



**THE RACIAL RELIABILITY OF OBAMA:  
AN UNWORTHY AND CONTRADICTIONARY CONVERSATION**

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There is an unworthy and contradictory conversation going on in a few unseemly places about the *racial reliability* of Barack Obama as an adequate representative of Black interests in the presidential process. This revolves around a test of racial wholeness not normally used. For we used to hold that Black blood was like the blood of Jesus; one drop makes you whole. The origins of this contrived issue are, on one level, suspect and at first appear as an attempt to cover up or justify support for favorite White candidates. After all, it seems odd, irrational and morally untenable to question racial representation by a mixed Black man, Obama, and holler hallelujahs for a completely White woman, Hillary Clinton; not to mention the contorted silliness and suspect naming of Bill Clinton as “soul brother” and John Edwards as “homeboy”. It also represents a dance of desperation by Black conservatives to appear concerned about a history they don’t really discuss and a people they constantly counsel to forget their concepts of race and the racial realities of oppression.

But this questioning also comes from a mistaken posing of a legitimate concern for support of issues and policies important to Black people. Clearly, we have the right and responsibility to be concerned about our interests being effectively and rightfully represented. But our criteria must not include unworthy and contradictory ideas of racial reliability based on questions of “pure” parentage and imagined experience, rather than on African ethical ideals of social justice and human good in the world. Other sources seem to be more out of unawareness and an insecure identity and rootedness in one’s

own culture and history. Indeed, we have always recognized mixtures, usually accepted a person’s self-definition as Black, and respected those who chose to be Black even when they could have passed.

These arguments about racial reliability revolve around several unsupportable and contradictory notions. First, there is a question about whether Obama’s being born in Hawaii and traveling around the world makes him less sensitive to Black heartland or mainland thinking, needs and aspirations. But Hawaii, like Wyoming, is a part of a racialized U.S., hardly exempt from racist practices and lessons from this. Also, African Americans in the military take their children around the country and world regularly and until now such a world experience was considered an asset rather than a liability.

Secondly, there is the question of whether Obama’s so-called lack of an enslaved past makes him different than other African Americans? But some of us are descendants of free and unenslaved Blacks and we’ve never raised any questions about their difference or ability to represent us. Moreover, having a direct or indirect relationship to the Holocaust of enslavement does not guarantee a sensitivity to this history, the ancestors who experienced it or the struggles we’ve waged to free ourselves from its horror and continuing legacy. After all, Clarence Thomas and Condi Rice could hardly be called representative of the social consciousness and social justice commitment such a history invites and encourages.

Also, any narrow notion of the Holocaust of enslavement or conquest of the Continent itself undermines our real link

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with our ancestral families and people in Africa whose historically enslaved relatives and descendants we are and who have suffered also in the global oppression Europe imposed on African people. Clearly, the African Holocaust of enslavement is a shared heritage and history of all African people. We easily understand and accept this about the Jewish Holocaust for Jewish people. We only become forgetful or confused when it comes to us.

Furthermore, it is said that if Whites embrace him, we should have a healthy concern about his sense of obligation to them and how this will affect his understanding of his relationship and obligation to his community and the social justice and human good issues they hold dear. Whites are said to like Obama for several reasons: because he doesn't hate or have a grievance against them or make them feel guilty for what they have done and do; and offers them a chance for redemption and recovery in the bloodied and offended eyes of the world. But one of the paralyzing aspects of Black politics is the continuous efforts to show care and concern for Whites and reassure them of our commitment to them and society.

Moreover, what Whites call grievances are actually our just demands which should have been met centuries ago in any society claiming liberty and justice for all. So, if there is any feeling of White guilt, it's self-inflicted and my sense is, if Oprah and a meaningful commitment to justice do not help them deal with their racial demons and dilemmas, there is little hope Obama will either. Our need is thus not to alienate Obama and turn him toward Whites as a savior from his own people, but embrace

him in his progressiveness and the promise this offers for us, society and the world.

Finally, the problematic conversation is reduced to questions about Obama's parentage and the political and moral nature of our concern about his candidacy and his commitment to social justice is lost. However, it is not Obama's parentage but his political views and practice that are critical. He has announced a commitment to diversity, but whom has he chosen as advisors and assistants in the highest places? And where does he stand on issues vital to us as a people, the country and the world: on poverty, civil rights, hunger, homelessness, health care; on the oppressed, vulnerable and struggling peoples of the world, especially the peoples of Africa, Haiti and Palestine; on war, global warming, education, immigration, employment, economic initiative, energy and urban renewal as distinct from urban removal of us in New Orleans and elsewhere? And where does he stand on privatization, the prison-industrial complex, prisoner's rights and the legal bloodletting called capital punishment?

There are signs Obama understands the ethical meaning of his mission, in both the campaign and the office. He has said that his thought and work are rooted in the African American spiritual and ethical tradition which calls on us to care for the vulnerable, support social change and continue the "historical struggles for freedom and the rights of man." But Obama cannot save us or salvage whatever is good and meaningful in this country by himself. This is the task of a rebuilt Movement, broad in its inclusiveness of peoples, deep in its commitment to social justice and human good, and actively committed to achieving and sustaining these.