

# **BARACK IS THE NEW BLACK**

## ***Obama and the Promise/Threat of the Post-Civil Rights Era***

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**Abstract**

Barack Obama's political strategies during the 2008 presidential election were those of a cohort of younger, new Black politicians, who have rewritten the playbook by which Blacks can win election. Their success suggests that White racism is no longer the insuperable barrier to Black success that it has been for all of American history and that the old style of Black politics, which relied heavily on racial bloc voting and influence peddling within the Black community, may be obsolete. However, Obama's strategy of not appealing to narrow racial solidarities but instead of drawing broad support from voters of all races cast a shadow of doubt on Obama's racial loyalties. It remains unclear whether the Obama phenomenon will mark the renewal of civil rights or the repudiation of its historical commitment to the most disadvantaged.

**Keywords:** Barack Obama, Postracial, Racial Divisions, Civil Rights, Black Underclass

“I want to cut his nuts off.” That’s what the Reverend Jesse Jackson—civil rights veteran, former presidential candidate, and man of God—said of the first Black nominee of a major political party. Unbeknownst to him, Jackson’s microphone was still live as he whispered his disdain for Obama to a fellow guest on FOX News. And FOX News, no doubt after a great deal of agonizing and soul searching, decided to run the footage. They had a duty to the public, host Bill O’Reilly of FOX News’ *The O’Reilly Factor* explained: who was he to keep this important news from the American people?

And why did Jesse Jackson want to castrate the man who was likely to become the first Black president of the United States? “He’s talking down to niggers,” Jackson whispered on the candid footage. Obama had just given a speech to the NAACP, in which he stressed the need for emphasizing education, personal responsibility, and dedicated parenting in the Black community. There was nothing espe-

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cially controversial or surprising in Obama's speech; it had been expertly crafted to offend no one. It was neither overtly liberal nor overtly conservative but touched on themes that might appeal to either ideological camp; it made no radical policy proposal; it broke no new ground. Indeed, the speech of Republican Party nominee John McCain to the same group was in its own way more daring, with its suggestion that vouchers might help improve the quality of public education in Black schools. The speech, marked by all of the hallmarks of a colonial magistrate's careful, diplomatic salutation to a foreign and potentially hostile tribe, was a slightly risky attempt to press one of the few conservative pet policies that might appeal to the Blacks.

What was it about Obama's speech that pushed Jackson's buttons? Why did Jackson think that Obama was "talking down" to his audience? It wasn't the substance of Obama's comments, which echoed themes that Obama and Jackson himself had sounded many times in the past. Jackson's bitter aside reflected a much deeper and more long-standing animosity, unexpressed but never far beneath the surface of Jackson's public endorsements. Obama had been making Jackson and many other Black community leaders nervous for quite some time. Some had complained that Obama had few if any Blacks in the most important decision-making positions in his campaign. Others had been distressed by what they saw as Obama's betrayal of Trinity Church's Reverend Jeremiah Wright—and with him, all of Black liberation theology. But these specifics were little more than excuses—not one of them, nor all of them in combination, could explain the unease and tentativeness that Black opinion leaders such as Jackson felt about what should have been an unambiguous cause for celebration—a Black man with a real chance of becoming president.

"Barack is the New Black," read the bumper stickers displayed proudly on bright red Mini Coopers, on sleek and sedate silver BMWs, on pimped out Cadillac Escalades, on rusted "vintage" VWs, on Vespa scooters, stuck right next to Union Jacks or those red, white, and blue target emblems popularized by the Mods in the 1960s and displayed on bicycles that raced through the financial districts of major cities or across college campus. This slogan had not been approved by Barack Obama, the Barack Obama for President Committee, or the Democratic Party. But by the middle of 2008, it had become the unofficial theme of an informal subcommittee of Obama supporters. Obama was a new kind of Black politician. He had consciously and conspicuously avoided the style—and much of the substance—of the Black politicians of Jackson's generation. Jackson was a brash, belligerent, speak-truth-to-power race man in the Black Power tradition—a somewhat more respectable Stokely Carmichael, a cleaner cut Al Sharpton, but still unmistakably a product of the long hot summers, a field marshal in the culture wars of the 1960s and 1970s.

