The Twenty-Second Annual Dr. Eric Williams Memorial Lecture

"The Evolution of the African-American Image: The Road to Obama"

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Friday, May 23, 2008

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"The Negro is America's metaphor."

Richard Wright, 1957

I want to thank you, Governor Williams, and your remarkable staff at the Central Bank for this precious invitation, and for the warmth and efficiency and thoughtfulness you and they brought to my visit to Trinidad with my wife, Marvina White, and our son, Luke.

It was my honor and pleasure as a schoolboy to have heard Dr. Williams speak in Woodford Square in the early days of his nationalist political campaign, and I recall clearly how moved and inspired I was by his vision for the future of Trinidad & Tobago. That he was also a scholar, trained at a great university, who had produced notable books only added to the sense of awe with which I and others viewed Dr. Williams. Never in my wildest dreams did I think that one day I might be asked to deliver a lecture dedicated to his memory.

Easily the most extraordinary phenomenon in race relations in the United States in recent years has been the sudden, stunning, and to many people exhilarating rise in popularity of Barack Obama, and of his emergence, as if from nowhere, to become a viable candidate for the presidency of the United States. Although his election is by no means assured, and some pragmatists and cynics think of it as unlikely, the simple chance that he might be elected has astonished and elated many people around the world.

Who or what is this Barack Obama? That's not an easy question to answer; he remains a bit of a mystery. He is tall and elegant, good looking—but not overwhelmingly so, some people might say. By birth he is interracial, to use a fashionable term, the child of a union between a black man and a white woman. Historically this combination of parents has been, for most Americans, almost base. It would have been illegal, as well as highly inflammatory, in various states at various times. He is the child of a failed marriage. His father was a foreign national from Kenya, which represents a further dilution, in the eyes of some observers, of Obama's claims to be truly American. To most American ears he possesses two odd-sounding names, Barack and Obama. In addition, his third name, Hussein, evokes the memory of Saddam Hussein, whose excesses led directly or indirectly, as cause or pretext, to the current dreadful war in Iraq. And yet for all these negatives, here Obama stands, victorious over a brilliant, seasoned, and tireless challenger within his own party, Hillary Clinton. He is said to be doing well in polls that pit him against John McCain, the presumptive Republican nominee for the presidency. But McCain should have an overwhelming advantage over Obama. He is, after all, a war hero who survived a terrible ordeal in a North Vietnamese prisoner-of-war camp. And yet there is the strong

belief in some quarters that Obama will trounce McCain and win the presidency in a landslide.

The main questions I ask this evening are: How did the United States of America, with its centuries of slavery, bitter racial segregation, and evident faith in the idea of white supremacy, find itself willing to consider seriously the election of a brown-skinned, crinkly-haired, half-African man, to be its supreme leader? How did the mainly rural state of Iowa, with a miniscule black population, come to propose so dramatic a change in American history when it gave him a resounding victory in the first electoral contest? Yes, many whites will vote against Obama because he is black. Consider a headline in the *New York Times* immediately after one primary: "Clinton Wins West Virginia, with Race a Factor." And yet many millions of whites, starting with those in snowy Iowa, have already voted for him, so that his political career has made history no matter what happens in the presidential election. At one point, when a certain nasty controversy seemed about to cripple his chances, a mammoth crowd of 75,000, almost all of them white, turned out to hear and applaud him in Oregon. But although his success strikes many of his admirers as an epiphany, a sudden, unanticipated manifestation of Providence, I believe that it is important to see his success as the end result of an evolution in American history, and specifically the evolution over the centuries of the image of the African-American in the white mind. That is my topic tonight.

In speaking of "the evolution of the African-American image" (in essence, how American whites have viewed American blacks over the centuries), I do not mean to deny the agency of blacks. They have

earned in blood whatever successes they have enjoyed during their version of the Babylonian captivity. However, how whites view blacks in America has always mattered profoundly to both groups. For centuries, in the opinion voiced brilliantly around 1900 by the black intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, African-Americans saw and judged themselves almost exclusively as they believed whites saw and judged them. The result, according to him, was a painful, often crippling, and virtually permanent condition of black double-consciousness. Even as he was predicting that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" (an idea prompted by the writings of his astute contemporary Henry Sylvestre-Williams of Trinidad), Du Bois described the Negro (the term he used) as "a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no [true] self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world." He went further: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."

From their side of the color line, whites historically saw blacks as an inferior people, who were incapable of lifting themselves up into a position of equality with whites. African-Americans, therefore, were unthinkable as a potential source of leadership over whites.

The major difference between 1900 and today, with the arrival of the Barack Obama phenomenon, is clear. Whatever the outcome of this election, for the first time in their almost four hundred years in North America, blacks at last can begin to believe that "in the eyes of others"—that is, in the eyes of the whites gazing at them, they are no longer

viewed simply with “amused contempt and pity.” Instead, in the person of Obama and perhaps more generally, they are apparently now seen as a potential source of hope and help for the entire nation. Blacks are seeing, in many cases with disbelief, the first solid evidence that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., might have been drawing not simply on the windy rhetoric of the pulpit but on an inspired and yet practical vision of the future of his country when, during the March on Washington in 1963, he prophesized that the time would come in his race-haunted nation when black people, like whites, would be judged by others “not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

Let me ask a few more questions, some easy to answer, some not so easy, that might help us with our inquiry into the origins or antecedents of the Obama phenomenon. Given the limited time at my disposal this evening, obviously all of my answers have to be in shorthand. Why, historically, were whites so invested in suppressing blacks? How was this suppression justified in a country that believed from the start in the importance of its moral, religious, and scientific character? What were some of the important landmarks—legal, for example—in the history of this suppression? Were there ever large numbers of white Americans who regretted the waste of human ability and potential in this suppression of blacks? Are there striking examples of African-American men or women who plausibly might have aspired to positions of national leadership? What was their fate? How did blacks manage to hold on to their sense of integrity in the face of slavery, legal segregation, and pervasive racism, so that an Obama eventually could arise? What instruments did blacks use covertly, what secret passages did they explore, to infiltrate and subvert white American power and thus make this Obama moment possible? Last of all, what are some of the more

recent signs that might have alerted us to the possibility of the coming of an Obama?

Why the white suppression of blacks? The answer lies, of course, in all-too-human greed (a trait common to all peoples), in this case the temptation that appeared in the form of a vast continent ready to be possessed and exploited, defended only by its natural barriers and by a brave but technologically backward people. Greed and the vast amount of land demanded slavery, eventually African slavery, because the native population, Indians, would not be slaves. How was this suppression maintained? In effect, by any means necessary. By arguing the need for pragmatism or the wisdom of expediency. If such arguments failed, religion was invoked to show that the Bible supported slavery in principle, and in particular the enslavement of the so-called children of Ham. For those unmoved by the preceding arguments, there was science, or pseudo-science; and if all else failed, there was always the law—learned arguments about the precious intentions of the Founding Fathers, the crucial doctrine of "states' rights," or the importance of "strict constructionism" in judicial decisions.

