



**HEALING AND HOPE WITH OBAMA:
NEGOTIATING RACE, RACISM AND RECONCILIATION**

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Some of us are sufficiently satisfied just to share space and special moments with them, to have them turn and tell us something nice, to smile at us without racial arrogance, paternalism, maternalism or studied meanness, and to have them concede our humanity and spend an afternoon with us doing tennis, herbal tea and small talk. And then there are those among us who want and demand only respect in personal encounters, justice in social exchange and an equitable sharing of societal wealth and power. We do not seek public office or White praise and, like Malcolm, we make a clear distinction between being responsible to our people and responsible to those in power. We know that often to be responsible to our people requires us to be *outrageously irresponsible* in the eyes of our oppressor. As we say in *Us*, it is a good thing to be criticized and condemned by the oppressor. For it raises and reinforces the ethical distinction and division between us and them.

It has been part of the burden and heaviness of our history, then, that we as an oppressed people have had to produce and at least partially support people among us who would see some measure of humanity in our oppressor and try to bring out that humanity and save them and us from the savagery masquerading for centuries as civilization. They have counseled them like King, empathized with them like Oprah, racially identified with them like Obama and reminded them like Langston Hughes and most of us that we, too, sing and celebrate America. And this, too, has been our burden and obligation: that some of us must be ever on the battleground for something better, fighting fiercely to hold onto hard-won gains and advance ever forward in the ongoing struggle for an expanded realm of human free-

dom and human flourishing in society and the world.

Everyone must concede Barack Obama's Philadelphia speech was historic in content and consequence if rightly read and approached. But it was not without its flaws and problematic character. He did what he could, working with what he had, in the context of the media-driven right-wing thrust to undercut his campaign for the presidency and in the process call into question the legitimacy, not just of Black liberation theology, but also of the Black church itself, as a historically community-and-culturally-based institution. The beneficial consequences of his speech depend on a real, long and hard look at the realities of White racial dominance and the rejection of any attempt to equate our oppression with the unease of those who carry it out, or support or benefit from it.

Furthermore, it's untrue and an un-called-for concession to Whites who might need it, to reductively portray Rev. Jeremiah Wright and his generation as trapped in the past with "memories of humiliation, doubt, fear, anger and bitterness." This is obviously bad and bogus history. For this is a generation which refused to be humbled, who did not doubt the rightness of their cause nor the victory of their struggle, whose rightful concern about White violence was counterbalanced by courage, whose anger was righteous, and whose moral and spiritual groundedness was a shield and shelter against the racist bitterness and bloody resistance to our struggle for freedom and justice from the other side. It is this generation that expanded the realm of human freedom and provided a moral vision, vocabulary and model of struggle that resounded and still resonates around the world. The memories of this gen-

eration are of Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Rosa Parks, Joseph Lowery, and Martin and Coretta Scott King, and of the reaffirmation of our social justice tradition and our Africanness and the commitment to struggle this represented.

Another problem here is that Obama talks about America, i.e., the U.S., as if it is a living self-existing being, granting blessings because of its loving and nurturing nature. But the U.S. did not give freely; our people fought to open up this space and to expand the realm of freedom and possibility in this country. And they did it, not because they engaged in self-blessing and self-congratulatory conversation about this country, but because they took it to task, courageously confronted it and dared to change it.

Also, Obama represents a tendency of those who believe a declaration of “newly” discovered disorders and damaged psyches among Black people is liberating or at least required to put Whites at ease. Thus, he says that the Black “church contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and shocking ignorance, the struggles and success, the love and yes the bitterness and bias that make up the Black experience in America.” This is at best awkward and uncalled for and would most likely not be a way his advisors would counsel him to speak of a Jewish synagogue or even a Catholic church. Mom Mabley’s “We do crimes too” is not appropriate here. And it certainly does not explain his relationship, as he claims with Rev. Wright, unless there’s some mystery in it we’ve missed.

Symptomatic of almost every liberal’s audacity to hope is an accompanying problem of denial of the continuing realities not simply of race, but more fundamentally of racism. Thus, Obama denies that racism is endemic to U.S. society, i.e., native and constantly present, and conflates race with racism. But contrary to popular belief and persistent hope, racism is here in raw and redressed form, brutally evident in the attenuated life chances and life conditions of peoples of color. And this rough *racist* reality in no way resembles the *racial* discomfort, insecurity and unease that Obama asks empathy for. Human empathy is one thing, claiming moral equivalence of oppression and unease and failing to deal with the difference is a whole ‘nother thing.

We clearly need a new vision of justice and democracy, one in which we are not what Malcolm calls “victims of democracy”, a racial arrangement in which “we, the people” are defined as White; justice is determined by wealth and power; and the future of our people depends on the patronage and petitioned kindness of White folks. No, this is not what Harriet Tubman lifted us out of enslavement for, what Frederick Douglass and Fannie Lou Hamer sacrificed so much for; nor for what Malcolm, Martin and millions more were martyred. Ours is a more expansive view of human freedom and human flourishing, and we cannot and must not accept anything less than that which our history and humanity demand of us.