By contrast Obama wasn't angry or belligerent—he was poised, confident, and unflappable. The older generation of Black activists—and this included many who in fact held public office—tried to pressure *other people* to take action on their behalf. They lectured White liberals and railed against conservatives. The basic model was oppositional and the tools used—mau-mauing, dramatic confrontation, public embarrassment, the guilt trip—were the tools of the weak. By contrast Obama didn't raise the roof about social injustice, hoping that those in control would take some notice—he had every expectation that *he* would be in control. Obama and the Black politicians of his new generation didn't speak truth to power—they were power. And they used the language and tools of the powerful: moderation and compromise, backed up by the proverbial big stick.

Obama was leaving Jackson and his breed of angrier race politics behind, and that cast a shadow of doubt on his racial loyalties. In February 2008, when television and radio host Tavis Smiley held the annual "State of Black America" conference in

New Orleans, presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton made the obligatory appearance, but Obama politely declined, citing a prior commitment in Springfield, Illinois. Princeton University professor and prominent race-relations commentator Cornel West attacked Obama, suggesting to the largely Black audience that his absence cast doubt on Obama's commitment to the Black community:

The problem is . . . him going to Springfield the same day Brother Tavis has set this up for a *whole year*. We already know then that him coming out there is not fundamentally about us. It's about someone else. He's got large numbers of white brothers and sisters who have fears and anxieties, and he's got to speak to them in such a way that he holds *us* at arm's length . . . [but] you can't take Black people for granted just because you're Black. . . . He's got to be accountable, and starting off in Springfield, Illinois, is not impressive to me (Sheppard 2007).

Earlier, when Jackson and Sharpton led a civil rights style march to Jena, Louisiana, to protest what they claimed was the racist criminal prosecution of six Black high school students, Obama steered well clear of the controversy. Jackson commented to the press that he thought Obama had made a mistake in not speaking out about the "Jena Six": "If I were Obama, I'd be all over Jena," Jackson chided. But Obama was poised to become the Democratic Party nominee for president in part because he wasn't "all over" every racial scandal that offered a photo op. Obama was judicious and measured, rather than righteous and opinionated; he avoided controversy, while Jackson and Sharpton chased it. Obama was a viable candidate for president because he *wasn't* Jesse Jackson. Obama's critics and ambivalent supporters among Black opinion leaders understood this fact. But they also resented it, and they resented Obama for his willingness to distance himself from the symbolic issues that had historically defined Black political activism.

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Obama pulled together an unlikely coalition of college students, hard-core progressives, and political independents and raised millions of dollars from small individual donations. Obama, with his Ivy League pedigree and inspiring but nuanced rhetorical style, reminded some of a Black Adlai Stevenson: he might appeal to latte-sipping intellectuals and idealistic liberals, but racism, they predicted, would stop Obama cold in the vast, conservative, and backward American heartland. Yet some of Obama's most impressive victories were among politically moderate White voters in midwestern and western "red" states such as Iowa and Nebraska, among corn farmers and cattle ranchers who had never seen the inside of a Starbucks.

Obama was not alone in his new, less confrontational style of politics. He was part of a cohort of new Black politicians who have won office not by appealing to narrow racial solidarities but instead by drawing broad support from voters of all races, and in some unlikely locations. Newark mayor Cory Booker has made reform of Newark's notoriously corrupt racial politics one of the hallmarks of his tenure as mayor. He ran against a corrupt Black mayor, Sharpe James, who beat Booker in 2002 by slandering him, according to an account in *Esquire*, as "a white, gay, Jewish Republican funded by the KKK" (Raab 2008). Booker returned to so thoroughly trounce Sharpe in 2006 that the incumbent mayor threw in the towel before Election Day. Massachusetts governor Deval Patrick ran an Obama-style campaign in 2006 (or one might say that Obama ran a Patrick-style campaign in 2008) and became the Commonwealth's first Black governor. Philadelphia mayor Michael Nutter won

election in 2007 as a pragmatic reformer who combined such liberal positions as smoking bans and support for gay rights with more conservative policies such as mandatory curfews and warrantless police searches in high-crime areas. This cohort of younger politicians has rewritten the playbook by which Blacks can win election. Their success suggests that White racism is no longer the insuperable barrier to Black success that it has been for all of American history and that the old style of Black politics, which relied heavily on racial bloc voting and influence peddling within the Black community, may be obsolete.

