end, four teams – Albuquerque, Denver, New York, and the San Francisco Bay Area – battled onstage for this year’s crown of new grand slam champion.

While the competition remains an integral part of the festival, the chance to consider the themes that youth participants tackle in their writing – voice, identity, citizenship, and leadership in the twenty-first century – is equally important. What

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do these themes suggest about the possibilities of poetry in a *new race era*? Indeed, what do they convey about inhabiting a new race era?

In the age of Obama, race has surfaced in new ways. Terms such as *post-racial* have been used liberally. With the election of the first black president of the United States, the notion that race has become a thing of the past is indicative of the politics and vestiges of color blindness. With Obama in the highest position of power, it has been argued that American society has either entered or reached the promise of a post-racial era.¹ Whether we embrace Obama's politics or critique his administration's domestic and foreign policies is beside the point. On the one hand, the stage was set with the historic electoral win on November 4, 2008. On the other, the stage was also extended for new conversations to take place, inspired, perhaps, by a renewed sense of the need to ask, what is at stake in these new times? To say that we are in a post-racial era without acknowledging the historical permanence of race and the everyday processes of racialization in America is not enough. That is, race as skin color and racialization based on difference continue to perpetuate assumptions and produce hierarchy in society.² It is still necessary to pry open such matters in discursive spaces and envision hope without shying away from politics. The age of Obama – reflecting the cultural intricacies of the man himself – is not the end of race but rather the beginning of new ways of engaging the complexities of it. In other words, it is an opportunity to assess the future of race.

According to social and education theorist Zeus Leonardo in an essay on race ambivalence,³ post-race thought in a so-called post-racial era requires vision: the vision to recognize how the history and

presence of racism shape the world today, in even the mundane interactions of daily life; to find language to express what may at times be difficult to invoke; and to acknowledge indignation without concretizing victimhood, disregarding optimism, or eschewing possibility. Post-race thought calls for moving forward and facing race head on, maintaining hope – the audacity of hope – in (re)configuring steps toward a more democratic order. As Leonardo conceives it, this moment is an opportunity to express ambivalence toward racialization without encouraging race-blind analysis. His conception envisions not a society without race, but one aspiring to that goal – and getting there by going through race, not around it.

I was in Washington, D.C., last year when the subject of this essay first came to me.⁴ It was late October, nearly one year since President Barack Obama's historic electoral win in 2008. I was thinking about youth culture in America today: who is shaping it? What has transpired, and what has been significant in recent years? What is it about the growing literary arts movement in various metropolitan areas? In particular, what is it about poetry? It seemed to me that there is a window of opportunity through which discourses about youth and, in turn, youth culture are being shaped. I wondered about the connection between this window of opportunity, the *new race era*, and poetry.

In youth poetry, identity and cultural politics are central to the art. Youth poetry encourages conversations that make explicit the asymmetrical relations of power based on various markers of difference, including, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, ability, age, and language. It merges a particular genre of writing with existing practices of hip-hop culture. It differs

from an essay, play, or novel partly because it blends elements of literary precision and performance with the universal cache of hip-hop music, language, and style. The affinity for poetry is not without the influence of the culture in which it is embedded, and vice versa. Youth poetry allows micropolitics to converge, individuals to mobilize different identities (sometimes collectively), and norms of identification to play out.⁵ It makes apprehensive truths transparent.

Poetry resonates with many individuals in various contexts; its language exposes social realities that are often steeped in the margins, especially for the young who are frequently attracted to reading and writing it because it is accessible to experimentation in a way that prose is not. In a study conducted in northern California, for example, I found that many high school students turn to poetry as a literacy practice inside and outside the classroom.⁶ Carolyn, a seventeen-year-old African American student, wrote the following poem to denote everyday experiences:

Can you see me?
When you think black
You think guns going glack glack
Sending shots through your neighborhood
Stores
There's no turning back
You wack, you scared
Can you compare
To all the lashes I got across
My back
Seek
The curse in my eyes
The flare of my nose
The adrenaline in my chest
The grinch in my teeth
The bitch in my breath
Why the hell
You gotta be so
Difficult

Listen to me when I tell you
What's on my mind
The truth
Twisted up but I spit it out
So let it be known
What the guns in their hands is all about
You
Don't see me
You see right through me
You want me locked up as much as the
next man
Do I look like a hoodlum to you?
I'm not the black you know
I'm the black you will know
So I ask
Once more
Can you see me?

Poetry is not a new phenomenon, but it has (re)emerged as more inclusive than ever, as well as more visibly connected to politics. For instance, President Obama's inauguration consisted of a celebration of the arts with world-renowned musical guests and artists. It also featured a commissioned poem, "Praise Song for the Day," by Yale University professor Elizabeth Alexander. The moment was not the first of its kind. Robert Frost shared a poem at the inauguration of President Kennedy, as did Maya Angelou and Miller Williams, respectively, at the first and second inaugurations of President Clinton. Every inauguration has had its share of artistic performances. But Obama's choice of Alexander seemed a conscious attempt to reach out to a particular school of black poetry – represented by Cornelius Eady, Toi Derricotte, Carl Phillips, Nathaniel Mackey, and Yusef Komunyakaa – that distinctly blends poetics and cultural politics, and that is both complex yet accessible in many of its references to readers of color. These poets are the children of the black literary and performance poets of the 1960s and 1970s, just as Obama him-

self is. At such a highly visible event, talented artists fill the stage and let their craft do its work. On a smaller scale, and complementary in spirit, are the local, regional, and national venues where emerging writers, who range in age and hail from various cities and towns, share their passion, thought, and experience.

Literary arts organizations such as Youth Speaks in the San Francisco Bay Area and Urban Word in New York City lead the way in serving youth ages thirteen to nineteen, providing them with mentorship and learning opportunities through after-school writing workshops, internships, and, most of all, formal spaces for sharing their work in front of large audiences. The pedagogical approach to spoken word poetry has been modeled after successful programs such as Poets in the Schools and Poetry for the People, which not only have influenced how poetry is taught in the classroom, but also have led to the proliferation of other programs.⁷ Innovative in its approach, BNV (with representative teams from San Francisco, New York, Chicago, Hawaii, Santa Fe, Fort Lauderdale, Ann Arbor, and Providence, to name a few) now includes a Brave New Teachers program. Training sessions and workshops have become a critical component of the week-long festival.

Aside from its popularity in hip-hop, theater, and literary arts circles, BNV is also a documentary series on the HBO cable network.⁸ The series is approaching another season, featuring rapper and actress MC Lyte as narrator (Queen Latifah narrated previously). The provocative topics presented onstage, projected by a single or by multiple microphones, are complex and often personal. Social issues and forms of inequality that teen poets encounter in their lives take the form of words, gestures, intona-

tion, and, in some instances, coordinated group performance. The power of this collective voice in one room is bracing. Not long ago, emerging and seasoned poets alike graced the same stage in an HBO series called *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, hosted by rapper and actor Mos Def. Successful in its late-Friday-night time slot, the show ran for six seasons. The BNV slam competition and documentary series demonstrate a resurgence of literacy as a means for young people not only to write about their lives and share their words with a large audience but, more important, to craft life trajectories with a literary cadence that challenges social norms and inequalities. The writing is a celebration of life and its meanings.

Putting such passion, thought, and experience into the language of poetry has real-world implications; it is indicative of the everyday practices of young people. Featured poems from the 2009 slam competition include titles such as “Fish, Grits & Buttermilk Biscuits” by eighteen-year-old African American Britney Wilson, a BNV poet from New York. The challenge of having cerebral palsy intertwined with the courage to break social molds takes on a particular force as she describes her own battles, ambitions, and dreams. Another poem, “Change,” by nineteen-year-old African American B. Yung, also a BNV poet from New York, points to the historical struggles of being a young black male in American society. He performed his four-minute poem at the Urban Word NYC Slam Finals; here is an excerpt:

Every time I write a slave poem, my paper
bleeds
[...]
Society never wanted me to make it
So I guess the gravity ain't the only thing
That's been holding me down lately

But I don't hate you, as a matter of fact I
don't even despise you
I think I love you more than I can love half
of my ignorant brothers
And I know, I know my brothers ain't as
personable
But you got to understand, it's kind of hard
Teaching high school boys that whips and
chains
And "whips" and "chains" are symmetrical
So from the bottom of my heart
I am sorry that we are the way we are
But you got to understand, these mother-
fuckers told us
That change was going to come
And I am just so tired of waiting⁹

Other examples of poetry come in a variety of multimedia formats. Chinese Taiwanese American Kelly Tsai's "By-Standing: The Beginning of an American Lifetime," a five-minute spoken word video and winner of the War and Peace Award from Media That Matters, was featured in its Seventh Annual Film Festival in New York.¹⁰ The following excerpt signals humanity and responsible action in a multiracial society:

My friends, my family, my lovers, myself
We who sit back into what our lives were
like before
Making our convictions seem trendy
Yesterday, I went to study happy people at
Navy Pier
They don't go to rallies or conferences
They don't talk about war
They wait for a sunny day and go to Navy
Pier
They smile beneath their sunglasses
They hold each other – close
They eat ice cream that they paid too much
money for
They take advantage of the opportunity –
to love
They are lucky and everyone in this world
should be as lucky

Never, nowhere, anywhere
This is why – NO WAR

In an artist's statement released by Zu Zu Films,¹¹ twenty-something Kelly Tsai noted the relevance of the spoken word video:

In 2003, I was asked to perform at the Not In Our Name Rally in Chicago, which over 4000 people ultimately attended. I felt moved and compelled to write a poem at the most human level that spoke to the existence of war throughout our lives even in times of so-called peace. My hope was to tear ourselves away from polemics and rhetoric to understand at a fundamental level that war affects us all and that for every one person that suffers at our hands whether near or far, we all bear the consequences as we deprive each other and ourselves from the essential human right to peace that gives us the opportunity to live our lives however we choose. Unfortunately nearly 4 years later, the message is still relevant today.

Similarly, numerous spoken word artists have produced their own videos and used YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, and other social media sites to share or distribute their work. Armed with such new media technology, artists have a growing interest in taking poems from the page to the stage and onto the screen. Convergence and remix are at the fore of production. A recent example involves the fictional character Claireece Precious Jones, from novelist and poet Sapphire's *Push*.¹² In the novel, writing poetry plays a key role in various stages of Precious's life. The character pens her pains and struggles and, in the end, offers many lessons about life as it is experienced by some youth in impoverished urban communities. One of the poems that appears in *Push*, "Everi morning," conveys that experience:

everi morning
 i write
 a poem
 before I go to
 school
 marY had a little lamb
 but I got a kid
 an HIV
 that folow me
 to school
 one day.

