



**AN AMBIVALENT EMBRACE OF OBAMA:  
THE MATURITY OR MASKING OF AMERICA**

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It is a fundamental lesson of our history, witnessed and inscribed in the hard-rock reality of our daily lives and enduring struggle, that there is no easy walk or way to freedom, no shortcut or quick jump to justice or empowerment of the people and no untroubled and trial-free path to an enduring peace in the world. Every inch of ground gained and every achievement worthy of the name requires serious and sustained struggle. Indeed, Frederick Douglass forever reminds us “Without struggle, there is no progress.” Thus, as we dare the awesome task of repairing and remaking society and the world, we must also remember Amilcar Cabral’s advice to “mask no difficulties, tell no lies and claim no easy victory.”

And so, when we see Barack Obama embraced and voted frontrunner in Iowa, we must not misread the signs or see signs where there is none. Even the most cynical among us can see that Obama speaks to the masses of people needing and longing for another way to understand and assert themselves in the world. They yearn to move away from the Bush-men’s fear peddling and people-hate, their war-mongering and wanton waste of lives and futures, and their polar-cold contempt for the rightful concerns of the masses of people of this country and the world. Certainly, the people would rather send their sons and daughters to college than to die an undeserved death in an unjust and illegal war. They are tired of the crass con-games of Karl Rove, the cultivating of paranoia posing as patriotism of Dick Cheney and the readiness of the crazed right to blow up the world in the name of an imagined superior race, racialized religion or some other illusion on which they self-medicate and sell to others. And Obama lifts the people up; talks hope, healing, unity and change, and offers a chance for everyone to

come together on common ground and to act together for the common good.

But there are signs that all is not as it seems here. First, the claims of the maturing of America is code for the maturing of White America thru its media-claimed move beyond racist and racialized thought and practice to endorse a Black man as frontrunner in a 95% White and small state called Iowa. Surely, the problems of centuries of racial injustice and oppression are not solved even by the election of a Black president of the country let alone by the political endorsement of a small Midwestern state. The question remains what will they do in the long run and when they don’t vote by raising their hands as in Iowa but vote in secret and serious remembrance of race and class in states still to speak?

Perhaps, the White support for Obama is softer and more ambivalent than we want to believe and depends for many on his temporary use as a sellable symbol of racial reconciliation without resolution thru struggle; an undeniable asset in party-building, bringing in new voters and those once alienated; and for providing a mask and moral message of change from an African American known for compromise and seeking consensus.

Secondly, one cannot claim political or moral maturity on the issue of race if Obama is compelled to practice ethnic self-concealment as an African American. Much has been made of his being a “Kansas Kenyan”, which is seen as a mixed and “global identity”, free of the “urban identity” that suggests anger, indictment and social justice claims. But this makes as much sense as finding relief and some confused and convenient meaning in Colin Powell’s being a “New York Jamaican”, instead of an African American shaped, like Obama and other mixed race and nationality Blacks, in the

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crucible of life and struggle in America. And what justice or principled unity is there, if we, as Africans, have to come to the table of common ground naked and in need of White approval rather than fully clothed in the concerns and identity of our own cultural community, not needing permission or sanction from anyone?

Thirdly, when Obama talks of change it must be more than one president and administration replacing another. It must be structural, systemic not simple surface change? This means change in the unegalitarian distribution of wealth and power in this country which are overwhelmingly in White hands and this requires a movement not just an election. Moreover, if we declare the need and desire for real change, we must prefigure in our current practice the future we wish to forge and bring into being. Thus, if he values multicultural and multiracial cooperation for common good, Obama must have more than Whites around him as major advisors and they must be seen and known, recognized and respected. Surely, there are Native Americans, Africans, Latinos, and Asians, conscious, capable and committed enough to merit position and power now. Without such a prefiguring of the future, the message is clear that our identities of color are disadvantageous; Whiteness is normal and thus the solution for us is self-concealment and pathetic dependence on White approval and patronage.

Moreover, Obama, if he is to be at his best, must be allowed to reaffirm his rootedness in the African American social justice tradition in which he is grounded and grew. It is a tradition which is defined not only by an ethical insistence on shared good in the world, but also by a commitment to relentless struggle to achieve and sustain it. Indeed, it is this social justice tradition and the Movement it generated to expand the realm of freedom in this country that offers Obama his most important lessons.

Among these are the lessons that for fundamental change in this country, there must be a progressive multicultural movement that struggles for it beyond electoral politics and the self-masking that elections encourage; that an expansive vision and program that address the critical issues of our time and world are indispensable; and that we must move beyond the conception of America as a White finished product and understand and approach it as what it is, an ongoing unfinished multicultural project. Within this project, each people has both the right and responsibility to speak their own special cultural truth and make their own unique contribution to how this society is reconceived and reconstructed. Anything less is a dangerous self-deception which will, in New Hampshire, New York or some other states retrogress to or simply reveal a racist Jekyll and Hyde hypocrisy of quoting the Constitution in daylight and whistling Dixie in the dark.

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