Part of Obama's appeal was that he implicitly promised to bring the United States' long, ugly racial struggle to a heroic conclusion: the charismatic Black president would heal the nation's racial wounds, just as he promised to bridge its ideological chasm. But some had begun to suggest that if dust bowl aggies and high-plains cowboys were ready for a Black president, the nation had *already* gotten beyond race. Obama's surprising success suggested that the nation was already *postracist*.

This fueled the nagging concerns and resentments of old school Black opinion and political leaders. At least some of Obama's considerable support among White voters was the result of an implicit promise: that if the United States could elect a Black president, this would prove that the nation had finally overcome the long-lived evil of racism. Voting for Obama was like reparations on the cheap. Obama did not encourage this kind of thinking, but as a savvy politician, he had to have understood it was at work, and he did not discourage it. Obama's success might actually make it harder for traditional civil rights activists to get attention and sympathy for their causes. And while many hoped that the nation's first Black president would aggressively address the racial injustices that still mired the nation's inner cities in poverty and despair, what mandate would Obama have to confront racial injustice when his candidacy had implicitly promised a "postracial" America?

In fact, some began to ask whether race wasn't actually an *advantage* for Obama and, by implication, for other Blacks as well. In a *New York Times* op-ed, noted feminist Gloria Steinem suggested that Obama's race might be a political asset: "Racism stereotyped Black men as more 'masculine' for so long that some white men find their presence to be masculinity-affirming" (Steinem 2008). Walter Mondale's 1984 running mate Geraldine Ferraro went even further, suggesting that Obama was, effectively, the beneficiary of a kind of political affirmative action: "If Obama was a white man, he would not be in this position," she insisted. "He happens to be very lucky to be who he is" (Elder 2008).

*Lucky?* Had Black skin—what W. E. B. Du Bois called a badge of insult—become a sign of privilege? The idea that being Black could be an advantage wasn't new: the decades old opposition to affirmative action was driven in large part by resentment that Blacks had turned past oppression and White liberal guilt into a present-day advantage. The 1986 movie *Soul Man*—a postmodern inversion of John Howard Griffin's classic work of investigative journalism *Black Like Me*—took the idea that Black skin could give one a leg up to its *reductio ad absurdum*. The protagonist, an ambitious White college student who hopes to attend Harvard Law School, resorts to megadoses of tanning pills and an Afro wig to pass as Black and qualify for a minority scholarship. He attends Harvard as a Black man and has a series of unexpectedly difficult (and comical) encounters with militant Black students, White sexual fetishists, and pervasive racism before he eventually repents his deception.

The film reflected the changing racial climate and increasingly competitive economy of the 1980s. Despite still tense and often hostile race relations, overt racism was rare, and businesses and government were, at least formally, committed to racial equality. At the same time, Blacks were heavily represented among popular

musicians and professional athletes—those rare individuals who personified sexiness and cool in the popular culture. As a result, naïve Whites could imagine that being Black might be kind of fun. *Soul Man* perceptively tapped into an inchoate fantasy of temporary metamorphosis: *What if I woke up, not as a cockroach, but as a Black guy? I could get into a great college on affirmative action, get lucky with all of those girls with jungle fever. . . and then go back to being white when it's time to land that job on Wall Street.* The temporary nature of the transformation was, of course, critical: no one in 1986 really believed that the meager advantages of race-based scholarships and admissions preferences outweighed the day-to-day injuries of racial prejudice. But had these beliefs changed in the twenty odd years that separated *Soul Man* from the candidacy of Barack Obama? Had the United States become “postracist,” as many in the media began to argue when Obama became a viable candidate for the presidency?