Precious, the 2009 film adaptation of *Push*, garnered critical acclaim: directed by Lee Daniels, the film received various major awards, including the 2009 Sundance Film Festival's Grand Jury Prize and three Screen Actors Guild Awards.¹³ Although my intention is not to argue for the perpetuation of the culture of poverty or the commodification of youth culture, it is important to note that there are economic as well as political and cultural factors that open up different opportunities and spaces for minorities to be represented in the media. Some representations challenge existing stereotypes, for example, of black and brown youth from impoverished communities as pathologized beings; others reinforce them, often to great success at the box office.¹⁴ However, it is beyond the scope of this essay to address the role of culture industries, media marketing strategies, and complex economic apparatuses in building on the "popular" to create and sell cultural products and, in turn, shape culture.¹⁵ The primary point here is that poetry has emerged in youth culture as more powerful than ever. It is worth exploring the possibilities for verse to inform ongoing programs and policies that support young people.

As we negotiate matters of identity and cultural politics in a new race era, we must remember the potential power

of words in the movement toward individual and social transformation. My own research affirms the idea that poetry can be used as a form of critical literacy both inside and outside school. That is, rooted in the poetry process are literacy practices that assess traditional and social texts to negotiate the relations of power that inform them. As a medium of expression, poetry can be one means for moving educators a step closer to improving educational practices and, ultimately, can accelerate literacy achievement for traditionally underserved students. It creates learning environments that allow youth to take part more fully in their own learning process. Likewise, it can give adults a way to make sense of youth's social worlds – to enter everyday imagination and lived experience. It extends words into action for the sake of alleviating human struggle. Words as speech acts perform actions in themselves or convert to action in the process of recontextualization. In my encounters with youth poets and other emerging writers, I have discovered that the dialogue we have through writing is sometimes a necessary reflection to ease the pain of experience with courage and clarity. Sometimes, it is about releasing fantasies and taking pleasure in the sublime, or celebrating the randomness that springs up daily in our lives – the kid who jumps at the chance to play, laugh, and love or be loved. Other times, it is about working through indignation without dwelling on anger and deepening wounds.

A personal anecdote is illustrative of my point. I teach at Washington University in St. Louis, live in a residential neighborhood near campus, and speak English. (I also speak Tagalog and Spanish.) I am a Filipina American. Recently, I approached a white local contractor to erect a fence in my backyard. In our interaction, he asked what I am, where

I come from, what I do for a living, and how I learned to “speak English well.” It was as if I needed to legitimize my status and personhood to this white male contractor. In hindsight, and perhaps in fairness, this small business contractor may have found it necessary to ask such preliminary questions because of problematic experiences with past clients; it may have been a wise business practice to gather a bit of information before commencing a job. Perhaps I reacted hastily to my suspicion that, had I been white, the interrogation would not have occurred. Whatever the case, the encounter triggered memories of other moments in which I had been made to feel similarly singled out. Was it a race moment that called forth the stereotypic assumption of Asian as “forever foreigner”? Did the English language binding us in that moment evoke a common yet shifting ground of who is American (or who is not)? Perhaps it was a matter of gender and gender relations underscoring who had power in that moment. Perhaps it was a matter of attribution or even paranoia prompted once again by difference. Such thoughts came to my mind.

In the field of critical race theory, such negative interactions have been labeled *microaggressions*.¹⁶ There are different forms, some subtle, others more explicit in nature. In documented studies of African Americans and their families, psychologists and sociologists have long held that microaggressions result in stress over time.¹⁷ The stress of having suffered repeated indignities, whether they are committed wittingly or not, impacts the psyche and worldview of individuals whose lives are shaped by such seemingly small yet ubiquitous and constant forms of oppression. Being refused service, being followed in a store, being ridiculed for having particular observable traits, being stigmatized

for a linguistic accent, and being treated as inferior: all these experiences occur in day-to-day interactions, making them mundane and ordinary; yet when sustained over time, they can produce harsh and extreme effects. To challenge the contractor during our interaction, I posed the same questions back to him. Later, I jotted down what transpired between us. It was the impetus for an art-making process. I drew on the experience, reified it in words, and in the end transformed it to share with you, the reader. The process parallels what emerging and seasoned writers have done with their subjective experiences. The following poem attempts to capture my experience:

Microaggression. When are racist and
sexist jokes not
Racist and sexist? One could argue that
they depend on
The context, person, or tone. To whom?
Too many have
Let their guards down and dangerously
assume jokes are
Only jokes. Subtle ones, at best, betwixt.
Comfortability
And camaraderie at each end, inevitably
soft laughter
In between. The privileged (in this case a
middle-aged
White male) does not realize the joke, the
ramifications
Of the joke or transparency through which
the joke reveals
Itself. Normalcy of ignorance and sense of
entitlement
Privilege the teller to say what is really on
his/her mind.
There are untold stories here. Stones still
unturned. It is
Time once again to rage about curiosities,
the elephant
In the room. It is time to revisit the past.
Otherwise, we

Risk the chance of bequeathing dangers
we have known
For several generations. All bets are on the
table.

The quest for answers continues –
whether in thought, in poetry, or in
other forms of writing. If we are to en-
vision a hopeful world, a place rid of
oppression, then we ought to will our-
selves to engage in deeper conversa-
tions. The stakes are higher in these
times, yet they are opportunities for

us. Naming infractions and injuries
offers a beginning for expanding dis-
course in a new race era. As youth po-
ets have demonstrated in notebooks,
classrooms, workshops, slams, and
elsewhere, writing about what matters
most is where the possibilities lie. Our
lives – and the lives of those who have
yet to put their truths into words –
depend on it. Time will tell who will
broadcast the loudest chants and de-
liver the most compelling poems.¹⁸

ENDNOTES

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- ² Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).
- ³ Zeus Leonardo, “After the Glow: Race Ambivalence and Other Educational Prognoses,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (forthcoming).
- ⁴ Many thanks to Zeus Leonardo for an engaging conversation then and the continued dialogue present here.
- ⁵ Kwame Anthony Appiah, “The Politics of Identity,” *Dædalus* 135 (4) (2006): 15–22.
- ⁶ Korina Jocson, *Youth Poets: Empowering Literacies In and Out of Schools* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).
- ⁷ Maisha Fisher, *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007); Korina Jocson, “‘Taking It to the Mic’: Pedagogy of June Jordan’s Poetry for the People and Partnership with an Urban High School,” *English Education* 37 (2) (2005): 44–60; Ruth Kim, “Spoken Art Pedagogies: Youth, Race & the Cultural Politics of an Arts Education Movement,” unpublished dissertation (University of California, Santa Cruz); Jen Weiss and Scott Herndon, *Brave New Voices: The Youth Speaks Guide to Teaching Spoken Word and Poetry* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2001).
- ⁸ For more information on each organization, visit Youth Speaks, <http://www.youthspeaks.org>, and Urban Word NYC, <http://www.urbanwordnyc.org>. For schedule and details on BNV’s Annual Youth Poetry Slam Festival, visit <http://www.bravenewvoices.org>. Video clips of past episodes on HBO as well as sample poems performed by various teams are available at <http://www.hbo.com/bravenewvoices>. The series based on the BNV Festival held in Los Angeles aired on HBO in Fall 2010.
- ⁹ These and several other poems from teams Ann Arbor, Fort Lauderdale, Hawaii, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Santa Fe are featured on HBO’s website, <http://www.hbo.com>. Full episodes of the BNV series, interwoven with narratives about each poet, may also be viewed via HBO On Demand or purchased as a DVD set.
- ¹⁰ The video can be accessed via <http://www.mediathatmattersfest.org/films>. For more information on the artist, visit <http://yellowgurl.com>.
- ¹¹ <http://www.zuzufilms.com>.

- ¹² Sapphire, *Push* (New York: Vintage, 1996).
- ¹³ *Precious* was also nominated for three Golden Globe Awards, including Best Motion Picture, Best Performance by an Actress in a Motion Picture (Drama), and Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role in a Motion Picture (Drama); actress Mo'Nique was nominated, and won, in the latter category. Additionally, *Precious* was nominated for six Academy Awards, including Actress in a Leading Role, Actress in a Supporting Role, Director, Film Editing, Best Picture, and Adapted Screenplay. Mo'Nique won in the category of Actress in a Supporting Role, as did Geoffrey Fletcher for Adapted Screenplay.
- ¹⁴ For a related discussion, see Zeus Leonardo and Margaret Hunter, "Imagining the Urban: The Politics of Race, Class, and Schooling," in *International Handbook of Urban Education*, ed. William T. Pink and George W. Noblit (New York: Springer, 2007).
- ¹⁵ Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, Classics Series (New York: Routledge, 1991); Henry A. Giroux, *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence, and Youth* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Henry A. Giroux, *Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability* (New York: Palgrave, 2009).
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- ¹⁷ Grace Carroll, *Environmental Stress and African Americans: The Other Side of the Moon* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997); Chester M. Pierce, "Offensive Mechanisms," in *The Black Seventies*, ed. Floyd B. Barbour (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1970), 265–282.
- ¹⁸ I would like to thank Gerald Early for the invitation to contribute to this volume. His critical feedback pushed the writing and further shaped the ideas presented in this essay. I would also like to thank all the poets and writers whose works are included, allowing for a fuller illustration of the topic.

Seeing Jay-Z in Taipei

Hua Hsu

My father left Taiwan for the United States in the mid-1960s at the age of twenty-one. He would be nearly twice as old before he returned. In the interceding years, a willing maroon far from home, he acquired various characteristics that might have marked him as American. He studied in New York, witnessed and participated in student protests, and, according to photographic evidence, once sported long hair and vaguely fashionable pants. He accidentally became a Bob Dylan fan, thanks to second-hand exposure through the floorboards of his apartment building. He subscribed, very briefly, to *The New Yorker*. He acquired a taste for pizza and rum raisin ice cream. He and my mother spent their honeymoon driving across the country, and among the items that have survived my parents' frugal early years are weathered paperback copies of the bestsellers *The Pentagon Papers* and *Future Shock*. For a brief spell he toyed with anglicizing his name and asked to be called Eric, though he soon realized that assimilation of that order did not suit him.