Science was fueled initially in the area of race by the respected, pioneering work of Linnaeus and his taxonomy of nature. Then natural science migrated into the area of organized social knowledge in the service of genetic racism and the justification of slavery. What ensued was the equivalent of a conspiracy to lower the genetic prestige of blacks until men such as Josiah Nott and George Glidden in the United States could seriously propose (and find a receptive audience for their "scientific" ideas) that blacks and whites were not variations of the same species, homo sapiens, but separate species altogether. Thus blacks were not

quite human; therefore, with a clear conscience whites could exploit them just as whites would exploit farm animals. Nott and Glidden would make their mark before the Civil War, which ran from 1861 to 1865. Their "science" was augmented after the Civil War first by the rising authority of scientific Darwinism (with its doctrine of the survival of the fittest) and then by social Darwinism, the highly selective and convenient application to the social world, especially where whites ruled blacks, of some of Darwin's key ideas and discoveries about the natural world.

At one point, it was argued (complete with actuarial tables) and accepted that because of diseases and other insufficiencies to which they were susceptible, black Americans would eventually die out as a race in America. Early in the twentieth century, science took a psychological turn. Intelligence Quotient (IQ) tests appeared. After first appearing to suggest the intellectual superiority of blacks, these tests were hastily revised to prove blacks' innate inferiority. Perhaps the penultimate stage of this dreadful historical march that started in the eighteenth century was the extended controversy over immigration to America that obsessed whites during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Writers such as Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard sounded the alarm that the white or Aryan or Nordic race was in grave danger of being swamped and irremediably corrupted by the darker races of the world. These darker races included not only blacks, whose threat was self-evident, but also Italians and Spaniards and the other swarthier races and peoples of Europe. The qualifications of Slavs and other lesser breeds were also called into question, despite their fair skin. We know where all of this theorizing ended: in the demented logic of the Nazis, in Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and other extermination camps.

These factors had two decisive consequences for the social formation of black America. One was the triumph of the "one-drop" theory. With slight variations, the belief among whites was that possession of virtually any amount of African ancestry or "blood" damned one to a kind of eternal social perdition. Many light-skinned people passed over the racial line, but most probably stayed with their darker kith and kin and became what were called at one point "voluntary Negroes." This term was applied, for example, to Walter White. Blond and blue-eyed, this talented leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) fought racism stoutly for many years during the first half of the last century. It is true, however, that a sense of racial solidarity did not prevent competitive color-consciousness from taking hold among blacks and persisting to this day. One can see this trait in the many clamoring advertisements for skin-lightening creams that once abounded in magazines catering mainly to blacks. Such products still exist, although they have been repackaged and promoted in disguise. Or one can simply watch many music videos starring black male performers, in which the preference for light-skinned over dark-skinned women is all too obvious.

Despite such tendencies, blacks of all complexions saw and see themselves, on the whole, as one people. Whites did not give them a choice, and eventually most people of color proudly did not want one. "Who wills to be a Negro?" the conservative Ralph Ellison asked in the 1960s, even as he came under attack by black nationalists. "I do." The second salient aspect of extreme white racism is the extent to which, during the era of slavery, it sought to make a mockery of the status of the black freedman and freedwoman. In the North and the South alike, the free person of African descent was typically treated worse than slaves

were. Slaves, after all, enjoyed the protection of their owners, who spoke up for them if for no other reason than the fact that the slaves were their property. Any prosperous or educated free black man or woman was an implicit rebuke to poorer or less educated whites, and to some extent a rebuttal of the idea of white supremacy. On the whole, according to virtually all studies and reports, most whites made life as miserable as possible for freed blacks at every level. Freedom did not mean the ability of blacks to rise far above slavery in the American world. It often amounted to frustration and bitterness.

If being light-skinned or being free gave African-Americans virtually no prestige as far as whites were concerned, it seems true that being slaves, or having been descended from slaves, was an additional, if largely immeasurable, blight on one's reputation and social standing. Astonishingly, this is true in some quarters to this day. It is a not uncommon slur cast at black Americans by Africans and their children living in the United States that they, unlike blacks rooted in America, are not descended from slaves, and therefore are socially superior. We cannot tell the impact on white voters of this aspect of Obama's background—or, indeed, the impact of this matter on Obama himself at the conscious and subconscious levels. The fact that he is not descended from slaves could have been important to the development of Obama's notably superior sense of self, his air of noblesse oblige, and his patrician, even aristocratic manner, which his opponents have tried to exploit by calling it, unconvincingly, elitist. (Others have traced this aspect of his character to his being in part Luo, a people of Kenya noted, it is said, for their reserve and self-assurance. These traits are perhaps behind the fact that the more populous Gikuyus have resisted Luo political ambitions.) In his acclaimed speech on race after Reverend Jeremiah Wright threatened

to derail his candidacy, Obama made the point, innocently, that his wife and children are descended from slaves. In doing so, however, he unwittingly reminded Americans that he is not.

What were some of the defining moments in American racial history—that is, in America's constant wrestling with the question of what to do with its blacks both during slavery and after slavery? First of all, perhaps, was the struggle during the founding of the nation between the advocates of high principle and the advocates of reasoned expediency, between ideals and the imperatives of self-interest, property, and even greed. This struggle shaped or misshaped what Ralph Ellison, again, has reverently called America's "Sacred Documents." These documents were, of course, the Declaration of Independence in 1776, with its glorious and yet ambiguous assertion that "all men are created equal," and that they possess "inalienable rights," including the rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Article One, Section Two of the new U.S. Constitution revised this statement by quantifying the worth of blacks in the devilishly clever "Three-Fifths Compromise." This device was designed to check the power of states with populations swollen by slaves—men who could not vote but whose numbers, when counted, boosted the power of white men who could do so, and the states in which they and their slaves lived. For the purposes of taxation and representation, according to the new constitution, the population of each state would be determined "by adding to the whole number of free persons, including those bound to service for a term of years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons." Thus the Northern states sought to hold in check the Southern states, where more than ninety percent of blacks resided.

A second important event here is the abolition of the slave trade to American in 1807. Abolishing the slave trade was relatively easy; abolishing slavery was not. The latter became the nexus of a deepening national crisis. Yet another landmark along the way, helping us to measure the stature of the black American, was the Missouri Compromise. This agreement was intended to limit the spread of slavery into new states joining the Union. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which radically tilted the scales of justice against escaped slaves, further incited passions among the pro- and anti-slavery elements. The next major provocation—and insult to the dignity of blacks—was the U.S. Supreme Court decision of 1857 in *Dred Scott v. Sandford.* This case involved Scott's right to claim freedom after his master had transported him into a "free" state. In finding against Scott, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney declared that the Founding Fathers of the republic were undoubtedly of the belief that blacks could never be citizens of the United States. Indeed, they clearly believed, Taney wrote, that blacks "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect, and that the Negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit."

Congress thus had no authority to restrict the spread of slavery into new states and territories. About four years later would come the firing on Fort Sumter, South Carolina, by Confederate or pro-slavery forces. The Civil War began, with the number of dead and wounded exceeding the combined number of the dead and wounded in all the other wars ever fought by America. In 1863 Abraham Lincoln abolished slavery in most of the United States. In 1865 the South capitulated. Between 1865 and 1876, Union forces controlled the South during the period known as Reconstruction.