In reaction to such millenarian suggestions, some insisted that Obama's success said little about the demise of racism because Obama wasn't really Black. Obama, the son of a Kenyan father and a White mother, was one of a growing number of Americans of mixed racial parentage, and part of his compelling autobiography, *Dreams of My Father*, involved his struggle to come to terms with this atypical racial identity. For many, Obama, like so many Americans of mixed racial parentage before him, was simply Black. But for others, Obama personified a crisis—whether welcomed or feared—for the meaning of race itself. Even as Obama's political successes gave currency to the notion of a society that was *postracist*, some insisted that Obama himself—his biography, perhaps even the very core of his DNA—was racially enigmatic, *postracial*.

Obama inadvertently helped to promote such unconventional ideas about race, but they predated his rise to prominence. For instance, novelist, Nobel laureate, and esteemed commentator on American race relations Toni Morrison asserted in a 1998 *New Yorker* article that Bill Clinton was “our first black President.” She insisted that the fair-haired and pink-cheeked Clinton was “Blacker than any actual black person who could ever be elected in our children's lifetime” (Morrison 1998, p. 32). Ten years later, in 2008, Obama—someone most people would instinctively call an “actual Black person”—was on the verge of being elected. As the contest for the Democratic nomination heated up in heavily Black South Carolina, civil rights veteran and Hillary Clinton supporter Andrew Young picked up Morrison's line, arguing, “Hillary Clinton . . . has Bill behind her, and Bill is every bit as black as Barack” (Young 2007).

Young wasn't the first to question Obama's racial bona fides. Obama's former opponent for the Illinois senatorial race, Black conservative Alan Keyes, had complained that Obama wrongly “claims an African American heritage” (Keyes 2004). Contrasting Obama's presumptuous claim to Blackness to his own valid one, Keyes channeled the spirit of left-liberal multiculturalism to perfection: “My ancestors toiled in slavery in this country. . . . My consciousness, who I am as a person, has been shaped by my struggle, deeply emotional and deeply painful, with the reality of that heritage” (Keyes 2004). Later, columnist Debra Dickerson echoed this opinion, writing for *Salon*:

Obama isn't Black.

“Black” in our political and society reality, means those descended from West African slaves. Voluntary immigrants of African descent (even those descended from West Indian slaves) are just that, voluntary immigrants. . . . It can't be assumed that a Nigerian cabdriver and a third-generation Harlemitte have more in common than the fact that a cop won't bother to make the

distinction. They're both "Black" as a matter of skin color and DNA, but only the Harlemiter, for better or worse, is politically and culturally Black (Dickerson 2007).

Obama's detractors have made much of the fact that Obama is the son of an African immigrant and not the descendant of American slaves. But while this makes him unlike most American Blacks, including almost everyone in the civil rights establishment, it also joins him to an increasingly prominent segment of the Black middle class and elite—immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean—who, for many reasons, have been disproportionately successful among Americans of African descent. In 2004, when Obama was still a community organizer, Harvard professors Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Lani Guinier worried publicly that a growing percentage of "Black" students admitted to Harvard were the children of African or Caribbean immigrants rather than descendants of American slaves (Rimer and Arenson, 2004). In this sense Obama represented a crisis in Black identity precipitated by recent waves of immigration from Africa and the Caribbean—people who were undeniably Black in terms of phenotype and ancestry but who did not share the experience, culture, or oppositional politics of American Blacks.

But while some have argued that Obama—with his mixed parentage, international upbringing, and Ivy League pedigree—isn't representative of most American Blacks, in a sense, their real worry is that he's all too representative. Obama is a symbol for a change in American race relations, from a Black community unified by common neighborhoods, experiences, culture, and grievances to a Black community increasingly *divided* by all of the above.

Obama is successful, well educated, and cosmopolitan. He seems free of the counterproductive rage, alienation, and self-doubt that are often a toxic byproduct of the American Black experience. But he is not atypical: there are millions of successful Blacks who share these characteristics with Obama. They represent a large and growing share of the Black students I teach at Stanford Law School; they are an even larger share of the Black undergraduate students that I encounter at Stanford, and I suspect an even larger share of the Black grade school students nationwide who are likely to attend college in the future.

