



TRANSCENDING RACE WITH BARACK OBAMA: RED-NECKING WITH ARKANSAS BILL

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Just when the established-order media had declared the maturing of White America beyond race, and Tiger Woods had graciously forgiven a White woman acquaintance for an on-TV joke about lynching him; and just when one of us at Harvard had argued for allowing Whites to call us "N's" in a book-length exercise in acute and disabling denial; and when some of our other intellectuals, were imagining and hoping out loud for the White transcendence of race in real time, the Clintons' campaign has rudely reminded us "They not ready yet." But whatever the Clintons do, and it is widely believed they will do anything to win, it must be conceded that their approach appeals to way too many Whites.

It's all there in the deep structure of the White racial consciousness. There is the arrogance and outrageous claim to be the real makers of Black history. There is the sense of being owed deference and support from Blacks for an imagined generosity of crumbs and cracked doors for the middle class and legal restraint and coercive moral reform for the masses. There is also the unashamedly red-neck and red-face rancor and resentment for a Black man who thinks himself equal in humanity, superior in candidacy and of greater promise as a president than the packaged deal of "Bill and Hill-ary Inc."

And then there is the scene "worthy" of "Gone With the Wind," the White man out front and furious, defending the White woman's questionable honor from a Black man who had no intention or desire to harm her. But Ol' Arkansas Bill conjures up racial demons and calls in code on White men and women to save this weeping "damsel-in-distress" and the country from whatever

racialized horror or harm they begin to imagine. So much for the would-be "first White/Black president," a conceptual absurdity in itself, obviously anchored in a dysfunctional and superficial conception of Blackness and sustained only in the shared fantasies and fantasizing of some serious co-dependents.

We talk of post-racial and post-raciality, post-Black and post-Black Blackness and of the transcendence of race. And often such concepts are used as codes for denial and negation of community and peoplehood, a demand or desire for us to self-conceal or disappear as a people in order to be accepted, be equal and receive the benefits of "society". But such self-concealment and disappearance as a people is not demanded of Jew or gentile, German, Italian or any other Whites and in any case, is neither possible nor moral, for at its most extreme, it suggests cultural genocide.

It is said that White youth of today have transcended race, that they will vote for Obama, that they like hip hop, have less racial hang-ups than their parents and will reject the roles of dominance their parents leave them as a legacy. There is evidence that many have less prejudice and seem genuinely moved by Obama's call for hope, unity and cooperative building of a new society. But being less prejudiced and voting for Obama does not mean that they will rush to share wealth, power and privileged status in a just, transformative and transcendent way. Indeed, one source of Obama's appeal is that he asks and says nothing that will make them feel less than good about themselves, their parents and their people, while feeling restrained to discuss the hopes, aspirations and needs of his own.

But whatever happens in the election, Whites will still monopolize wealth and power in and out of government. And only by a radical restructuring of society can there be real equal access, opportunity and promise for all and the social and economic justice required for their realization. Anything else is a conscious or unconscious self-deception and self-masking in the midst of the intoxicating and uplifting message of hope and racial reconciliation without required struggle.

Another racial self-masking of White America is the posing of the current presidential campaign as one of race vs. gender, erasing racial reference to being White. But it's not really a choice of voting for an African American or a woman, but of voting for a Black man and a White woman. Thus, both Obama and Clinton bring race and gender, the one Black and male, the other White and female. And they are perceived and approached within the framework of the attributes and understandings a racialized and racist system has assigned them.

Thus, to talk about Clinton as simply a woman is to mask her other essential identity as a White person and the obvious benefits of being White and a White woman in a racialized system which privileges and advantages her. Even if she were not wealthy and powerful thru the presidential career and connections of her husband, she has a racial status which even Oprah, though a billionaire, can't claim, the fact of which a simple White store clerk stands ready to remind her. For it is thru race and racism that people are assigned human worth and

social status depending on how close to or distant from Whites they are. In the same way Hillary is privileged and empowered just by being White, Obama is restricted and rendered less powerful by being Black in a racialized White-dominated society.

In the final analysis, then, it appears that it's not simply race that needs to be transcended; but rather racism. For to destroy racism is to eliminate not only the category, but all the illusions, lies, hatreds, and atrocities inspired by race, justified by immoral and irrational racial reasoning and perpetuated by institutional and social practices of racial discrimination, domination and even decimation. Attempts to define away our oppression and unequal wealth, power and status with new terms and talk about the end of race or of us in order to escape the penalty of being Black in a racialized and racist society do not work well for the sane or the sober.

However, if we put aside illusions and accept that what we long for, we must struggle for, then we are ready to dare the struggle necessary to create the just and good multicultural society we all want and deserve. This is a major historical moment in this unfinished ongoing multicultural project we call America which promises to open up new horizons of possibilities of repairing and transforming this society and the world. But we cannot forge a new future ignoring current and continuing injustice and indulging in empty claims and soothing calls that make the promised future no more than a replay of the past under a new and nice sounding name.