When the last Union soldiers withdrew from the South, the resurgence of white supremacy began in earnest. Twenty years later, in 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its landmark decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*. This decision held (in a case involving seats on a passenger train) that the practice of "separate but equal" accommodations for blacks and whites was constitutional. Racial segregation backed by the law, or "Jim Crow" as many people called it, took hold across the United States, but most cruelly in the South. "Separate but equal" quickly became separate and egregiously unequal in favoring whites. Fifty-eight years would pass before the Supreme Court essentially reversed this decision. When it did so, in 1954 in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* [Kansas], the resuscitation of the ideal of justice for blacks, and of the idea of blacks possessing the capacity to rise in American society in keeping with their potential, would begin.

Did a substantial number of white Americans ever indicate an interest (in a kind of intimation of Obama) in the idea of an essential black humanity? The answer is yes. However, with very few exceptions, even white people of good will on this score were moderate at best on the issue of black worth, and almost all carefully separated the issue of the morality of slavery from that of essential black integrity. In the South, George Washington, the outstanding military leader who became the first U.S. president, freed his slaves on his deathbed, in his will; but Thomas Jefferson, the main author of the Declaration of Independence, mainly wrestled with his conscience about slavery. "Indeed, I tremble for my country," he wrote privately once about slavery, "when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever." And a generation later: "Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free." But at his death on July 4, 1835 he did not free his

slaves—not even those who some people believe he had fathered by his slave (and half-sister of his wife, Martha) Sally Hemings.

The main organized opposition to slavery was the radical abolitionist movement that started in New England in the 1830s. This was in effect the latter-day counterpart to the more celebrated British movement led by men such as William Wilberforce and Granville Sharpe. This American movement, slowly gathering strength through propagandistic oratory, journalism, essays, novels, poems, demonstrations, and the like, took as its emblem a design by Josiah Wedgwood for British abolitionists. It showed a crouching, chained, supplicant slave, accompanied by the appeal: "Am I not a man and a brother?" William Lloyd Garrison epitomized abolitionist zeal in founding the antislavery *Liberator* in 1831 with these brave words: "I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch. AND I WILL BE HEARD." But the most radical white man opposed to slavery in the years to come was undoubtedly John Brown. In 1859, the fanatical Brown led a band of armed followers, black and white, in an attack on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Several men were killed in the attack, which was repulsed. Brown himself was tried and hanged.

One fringe of the abolitionist movement, fired by spiritual zeal, even argued the notion of the Christ-like natural moral superiority of blacks to whites, because blacks seemed so often to endure their suffering with a kind of super-human dignity. Not surprisingly perhaps, when this wing of the movement found its ultimate example of superior black moral authority, he was not a real-live black man but a figment of the white imagination. He was the eponymous hero of Harriet Beecher Stowe's bestselling novel of 1852, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (originally subtitled *The Man*

That Was a Thing). But Mrs. Stowe also supported the African colonization movement, which aimed to resettle American blacks in Africa, in contrast to emphasizing their right to stay in America. Eventually the name Uncle Tom came to be associated among blacks with the worst kind of racial cowardice (although the character in the novel is nothing of the kind). Before this decline, however, this character added to the moral fervor and conviction of the abolitionist movement. Tom the gentle martyr became part of the drama that ended in war.

In America, both before and after the Civil War, such distinguished European men of literature as Alexandre Dumas, father and son, of France, or Alexander Pushkin, the national poet of Russia, all known to be of "colored" ancestry, would have had their artistic promise severely threatened, or diverted into protest and propaganda, because of that fact. Similarly, even with the triumph of the North, American blacks could rise only so far in the civic, financial, and political world—and almost never with the support of the white South. But were there any American blacks of this era who might be seen, even in a token way, as prototypes of Obama, anticipations of him and his popularity? Three men in particular stand out here. They do so by virtue of being generally recognized as probably the most respected African-Americans in the eyes of whites and blacks alike. They are Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), John Mercer Langston (1829-1897), and Booker T. Washington (1856-1915). All had one thing in common. Each (like Barack Obama) was the child of an interracial union. Each (unlike Obama) was born of a white man and a slave or former slave woman. And each life is of genuine value in weighing the reputation of blacks in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Born a slave, the son of a slave woman and, probably, her master, Douglass escaped slavery, joined the abolitionist movement, and achieved fame in 1845 with his autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. This slender book would launch an illustrious career as orator, newspaper editor, author, and moral leader that would last until his death fifty years later, in 1895. With a deeply resonant voice and a glowering Byronic manner that bordered on arrogance, Douglass made even white female hearts flutter, it was said. Breaking with William Lloyd Garrison, his first major champion, he refused to be a mute object on the abolitionist lecture circuit, with his scarred back demonstrating the cruelty of slavery as white orators lashed out at it. Douglass soon became an abolitionist superstar. Looking beyond slavery, he took pride in being the only man, black or white, to play a major role in the historic Seneca Falls convention of 1848, which inaugurated the crusade of equal rights for American women. Bravely, following the death of his first wife, who was black, he married a white woman; in response to astonishment and outrage, he pointed out insouciantly that in his first marriage he had honored his mother's people, and in his second his father's. Douglass embodied the ideal of intelligent, sexually alluring black manhood able to influence blacks and whites alike, albeit in limited number only. Racism barred any hope he ever had of translating his prestige, such as it was, into political service.

The second credible prototype of Obama was the Virginia-born John Mercer Langston. The son of an emancipated slave woman of black and Indian ancestry and a wealthy white Virginia planter who, remarkably, left his money to their children, Langston became a graduate of the mainly white Oberlin College, a lawyer (despite efforts to deny him this goal), a radical abolitionist, a recruiter of black soldiers for the Union armies, the

organizer and first dean of the law school at Howard University (which the federal government funded), and U.S. consul general to Haiti for eight years (African-Americans sometimes served in such a capacity in predominantly black nations.) Then, in 1888, he ran for Congress in a mainly black district against a white Democrat and a white Republican. Langston won—but white Democrats (the Democratic Party dominated the white South) fought the decision for the first eighteen months of the usual two-year term. Eventually Langston served a few months in Congress, but was defeated, most likely by more white Democratic Party trickery, when he ran for reelection. He retired from public life.

The third possible prototype of Obama in the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth was Booker T. Washington. The founder and head of Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) in Alabama, Washington possessed an electrifying sense of purpose and an almost uncanny degree of shrewdness and cunning in dealing with whites in the South as well as the North. In fact, his power was built mainly on his ability and willingness to appease whites while advancing his goals for himself, his school, and his people. In 1895, his national reputation soared with a short address he delivered to a gathering of powerful whites, and many blacks, at the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia. In this speech, Washington graciously and gracefully made shocking concessions to white power. Urging blacks not to migrate north in flight from what many of them experienced as a kind of neo-slavery, he asked them to "cast down your bucket" in the South instead and to trust their white leaders. Agitation by blacks, he said, for social equality with whites was "the extremest folly." Black men should not push to exercise the right to vote, a right Congress had granted them in 1867 while the white South was virtually helpless in defeat.

