



**BLACK POWER, OBAMA AND RACE:
THE IDEA AND ETHICS OF BLACKNESS**

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It was again in that uplifting and life-altering historical moment and movement we call the Sixties that we, as a people, confronted the question of Blackness, its social meaning and historical mission and its ethical implications as a practice of liberation. In spite of oppressor-generated notions to the contrary, our concern and claim was not just about Blackness as an expression of beauty in body and soul, although this was important in light of the racist attempts to define us otherwise. It was also about defining Blackness so that it called for a cultural, ethical and political stance and practice radically opposed to the established order and deeply committed to liberation and a new future for Africans and humankind. Thus, with defiant dignity, outrageous self-determination and an exalting cultural and political consciousness, we reaffirmed our Africanness and our social justice tradition, the oldest in human history and central to our conception of ourselves and our work in the world.

We of the Black Power Movement, who were nationalists and pan-Africanists, raised up *African* as our formal and cultural name and *Black* as its colloquial counterpart and included in its definition the responsibility to resist and end oppression and bring justice and good in the world. Thus, if reports are right, Sen. Barack Obama and similar-minded Black politicians are wrong and misinformed about the mission and meaning of Black Power and politics. In a recent edition of a weekly news magazine, it was reported that Obama said "I think America is still caught in a little bit of a time warp: the narrative of Black politics is still shaped by the 60's and Black Power." He does not define Black Power, but continues, saying: "That's not, I think, how most Blacks and others are thinking."

They are, he tells us, thinking, along with Whites, about jobs, full gas tanks and college for their children.

Obama's conclusions are problematic for several reasons. First, he does not seem to realize that Black Power advocates also want and think about these things. Moreover, he has reductively translated both the aims of most Black people and all Black Power advocates as well as their conception of politics. And he does not claim in a similar manner that he and his fellow politicians are caught in a time warp because the narrative of U.S. politics is still shaped by the 1770's and White supremacy and power which enshrined itself as the established order in this period. So it is not a question of using ideas of the past as a foundation and framework for our current conceptions and practice of politics. It is rather a question of privileging things White and unthinkingly devaluing and denouncing things Black.

Black people not only think about material issues and acquisition, but also about issues of justice, about living lives of dignity and decency, about losing sons and daughters in unjust and unjustifiable war, about peace and the end of police violence and abuse, about resurgent racism, and about our heritage and history of struggle for African and human good. And yes, they seek power to determine their destiny and daily lives and to forge their future in good and expansive ways.

But we are told, taught and religiously reminded that denouncing and distancing oneself from Blackness is the price one pays for questionable success in the larger (read and remember White) society. There evolves, then, an old attempt at success thru racial self-concealment and self-effacement, currently called being "post Black." Thus,

one encounters such strange anomalies as a Black artist who puts on an annual national Black artist convention and claims there's no such thing as Black art and a Black curator in Harlem who defines her Black art exhibit as "post Black" art. They seem not to notice the contradiction of having an exhibition of an art which they claim does not exist and of benefiting from an identity and art that opens up space for them in the conservative and race-conscious White-controlled art world they would not otherwise occupy.

Although the category "post Black" is billed as the new way to approach Black art, politics and perhaps even life, it is not new at all. Stripped of its hastily assembled fig-leaf formulations, it is at best a new label for an *old liquor of illusion*, an attempt to escape from a degraded identity. And this ongoing attempt is as old as oppression itself and as new as the next art exhibit or political contest that raises it and cultivates a diversionary discourse away from the real issues of life and death, and the fact of White dominance over virtually every aspect of social life, including definitions of reality.

It is after all the dominant society that frames the self-mutilating discourse for Black people. There is no parallel conversation from other people of color to be "post-themselves" and no chance the Chinese will choose to denounce and deny their identity and history or the Japanese, having joined the G-8, will embrace discourse on post-Japanese Japan. And

clearly in the media, there is no discussion of post-White, either in its Jewish or Gentile forms. Only Blacks are urged, pressured and paid to denounce and distance themselves from their culture, social consciousness, and tradition of struggle that expanded the realm of freedom in this country and continues to serve as a model for oppressed, struggling and freedom-loving people throughout the world.

We are told that we are on the edge of a "sea of change" in Black politics and that at the heart of it is the new "trailblazers," dedicated to compromise and self-concealment and contemptuous or at least minimally concerned with the social justice tradition and struggles which opened space for them and the other marginalized and oppressed groups in the country. But they are not new or trailblazers, unless one thinks self-effacement, compromise or collaboration in the context of oppression is new or that being rewarded for ethnic and ethical amnesia with White praise but no power is a novelty. But regardless, the witness and weight of our history are there. And thus how can we stand at the crossroads of freedom and enslavement with Harriet Tubman and choose other than she did—i.e., to pursue and practice freedom in and for community and dare good in the world? After all, it is racially rumored that we all know how to dance and disguise ourselves. The real challenge is to bear the burden and glory of our history with the strength, dignity and determination it deserves.