I often try to spin these details into a narrative of my parents' early years in America. How did they imagine themselves? How did they acquire a sense of taste or decide which movies to see? Did any minutiae betray some aspirational instinct, a desire to fit in? Would they have recognized themselves in *Future Shock*? And who was the influential Eric after whom my father had named himself, if only briefly? These were the raw materials for their new American identities, and they foraged only as

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far as their car or the subway line could take them. In those days, as my parents never tire of reminding me, their sense of identity was bound by geography: proximity to these American effects, on one hand, and profound distance from home, on the other. Back then, they explain, it required a small fortune and months of careful planning to return home. They remember, with the kind of nostalgic fondness assigned to experiences that need not be repeated, that when they were young like me it took weeks simply to schedule a long-distance phone call and ensure a quorum of the family would be available on the other side of the line.

This specific detail has long captivated me. What must it have been like to leave home willingly and cross into a different world, with only the haziest plans for return? I could not fathom the idea that the rare phone call and the occasional transpacific letter – which might announce a future phone call – constituted the entirety of their connection to their gradually more distant homeland. In the absence of available connections, they held on to an imaginary Taiwan, more an abstraction, a beacon, a phantom limb than an actual island. The available technology could deliver them home only occasionally. So they would search for traces of it in the faces of their classmates; they would hear it wafting above the din when they visited Chinatown. My parents – usually rational, reserved, mellow people – would drive hours in search of neighboring immigrant colonies that promised Chinese restaurants, grocers, newspapers, and marathon lunches with old classmates. It was the same for my father’s entire collegiate graduating class, all of whom pursued their futures abroad. Any encounter was enough to nourish them and remind them of who they were.

Of course, they had chosen all this: the occasional loneliness, the itinerant lifestyle, the language barrier. They had arrived to study at American graduate schools far superior to their Asian counterparts, though the reward for such a mad pursuit had not yet come into focus. Despite their acceptance of this fact of displacement, what they had not chosen was to relinquish the place they held in their hearts in order to become Asian Americans, a category then coming into fashion. They had little in common with the American-born Chinese and Japanese students organizing on the other side of their campuses for free speech or civil rights; they knew nothing about the Chinese Exclusion Act, Charlie Chan, or why one should take deep offense to the slurs “Oriental” or “chink.” My parents and their cohort would not have recognized that they were representatives of a “model minority.” In fact, they hadn’t even planned on becoming Americans. It’s not that they were unconcerned: they simply did not know such categories of identification – national, racial, ethnic – were available to them. Their allegiances remained with the communities they had left. They subscribed to a narrative of return, and for the most part, they were not deeply invested in where they fit in the American racial landscape, even as it reoriented itself to accommodate their kind.

Many of them – my parents and their classmates, clustered at engineering schools – were the moving pieces in someone else’s grand abstraction, one that promised flexibility and improvisation rather than the strict contingencies of identity politics. “For the first time in history,” wrote the urban theorist Melvin Webber in 1964, around the time my parents arrived stateside, “it might be possible to locate on a mountain top and to maintain intimate, real-

time and realistic contact with business or other associates. All persons tapped into the global communications net would have ties approximating those used today in a given metropolitan region.”¹ A visionary of telecommunications, Webber was one of many 1960s theorists and planners to describe a future in which traditional notions of “identity,” tied to geography or tribe, would no longer matter. Instead, advances in technology would allow us access to the world’s farthest corners, inaugurating a new era of global simultaneity. Encounter and contact, the Grand Tour, and ethnographic exploration would no longer be the pastimes of the intrepid few. As the distance between here and there was abridged, Webber foresaw global possibilities: “By now there is a large class of persons around the world who share in the world culture, while simultaneously participating in the idiosyncratic local cultures special to their regions of residence,” he observed in a later essay. “Their range of opportunity is far larger and far more diverse than the most powerful and wealthy man of past eras could have imagined.”²

What were these men “imagining?”³ This vision of “world culture” was meant to supplement, possibly even supplant the more local expressions of identity that had arisen in the 1950s and 1960s. We had to rebuild our beleaguered urban centers, Webber and others agreed – riot-wounded places like Watts, Newark, and Detroit. But in this “post-city age,” we also had to anticipate the new social configurations of the future beyond the quaint, limiting city and the provincialism of local spaces. Suddenly, “encounter, contact, communication” were no longer problems. This revolution in “global communication” would be fomented and fine-tuned by people

of my father’s generation. As an engineer, he was essentially building a bridge back across the ocean, one made of silicon chips and wafers, circuits and microprocessors, the essence of a computer and the raw materials of the digital age. He was helping solve the problem of cheap, efficient communication that had been one of the defining limitations of his early years in America. The great distances that once separated various human outposts – that mystery of what lay beyond – had inspired artists and inventors and entranced conquerors, explorers, travelers, stowaways, and heads of state. Now there were better things to think about. Posed another way: why affiliate with arbitrary categories of race or ethnicity when connectivity empowers us to seek out those with whom we share interests, opinions, or background?

But what if our imaginations do not progress accordingly, at the same rate as theories or technological advances? What if we are unable (or choose not) to imagine something beyond the simple yearning for home comforts, or the tendency toward tribalism? The problem with such universalist thinking is its tendency to efface difference: to offer an inevitable, common future as antidote to our disparate, occasionally contentious pasts. While my parents had been pragmatic and unsentimental about the decisions that landed them in the United States, there was something about their relationship to their identity that defied such reason; it was irrational, if not steadfastly provincial. It was something that seemed to emerge instinctually.⁴ Over time, as I approached the age they were when they left home, I became mystified. I carefully listened to my parents’ stories about coming to the United States, desperate to locate some

Hua Hsu

bit of myself in their wanderings, unexplainably hopeful that some essential quality had passed through generations and geography to me. I wanted to feel some primordial connection, if only to shade in some long-imagined vector of my identity. It was an intoxicating, mysterious, secondhand nostalgia. If anything, with ease of travel and globe-spanning technology, this desire only grew. The advances of “world culture” did not efface the need for identity politics or resolve the past’s yearnings; it merely gave that need a wider platform, new articulations, unheralded claims.

Years later, when my father returned to Taiwan to pursue a job, this problem of distance returned – only we now had the technology to bridge it nightly. We bought a fax machine. Each night my mom and I would detail, in the smallest type possible, our daily activities. Each morning, before I left for school, his return message would be waiting for me. Faxes gave way to email, which was rendered quaint by Skype, and so on.

Taiwan was no longer a mere abstraction for them, but it remained a mystery to me. That distant place provided an approach to questions of identity that were frequently posed in terms of black and white. I spent most of my vacations there in middle school and high school, and upon each visit, I felt ever more dislocated. Was I just another American, my faint grasp of the spoken language an unbridgeable gulf? Or was I, warmly welcomed by my parents’ Taiwanese born-and-raised friends, just another version of them?

To import American racial categories achieved little. The notion of “Asia” is not immediately intuitive to many within this continental grouping, and the lassoing of different Asians into the category *Asian American* once they enter the United States seemed, to those over there,

vaguely laughable. Which is not to say that the legacies of familiar racial hierarchies were invisible. When my parents were growing up, a famous toothpaste brand throughout Asia was called Darkie; its yellow box was illustrated with a garish black man in a top hat, his black skin the void out of which shone a set of impossibly white, sparkling teeth.⁵ In Taiwan, Darkie toothpaste was probably the closest many came to encountering an actual black person, just as seeing Rock Hudson and Elvis Presley (whose hairstyle my uncle would dutifully mimic) in magazines or on television constituted their exposure to white Americans, intrepid Christian missionaries notwithstanding. Converging in these figures – the grinning cartoon minstrel, the debonair leads – were specific origins, histories, and contexts. But projected across the Pacific, they could seem like degrees of the same American effect.

“We are all bewildered by the movie,” young Rio Gonzaga remarks, “which is probably too American for us.”⁶ The movie in question is *A Place in the Sun*, George Stevens’s 1951 adaptation of Theodore Dreiser’s 1911 *An American Tragedy*, and Rio’s environs – the 1950s Manila of Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters* – are not ideally suited for this tale of forbidden love and murder, which stars Montgomery Clift, Elizabeth Taylor, and Shelley Winters, among other models of alien, American beauty. Rio’s envies are familiar: the “casual arrogance” of a “modern” American heroine, the “blond, fair-skinned” looks of her own cousin Pucha.⁷ And while Rio and Pucha hail from the local elite, in relation to the American splendor they see on-screen during their retreats to the air-conditioned movie theater, they are only marginally more privileged than their lowly chaperones.

But there is something about Rio's relationship to this American otherness that resists it. Though not yet critical of her adoration for exclusively white stars, she is beginning to understand that this is someone else's version of the good life. For Rio, the margin of her privilege manifests itself in an awareness that this American film was not meant for her, even if she finds something seductive in its images, themes, possibilities. "I decide that even if I don't understand it, *I like* this movie," Rio explains, and her desire to translate this feeling of bewildered enchantment into something more concrete distinguishes her as one of the novel's most astute voices. She doesn't understand America, yet she draws closer, and with caution.

This is how much of the world first experiences America: as an image. Once as a racist tube of toothpaste, now as a YouTube clip of kids in Oakland inventing a new dance. Today, this range of images is far greater and less singular in quality; American culture no longer privileges the fair-skinned cowboys or superheroes exclusively. Accessing America from abroad is no longer the fancy of the affluent or the intrepid. The infrastructure for the "post-city age" exists: the logic of social networking websites or crowd-sourcing and the proliferation of cheap, efficient cellular phone technology mean that we are connected in previously unimaginable ways. There is the famous, oft-repeated story of Max Perelman, an American college student lost in western China in the late 1990s. He encountered a group of Tibetans traveling to their capital, Lhasa. They had never wandered far from their village; they did not know what a camera was. At one point, while partaking in a feast of raw meat, one of the wandering Tibetans asked Perelman, how was Michael Jordan doing?⁸

There is something familiar, possibly even heartening about this anecdote. It flatters our sense of how connected the world is or can be. Even in a remote strip of Central Asia, Michael Jordan is recognized. But what lay beyond this mere fact of recognition? Did these itinerant Tibetans perceive Jordan as an African American – a pioneer of black style and status and (prior to the election of President Barack Obama) possibly the most famous black man ever – or just as an American? Were they familiar with his skills as a basketball player or his interchangeability with Nike? Which version of Jordan did we hope to project? Which qualities stayed affixed to Jordan as his image traveled the globe?