This speech certainly had no impact on the U.S. Supreme Court. The following year, 1896, it handed down its segregationist *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. But Washington was on the move. Befriended and patronized by some of the richest men in the country, including Andrew Carnegie, he broke many traditional color barriers by the force of his congenial personality and sterling reputation for prudence and moderation. Harvard University awarded him an honorary degree; Queen Victoria sipped tea with him. But Washington was black in an increasingly harsh world for African-Americans, and his appeal had its limits. In 1901, when his friend President Teddy Roosevelt had supper with him at the White House, this severe breach of racial etiquette led to an uproar in the South. In 1911, in New York City, after a white man thrashed Washington with a cane for allegedly peeping through a keyhole into an apartment where a white woman lived, the three judges at the white man's trial acquitted him two to one. For all of his magnetism and rich white admirers, Washington could not transcend race and become a leader among the mass of whites.

Plessy v. Ferguson made it easy for white Southerners especially to show their hatred of and contempt for black ambition in ways that ranged from the blunt denial of equal rights and opportunities to the frequent, terrifying practice of lynching. In response, blacks began what came to be known as the Great Migration. This exodus, among the largest movements of human populations in modern history, accelerated when white men shipped out en masse during World War I to fight in Europe, leaving behind an abundance of job opportunities in cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and New York. Harlem in uptown Manhattan, once mainly German-Jewish, became a major destination for blacks. In

the 1920s, the district lent its name to an outpouring of literature, music, and art that came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. As a result, Harlem became widely known, but in fact none of its writers, painters, or sculptors emerged as master artists recognized as such by the nation as a whole. Music was a different matter; but although the era came to be known as the Jazz Age even in the 1920s, hardly anyone recognized at once the full importance of jazz and the role it was already playing in the rising prestige of black America.

Political protest, along with the urge to attain largely bourgeois cultural standards and values, ruled the day. At the NAACP in New York City, W.E.B. Du Bois flailed racial injustice as editor of the organization's main organ, the *Crisis*. The business-oriented National Urban League used its own monthly magazine, *Opportunity*, to promote the arts, but even more to argue for a larger role for blacks in the area of business. The socialist *Messenger* carried the views of Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph. The latter would organize the International Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and eventually win a long, bitter struggle for its recognition as a trade union. The Universal Negro Improvement Association, whose high point was around 1920, led with spectacular if short-lived success by Marcus Garvey of Jamaica, called for a mass movement that would take blacks away from America and "Back to Africa."

In the 1930s, during the economic trials of the Great Depression, communism offered blacks at least two hallucinations of political power, although the hold of the Party on the black masses was always tenuous at best. The Communist Party of the United States officially pushed the possibility of a separate black nation carved out of the so-called Black Belt

in the South, including parts of Georgia and Alabama. This move, endorsed by Moscow, was based on the idea that blacks had earned the right to self-determination because of their history of slavery and Jim Crow. The communists also nominated a black man, James W. Ford, as their vice-presidential candidate in 1936 and again in 1940 when they nominated Earl Browder for the presidency of the United States. The Browder-Ford ticket fared poorly in both elections. Encouraged by the popularity of President Roosevelt, blacks began to shift their allegiance away from the Republican Party—the party of Lincoln—to Roosevelt's Democratic Party, despite its ties to the white South. These ties to the white South practically guaranteed that blacks would play only a limited role in the party leadership. Any measure of black ancestry remained a kind of diriment impediment to attaining high office. Similarly, contempt for blacks pervaded almost all writing by whites. In 1933, surveying the work of white writers of fiction, the black literary critic Sterling Brown of Howard University isolated seven stereotypes—like the seven deadly sins of old—to which these writers clung in creating black characters. The seven were: the contented slave; the wretched freeman; the comic Negro; the brute Negro; the tragic mulatto; the local color Negro; and the exotic primitive. Not on the list was any category suggesting that any blacks possessed qualities such as dignity, honor, bravery, integrity, or intelligence.

Nevertheless, by this time the successful if covert infiltration of white consciousness by black culture had already begun. The idea of a vast group's "consciousness," which might be "infiltrated" covertly by subversive elements, may seem fanciful to some people; and yet these are categories I consider authentic in trying to explore this broader question of the black American image. I think we have no real hope of

understanding the emergence of the Obama candidacy, and its resilience thus far in dealing with threats and challenges, if we resist these categories. The interplay between race, culture, and politics is a complex, often treacherous affair. The United States, with its slippery cultural fluidity, its intriguing constitution, its hyperactive legal system, its relentless capacity for rejuvenation and re-invention, presents a particularly difficult field for this examination. But try to understand it, we must.

White power tried to ensure that black scholars and intellectuals, men and women with broad cultural vision who might possess the ability to be national political leaders, were stunted by segregation. Such people were kept on what amounted to reservations (as in Indian reservations), although the last thing one should think is that we should not admire black institutions of higher learning such as Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, or black newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender*, and their accomplishments. But racial segregation, by its tendency to guarantee inferior facilities and other material resources, and its urge to marginalize men and women who sought excellence, exacted a painful toll on the morale of scholars, educators, and artists such as Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, Alain Locke, Jessie Fauset, Arthur Huff Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, Horace Cayton, St. Clair Drake, and Mary McLeod Bethune. Mrs. Bethune, who founded against the odds what became Bethune-Cookman College in Florida, was the only one of these figures allowed even a tiny measure of national political influence (which she secured through the liberalism of Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of President Roosevelt). I should add that another individual who belongs on this list is Dr. Williams himself. Starting in 1939, a year after Oxford University awarded him his doctoral degree, Dr. Eric Williams taught political science at Howard University in

Washington, D.C. until 1948, when he returned to Trinidad to work for the Anglo-American Caribbean Commission. Racial segregation aimed to frustrate the hopes of blacks in America. With notable exceptions, it achieved its mission.

But in one sense white racism in America, with its legal anchor in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, was a kind of Maginot line. Its formidable guns were anchored in one place, trained in one direction, but thus unable to address threats that came from any other direction. In hindsight, the greatest challenge to racism was the captivating genius of black music, dance, and humor—but especially music—and the understandable susceptibility of whites to forms they saw as irresistible but also having no real political consequence. Indeed, many of these forms and their performers seemed to reinforce racial stereotypes. Ragtime, blues, jazz, and popular songs transported the black sensibility, personality, and character into places where the law sought to bar them. Perceived for the most part as harmless, frivolous, diverting creatures, a succession of gifted black comedians and musicians skirted the Maginot line and began to colonize white consciousness. This colonization had an earlier history, of course. As long as blacks and whites were in close proximity to one another, as in slavery, and with black women often responsible for nursing and bringing up white children, especially in the South, many whites were bound to see a wretched inconsistency between what the law said about black character and what their personal experience told them. That inconsistency is central to the relationship between the white boy Huck and the black slave Jim in Mark Twain's classic tale of 1885 *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Mark Twain's inspired depiction of their friendship and this inconsistency, with which Huck struggles mightily, no doubt contributed to the enormous

success of his novel, from which, Ernest Hemingway famously suggested, “all modern American literature comes.”

