



**DEBATING DOWNWARD:
TOO-COOL BARACK AND JUST-NOT-WITH-IT JOHN**

Los Angeles Sentinel, 10-02-08, p. A-7

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

They came to debate in the midst of the country's and economy's descent into depression or something precariously similar, a slow or quick road to ruin rooted in the chickens-coming-home-to-roost consequences of unregulated and unrestrained corporate corruption and greed, a trillion-dollar war, unjust and unjustifiable, and long-standing capitalist practices of privatizing social wealth, subsidizing corporate ventures and socializing corporate debt.

And so there was Barack Obama, standing tall and too cool, giving clear, cogent and confident answers and on the other side John McCain tense and cantankerous, exuding that wooden and "White is back" look, wallowing in war talk, pretending a vision he doesn't have and promising a victory he can never achieve. He even refused to look at Obama, his superior opponent, sending a White Moose Lodge racial message to all those still looking in high and low places for racially satisfying scenes from "Gone With the Wind" or even "The Green Mile".

But lo and behold, it's a new day, the plantations have been burned or transformed into homes, hotels, hostels or tourist attractions; the people have left on the road to freedom; and the faithful retainer in his original form has been killed or otherwise silenced by the very people he served. For he saw impermissible things, and prophesied deliverance of the oppressed, divine damnation on the oppressor, and a new way for humans to relate and share in the world. And he had not even heard of Mr. Muhammad or Min. Malcolm nor studied liberation theology or visited that minister

and church in Chicago some say we must not mention until the election is over. But the names of Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright and Trinity United Church of Christ deserve to be raised and praised and will last and have meaning long beyond the election. For they are an inerasable and undeniable important source of this turning point of history that we as a people have brought into being thru long, hard and relentless struggle.

But there was also a racial protocol aspect to Obama's unwillingness to deliver the knockout blow everyone was waiting for. No doubt it has to do with his temperament and the lessons he recorded in his book about not threatening and scarring White folks. He recognizes their tentative and ambivalent embrace, their phobias about the angry, assertive, confident or capable Black man and their obvious and ongoing search for an alternative in the Reagan-reborn-ranger and the would-be wonder woman unraveling "across from Russia" as I write. Obama showed himself over-restrained by this unspoken racial protocol imposed on him. But if he is to win, he cannot again find himself repeatedly telling McCain he's right when McCain is indicting him as naïve and lacking understanding when obviously the opposite is true. And he must not bend over backwards or forward to show White folks he's not going to "go ghetto", make the White House too Black or fail to make them feel they're still his champion and in charge.

Let's face it, there is, as we all know, no comparison between Obama and McCain, only serious contrast. And if Obama loses, it won't be because he is not the best candidate by far, but because the

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White rulers and people of this country, who call on him to regularly declare his love and loyalty to it are not racially ready for Black excellence in places other than on the sports field, in entertainment or grateful service to them. So the lesson here is that Obama must fight for the space he wishes to occupy, for White America will not let him intellectualize or negotiate in niceness his way in the White House.

It is up to us and those of similar aspirations to ensure Obama wins, so that we can get beyond this early-man attitude about race and social and human reality and begin to build the good world we all want and deserve. But even if Obama wins and he should, it will not solve all of our problems or automatically mean the change we need will come in this country and the world. Indeed, in areas of equality and equal opportunity in this country and in certain areas of the world like Haiti and Palestine, it could complicate and further problematize the struggle for liberation. For as Obama himself has said, it's not about him, but about us and all the people of this country who want another way to live and relate in this country and the world. It's about us, making a decision to be free and self-determining in the fullest most expansive sense of the word and being willing to struggle to make it so. And here the lessons of history are clear and unmistakable.

This means his continuing the campaign and going into the debates with an attitude and will to struggle. It means his recognizing and addressing effectively the minds of the persons to whom McCain

appeals, especially those to whom intellect is seen as arrogance, thoughtfulness as dullness, and deference as timidity. Also, it means standing ready for the attack on the low level that's bound to come. And above all, it means that we who think critically and care deeply about life more than elections, and who know the inherent power and potential of an organized, aware and engaged people, must build a movement for serious and sustained social change.

Let me say here, I stand in the harsh winds of history with Frederick Douglass; so I don't barbecue on the Fourth, wear or wave flags, whistle Dixie, defer to White supremacist fantasies, praise or pretend a perfect union that never was, hope for a harvest of fruit or freedom without hard work and struggle to bring it into being, or wish for an ocean of possibilities without the radical roar and awesome waves of resistance the masses of people make to create the good world we all want and deserve to live in. And I stand at the crossroads of history with Harriet Tubman, knowing that "freedom ain' free", that it is not about individual escape or comfort in oppression, and that once we have decided to be free we can't half-step, stop half-way, turn around or run away from the heavy ethical responsibility placed on us by history and heaven. And that is to honor our divine nature to be free and flourish and together with others of like mind and heart and corresponding practice, create and share the good world we all must want, work and struggle for.

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