I was visiting Taiwan with my parents in Fall 2006 when I learned that the rapper Jay-Z was bringing his elaborate world tour to the Taipei Dome. Jay-Z's status as hip-hop's iconic 2000s hero was already, at the time, assured. This tour, with United Nations-cosponsored dates throughout Africa, was ambitious and, in some way, heartening. It was supposed to make him a global presence, and not just in London and Tokyo. Each time he left an African city – traveling beyond Cape Town and Johannesburg to Dar es Salaam, Accra, Lagos, and Luanda, too – startling photographs of Jay-Z aiding humanitarian water security missions, touring rural lands in modest, utilitarian dress, or meeting heads of state would circulate the Internet. These photographs suggested new collective possibilities.

This had long been hip-hop's promise. When the former gang leader-turned-DJ Afrika Bambaataa became hip-hop's first philosopher in the early 1980s, he imagined a form that would be voracious, inclusive, and global. Anything with a beat could be assimilated into his genre-resistant DJ sets: why couldn't he and the

young men and women of the South Bronx found a culture on roughly the same principle? The cosmopolitan possibility of hip-hop was captivating, and as it traveled the nation and then the world – thanks to epochal singles and one-hit wonders, bootlegged documentary videos and self-published magazines – its potential for change grew as well. For the most optimistic, hip-hop’s global reach was predicated on its capacity to coalesce different groups around notions of justice or foster a new creativity perched on the possibilities of “sampling.” This cultural form was a piece of my identity, and it was founded on a sense of community or “nationhood” as abstract as my parents’.

Hip-hop’s entry into the cultural mainstream introduced a new kind of proud antihero to the American imagination. Even as the music produced a multibillion-dollar industry, allying itself with the forces that had once tried to stymie its growth, there was a sly and almost residually subversive quality to it. The music became a business, and the artists blossomed into savvy, swaggering businessmen. Men like Russell Simmons, Sean Combs, or Jay-Z were unimaginably famous for reasons beyond music. Often, they were the least powerful men in the boardroom – but the only ones who, with a squint or a frown, could make everyone else feel uncomfortable, beholden to their charisma. How far could this *swagger* take us?

The rise of hip-hop and the general “colorization” of American culture prepared us to see ourselves anew. Demographers predict with some degree of certainty that, in the next three decades, the population of the United States will finally become “majority minority”; it will be the “end of white America,” at least to the slab of the population that

finds any meaning whatsoever in those vague, fraught words. To those who recognize that minorities are no longer token contributors to our cultural self-image, this news only confirms what has been felt for some time. The audience for such news will have experienced a culture that moves free of city or space, where mixture and multiculturalism are valued. The primacy of the idea of “whiteness” only makes sense in isolation, abstracted from history or culture, protected from the larger, global flows of majorities and minorities within which Americans, white or otherwise, will always fall into the minority category. Whiteness will only matter insofar as people continue to choose the category, to validate it with their hopes and fears; along these lines, perhaps hip-hop has charmed the world’s stage more successfully than “white America” (if such a concept still holds) ever did.

But did hip-hop’s importance as an intervention in America’s racial hierarchy, if only cosmetically, travel? Was its global rise predicated on a vague black coolness or its symbolic overturning of a heretofore lily-white American order? How far could style translate, and was it a sufficiently durable, transferrable, translatable quality?

From the American perspective, these issues formed the subtext of the photographs of Jay-Z, the living embodiment of hip-hop’s victory. The photographs were his appeal to all who had ever considered themselves members of the underclass. They portrayed a globally famous black pop star returning to his ancestral lands, rewarding their patronage with an image of success. One could have anticipated different versions of these photographs dispatched from all the obscure parts of the globe where he would perform. This tour was not for America; it was for the rest of the world.

We grafted our struggles onto his, and now the rest of the world could do the same.

As I approached the Taipei Dome and spied the throngs of locals, all of them recognizable as versions of the “global citizens” I grew up with in California, I thought about that symbolic victory for the underclass. As an American versed in the codes and meanings of hip-hop, I was a somewhat protective spectator. Did the triumphs that Jay-Z represented translate? Were people here to revel in the spectacle, or to share in acts of subversion? When the local fans thrilled to every move of the opening act, a Taiwanese rapper named MC Hot Dog who had carefully studied the playbooks of his American peers, I scoffed. His very name made me cringe, yet the fans adored him. After a brief intermission, Jay-Z took the stage. The audience sat politely through most of the set, rising only in the presence of the easy hits. I felt an irrational sense of alienation. Perhaps this, in a way, was hip-hop’s victory. A local version had mastered the moves, and at least the fans could understand what MC Hot Dog was saying: he both rapped in their language and filled his rhymes with defiantly local references. He was oppositional in a way they could relate to.

The divide between Jay-Z and the audience only widened as the evening dragged on. Often, it seemed they had only the faintest clue what he was talking about between songs, and his raps lost them altogether. The African American star’s swaggering charisma didn’t translate either. Still, the spectators craned their necks and climbed atop seats merely to see an American in our presence, validating this market by showing up. They may not have understood him, but they knew they were supposed to like him.

“We relate to struggle,” Jay-Z shouted to the audience midway through his progressively lackluster set. “We relate to y’all.” It was a somewhat generic thing for him to say, more a performance of empathy than a gesture of sincerity. Struggle: such a common, universal, oft-uttered condition. Could solidarity really be forged through so vague a notion? What were the consequences of taking one’s struggle abroad? Was Jay-Z actually introducing the youth of Taiwan to a new vocabulary for understanding their lives? Where “struggle” in the American context might describe the minority’s struggle against a power structure or cultural mainstream, here it meant something else. What hip-hop helped achieve in the United States was the victory of the image: kids of color, kids with attitude who could not be underestimated – who took that underestimation and made billions of dollars off it. But projected abroad – and complicated by language – hip-hop’s valences were different. In the context of American race politics, it represented the ascension of an underclass, and its effects could be felt economically, politically, and even spiritually; in Taiwan and elsewhere, hip-hop could just as easily represent the ascension of American culture in general.

Efforts at solidarity approached farce later during the concert, when the enormous screen behind him flashed the logo for Jay-Z’s record label, ROC (short for Roc-A-Fella, a riff on Rockefeller). The crowd awakened with ferocious, unexpected energy. In Taiwan, “ROC” reads as the abbreviation for “Republic of China.” The name is a reminder of Taiwan’s strained relations with the Chinese mainland. Some argue that Taiwan and China must reunite, while others rally for formal independence: this schism, in some way, defines Taiwanese

Seeing
Jay-Z in
Taipei

identity. The crowd assumed that their American hero was referring to their struggle.

From a distance, the bare facts of this scene might describe the “world culture” of Webber and others. But within this set-piece of globalization, the translations – of culture, symbol, language – remain vexed. The coming together of different localities does not always result in the kind of solidarity we would have hoped for. In this case, was it empathy, or something else? What happens when these immense distances collapse and we surrender our long-held, reliable notions of authenticity or essence, memory and imagination? As the opportunities for new moments of contact proliferate – and as the figures and images circulating along those pathways change as well – what will be the basis of our “world culture”? Do these notions of struggle, community, or identity politics translate across such vast spaces, or does the astonishing rate of circulation loosen them from intent and meaning?

The circulation of images happens at a rate that is either terrifying or exciting, given your age. Suddenly it is impossible to ignore the interconnectedness of American fates with those worldwide. Many Americans were introduced to this idea only recently, in the wake of 9/11; others may have read it in our shoes and socks, shirts and appliances, most of which are crafted overseas and will travel farther distances than many of us ever will. The circuits that implicate us are infinite. Against such a backdrop of extreme possibilities and energies, what of our older allegiances to seemingly outdated notions like race or ethnicity? Those who venture to America, as my parents did forty-odd years ago, no longer face the same light homesickness. Wherever immigrants live, they

now have their own strip malls, shopping centers, and newspapers. Indeed, the predictions went slightly awry. Instead of creating a “world culture” of uniform desires and tropes, the new flows of information merely gave coherence and credence to more micro-regionalisms. Categories of identification became segments of a market share, and the logic of this “world culture” became that of the neoliberal market or a social network online.

This outcome is a version of what anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff describe in their book *Ethnicity, Inc.* There was a certain kind of claim, the Comaroffs explain, to essence or invisible affinity, which was supposed to wither away in the modern age. We were supposed to stray from binding myths – of origin, tradition, belief, and culture. The seemingly archaic, vernacular meaning of community was supposed to flounder in the “post-city age,” in which geography was suddenly incidental, or at least surmountable. These new associations, it was predicted, would cause the abstract, not-quite-rational core of identity politics to shrink, causing us to act more rationally or sensibly toward the world around us. We would access far corners of the world as an endless stream of images and data, customizing our preferences and tracking usage statistics along the way.

Instead of advancing past our provincial affiliations, however, we have found reasons to return to and properly mark these delineations. The feeling of authenticity, that alluringly vague line dividing two tribes, the abstract outline of a community, could now be monetized. New forms of consumption activated identities in novel, almost chillingly pragmatic ways, creating a need to crystallize or codify boundaries that previous generations had never thought to demarcate.

There is *belonging* in the nebulous, homesick sense, and there is a legal type of “belonging,” which entitles you to claim a piece of a Native American gaming casino or an obscure, mountainous Japanese tea ceremony. “Neither for consumers nor for producers,” the Comaroffs write, “does the aura of ethno-commodities simply disappear with their entry into the market; sometimes, as we have seen, it may be rediscovered, reanimated, regained.”⁹ We know that identity can enter into commodity relations – the idea that blackness can signify “cool” to American consumers or that an ethnic rite can be trademarked. But to presume that this marketability automatically compromises the integrity of that identity is to presume a kind of original authenticity, which simply locks us in a circle. Instead, the Comaroffs’ idea of the “ethnicity industry” is useful for considering what entry therein does *not* guarantee. The rise of entertainment marketed specifically to white Americans – the Blue Collar Comedy Tour or auto racing are two sturdy examples – might help us reorient our understanding of racial hierarchy and the emergence of a white claim to identity politics that follows the example of actual minority groups. But accepting the fact of the “ethnicity industry” discourages us from scrutinizing related broader notions: the very *idea* of blackness or whiteness, for example.

The conditions of identity haven’t changed so much as our ability to articulate, choose, express, and complicate them has. The end of white America – a numerical majority – is assured; the end of whiteness – an idea, a hegemonic center – will not die so easily. The paradox of all these new ways of articulating and embracing difference – of customization and connectivity, lifestyle choices and segmented markets – is that

they rely on a shared, universal logic. We possess unprecedented forums for instant, global contact, but too often this connectedness merely means that we are implicated as slivers of a market whole. Rarely does the potential to connect on a global scale embolden us to seek mutuality or discover radical new possibilities for feeling and transferring empathy. Perhaps this is asking too much.