If we look at the 1920s alone, we see something of this dynamic of infiltration and colonization at work. In 1921 the all-black musical *Shuffle Along*, with music and lyrics by the black team of Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, transformed the nature of the Broadway musical. Vocal blues recordings by powerful performers such as Bessie Smith, Clara Smith, and Mamie Smith appeared about this time to instant success among whites as well as blacks. In this way began the influence that would culminate in the landmark creativity and vitality of white rock ’n roll stars such as Elvis Presley, the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, and Eric Clapton, who would all pay homage to the black roots of much of their best music. In 1924, at Aeolian Hall in Manhattan, an orchestra led by the white musician Paul Whiteman played the premiere of George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, with its bold, innovative appropriation of black jazz and the blues that formed a tribute to black culture that Gershwin and Whiteman readily acknowledged. In this decade, too, Louis Armstrong, who some critics would call the most important American musician of the century, showed off his talent on the jazz trumpet in performances which still rank among the finest in American musical history.

Various artists explored the forbidden territory of racial integration. Miscegenation is the theme of *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*, by America’s finest playwright, Eugene O’Neill, who depicted the complexity of American racial feeling again in *The Emperor Jones*. Jazz and the putative playing of “The Jazz History of the World” is an essential element at one point in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s acclaimed novel of 1925, *The Great Gatsby*. The hit 1927 musical play *Show Boat* featured the subversive protest song

"Ol' Man River," with lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II. In 1929, William Faulkner's breakthrough novel *The Sound and the Fury*, set in the South, recognized the heroic endurance of blacks. All of these acts and modes of influence on mainstream art, from high to low, from elitist to popular, came at a time when laws tried doggedly to bar the progress of blacks—and undermined those laws in favor of black progress.

Suppressing the Negro in America almost always entailed the white man's fear, acknowledged or unacknowledged, of the black man's sexuality and physical prowess. In few places was this apprehension dramatized more vividly than in sport. Early in the century, the black boxer Jack Johnson (heavyweight champion from 1908 to 1915) had flaunted both his money and his right to freedom by marrying a white woman. When she died a suicide, he married another. Johnson so upset whites that they began to search for someone they called openly the Great White Hope. Blacks were driven from horseracing, in which they had formerly excelled as jockeys in such elite events as the Kentucky Derby; but team sports demanded special attention. Baseball, the acknowledged national pastime, barred blacks from the Major Leagues and also from their "farm" system of minor league clubs. Star players such as the pitcher Satchel Paige and the hitter Josh Gibson were made to scramble for a living in the hardscrabble Negro Leagues.

When boxing eventually produced a black star with all-American appeal in the 1930s, he was, predictably, the opposite of Jack Johnson. Humble in his demeanor, soft spoken, and apparently none too bright, Joe Louis served in part as a theatrical prop in America's opposition to Hitler. Fighting the feared German boxer Max Schmeling and losing their first fight, Louis then seemed to many whites to restore the national honor and

to explode the Nazi myth of Aryan or white supremacy by defeating Schmeling—even as Louis contributed unwittingly to sustaining its American version. The black American athlete was hardly more than a pawn or a token when whites looked on him or her with apparent benevolence; mainly he or she was to be kept apart, denied full recognition and reward in an area, maddeningly, in which black equality or even superiority to whites was perhaps most readily demonstrable. Ironically, however, when the time came for America to begin to change its ways about racism, a black athlete would lead the way.

The U.S. entered the war with a segregated army that treated its blacks as inferiors. Separate black units answered to white officers almost exclusively. The entire army included only six black officers, four of them chaplains. The navy accepted no black volunteers or conscripts. The hallowed Marine Corps, always a voluntary force, also barred blacks. Finally in 1943, after heavy pressure by civil rights organizations, the army allowed blacks to enter OCS, or Officer Candidacy School. But aside from the efforts of the Tuskegee Airmen, a squadron of fighter pilots trained at the school founded by Booker T. Washington, few blacks saw combat. Instead, they toiled in support units used substantially for manual labor. They were thus denied access to the nation's treasured badges of courage, honor, and manhood.

The end of World War II found black Americans apparently in much the same humble and often humiliating position they were in when it began. But certain forces were already at work that would combine with the infiltration and subversion of which I have spoken to ensure important changes. The terrifying use of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the threat of universal nuclear annihilation; the ominous falling of the Iron

Curtain between the Soviet Union and western Europe; the increasingly tense Cold War competition between the rival ideologies of capitalist and communist democracy; the unmistakable and perhaps fatal weakening of the British, French, and other European empires—all these factors contributed to a dramatic alteration in the world view of people almost everywhere. In 1947, India became free and adopted a policy of non-alignment that defied the United States. In 1949, the communists seized power in China and were soon embroiled in the Korean War against the United States. The non-white peoples of the world were unmistakably on the rise. Wearing its albatross of white supremacy with increasing embarrassment if not shame, the U.S. needed as never before to define, defend, and assert its moral qualities against an array of progressive forces.

The next few years would bring striking changes. They started, in a sense, with one event that seemed almost trivial compared to the grander questions involving war and the national survival that faced America. In 1946, the Brooklyn Dodgers invited to its training camp a black player, Jackie Robinson. For a year he starred on the Dodgers' Minor League team in Montreal; then, to the consternation but also to the delight of many whites, he integrated Major League baseball when the 1947 season opened. Predicted as almost certain to fail by some experts, he became Rookie of the Year in the National League, and two years later, in 1949, was chosen as its Most Valuable Player. The colorful flair and yet cool competence with which Robinson played the game assailed stereotypes about blacks, who were said to lack the sterling qualities of character needed to maintain fine play at the highest level of the sport. Robinson also refuted the notion that white teammates, especially those from the South, would refuse to live so closely with a black man. (Baseball officials

had to crack down on a few recalcitrant white players, who gave in quickly to the new order.)

Unlike the “Brown Bomber” Joe Louis, Robinson was black-skinned, extremely handsome, had been to college, and had served as a lieutenant during the war. He embodied black masculinity in a manner that practically compelled white admiration. Because baseball was lodged so deeply, practically from childhood, in the psyche of most American men and many American women, he visited and affected a region of the white American mind and heart that had been closed to blacks for centuries. No wonder that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., would later admit freely that Robinson was the prime model and inspiration for civil rights activists in assessing how far blacks could go, and how they should comport themselves, in negotiating their way into the white world.

Change continued. In 1948, a year after Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers, President Truman stunned and dismayed many white people, including the army leadership, by integrating the armed forces through an executive presidential order. In 1950, an African-American, Ralph Bunche, won the Nobel Peace Prize for his dangerous but effective work in Palestine involving Jews, Arabs, and the founding of Israel. This honor for Bunche as a diplomat spoke to the tragic waste of African-American talent over many generations. The United States would never have allowed him or any other black man or woman to reach such a high diplomatic position. Bunche won the honor as a senior official of the United Nations organization. Other unusual honors came the way of blacks. The same year, the poet Gwendolyn Brooks became the first African-American to win a Pulitzer Prize, the nation’s most prestigious award for writing, for her collection *Annie Allen*. In 1953, Ralph Ellison

stunned the literary community by beating out Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck to win the National Book Award in fiction for his first (and last) novel, *Invisible Man*.