This is a generational divide, but more than that, it is a socioeconomic divide. Many of the parents of these students are learning from their children. As Obama was about to have his first debate with John McCain at Ole Miss, I had drinks with a Black man who attended that bastion of the Old South in the racially tense 1970s. He wore a blue oxford shirt, tweed jacket, bow tie, and gold-rimmed glasses—the standard uniform of the East coast cultural elite. And he spoke—in the accent of a Beltway Brahmin—with unbridled astonishment of the changes that have taken place at his alma mater, where the confederate flag was once proudly flown at football games, waving in the thick Mississippi air to the sound of "Dixie"—the school's de facto "fight" song. He remarked that for his son, who attends prep school in New England, race isn't much of an issue. The civil rights leaders who have greeted Obama's success with chilly apprehension are worried that a new generation of Americans will undermine the struggle for civil rights by prematurely declaring themselves, and their society, postracist. But for this Black alumnus of Ole Miss, a certain kind of postracism is the ripe fruit of the civil rights struggle.

American racism is in steady decline as aging White supremacists influenced by *Birth of a Nation* and Father Coughlin are replaced by a generation raised on *The Cosby Show* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Legally enforced segregation is a thing of the past: today the law prohibits race discrimination by government, employers, and

landlords. Elite employers and selective universities aggressively seek out minority race applicants in order to achieve racial integration. For well-educated Blacks, acculturated to the norms of the prosperous American mainstream, racism is rarely a serious impediment to success, esteem, and well-being. Yes, there are still the vexations caused by petty insults and slights, but for many Blacks the once ubiquitous iron law of White supremacy is now an occasional and petty hindrance; the once arrogant and terrifying bigot is little more than a pathetic annoyance; the menacing specter of Jim Crow has been reduced to an irritating gnat.

But many of America's cities are as racially divided as during the era of Jim Crow segregation: racial discrimination in employment and housing stubbornly persists, racial stereotypes are a staple of popular culture, and hardly a month goes by without a new race scandal to occupy the intensive, if fleeting, attention of the mass media. Racist cops, prejudiced employers, and bigoted landlords seem to have little trouble knowing against whom to discriminate. In these and many other respects, racism and race seem as blatant and implacable as ever.

Today's race relations are a good news/bad news stories. The good news: since the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, life has gotten much, much better for Blacks with the resources, skills, and socialization necessary to enter the American mainstream. Racism has consistently and steadily declined, and opportunities for well-educated Blacks have expanded even more quickly than a rapidly expanding economy. The bad news: things got much, much worse for those without such advantages. The exodus of the more successful Blacks left poor Blacks without economic capital and positive role models. A changing economy shed many of the once plentiful, well-paid, blue-collar jobs. The War on Poverty morphed into a war on the poor: social welfare programs yielded to a "tough love" that slashed benefits and pushed millions into homelessness and abjection, and a zero-tolerance approach to law enforcement led to the incarceration of unprecedented numbers of Black men.

Today "racism" does not describe a single attitude or phenomenon but rather a number of distinct and often unrelated social problems. The joblessness, isolation, and despair that afflicts poor Blacks in inner-city ghettos is different in kind—not simply in degree—from the subtle bigotry, ambiguous slights, and "soft" exclusion of which wealthier and professional Blacks complain.

The success of the more fortunate Blacks who live out the good news story does not suggest any improvement in the dire circumstances of the Blacks who must live out the bad news story, nor are the benefits of policy reforms designed to help the former group likely to trickle down to the latter group. The very idea of a Black community is an anachronism. Today there are, effectively, at least two Black communities: an increasingly prosperous and well-educated professional class and an increasingly isolated, poorly socialized, and demoralized underclass. These two Black communities are joined by a shared history but increasingly divided by lifestyle, values, norms of behavior, and life prospects.

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"Let me tell you something about niggers," begins an article published in the November 2006 issue of *Esquire*.

Always down. Always out. Always complaining that they can't catch a break. . . . Constantly in need of a leader but unable to follow in any direction that's navigated by hard work, self-reliance. And though they spliff and drink and

procreate their way onto welfare doles and WIC lines, niggers will tell you their state of being is no fault of their own (Ridley 2006).