Furthermore, amidst all this possibility, it becomes difficult at the individual level to feel all that unique or original. How does one orient oneself in a sea of such endless connective possibilities?

As I began recollecting the scraps of conversation that constitute the opening pages of this essay, I had to take care to remember what was mine and what I had read in someone else’s memoir, or overheard in a class. Was the shape of this narrative cliché or easily predictable? Did I just rearrange the details of my parents’ lives according to a recognizable script? It was like that line in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* about the impossibility of distinguishing Chinese Americanness from the unique weirdness of your own family.¹⁰

It was a somewhat generic strategy on my part, though, as Kwame Anthony Appiah has observed in his discussions of culture, “[O]ne is bound to be formed – morally, aesthetically, politically, religiously – by the range of lives one has known.”¹¹ Just as markets exist for a certain kind of by-the-bootstraps ethnic art, its opposite now courts audiences as well. This is exactly the form of ethnic knowledge Nam Le assails in his recent short story, “Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice.” Le describes a wry, frustrated young Vietnamese-Australian writer at the University of Iowa’s

M.F.A. program. He struggles to complete a final assignment. “How can you have writer’s block?” a friend (presumably white) wonders. “Just write a story about Vietnam.”¹² But he resists, even as instructors assure him that ethnic literature is “hot” and lusty literary agents encourage him to mine his “*background and life experience*.” Ethnic literature is “a license to bore,” its stories stocked with “flat, generic” characters and “descriptions of exotic food,” his classmates decry, and Le’s young proxy in the story agrees.¹³ Instead, he chooses the righteous path: he writes fantastical stories about vampires, assassins, and painters with hemorrhoids.

There is something disarming about Le’s seemingly ironic take on identity, the way the short story anticipates readerly expectations. It’s a knowing, bracingly logical put-down of ethnic literature – and from an insider, no less. When the story turns, slightly, upon the arrival of the young writer’s father, a witness to unimaginable wartime atrocities, it is unclear whether the reader is merely being set up for a savage fall. After a series of wrenching, relationship-advancing conversations with his father about his experiences during the war – the type of wondrously food-filled conversations the characters within the story mock – the young writer begins writing his “ethnic story.” It abides by certain generic conventions, and it vio-

lates every rule he and his friends have agreed upon. Ultimately, his father cannot accept his son’s desire to fictionalize the past. But he chooses to write it.

There are specificities we lose when we surrender to the universal, a fear that Le’s short story seeks to express. It does not overcome the stinging criticisms Le’s characters set out for their creator, nor does Le seek to reclaim or own such stereotypes by turning them on their head. Instead, Le embraces identity’s current contradiction: he wants to have it both ways, to possess and control his identity, but without being completely beholden to it, without letting it over-determine his actions. The story is skeptical and ironic about identity politics while passionately defensive about our right to claim our sense of self.

The final paragraph in Le’s story begins, “If I had known then what I knew later, I wouldn’t have said the things I did.” The writer’s father has just destroyed the only existing copy of his son’s story, and a strained relationship is about to disintegrate altogether. This writer – so unimpressed and otherwise ironic – never reveals this secret. He keeps it for himself, to defend his father. Certain details in this life simply cannot be assimilated into a larger whole, whether that whole is a story or a market economy. They should be allowed to serve no end.

ENDNOTES

¹ Melvin Webber, “The Urban Place and the Non-Place Urban Realm,” in *Explorations into Urban Structure*, ed. Melvin Webber, John Dyckman, Donald Foley, Albert Guttenberg, William Wheaton, and Catherine Wurster (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), 79 – 153.

² Melvin Webber, “The Post-City Age,” *Dædalus* 97 (4) (Fall 1968): 1099.

³ I am reminded here of Arjun Appadurai’s stirring discussions of how globalization – another way of approaching Webber’s “world culture” – expands the imaginative scope

of its subjects. See Arjun Appadurai, “Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination,” in *Globalization*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Durham, N.C. : Duke University Press, 2001) and Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

⁴ While these forms of sentimental yearning were important to people like my parents, I do not want to overstate or generalize their effects. Aihwa Ong, for example, has written about how flows of migration and capital across the Pacific have inaugurated “flexible,” pragmatic, new approaches to citizenship. See Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, N.C. : Duke University Press, 1999).

⁵ Over time, and in what ranks as possibly the most tepid exercise of political correctness ever, the manufacturers of Darkie toothpaste decreased the resolution of the image so it was merely the shadow of a black face and renamed the toothpaste Darlie.

⁶ Jessica Hagedorn, *Dogeaters* (New York : Vintage Books, 1990), 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸ Walter Lafeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (New York : Norton Books, 1999), 14.

⁹ John L. and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2009), 20.

¹⁰ Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (New York : Vintage Books, 1975), 5 – 6.

¹¹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (London : Oxford University Press, 1991), ix.

¹² Nam Le, *The Boat* (New York : Knopf, 2008), 8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

The Concept of Post-Racial: How Its Easy Dismissal Obscures Important Questions

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Why are so many people afraid of the concepts *post-racial* and *post-ethnic*? Both are often brushed aside amid a competition over who can declare the most resoundingly that racism is still a vital problem in the United States, and that the physical marks of descent remain highly determinative of an individual's destiny. One pundit after another proclaims sanctimoniously that all one must do is look at the color of the prison population, or at the 2009 arrest of Harvard University Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his own home, and one will see that all this talk about a post-racial America is nonsense.¹

Yet almost none of the people who have sympathetically used the terms *post-ethnic* and *post-racial* have advanced the claims now being refuted with such ease; rarely have they used the terms in a manner that could leave one wondering, what were those prophets of post-ethnicity and post-raciality smoking when they started talking in such terms? The gap between what is being refuted and what is being affirmed is a discursive Grand Canyon.

What is being affirmed? I tried to summarize it in an essay for the journal *Callaloo* in 2008. I suggested that the election of Barack Obama as president – that historic event of the election of a black president of the United States – made it easier to contemplate “a possible future” that might be called post-ethnic or post-racial:

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a possible future in which the ethnoracial categories central to identity politics would be more matters of choice than ascription; in which mobilization by ethnoracial groups would be more a strategic option than a presumed destiny attendant upon mere membership in a group; and in which economic inequalities would be confronted head-on, instead of through the medium of ethnorace.²

Almost no one calls into question the desirability of such a future. Few will deny that the election of a black man as president is a step in that direction. But virtually every journalist and academic savant who gets press attention in relation to post-raciality wants to talk only about whether that future has arrived. This scenario is true of even ambitious and thoughtful scholars, such as historian Thomas J. Sugrue, whose recent book, *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race*, will convince anyone still in doubt that racism continues to be a problem for black people in the United States.³ Once that becomes the question – usually understood as, “Are we beyond racism or not?” – there is no room for discussion other than to exclaim, “Of course not!”

Questions so easily answered are not the ones most deserving of our attention. Might the rush to deny what almost nobody affirms betray an eagerness to avoid more challenging issues, including those explored by people who have popularized the terms *post-ethnic* and *post-racial*?

These concepts were generated to sharpen our vision of what a society long accustomed to invidiously ascribing and enforcing ethnoracial distinctions might look like if those abhorrent protocols could be weakened. This decidedly historical undertaking is quite different from a debate about “color blindness” in the abstract. The post-ethnic/post-

racial analytic project acknowledges the reality of an ethnoracially intensive past; it tries to assess and understand the diminution of that intensity in a variety of contexts. The point has been to confront and examine the contingency of ethnorace in America – past, present, and future – while registering the effects of descent-related experiences that survive the loosening of attributed or chosen connections between an individual and his or her community of descent. Given this trajectory, the post-ethnic–post-racial project inevitably has focused on the problematic character of the concept of race; on the historicity of group formation and deformation; on boundary-crossings; and on the internal diversity of the descent communities that is obscured by the five gross categories of the ethnoracial pentagon (white, black, yellow, brown, and red). So, too, has this project promoted direct and honest confrontation with economic inequalities that are historically specific but are too often dealt with only through the proxy of ethnorace.

The term *post-ethnic* is broader and deeper than *post-racial*. The former recognizes that at issue is all identity by natal community, including that which is experienced by or ascribed to population groups to which the problematic term *race* is rarely applied. These matters affect the status of Latinos, Arabs, Jews, and other immigrant-based populations not generally counted as “races.” A post-ethnic social order would encourage individuals to devote as much – or as little – of their energies as they wished to their community of descent. It would discourage public and private agencies from implicitly telling citizens that the most important thing about them is their descent community. Hence, to be post-ethnic is not to be anti-ethnic, or

even color-blind, but rather to reject the idea that descent so determines destiny as to render suspect trans-descent programs that seek to diminish inequality.⁴

Politically, a post-ethnic perspective actively encourages strategic enclaving; what this perspective opposes is the assumption that people are deeply obligated in the nature of things to make common cause with others of the same skin color, morphological traits, and kinship system. Post-ethnicity considered as a goal is a choice-maximizing ideal that encourages cultural and political dynamics responsive to individual perceptions and ambitions. Post-ethnicity as a condition – now largely in effect for Americans of European ancestry, who can decide just how Irish or Polish they want to be – is the experience of being able to really choose. Political scientist Robert Putnam is right to describe as “post-ethnic” his sense that “it seems important to encourage permeable, syncretic, ‘hyphenated’ identities . . . that enable previously separate ethnic groups to see themselves, in part, as members of a shared group with a shared identity.”⁵

Literary scholar David Mastey gets it exactly right when he observes that “a post-ethnic policy” of “affiliation by revocable consent” was reflected in Columbia University graduate Barack Obama’s decision to become a community organizer among the black poor of Chicago, in that young man’s later decision to leave that community to attend Harvard Law School, and in the decision of many of his black friends in Chicago to accept his departure from their community to pursue a law degree at Harvard.⁶ When sociologist Jonathan Rieder describes Martin Luther King, Jr., as “a post-ethnic man,” he implies nothing to the effect that King thought he was living a color-blind life, but rather that King had the capacity to “articulate his complex sense

of self by drawing from a rich repertoire of rhetorics and identities,” unconfined by such narrow and singular roles as “ethereal integrationist” or “vernacular black man.”⁷

Yet when a basic idea is widely accepted while the words that ostensibly embody the idea are resisted, one wonders if the words can possibly be right. *Post-racial* and *post-ethnic* may be inadequate to take on the tasks some of us have assigned to them. One of the interesting challenges of our historical moment is to find a vocabulary adequate for the meanings many of us are struggling to get “out there” in public discourse. Some of the terms that are literally accurate are even more awkward: post-ethnoracially-intensive, post-pentagonal, post-identitarian, post-ascriptive, post-primordial, and post-descent-defined all convey part of the action, but none is viable. To be sure, there are so many posts these days – postmodern, post-Marxist, postcolonial, postfeminist, post-structural – that one must bring a certain skepticism to the whole enterprise of “posting” things. There is no doubt this popular practice reflects a lack of invention. What keeps the practice of posting alive with regard to ethnicity and race, however, is a determination to keep track of the past, to register its legacy without denying the reality of change. The *post-* is designed to flag this meaning. Ironically, it is this sensitivity to the legacy of the past that users of the terms *post-racial* and *post-ethnic* are routinely accused of lacking.