But the most momentous change of all came in 1954. That year, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its decision in a case challenging racial segregation in schooling, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* [Kansas]. Unanimously the court ruled that in the area of public schools, the practice of racial segregation—the now infamous "separate but equal" doctrine asserted by the Court in 1896 in *Plessy v. Ferguson*—was unconstitutional. In effect, the court had ruled against racial segregation in American public life.

The longest national disgrace appeared to be over. However, conservative and reactionary forces among whites rallied to carry out what would be called in Virginia and other Southern states "Massive Resistance"—a deliberate counterbalance both to the court decision that called for change "with all deliberate speed" and to the civil rights movement that had agitated for the change. The story of the civil rights movement led by Dr. King especially, according to principles and practices inspired by various sources, from the old black church to Mahatma Gandhi's teachings and example in struggling with the British in India, is certainly so well known that we can turn our attention to less obvious but perhaps equally vital ways in which African-American culture asserted itself on the national stage.

I spoke earlier about the impact of black music, especially in recordings that were being purchased by whites and enjoyed without the presence of blacks themselves; or enjoyed in listening to the radio in

similar circumstances. The story is different in the visual media, notably film and television, which far more directly and intricately challenged the myth of innate black inferiority. Many whites in positions of power in the media seemed to believe that blacks should be treated in a manner that was the reverse of the old rule about children: blacks could or even should be heard, but not seen. White people who listened to recordings by black musicians were not prepared to have these musicians and their kith and kin presented as complex human beings on the screen. In part this attitude was a tribute to the power of movies both to create and to destroy social myths. In 1915, the director D.W. Griffith's movie *The Birth of a Nation*, acknowledged as a technical and esthetic milestone in motion picture history, was so crudely artful and timely in its race-baiting that it spurred the revival of the Ku Klux Klan across the South.

Hollywood absorbed the essential message about race in this movie, especially to please white patrons in the South. From then on, the movies almost always portrayed American blacks—and Africans, too—in highly demeaning ways. No wonder that the film historian Donald Bogle called his authoritative book on blacks in Hollywood *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. In darkened movie houses, whites guffawed at the bug-eyed, dim-witted, illiterate drawl of stock black buffoons, or pitied and despised cowardly or incompetent black characters, such as the character in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) who confesses at last that she didn't "know nothing 'bout birthin' babies" after she had blithely pretended otherwise, thus provoking the white heroine, Scarlett O'Hara, into slapping her. In these same darkened movie houses (in segregated balconies throughout the South), black Americans both resented the portrait of themselves projected onto

the silver screen or sadly, in too many instances, internalized the distortion as self-hatred.

Not until 1949—in those almost magical postwar years again—do we find the first movies designed with an explicitly liberal intent. These films include *Home of the Brave* (about black soldiers and the presumption of their cowardice), *Intruder in the Dust* (based on a work of fiction by Faulkner, set in the South), and *Pinky*, about a young black woman who breaks her black mother's heart in passing for white. Such movies, exploring race relations, tried to depict blacks with a measure of integrity and complexity. Typically, they did so in awkward ways that spoke to the nation's confusion about the issue. In addition, the black movie star was virtually nonexistent, and almost impossible to imagine in a Hollywood so steeped in racist portrayals of blacks and so devoted to satisfying—and sustaining—what it believed to be an intrinsically racist white audience. Suddenly, two actors, Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte, appeared in movies and began to break the old racial stereotypes. (Poitier's first film, *No Way Out*, also appeared in 1949; Belafonte's first, *Bright Road*, in 1953.)

It is of intense interest that both pioneers brought with them strong Caribbean backgrounds—that is, backgrounds that were not exclusively or even fundamentally African-American, although exactly how this factor of foreignness worked (and works) is not easy to decipher. Both men, the first Miami-born but brought up in his parents' Bahamas, the other Harlem-born but taken by his mother to live for several years in her native Jamaica, exuded on the screen a degree of confidence never seen before in black men—as well as "sex appeal" to an extent verboten to this point for black actors in Hollywood. (As I noted earlier, this matter of relative

foreignness is also important, but also hard to decipher, in the case of Barack Obama.)

How did the Caribbean background of Poitier and Belafonte help them become stars, and also determine their image, at such a crucial time? I would guess in two major ways. First, unlike other native-born blacks who knew only the depressing American milieu, they had not internalized a radical expectation of failure or rejection as the inevitable consequence of any effort to rise in the world. Secondly, whites were clearly prepared to accept from blacks who were not identifiably or unambiguously African-American a confident presumption of self-worth that these same whites would not have tolerated in American blacks. The white response to black male sexuality is intriguing here. Poitier, who worked to cover up his Bahamian accent on the screen and present himself as a kind of "genuine" African-American, had to be, and was, the more demure of the two men. Belafonte, who emphasized and even exaggerated his Jamaican roots in order to succeed as a calypso singer (which he did with spectacular success), could be and was far sexier on both stage and screen. In his role in the 1957 movie *Island in the Sun*, set in the Caribbean, he ventured further into the minefield of miscegenation between a black man and a white woman than any black actor had gone in a Hollywood film—and returned unscathed. The world was changing.

Among several emerging women stars, Lena Horne and Eartha Kitt (the former as singer and actress, the latter almost exclusively as a singer) also gave off a steamy sexual charm and exuded a measure of self-confidence as entertainers that had never been seen among black entertainers facing mainstream white audiences. However, these

elements, although remarkable, were not revolutionary. Black American women, both in and after slavery, had seldom been called upon to suppress their sexual power; instead, they had been asked to expose it, for the benefit of white men. Certain light-skinned racial types, such as the "octoroon," seemed to hold a special fascination for white men—and, perhaps as a result, for black men too.

Among the media, television was far more timid than the movies when it faced the issue of race. This timidity sprang from its essential domesticity in practice, the intimacy of its place in the home. Also, its programs were rigidly dependent on corporate sponsors who were chronically nervous about offending customers or potential customers. Thus, despite the fact that Nat King Cole's lush recordings of sentimental ballads were extraordinarily popular across America starting in the late 1940s, he failed miserably on television. Or rather, his variety show on the NBC national network failed to survive. From its debut in 1956 critics deemed it an artistic success, but Cole abandoned it after slightly more than a year because very few companies would agree to sponsor it consistently. (The network itself showed courage, but to no avail.) No doubt this failure served as a warning to Johnny Mathis, another immensely popular black balladeer of the era; he stayed away from television even as sales of his songs soared. When blacks and whites appeared together on a television show, everyone trod very carefully. When on one occasion the popular white crooner Dean Martin offered his handkerchief to the multi-talented Sammy Davis Jr. (the sole black member of a circle of entertainers known as the "ratpack," led by Frank Sinatra) after Davis finished a particularly strenuous number, observers saw the gesture as uncommonly bold. When Joan Crawford pecked Davis on the cheek during a televised awards ceremony, many members of the

audience gasped instinctively. These moments came at least a decade after the Brown decision.