“The Manifesto for the Ascendancy of the Modern American Nigger” was not a racist screed penned by a White supremacist, although it occasionally read like one. It was a tendentious, yet often nuanced polemic written by an African American writer and film producer, John Ridley. It relied on a distinction popularized by the comedian Chris Rock, between “niggers”—the down and out, impoverished, and culturally dysfunctional underclass—and those Blacks “who are undeniable in their individuality and exemplary in their levels of achievement” (Ridley 2006). Its prescription was a stark repudiation of the racial solidarity that has been a common theme of almost all serious Black social thought since Reconstruction.

It’s time for the ascended Blacks to wish niggers good luck. Just as whites may be concerned with the good of all citizens but don’t travel their days worrying specifically about the well being of hillbillies from Appalachia, we need to send niggers on their way (Ridley 2006).

This was a shocking inversion of W. E. B. Du Bois’s notion of the talented tenth. The talented tenth were the most successful Blacks who, by their efforts and by their example, were to improve the welfare of their race. As late as 1995, Harvard professors Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Cornel West cited the idea of a talented tenth, asking how they and their students could make good on Du Bois’s promise. But since then, some prominent members of the talented tenth have publicly gone on strike. Bill Cosby, civil rights activist and longtime goodwill ambassador between the races lamented at the Rainbow/Push Coalition annual conference in 2004:

People marched and were hit in the face with rocks to get an education and now . . . the lower economic people are not holding up their end of the deal. . . . They think they’re hip. They can’t read. They’re laughing and giggling, and they’re going nowhere (Cosby 2004).

Cosby struck back at Afrocentrists who celebrated Black cultural distinctiveness, making a pointed demand for assimilation: “With names like Shaniqua, Taliqua and Mohammed and all that crap, and all of them are in jail. . . . They’re standing on the corner and they can’t speak English” (Cosby 2004). He lambasted Black parents who failed to raise their children well and attacked the culture of ostentatious consumption so prominent in many poor Black neighborhoods: “These people are not parenting. They are buying things for the kid. Five-hundred-dollar sneakers. For what? And yet they won’t spend \$200 for Hooked on Phonics” (Cosby 2004).

“Giving back to the community” has long been a deeply felt obligation—and a loudly voiced admonishment—for successful Blacks. “Giving back” was not only a moral obligation but also a matter of self-preservation: successful Blacks owed their own comfort to the efforts of past generations. Courageous struggles against slavery, post-Reconstruction backlash, Jim Crow segregation, subtle but pervasive institutional racism had paved the way: *we all stand on the shoulders of giants*. And at the same time, White racism tied the fates of all Blacks together: the bourgeois Negro who thought he could ignore the plight of poor Blacks was a selfish fool—his position was more precarious than he knew, and the same racism that held his less fortunate brethren down would also bring him low soon enough.



But increasingly the racism suffered by more successful Blacks was different in kind—not just in degree—from the racism that plagued the underclass. And increasingly the responses to that racism also diverged. Middle-class Blacks worried about an increasingly subtle bias, which denied them professional networking opportunities, business contacts, and effective mentoring and inspired chilly receptions in predominantly White neighborhoods and social settings. But traditional civil rights agitation and legislation could not change such subtle and elusive attitudes: in fact, to the extent it reinforced the stereotype of the Black militant, civil rights activism might even have contributed to the problem. Middle-class Blacks hoped to change subtle bias with the technocratic tools of management science: sensitivity training and diversity consultants became almost as common a fixture in corporate and professional America as pinstripes and wing tips.

By contrast, the underclass had to contend with failing schools, violent crime, abusive law enforcement, and a pervasive ethos of nihilism, recklessness, and despair. Traditional civil rights legislation didn't address these problems either, so a new, increasingly angry, confrontational, and scandal-driven style of activism filled the gap. Watch-dog groups monitored police and were quick to condemn any hint of bias or abuse. Religious leaders, poverty service professionals, and civil rights lawyers adopted an attitude of permanent umbrage. Community leaders became adept at organizing mass demonstrations on short notice. Rage became not only acceptable but almost obligatory—occasionally erupting into uncontrolled and aimless violence.