When I first pushed the term *post-ethnic* in essays of 1992 and 1993, I was looking for an alternative to *cosmopolitanism*, which seemed too abstract, too ahistorical, and too encumbered with ambiguous ideological associations.⁸ The term *post-ethnic* appealed to me then – and still does – because it implies a strong hold-

over from the past, but a refinement of that legacy in relation to new opportunities and constraints. So, too, with *post-racial*. On the closely related notion of post-blackness the writer Touré remarks, “Post-blackness sees blackness not as a dogmatic code worshipping at the altar of the hood and the struggle but as an open-source document, a trope with infinite uses.”⁹ A similar dynamic is invoked under the flag of “post-Jewishness” as defined, for example, by the organizers of a highly successful exhibition of post-Jewish art at the Spertus Jewish Museum in Chicago in 2008. “The post-Jewish generation,” in the words of the Spertus catalogue, “focuses on self-definition and on balancing lived experience and heritage in intellectual and daily practice,” fostering “an internal, highly personal consciousness as to how one connects with Jewishness today.”¹⁰

In this essay, I focus on two highly diversifying demographic trends that continue to inspire post-ethnic/post-racial writers, and that get short shrift in the competition to show just how bad racism still is. One is the extent and character of cross-group marriage, cohabitation, and reproduction. The second is the extent and character of recent immigration, especially of dark-skinned peoples.

The role of “race mixing,” as it is often called, in blurring the lines between the standardized ethnoracial groups is now widely acknowledged. It was even registered in the Census Bureau’s decision to include in the 2000 Census the option to identify with more than one ethnoracial group. Yet critics of the post-racial concept almost never address this reality, despite its ever-growing salience. The Pew Research Center recently studied the 3.8 million marriages that took place in the United States during 2008 and found record levels of out-marriage for every ma-

or demographic group. Thirty-one percent of Asian Americans who married in that year took a non-Asian spouse, while 26 percent of Hispanics took a non-Hispanic spouse and 16 percent of black Americans took a non-black spouse. Nine percent of whites took a non-white spouse.¹¹

Black out-marriage thus remains rare in comparison to the statistics for out-marriage among Hispanic Americans, American Indians, and the various groups of Asian Americans. Nonetheless, the black case demands all the more attention because of the long and deep opposition to black-white marriages, which has lasted well beyond 1967, when the U.S. Supreme Court finally eliminated laws prohibiting such marriages in the dozen states where they still existed. The current trend is unmistakable, especially for males. The Pew study found 22 percent of the black men who married in 2008 were married to non-black women, up from 15.7 percent in 2000 and 7.9 percent in 1980. Only 9 percent of black women acquired non-black husbands in 2008, which is consistent with earlier surveys showing that black men marry non-black women much more frequently than black women marry non-black men.¹²

Yet marriage statistics do not measure the full extent of the blurring of color lines. Sociologists Joel Perlmann and Mary C. Waters argue convincingly that these statistics underestimate the rates of ethnoracially mixed families, especially when black people are involved. “Low levels of black marriage and higher levels of black-white cohabitation than of black-white marriage,” they explain, “radically complicate the interpretation of intermarriage rates.”¹³

One of the most distinctive and revealing yet rarely cited of the relevant studies calculates the percentage of families

who had a mixed race marriage within their extended kinship network. Demographer Joshua Goldstein found that among U.S. Census-identified whites, by the year 2000 about 22 percent of white Americans had within their kinship network of ten marriages over three generations at least one white–non-white marriage; in that same year, nearly 50 percent of Census-identified black Americans had a black–non-black marriage in their kinship system. The percentage for Asian Americans with Asian–non-Asian families was 84 percent. These figures rose dramatically from earlier Censuses. In 1960, only about 2 percent of Census-identified whites and 9 percent of Census-identified blacks had in their kinship network a single marriage across the color line. As late as 1990, these figures were only 9 percent for Census-identified whites and 28 percent for Census-identified blacks.¹⁴ Goldstein's statistics suggest that acceptance of cross-boundary marriage and reproduction, already registered in popular culture and opinion polls, will continue to increase. Our social psychologists tell us that hostility to mixed race couplings, like opposition to same-sex relationships, diminishes with intimate familiarity: when someone in your own family is in one of these traditionally stigmatized relationships, the stigma loses some of its power.

The significance of the increase in cross-group families can be exaggerated. Occasionally someone will be bold enough to predict the end of standardized communities of descent within the next two or three generations. But the fact that this surely extravagant prediction is more often ridiculed than seriously advanced is another example of the complacent refutation of a claim rarely made. We need an honest discussion of the blending of ethnoracial lines that is

empirically visible in the composition of families within the United States.¹⁵

A second demographic trend that has engaged post-racial/post-ethnic writers is the diversification of American society by immigration during the past several decades. This development, too, is widely acknowledged, but its significance for our inherited intellectual and institutional apparatus for dealing with diversity remains to be fully recognized. Increased immigration from Asia and Latin America was not anticipated by the Congress of the United States when it enacted the Hart-Celler Act of 1965. But Latin American immigrants, once they began to arrive in unexpected numbers, were at least more familiar to empowered Anglos than were the previously rare immigrants from Asia. The more striking and category-disrupting change was the many millions of new Americans emigrating from China, India, Taiwan, Korea, the Philippines, Pakistan, and other Asian countries. These immigrants and their descendants have not only greatly diversified the society; in their diversity they have made a mockery of the pan-ethnic concept of "Asian American." Was an immigrant from Syria, Anatolia, or Iran an Asian American?

The character and extent of the post-1965 immigration was apparent even in the 1980s, but as late as 1998 President Clinton's "Initiative on Race," *One America in the 21st Century*, the only presidential commission to deal with race since the Kerner Commission of thirty years before, resoundingly reinforced the "old religion." The report systematically denied that there were salient differences between African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans. It willfully obscured the differences in language, culture, and economic position within the Asian American group. It

offered fifty-three specific recommendations for multicultural programs and anti-discrimination remedies, not a single one of which dealt with the historically unique situation of the black Americans whose lives had been affected by centuries of legally sanctioned slavery, violently enforced discrimination, and cataclysmically inadequate educational opportunities.¹⁶

One America in the 21st Century massively denied the diversity of American life while ostensibly celebrating it. Central to this failure was a determination to treat all immigrant-based populations from Asia and Latin America as comparable to the descendants of American slavery and Jim Crow. Dissenters from this old religion have been rare among established politicians, though in 2010, Senator James Webb of Virginia wrote that all “diversity programs” should be terminated for immigrant-based populations and yet be preserved for “those African-Americans still in need” of government-directed assistance.¹⁷

The relative success by standard indicators of many specific immigrant groups from different parts of Asia is too often overlooked rather than analyzed in relation to the dynamics of racism, inequality, and incorporation into a society of predominantly European origins. The great majority of adult immigrants from Korea are college graduates, and a substantial segment of immigrants from several other Asian countries are highly skilled and literate in English when they arrive. This is not the case with most immigrants from Mexico, Guatemala, and other Latin American countries that provide so much of the low-skilled labor force in the United States. According to the most recent study, 34 percent of foreign-born Hispanics of all ages who reside in the United States have had no education beyond the eighth grade.¹⁸

The juxtaposition of the pre-immigration social circumstances of migrants from Latin America with those of migrants from several East and South Asian countries reminds us that attention to particular histories, especially to the educational and economic backgrounds of immigrants, presents us with a radically different picture of diversity than the one we inherited from the civil rights era. Do Hispanic Americans have a claim on special treatment? Perhaps they do, but the most plausible justification for such treatment would surely be an economic one, pivoting on the fact that the United States persistently encourages, and indeed demands, an underclass of workers who will do low-skilled work for relatively low wages and who are not likely to join labor unions. Our system, however, deals with the Hispanic population as an ethnoracial group. We use ethnorace as a proxy for economic inequality, designing programs targeted at an ethnoracially defined population when the most salient property of that population is instead its economic status. Support for affirmative action for Hispanics has waned in the context of the theoretical and practical obstacles to creating a politically viable justification for it.¹⁹

The history of discrimination against Hispanic Americans includes school segregation and exclusion from juries in several states prior to sixty years ago. But unlike immigrants from Mexico, those from East Asia and South Asia were not even able to achieve naturalized citizenship in 1952, and we cannot remind ourselves often enough that Asian Americans of Japanese ancestry were taken from their homes and thrown into internment camps less than a generation ago. (Indeed, Japanese internment occurred in my own lifetime and within a few miles of where I now live in California.) The different trajectories of Mexican Americans, on

the one hand, and of an array of Asian Americans, on the other, should refute the idea that the operative force is racism in the eye of the empowered white beholder. In the twenty-first century, we do not have to claim that empowered whites have emancipated themselves from racism in order to confront the fact that the power of this racism to damage its victims now varies enormously according to the economic and educational circumstances of those victims.

This truth has been shown to apply to black people, too, on account of another dimension of the immigrant transformation of American society. President Obama's status as the son of an African immigrant has heightened public awareness of the migration of black-skinned people from Africa and the Caribbean, but public discussion of immigration still takes little account of the magnitude of this migration. The federal government's statistics show that between 2000 and 2008, 636,938 immigrants from African countries obtained permanent legal resident status. During the entire decade of the 1980s, only 141,990 did so. People from Africa accounted for only 1.7 percent of immigrants obtaining such status during the 1970s, but now account for about 7 percent of the total. African countries, taken together, produce more legally permanent immigrants than does India, China, or Russia. The even larger migration from the Caribbean includes many individuals who, whatever their status in their nations of origin, are black by the American one-drop rule. More than one million immigrants from Caribbean countries obtained permanent legal residence in the United States during the 1990s.²⁰

That the first black president is of immigrant stock is an emblem not only for the sheer magnitude of this migration, but also for the fact that black immi-

grants and their children have managed to overcome the barriers created by anti-black racism to a greater extent than non-immigrant blacks. Study after study by our social scientists and journalists document the gaps in economic position and educational attainments between the immigrant-based and non-immigrant-based black populations.²¹ These studies imply that blackness itself is not enough to explain the enduringly weak class position of the bulk of American black people. There is good reason to believe that the educational and economic circumstances of immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean provide an advantage. As with immigrants from Asia and Latin America, the specific social character of the newcomers exercises great influence over their destiny in the United States. History makes a huge difference.