Nevertheless, it should be recognized that in their harmonizing of the strains of romantic love for an intensely receptive white audience, Cole, Mathis, and other African-American singers, including the blind Ray Charles, brought a sense of black dignity and esthetic prestige that had been barred from full expression before this era. Charles even crossed over with great success from the black-dominated realm of rhythm-and-blues into the normally lily-white country-and-western world. Occasionally black entertainers were treated roughly in the South, but on the whole they conquered America, and especially young white America.

A higher level of prestige, though not necessarily of effectiveness, followed the efforts of blacks in the world of classical musical. Such efforts date back at least to the nineteenth century—although a master of German lieder such as Roland Hayes in the early twentieth century found a much warmer reception in Europe than at home. For generations, black leaders had clung to the notion that achieving distinction in classical music, poetry, painting, sculpture, and other “high” arts would compel whites to recognize black humanity and weaken segregation and racism. It is hard to judge how correct these leaders were. They seemed justified when Marian Anderson became a national symbol of dignity and artistic talent after she was denied permission by the patriotic Daughters of the American Revolution to perform at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. but then performed outdoors before a huge assembly at the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday, 1939, at the behest of Eleanor Roosevelt. In the wake of 1954 blacks flourished as never before in the world of operas and recitals. In 1955, an aging Anderson integrated the Metropolitan

Opera Company when she appeared in a performance of Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*. In Manhattan, the new Metropolitan Opera facility at the massive Lincoln Center cultural complex opened in 1966 with a performance of *Anthony and Cleopatra,* a new opera by Samuel Barber commissioned specifically for Leontyne Price in her glorious prime.

But the classical area revealed curious patterns. Prominent black classical instrumentalists were—and are—embarrassingly few. The bi-racial pianist Andre Watts (an African-American father, a German mother) became a star while still young, as the versatile trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, when he turned away from jazz to explore the classical trumpet repertoire. Compared to the success of black divas such as Anderson, Price, Kathleen Battle, and Jessye Norman, black male singers have achieved relatively little. In ballet, Arthur Mitchell became a leading member of Balanchine's New York City Ballet; but few blacks succeeded him at that level. Painters have had to struggle for national recognition, with Romare Bearden achieving the only notable success as an abstract modernist. Writers, however, have done much to lift the image of the black American as creative artist. Their efforts were crowned, so to speak, when Toni Morrison won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993.

In sport, starting with Jackie Robinson in baseball, blacks made spectacular progress in garnering awards for their talents—and the full range of their personality and humanity recognized. The tragic Arthur Ashe, doomed to die early of AIDS contracted from a blood transfusion, became an icon of nobility and dignity even before his medical ordeal. But in some ways, the phenomenon of Cassius Clay is more significant here. As a youthful braggart winning an Olympic Games medal in Rome in 1960, whites found him amusing; as a defiant Muslim, renamed Muhammad Ali,

they (the authorities, strictly speaking) stripped him of his title and threatened him with jail for refusing to take up arms against the Vietnamese. Later, however, he would become so nationally and internationally respected and even beloved that he was asked to light the Olympic torch at the 1996 games in Atlanta. The two black athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who stood on the victory platform at the Olympic games in Mexico City in 1968 wearing black gloves on upheld fists were sent packing home in disgrace; but forty years later, a statue has been erected in their honor in San Jose, California, where they attended college. Such men paved the way for the emergence of international superstars such as Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods, who have taken the image of the African-American in sport—and to some extent in life—to heights unanticipated in even the recent past.

Both of these stars, and others, have refused to accept older, possibly outmoded to their thinking, notions of black racial solidarity. Jordan refused to lend his support to a black Democratic Party candidate for the Senate in his home state of North Carolina. "Republicans buy sneakers, too," he remarked, as he acknowledged his superior allegiance to one of his sponsors. Woods—yet another high-achieving half-black, with an African-American father and a Thai mother—once declared himself, perhaps partly in jest, to be not black but "Cabalasian." The effect of black athletes expressing their newfound sense of freedom and confidence may be seen in another area. Muhammad Ali, along with the basketball giant Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, born Lewis Alcindor (of Trinidadian background), and lesser sportsmen such as the football player and sports commentator Ahmad Rashad (all of these names chosen by the athletes themselves), probably aided Barack Obama in one crucial way. In blending Islam with their immense popularity as athletes, they paved the

way for American whites (and many blacks) to accept a politician named Barack Hussein Obama. Not even the events of September 11, 2001, and the sudden rise of strong anti-Islamic feeling, could erase this piece of education, or conversion, or assimilation.

Of course, no accounting of the evolution of the African-American image can ignore the late 1960s, the early 1970s, and the impact of the separatist Black Power and Black Arts movements. In this tempestuous period, white Americans as a whole both recoiled from and came to terms with the harsh message about history and chronic white American injustice preached in various forms by militant blacks such as Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, among others. This is the main reason, I think, that millions of whites did not desert Obama over the extremely provocative words and actions of Reverend Jeremiah Wright. To many whites, Wright in one sense sounded like a scratchy LP in the age of CDs; but also to many whites, the element of truth in what he said even at his most radical and coarsely theatrical was something they had long ago engaged, if not fully accepted.

The impact of Black Power and Black Arts on black people is a related and yet different matter. Most black Americans, like most people, are conservative; it requires an effort to be liberal, much less radical. Thus most black Americans were almost as shocked by the message and manners of Black Power as were white Americans. Their passage through that turbulent time I would call paradoxically the era of their domestic expatriation, when they began to acquire the sense of inner confidence that foreign blacks, including Caribbean blacks, typically brought to the demeaning American scene. The heyday of Black Power as we knew it was brief. Stokely Carmichael became Kwame Toure and moved to Africa,

and Amiri Baraka (born LeRoi Jones) declared himself no longer a separatist but a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist. But with these defections from Black Power, many if not most blacks were not demoralized. On the whole, it seems clear, most blacks had become stronger, more confident, and even more content with their place in American life despite its continuing difficulties.

I believe, incidentally, that there could be a line that connects the confidence generated by Black Power to what, to my mind, is in a way even more amazing than the emergence of Obama. I refer to the quiet arrival of black captains of industry who preside or presided over institutions worth many billions of dollars. Robert Johnson of the BET network (Black Entertainment Television) has become America's first black billionaire—or perhaps the second, following Oprah Winfrey; but I am thinking more of black businessmen heading white organizations, such as Ken Chenault at American Express; Richard Parsons at Time/Warner; and Stanley O'Neal at the iconic brokerage house Merrill Lynch. And to think that only fifty years ago, and even later, these men would have had some trouble finding a job as store clerks on 125th Street in Harlem.