This oppositional and often belligerent political stance has been a central part of Black identity since the civil rights and Black Power movements. But, for the significant cohort of Blacks who enjoyed the fruits of those movements, blatant White racism was less and less common. And their own successes suggested that racism was not simply more subtle but also less severe than in the past. Some began to wonder whether it was the menace of *racism* they shared with an increasingly dysfunctional and antisocial Black underclass, or simply *race*—and an outdated sense of solidarity. Against the harmony of civil rights solidarism—*there but for the grace of God go I*, a discordant refrain, voicing a kind of secessionist impulse—was the just barely audible *we need to send niggers on their way*.

Obama's mixed parentage and cosmopolitan upbringing led some to question his racial authenticity. But this debate was only a tempest in a teapot. The perfect storm that threatened racial solidarity was the split—in lifestyle and language, norms and neighborhoods—between successful American Blacks and the Black American underclass.

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In the 1970s, sociologist Nathan Glazer argued that the Black experience was best understood in comparison to the experiences of other distinctive ethnic groups in American society, such as the Irish, Italians, or Jews (Glazer 1975). Like Blacks, these groups were the targets of pervasive and invidious discrimination, and yet they eventually assimilated into the prosperous mainstream of American society and have now, by and large, shed the stigma they bore in the past. With the benefit of civil rights legislation, Blacks too would take their place in this nation of minorities, and the distinctive stigma of Black race—W. E. B. Du Bois's badge of insult—would fade to insignificance. Time has not been kind to this hypothesis: indeed some three decades later Glazer repudiated his own earlier position, admitting, "Even after taking account of substantial progress and change, it is borne upon us how continuous, rooted, and substantial the differences between African Americans and other Americans remain" (Glazer 1998, p. 24).

But to many, the election of Barack Obama suggests that Glazer's prediction of successful Black assimilation might have been not wrong, but simply premature. Obama's election signals a new type of racial consciousness among Americans—it suggests that Whites are beginning to make distinctions between those Blacks whom they associate with negative racial stereotypes and those whom they see, increasingly, as an ethnic group—people with slightly different accents, culinary styles, and traditions, but otherwise assimilated to mainstream norms of behavior. It's the difference between associating a Black face with gangbangers, crack addicts, and panhandlers and associating that face with jazz, soul food, and Kwanzaa.

The emphasis in the 1980s on multiculturalism may have sped this development. Multiculturalism emphasized the *cultural* difference between racial groups, implicitly, if unintentionally, analogizing racial difference with ethnic difference. Consider this example:

At least since the American civil rights movement, many people have become more aware of the harm suffered by ethnic and cultural minorities laboring under discriminatory practices or inequities. . . . The conditions of the American black and the American Indian, the Canadian Inuit, the New Zealand Maori, and the Australian Aborigine have been the subject of various administrative and legislative initiatives. And the political claims of the Basques in Spain, the French Canadians in Canada, and the Tamils in Sri Lanka have been gaining wider prominence (Kukathas 1992, p. 105).

The author implies that Blacks are analogously situated to Spanish Basques and Quebecois, groups distinguished not by race but rather by ethnicity. It's not a big leap from this analysis to Glazer's (1975), which analogized Blacks to Irish and Italian Americans. And the tendency to treat race as a type of cultural difference was also reinforced by the diversity idea of racial difference, ensconced by the Supreme Court as, practically speaking, the only legally acceptable rationale for affirmative action in higher education. Under the Supreme Court's diversity jurisprudence, racial minorities would provide a distinctive cultural perspective that would enhance classroom and extracurricular conversations in colleges and universities. This encouraged applicants to selective schools and the schools themselves to emphasize the cultural aspects of racial difference. Both multiculturalism and the diversity rationale for affirmative action reinforced the idea that racial difference was a kind of cultural or ethnic difference. So college students of all races received the message that race was primarily a matter of relatively innocuous cultural difference: among the elite, the racial badge of insult began to morph into a stylish ethnicity.

