

“Obama’s Mixed Race Politics”

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“...According to the racial zodiac, 2000 is the official Year of the Mulatto. Pure breeds (at least the blacks ones) are out and hybridity is in. America loves us in all our half-caste glory”

Danzy Senna, “The Mulatto Millennium”

On the one hand, Barack Obama’s acceptance of the Democratic nomination to become the first black President on the anniversary of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream Speech” has been hailed as a defining moment for black people and politics. On the other hand, questions about whether race still matters, and whether Obama--in the spirit of Senna’s ironic “half caste glory”—is ushering in post-black politics, have only intensified following his nomination.

The New York Times (Feb 12, 2008) reported that some of Obama’s supporters chanted “Race Doesn’t Matter” at a rally earlier in the year. But to his credit, Obama has not so far used his mixed-race and cosmopolitan identity to argue that he is a post-race representative, a biological “bridge” who can--merely by virtue of his biraciality--heal racial divides, or an ambassador to a new world order where race as we know it no longer matters. All of these would be easy seductions. Rather, he always mobilizes his personal identity as both white and black, and as someone raised in multiethnic communities like Hawaii or Indonesia, to launch much wider public discussions about racial inequities and social injustice.

He does precisely this, for instance, in his March 18, 2008 speech, “A More Perfect Union,” at Philadelphia’s Constitutional Center, where he invokes his private relations with Reverend Wright as well as with his white grandmother in order to look more deeply and analytically at race beyond “spectacle,” as he puts it, which is what “we did in the OJ trial - or in the wake of tragedy, as we did in the aftermath of Katrina - or as fodder for the nightly news.” In that Philadelphia speech, he replaces these sensations with substance by examining the historical tensions and legacy between whites and blacks as, in part, a function of systemic socioeconomic imbalances that

have been most recently aggravated, he argues, by unchecked corporate self-interest. In this way, he takes a conversation about his biography, especially his racial identity or racial allegiances, and both widens and refocuses it to consider race's intersection with issues of class or privilege. And he often does so strategically in order to prompt cross-racial and ethnic alliances:

“This time we want to talk about the shuttered mills that once provided a decent life for men and women of every race, and the homes for sale that once belonged to Americans from every religion, every region, every walk of life. This time we want to talk about the fact that the real problem is not that someone who doesn't look like you might take your job; it's that the corporation you work for will ship it overseas for nothing more than a profit” (Obama, “A More Perfect Union”)

As suggested here, Obama recasts divisive debates associated with affirmative action so that job competition is not about interracial conflict but about corporate greed, greed requiring a multiracial coalition to combat.

In my opinion, through such moves, he productively moves past discussions of multiracial identity that focus predominantly on personal expression, demographics, or genetics. Rather, racial identities for him must always be understood within, and in relation to, evolving political and social contexts. For this reason, he refuses to go “beyond race,” though he is often characterized as transcending race. As Obama puts it directly in the Philadelphia speech, “race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now.”

His refusal of post-racialism was evident as at least as early as 2005. When the MAVIN Foundation, which identifies itself as “the nation’s largest mixed race advocacy organization,” sent five people in their twenties to travel the country raising awareness “of America’s mixed race baby boom” on a bus tour called Generation MIX, they met with Obama, in Washington D.C. at his offices (April 25th, 2005). It was “was really exciting because he’s mixed race,” one of the participants noted in the Foundation’s film documentary of the tour (“Chasing Daybreak”). One gets the clear sense from the documentary that Generation MIX hoped to find in Obama a representative who could serve as an advocate for mixed-race identity and concerns in the Senate. But in his meeting with the Generation MIX group, Obama soberly tells them:

Well you know, I don’t think that you can consider the issue of mixed race outside of the issue of race. And I do think that racial relations have improved somewhat, and I think to the extent that people of

mixed race can be part of those larger movements and those larger concerns then I think that they serve as a useful bridge between cultures. But, you know, what I am always cautious about is persons of mixed race focusing so narrowly on their own unique experiences that they are detached from larger struggles, and I think it's important to try to avoid that sense of exclusivity, and feeling that you're special in some way. I think you are maybe unique in your experiences and [that] may allow you to reach out to more people, but ultimately the same challenges that all of you face are the same challenges that a lot of young people face, which is how you can make an impact on the world that is positive.

The message hit home: in particular, one participant, Geetha Lakshminarayanan, took to heart his message that they need to “be careful not to separate ourselves,” and to understand the mixed race movement in the context of the civil rights agenda more broadly.