The impact of Black Power and the durable upsurge of confidence among blacks who assimilated that impact, as well as the revival of feminism, black and white, about the same time, must have also served as a crucial factor in the making of Oprah Winfrey. Growing up in humble and troubling circumstances, she has now reigned for some years as the queen of American television. In the process, she has become immensely rich by displaying astute business skills and a commanding maturity. A beautiful brown-skinned woman, she traded not at all, or very little, on her sexual appeal in rising as a television personality. Instead, she

conquered the world of whites, especially white women, by being both jauntily feminine and quintessentially American—energetic, optimistic, curious, intelligent, ambitious, and yet just. She mastered the white world while keeping the respect of blacks by her consistent involvement of blacks as guests and experts on her show. A few black entertainers, notably perhaps Bill Cosby, have also succeeded in crossing the color line decisively; but Winfrey's almost daily exhibition on television of her gifts of mind and heart, as well as the scope of her ambition to educate as well as entertain her viewers, have made her incomparable as a presence. Her book club astonished the publishing world by its instant success. Her magazine, with her portrait on each cover, flourished from the start. She commands a loyalty among her many millions of viewers that, until Obama, no black politician could begin to match. Her support for Obama at a crucial time in the primary season undoubtedly boosted his fortunes—but in a real way she had prepared the way for him.

Finally, there is the record of blacks in electoral politics and in presidential administrations. As for electoral politics: we have come a long way from the time when the glamorous, flamboyant, virtually white Adam Clayton Powell III, a lonely and embittered lion from Harlem, lived large and mocked and defied the rules of the US Congress, hiding in plain sight in the Bahamas even as he legally represented Harlem. Now his successor in Congress, Charles Rangel, is the soul of sobriety as well as wit, wisdom, authority, and competence as chairman of the mighty House Ways and Means Committee. But the severe difficulties that faced, and still face, the black politician who would aspire to national office become clear when we rise above the limited constituencies of the House of Representatives to the larger, truly race-haunted territory of the Senate, with its one hundred members. In the entire 20th century only two blacks,

Edward Brooke (two terms, from 1966 to 1978) and Carol Moseley Braun (1993-1999) became senators; and each left office under a large cloud. Now Obama is the only black senator. Black governors are even rarer. Since Reconstruction, only L. Douglas Wilder of Virginia had been elected a governor (1990-1994) until 2006, when Deval Patrick became the governor of Massachusetts. Thanks to his white predecessor's indiscretions, David Patterson of Harlem became governor of New York in 2008, after serving as lieutenant governor when the Spitzer scandal broke.

As for presidency itself, the ascendancy of Obama is astonishing because until his arrival no black aspirant seemed to have a chance at winning, or even coming close to winning; being on a ticket doesn't mean that you have a chance. The gallant Shirley Chisholm of Brooklyn, with her strong Caribbean roots, ran quixotically for the highest office in 1972 while serving in the House of Representatives. The Rev. Jesse Jackson who, with his Rainbow Coalition that, sadly, seldom seemed to comprise more than different shades of black, ran for the presidency in 1984 and 1988. Although he once, as President Clinton recently reminded us, won South Carolina in a primary, his success was always minor.

If one steps down from the presidency but remains within the White House in order to check the history of black appointees to the various cabinets, one sees a relatively blank slate until recently. Blacks held no cabinet positions in the Kennedy administration, despite his wild popularity among them. They entered at a secondary level within the cabinet in the Johnson administrations and beyond. None shone very brightly; all seemed to be tokens, even if each was doubtless competent. If there was a low point on this score, it came perhaps when, according to

reports, President Reagan mistook his only black cabinet member for a mayor who happened to be visiting the White House.

The great change came, I believe, with a quiet announcement made just after William Jefferson Clinton won office in 1992. The statement made it known that presidential appointments in the new administration would be vetted initially by a tiny group led by a former civil rights leader who had been shot in the back by a white sniper after a meeting with a white woman at a motel. With this second chance at life, Vernon Jordan turned to working for an elite law firm and to employing his undeniable charm to establish and solidify important political alliances. In the Clinton administrations, blacks held many more high offices than had been dreamt of previously. But it was left to the present President Bush to appoint Colin Powell, and then Condoleezza Rice, both of whom had been championed out of relative obscurity by his father, President George H.W. Bush, to the illustrious position of Secretary of State, a position once held by Thomas Jefferson, among others. Powell, a military hero, is the child of Jamaican immigrants. (It has been said that had his parents gone to Great Britain instead, Powell almost certainly would have been successful there too—but more likely as a highly respected bus conductor in the London Transit system.) Rice is a child of the aspiring Southern black middle class who had become a trained Soviet Union expert with a teaching position at Stanford University, where she impressed a former Republican Secretary of State, George Schultz, who propelled her toward a position in national security. There she caught the attention of the younger President Bush.

Both Powell and Rice benefited from personal patronage, but there is nothing inherently wrong with such patronage, and there was nothing wrong and undeserved about their promotions.

Having come thus far, blacks are perhaps now ready for the next step—although there is a world of difference between a presidential appointment and winning a national election. Again, I have no definitive explanation for the exalted position in which Barack Obama finds himself. I have tried only to trace some of the major steps as black Americans have risen from slavery to this auspicious moment. Has Obama been lucky? Branch Rickey, the man who plucked Jackie Robinson out of thin air and pushed him and black Americans forward, once said famously that "luck is the residue of design." Obama prepared himself carefully, and, in the classic American manner, awaited his chance. To switch metaphors, he perhaps has benefited from the arrival of a perfect storm, when four consecutive presidential terms have been marked by some success but also have been scarred by personal and professional errors and malfeasance of which Americans, a moral people despite their faults, are tired and ashamed. I will go no further in speaking of these errors. Of course there have also been problems that were beyond the ability of the two presidents in question, Clinton and Bush, to anticipate or correct.

In any event, here Obama stands, and whatever happens, America will never again be quite the same. Black Americans will never again be quite the same. Last of all, I hope no one has taken anything I've said to constitute some kind of unfair criticism of America. Only in America, Obama has said, could his story have unfolded the way that it has. This is testimony, I think, to the unmitigated brilliance of the American constitution in comparison to all others; the loyalty of the American people

to that constitution and the ideal of law and order, long periods and even traditions of delinquency notwithstanding; and to the unceasing optimism and spirit of enterprise that are so American as qualities. Many other countries could learn much from the United States.

I began with an epigraph from the black American writer and author of the landmark novel *Native Son*, Richard Wright: "The Negro is America's metaphor." Perhaps America is the world's metaphor. Incidentally, Wright's words hovered in my head as I began to think of composing this talk, uncertain what I would say. I don't know why they did. Then, just before coming down to Trinidad, I thought I should double-check my source. I turned to the book in which Wright's essay containing this sentence was first published, late in the 1950s, not long before his death in 1960. It's called *White Man, Listen!* As I flipped open the book, I was startled to read its dedication. I had forgotten that Wright had paid tribute in *White Man, Listen!*—and I quote—"To my friend, Eric Williams, Chief Minister of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and Leader of the People's National Movement; and to THE WESTERNIZED AND TRAGIC ELITE OF ASIA, AFRICA, AND THE WEST INDIES."

Those of you who don't identify with the first part of the dedication perhaps will identify with its second part. Some of you, I think, may find yourselves identifying with both parts.

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