The more we recognize the historical particularity of the circumstances surrounding the various descent communities in the United States and of the individuals within them, the more difficult it is to avoid a conclusion that I have already argued for in the pages of *Daedalus*. If the problem of the twentieth century was, as W.E.B. Du Bois declared, the problem of the color line, the problem of the twenty-first century appears to be one of solidarity.²² With precisely whom does one try to affiliate, and for what purposes? This is the problem of solidarity, and it looms larger or smaller depending on the extent to which willed affiliation becomes a possibility. Ethnoracial mixing and massive immigration have changed the United States, which continues to operate with an increasingly anachronistic ethnoracial system that assumes each group is an enduring, clearly bounded, color-coded entity.

The more that we come to see the color-coded "races" as artifacts, as con-

tingent results of human action rather than primordial causes of it, the less prominently the color line factors among other social distinctions that may or may not be the basis for the assigning or choosing of affiliations. The less fixed ethnoracial categories and their socially prescribed meanings become, the more opportunities people have to ask what is meant by “we” and to choose their affiliations rather than accept roles assigned by empowered

elites. This move from the problem of color to the problem of solidarity can be described as a “post-racial” or “post-ethnic” step, but the step is worth making even if those terms do not accompany it. The very question, “With whom should one affiliate and for what purposes?” is precisely the sort of challenging question that is pushed aside when folks rush to answer the easy question, “Are we beyond racism?”

ENDNOTES

- ¹ A quick Internet search turns up countless examples of what I am describing; for example: “Whoever came up with the insipid term ‘post-racial’ ought to be forced to sit down and read aloud the vile commentary that pours into any newsroom after it publishes or airs a story on race. . . . That would quickly cure the urge to insist we’ve finally reached that harmonious other side of the rainbow”; Mary Sanchez, *The Kansas City Star*, June 26, 2010, <http://www.kansascity.com/2010/07/26/2109308/post-racial-america-is-an-obvious.html#ixzzovkAxqOaB>.
- ² David A. Hollinger, “Obama, the Instability of Color Lines, and the Promise of a Post-ethnic Future,” *Callaloo* 31 (2008): 1033–1034. This essay is also available in Randall Kennedy and Gerald Early, eds., *Best African American Essays 2010* (New York: One World/Ballantine, 2010), 44–51. See also Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2000).
- ³ Thomas J. Sugrue, *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).
- ⁴ For a rare example of journalistic commentary that demonstrates a nuanced understanding of post-ethnic/post-racial writings, see media scholar Mary Beltran’s posting on *FlowTV*: “As deployed by some conservative commentators, [the concept of post-racial] has implied an end to racial disparities and practices and achievement of the privileges of whiteness by all Americans, [but] other definitions, in contrast, offer no such reassurance to white America or claims that an ideal has been achieved. As defined by Paul Gilroy, post-racial, similar to David Hollinger’s notion of post-ethnicity, refers to a future in which racial notions, racialized hierarchies, and the hegemony of whiteness are in fact upended. Such a definition has far more subversive implications for equality and social power”; Mary Beltran, “What’s at Stake in Claims of Post-racial Media?” *FlowTV*, June 3, 2010, <http://flowtv.org/2010/06/whats-at-stake-in-claims-of-post-racial-media/>.
- ⁵ Robert Putnam, “E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the 21st Century,” *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30 (2006): 161, 169.
- ⁶ David Mastey, “Slumming and/as Self-Making in Barack Obama’s *Dreams from My Father*,” *Journal of Black Studies* 40 (2010): 493, 495.
- ⁷ Jonathan Rieder, *The Word of the Lord is Upon Me: The Righteous Performance of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2008), 9.
- ⁸ The first reference I saw to *post-ethnic* was in Werner Sollors, “A Critique of Pure Pluralism,” in *Reconstructing American Literary History*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 277. I developed the notion in a number of publications

- of the 1990s and 2000s, especially *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995; tenth anniversary expanded edition, New York: Basic Books, 2006).
- ⁹ Touré, “Visible Young Man,” *The New York Times Book Review*, May 3, 2009.
- ¹⁰ Staci Boris, ed., *The New Authentics: Artists of the Post-Jewish Generation* (Chicago: Spertus Press, 2008).
- ¹¹ For a convenient summary of this study, see Sam Roberts, “Black Women See Fewer Black Men at the Altar,” *The New York Times*, June 3, 2010.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Joel Perlmann and Mary C. Waters, “Intermarriage Then and Now: Race, Generation, and the Changing Meaning of Marriage,” in *Not Just Black and White: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States*, ed. Nancy Foner and George Fredrickson (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004), 275.
- ¹⁴ This study was reported in “Nation’s Many Faces in Extended First Family,” *The New York Times*, January 20, 2009. See also Joshua R. Goldstein, “Kinship Networks that Cross Racial Lines: The Exception or the Rule?” *Demography* 36 (1999): 399–407.
- ¹⁵ For a discerning commentary, see Jennifer Lee, “A Post-Racial America? Multiracial Identification and the Color Line in the 21st Century,” *Nanzan Review of American Studies* 30 (2008): 13–31. See also Jennifer Lee and Frank D. Bean, “Reinventing the Color Line: Immigration and America’s New Ethnic/Racial Divide,” *Social Forces* 86 (2007): 561–586.
- ¹⁶ Advisory Board for the President’s Initiative on Race, *One America in the 21st Century: The President’s Initiative on Race* (Washington, D.C., 1998).
- ¹⁷ James Webb, “Diversity and the Myth of White Privilege,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2010. Although this column was organized around the claim that some groups of impecunious white people are no less deserving of government help than some ethnoracial minorities, the most striking turn in the piece, given the prevailing discourse, was Webb’s sharp distinction between black people and other long-standing target groups for diversity programs.
- ¹⁸ Joseph Berger, “The Latino Lag,” *Education Life*, *The New York Times*, July 25, 2010.
- ¹⁹ See, for example, Gregory Rodriguez, “Affirmative Action’s Time is Up,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 2, 2010. “When affirmative action was established, it was intended to benefit a small percentage of the U.S. population, but as the rationale and scope of the program evolved, so did the number of people it included,” Rodriguez observes, stating truths that the civil rights coalition has rarely wanted to discuss. “Large-scale post-1965 immigration also complicated the equation and ultimately upset the political calculus that made affirmative action politically viable.” Rodriguez is the author of one of the most probing and discerning books ever written about Hispanics in the United States: *Mongrels, Bastards, Orphans, and Vagabonds: Mexican Immigration and the Future of Race in America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007). The persistent avoidance by political leaders of the contradiction between affirmative action and immigration policy is the theme of an underappreciated book by the late Hugh Davis Graham, *Collision Course: The Strange Convergence of Affirmative Action and Immigration Policy in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- ²⁰ See <http://www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/LPR08.shtm>. These tables were first called to my attention by Jennifer Hochschild.
- ²¹ One of the most widely publicized of these studies showed that among black students at Ivy League colleges, immigrants and the children of immigrants were greatly overrepresented. See Douglas Massey et al., *American Journal of Education* (February 2007).
- ²² Here I refer to my essay, “From Identity to Solidarity,” *Dædalus* (Fall 2006): 23–31. In that essay, I describe “the problem of solidarity” in some detail, and argue that its character and significance have been largely obscured by the popularity of the concept of “identity.”

Pursuit of the *Pneuma*

James Alan McPherson

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When the invitation from Gerald Early to contribute to this issue of *Dædalus* arrived in late February last year, I was commencing a ritual of mile-long walks and conversations with Phil Jones, an old friend and colleague at the University of Iowa. I had been trying to control the physical symptoms of diabetes, and Phil was kind enough to suggest that we walk for a mile or so every two days at a nearby mall. Phil had only recently been fired from his position as vice president for student services and dean of students at the University of Iowa. The public reason for his dismissal was that university officials were not satisfied with his handling of an incident involving several black student athletes and a white student. A white male official had also been fired for the very same alleged "neglect." Phil had served the University for forty years, but he was let go without a hearing. In return, Phil sued the University for what he believes was his unjust dismissal. Then he began to write a book about his experiences at Iowa, beginning in the early 1960s, when he first arrived as a student, and tracing his career there until the time of his dismissal as a vice president.

Phil asked me to read drafts of each section of the work-in-progress so that we could discuss them while we walked. His vivid recollections prompted me to recall my own encounters with institutional powers, not at Iowa but elsewhere. What struck me about Phil's writing was not his anger, which was not at all visible, but the affec-

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tionate relationships he had shared with his colleagues and peers. From university presidents to departmental chairmen to bureaucratic officials he encountered during his years at Iowa, he wrote nothing negative about anyone. Rather, he captured the nuances, the day-to-day actions of his well-meaning colleagues, who were deeply involved in creating a bureaucratic structure of affirmative action – the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) – intended to include, support, and nurture students from minority groups. Reading Phil’s detailed recollections, I saw the portrait of a muscular bureaucratic structure that must have evolved within universities in all parts of the country during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

What was striking to me was Iowa’s institutional receptivity to non-white students, especially black Americans. Phil described one major contributor to the University, a philanthropist named Roy Carver, who said to him in 1971, “I told you I was going to do something for the colored boys.” The same Roy Carver also contributed to the building of the Carver-Hawkeye Arena and additions to the University Hospital. For many years I had wondered what formed the basis of that receptivity and generosity, but could only speculate on the effectiveness of laws promoting inclusion and “affirmative action.” Now I truly believe that these developments at Iowa evolved out of a unique *spiritual* dimension of the state of Iowa’s population. One senses this trait, which I have begun to call “neighboring,” in Iowa store clerks, garbage collectors, postmen and women, young people, and, most especially, in senior citizens. When Phil and I walk through the mall, we are constantly greeted by passing strangers. If I had to capture this quality in language, I would employ the ancient

Greek word *pneuma*, meaning “the vital spirit of life itself,” whether at work or during times of worship, and especially during times of giving. Indeed, *pneuma* is foundational in all systems of religious belief, but it seems to me that, as a civic conviction, it is still vital as well in communities rooted in rural mores. Why else would construction workers feel more comfortable beginning their work at dawn? Why else would farmers’ markets remain so popular among residents of urban areas that are overstocked with discount supermarkets? And why else would communities like Iowa City, as well as its university, go to such great lengths to attract, and then to maintain – long before the advent of “affirmative action” – so many black students, as well as those from other minority groups? And what, particularly now, is causing so many institutions to retreat from this noble stance? There are the tensions caused by the Tea Party and its increasing numbers in all areas of the country. There is the legislative focus on Latino immigrants and the rising call to exclude them from the protections offered by the Fourteenth Amendment. Add to this list the declining popularity of Obama as the nation’s first black American president.