It is striking that in his Democratic Convention Acceptance Speech (August 28, 2008), he paid particular homage to his white mother and his white grandparents, and they figure large rhetorically and visually in the biographical film preceding his speech. He runs the risk of becoming the accommodating, genial, “Magic Negro” that David Ehrenstein describes in the *L.A. Times* (March 19, 2007), evoking his relation to what Stephen Carter calls the “paler nation” in order to reassure white people that he understands them, that his genetic hard-wiring is immune to the angry-black-man syndrome sometimes associated with his political forebearers.

But representing himself as a black man with a white family does not necessarily erase his own blackness nor his commitments to people of color. As one of my colleagues noticed, Obama does not mention the word “race” once in his Acceptance Speech, yet we agree that race is everywhere in that speech—whiteness conjured through his grandparents and mother, blackness evoked through religion, through references to “the preacher” (citing but not naming King) and through the Corinthians allusion to “fix our eye not on what is seen but what is unseen” (calling up both the Bible and James Baldwin’s 1985 racial-religious jeremiad, *Evidence of Things Unseen*, in one breath). Is this silencing race or transforming it? Is it an overly cautious or cynical refusal to say the R word to mollify whites, or a progressive attempt to recraft the discourses of race? Is this to make race less visible and harder to account for, or does it suggest that race is never a stand-alone category that has full explanatory force for the way the world is, as Obama likes to put it? His Acceptance Speech, I think, performs all these contradictions.

That said, I would not assume these are efforts on his part to transcend race or jettison blackness.

Why? Because, among other things, as his Indonesian-Caucasian sister, Maya Soetoro-Ng, noted in a January 20, 2008 *New York Times* piece, Obama identifies as black not because he is conscripted by the one-drop rule, but because he actively chooses it. He belongs to the black community not only because, historically, mixed people have always belonged, and because black has never been pure; he belongs also, his sister suggests, because of personal commitment and responsibility. The issue may appear moot since race is part choice, part social ascription, and Obama could not simply opt out of the race even if he woke up some morning and chose to. But it remains important that he does not bill himself as “mixed” or “other” even when it might appear political expedient or grant him some cultural glam. For the doubters, John Lewis’ speech prior to Obama’s clearly situated the nominee’s accomplishments within the fold of Civil Rights movement – perhaps a move to recuperate him as “one of our own” after the racial gate-keeping (“not black enough?”) earlier in the campaign. It both reveals and then reconciles the tension between Obama as racial outsider and insider, just as Obama himself begins his Acceptance Speech with the concession that he is an “unlikely” candidate with a curious name (Michelle Obama actually calls his name “weird” in her convention speech), only to remake himself into the Native Son, the representative American Adam.

These deft negotiations are not post-racial promises. It is important, for instance, that in his Acceptance Speech he makes clear that his parents’ interracial union did not represent racial progress nor that his biraciality was distinctive. He embraces his mixed race identity as one on the continuum of Blackness. In fact, he uses what he called the broken and “brief union” of his parents as the backdrop for, and implied contrast to, the stable nuclear black family that he has created with his wife, Michelle, and their two daughters, moving from his parents’ divorce to an African American family romance that positions him as Father Figure. Admittedly, Obama’s earlier controversial comments (“Father’s Day Speech,” June 15, 2008) about the need for black men to be more responsible parents plays into conservative discourses about family values, but we should also note that the contrasting image he creates in his Acceptance Speech of a black family norm works against the recurrent canard, popular since the 1965 Moynihan report, of the dysfunctional Black family and of amoral black sexuality. Of course it has always been a tricky high-wire act for black men to assert their manhood—historically whites feared that meant black men would not only assert their desire for civic and political enfranchisement but for white women. Obama’s asser-

tion of his manhood through black fatherhood is a savvy end-run around this dilemma: it allows him to counter stereotypes of black pathology and to assert a black masculinity without triggering the taboo of miscegenation. He may come from an interracial union, and he certainly advances a multiracial coalition to continue Civil Rights struggles, but his personal and domestic choices do not include love across the color-line. Not that Obama is against race mixing or hostile to mixed-race advocacy groups, but he is clearly most invested in broader black community interests and in cross- and intra-racial collaboration than in checking the Mark All That Apply (MATA) census option.

This is not to go beyond race; it is to take for granted the potent ways that race continues to matter, for both good and ill, in private lives and public spheres. Obama may often invoke and exploit the appeal of American exceptionalism and the melting pot mythology, but so far he has not used his mixed-race status to herald any kind of post-race salvation.