The promise of finally shedding the unique stigma of race—tantalizingly just out of reach for decades—underlies the disparate set of opinions, arguments, manifestos, screeds, and jeremiads that lament the continuing dysfunctional culture of the underclass and suggest that the underclass bear some of the blame for their own dire circumstances. The frustration of these successful Blacks isn't just a twenty-first-century iteration of the distaste and desire for social distance from poor Blacks exhibited by E. Franklin Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957). For Frazier's Black bourgeoisie, disdain for poor Blacks was born of insecurity and self-contempt: the Black bourgeoisie occupied a precarious social position that depended on the sufferance of Whites—poor Blacks threatened to undermine the delicate and meager esteem that the Black middle class clung to in their relations with White society. But the new generation of “ascended” Blacks weren't clinging to an only slightly and precariously improved second-class status. They were close to achieving meaningful social equal-

ity with Whites, and in some cases, they had in fact done so. And while Frazier's Black bourgeoisie were simply embarrassed by poor Blacks, who threatened to reinforce racial stereotypes and sully the bourgeoisie by association, Ridley's ascended Blacks no longer felt embarrassment so much as *betrayal*.

For example, in his Rainbow/PUSH coalition speech, Cosby complained that "the lower economic people *are not holding up their end of the deal*" (Cosby 2004; emphasis added). That deal was not only—or even primarily—between Blacks and Whites—it was a bond among Blacks, forged in the freedom summers: we will make our stand against a weakened but still powerful White supremacy together, and we will reach the promised land together. This pact underlay the long-standing admonishment that successful Blacks give back to their communities, both their time and resources, by a continued political solidarity (hence the widespread accusation of "sellout" or "Uncle Tom") and by serving as positive role models (which required both continued expressions of solidarity and exemplary behavior and achievement).

But some of the successful Blacks who had adhered to the terms of this implicit bargain (or had suffered the condemnation and contempt of their peers when they failed to do so) started to ask whether the weaker members of the community bore any corresponding obligations: *To whom much is given, much will be required*. But wasn't some effort required of everyone—even those to whom little was given? Cosby's notable expression of betrayal reflected the frustrations of a man who had dedicated his career to improving the image of Blacks and who had been remarkably successful in doing so. Yet for every Black child who aspired to the respectability and prestige of the college-educated and college-bound Huxtables, there seemed to be two or three who preferred the tawdry bling-bling of the gangster rapper and the momentary highs of drugs and promiscuous sex.

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Obama's cool style of politics, his political moderation, and his Ivy League affect all suggest a postracial politics. If Barack becomes the new Black, perhaps Whites will associate the Black race with the elite characteristics of Obama. But it's more likely that Whites will learn—as Obama's election proves that they are already learning—to distinguish between elite, Obama-like Blacks, whom they will treat like an American ethnic group, and the underclass, whom they will continue to treat as a despised and inferior race. It's plausible that more successful Blacks could eventually escape racial stigma, but only by breaking solidarity with the underclass—by *sending the niggers on their way*.

Obama has kept his own views on racial politics close to his belt; even his famous speech on race, delivered in response to the Jeremiah Wright scandal, was remarkable for its lack of specifics and for its ideological ambiguity. This reticence is understandable as a matter of political expediency, but it naturally fuels speculation and anxiety about what Obama's success will mean for race relations. Obama's visibility will undermine stereotypes and improve the public perception of Blacks. And this will be to the advantage of many Blacks—especially those who are well positioned to improve their social and economic status by moving into well-paid jobs and into better neighborhoods. But if it emphasizes the class distinction among Blacks, this latest improvement in race relations may come at the expense of precisely those Blacks who were least able to take advantage of the last great improvement in race relations: the civil rights reforms of the 1960s. It's hard to fault the more advantaged members of the Black community for trying to build on their successes, but it's also hard to think of this potential development as an unequivocal improvement in social

justice. In this context, the misgivings of such left-liberal Black politicians and activists as Andrew Young, Cornel West, Tavis Smiley, and Jesse Jackson are—while sometimes artlessly expressed—understandable. It's unclear whether the Obama phenomenon will mark the renewal of civil rights or the repudiation of its historical commitment to the most disadvantaged.

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