During our long walks and conversations I found myself repeating to Phil Jones a phrase I had absorbed many years ago from my conversations with Henry Nash Smith, a Mark Twain scholar and professor at the University of California, Berkeley. Touching on the political and aesthetic polarization of the 1960s and 1970s, Professor Smith employed, repeatedly, the term “bureaucratization of the *pneuma*,” meaning that the spiritual dimensions and processes of American life were increasingly being subjected to bureaucratic control. In my interactions with Phil Jones,

I tried to recall a time when bureaucratic power was not as visible in Iowa City as it is today. I was inspired by a telephone call I received from a friend in town, informing me that a woman we both knew, Dr. Jean Arnold, had just died at age ninety-seven.

This news took me back to the early 1980s, my first years in Iowa City, when I was recovering from the trauma I had experienced by means of the bureaucratic structures in Charlottesville, Virginia. Before leaving that city, I had gone through a brutal divorce, had lost even joint custody of Rachel, my young daughter, and was trying hard to heal a broken heart. Dr. Arnold herself was a Southerner, born in Alabama in 1921, and was the first disabled graduate of the University of Alabama Medical College in 1941. Ten years later, she became the first female psychiatrist to open a private practice in Iowa City. She practiced for twenty-eight years and helped a great many people, including me, all of us coming from radically different backgrounds. Our bond of friendship became almost as close as the one that I had shared with Breece Pancake, one of my most gifted writing students. I disclosed to Dr. Arnold that Breece had shot himself to death on the very same night – April 9, 1979 – that Rachel was born.

Our sessions focused to some extent on my growing awareness that many of my wounds were grounded in the racial attitudes that had shaped most of Charlottesville's perception of me: a black male who had been elevated from the lower class in Savannah, Georgia, to Harvard Law School and beyond. "You are a Pulitzer Prize winner and a MacArthur Fellow," she leveled with me. "You should never forget your early upbringing in Savannah, Georgia, and you should not have expected to be treated any other way in certain regions of the

South." For several years I worked with Dr. Arnold on coming to terms with my own emotional complexities and on what she termed my "neurotic need to rescue needy people." But most of all, Dr. Arnold helped me endure extreme personal pains. She advised me to do all that was humanly possible to maintain my bond with Rachel.

These memories of such a kindhearted white Southern female helping me regain my emotional balance return to me now as I read, almost daily, the news accounts of reactionary, racist developments in the South and Midwest, as well as in other parts of the country. Beyond the racist focus of the Tea Party, there are muscular legislative efforts to end the reach of "diversity" in public education. A recent issue of *The Progressive*, exploring such trends, featured an essay on the rise of fascism in the United States. One of the country's most conservative magazines recently ran a striking cover story on the dangerous threat of "multiculturalism" to the settled racial identities of the U.S. population.

Faced with such developments, one is almost forced to fall back on "liberal" rhetoric and "internationalist" clichés. But it does seem, once again, that rural states like Iowa, and especially small communities like Iowa City, offer alternatives to such trends. At the basis of these alternatives is the American belief in the sacredness of the individual. This belief is embedded in most of the country's sacrosanct documents, but it also plays an active role in the personal lives of most U.S. citizens. Moreover, it also seems to me that when two individuals, reared within the mores of the same region but who grow up separated by race and caste, discover each other outside of their native region, they are often inclined to reconnect through common strains of cultural background. When

this connection happens, as I have experienced in my relationships with Breece Pancake, Dr. Jean Arnold, and countless students and friends, a profound personal and cultural interaction can take place.

It is my belief that this "partial integration" of cultural selves, as it occurs between individuals from old, different caste levels of the South, is becoming the basis for "integration" between those from somewhat different cultural backgrounds. Perhaps it is the rural landscape of the state of Iowa and the small-town intimacy of Iowa City that encourage this subtle interaction. I do know that during my many years in Iowa City, I have worked with and befriended individuals from a great variety of ethnic, cultural, and color backgrounds; I have learned from them cultural and emotional dimensions rooted in levels of expression that go deeper than language. They may be called "white," "Chinese," "Korean," "Japanese," "Indian," "Arabic," or "African." In the past few months, I have received novels from three former students who are Chinese American: *All Is Forgotten, Nothing Is Lost* by Samantha Chang, *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl* by Yiyun Li, and *World and Town* by Gish Jen. But the integrative processes of the human imagination are almost always the same. In the classroom setting, the "teacher" learns just as much about the cultural dimensions through which the "student-writer" expresses himself as do the other students. Here I am tempted to recollect an ancient bit of spiritual wisdom, an insight that might still prove useful. It states that God *did not* create all existence in six days and then rest on the seventh day. Rather, God created imagination on the seventh day and gave this gift to his human creations. The person who is blessed with imagination is able

to stand in his own place and project himself into the places of all else God has created. The human imagination, in other words, is *integrative*.

We are so used to associating certain essentially human traits with color, or with its absence, that we are often tempted to impose stereotypes, and even *dos* and *don'ts*, on what we are being asked to read, solely in relation to the color or the cultural background of the person who has done the writing. Or to avoid the complexities of this trap, we sometimes tend to imagine the writer as "white." On the other extreme, when an unquestionably "white" writer attempts to explore the cultural mores that extend beyond those usually associated with "whiteness," the writer is often accused of trying to "pass" as "non-white" or of playing with the exploitation of a different cultural perspective. We can easily forget that the human imagination was created to be democratic as well as integrative.

In my view, the safest and most idealistic place for a writer is where he maintains contact with as many cultural traditions as possible. I am fully aware that I am stating this belief as a teacher of writing, one who works with students from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. Still, I introduce the idea as a mode of preparation for certain complexities that are evolving in American cultural life. It seems inevitable that more and more people from a great variety of cultural backgrounds will eventually arrive on American shores. They will learn, and probably practice, the mores of American life. We can also learn from them, in order to put ourselves in better touch with a broader range of the non-European worlds and the mores of their people.

I try to keep in mind the sage advice passed on to me by my old mentor, the novelist and critic Albert Murray, who

criticized the advocates of “black nationalism” during the 1960s and 1970s. In his book of essays, *The Omni-Americans*, Murray argued that black American cultural expressions had evolved through a tradition of “abstraction and recombination.” That is, beginning in the earliest colonial days, slaves had begun to absorb cultural and linguistic elements from the variety of peoples they encountered: Anglo-Saxon, Scottish, Irish, German, Spanish, Indian, and so on. A friend recently pointed out to me that the “trademark word” in the black American vernacular idiom, “motherfucker,” is rooted in the idiom that the early Irish employed to degrade their Anglo-Saxon masters. The slaves synthesized such idioms into something fresh and new. It was this new, all-inclusive Negro idiom, Murray observed, that provided “white” Americans with insights and perspectives not native to their own ethnic groupings. This tradition continued until the idioms of black nationalism obscured it or shut it down. But in its day, Murray’s arguments favored a historic perspective. Along with his colleague Ralph Ellison, Murray provided black people with a linguistic model for the “integration” of the imagination, despite the narrow currents of black nationalism. This approach formed much of the basis for Albert Murray’s “omni-American” perspective on American life.¹

Looking back on what may seem an abstract reflection of the American *pneuma*, I realize that, during all these years in Iowa, there was a pragmatic motive beneath my efforts to explore and cultivate an omni-American perspective and sensibility. The source of my motivation was largely Rachel. When Rachel’s mother filed for divorce, claiming complete custody of our child, I was presented with a tragic choice. I could stay in Charlottesville, maintaining employment at the

University of Virginia, and cultivate a place as a token individual on the outskirts of a racially polarized Southern community. Or I could take a great chance on a less polarized community in which I could nurture my daughter in the best possible human environment. Luckily for me, the Fellowship from the MacArthur Foundation arrived just when the Charlottesville judge was writing his divorce decree. (I was, of course, called “inferior” by the judge in his decree.) But I had already accepted the job at Iowa. The central focus of my life then became Rachel, and my care for her.

I decided not to use the MacArthur money for any purpose beyond my care of Rachel. I moved to Iowa City to begin my job in the Writers’ Workshop, but I maintained an apartment in Charlottesville, and after I had settled in Iowa City I flew back to Charlottesville several times each month to spend weekends with Rachel. Those years marked the beginning of our close bonds with friends in Richmond, in Washington, D.C., in Baltimore, in cities north along the East Coast to Boston and Cambridge. During her school vacations, I would travel to Charlottesville and bring Rachel to Iowa City. We would see friends in Chicago, in Cedar Rapids, and, of course, in Iowa City.

Over a number of years, Rachel and I built a multiracial, extended family unit. As she grew older, Rachel enjoyed deep bonds with a diverse group of friends in many parts of the country and in Iowa City in particular. The longer her stays became, the deeper her bonds with an extremely diverse group of young and very talented writers. Most important, Rachel *learned* from them. She learned much about the vital spirit of life, and, I suspect, she has

*Pursuit
of the
"Pneuma"* grown to anticipate this *pneuma* as an essential dimension of human experience.

I still maintain relationships with a great number of the young writers with whom I worked during those years. More often than I care to keep track of, I receive manuscripts or just-published books from these talented people. The bonds we have are lifelong ones, despite the differences in our ethnic or racial backgrounds. We are, and will remain, *friends*.

Rachel now works as a teacher of English in Barcelona. I try to call her each

evening, taking into account the seven-hour time difference. Most evenings she is out with friends, taking walks, in restaurants or bars, on a beach, or teaching. Often during our conversations she invites her friends to say hello to me. The cheerful conversations of this diverse group of European people remind me that Rachel, possibly drawing on her experiences here in Iowa City, has formed her own multicultural group of friends. I want to believe that, even in Spain, Rachel is becoming an omni-American. I want to believe that her *pneuma* is a muscular one.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans: Some Alternatives to the Folklore of White Supremacy* (1970; New York: Da Capo Press, 1990).

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Inside back cover: Barack Obama poses with his maternal grandparents, Stanley and Madelyn Dunham, in an undated family snapshot. Photograph © Reuters/Obama for America/Handout.



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