

## Mr. Obama and All Our Racial Sins Forgiven

When a child, I frequently heard from my mother and other black adults around me that in order to succeed in life at something beyond mere menial work I would have to be very good at what I wanted to do, extraordinarily good, impossibly good. “You know you have to be twice as good to get half as far as a white man,” I was told and I saw no reason at that stage in my life to question this, although I hardly understood it. The generation that taught me this had, after all, seen a certain type of public black excellence in the figures of people like boxer Joe Louis, or baseball player Jackie Robinson, or actor/singer Paul Robeson, or track star Jesse Owens, or jazz performers like Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, men who they felt would have been even more acclaimed and celebrated had they been white. And of course there were the countless personal stories of superior but anonymous blacks on the job site—whether at a department store or a library or in the military—who were passed over for promotion because of race, suffering the indignity of seeing a clearly inferior white take a position that the white did not merit. Ahh, merit, that magical word. This generation, my parents’ generation, these were the black folk who believed in merit, who believed that if blacks were only given a chance they would prove themselves not only equal to whites but frequently better. “That’s why they don’t want to give us a chance, because they know we can beat them if the game is fair.” So, the aim was to make the game fair. I grew up with this sort of race pride. Never let a white person beat you at anything, if you can humanly help it. And I grew up with a sort of race cynicism. You can never beat a white person no matter how good you are because white folks have rigged the game. This I heard during the days of the civil rights movement, a reform movement at loggerheads with itself on this very point, the hope of making the game fair (the American way) and the expectation that the game would never be fair (the white American way). I was taught this understanding of life, to hold these contradictions in balance, is what black heroism is.

My friend Stanley Crouch tells me that one of the greatest affliction that blacks suffer from is a love and acceptance of mediocrity. We have no standards worthy of the name; our sense of excellence is only superficial. He would remind me of the number of black award ceremonies I (or most blacks) have attended over the years where the achievements that would be celebrated were not especially impressive but, well, seemed pretty good for a black person, someone graduated from high school and won a modest scholarship, this sort of thing. Sometimes what was being celebrated, in fact, seemed downright ordinary, something that a reasonably capable person should be able to do. It is common knowledge among African Americans that we complain loudly about the mediocrity of the group, have a long history of this, how we can never do anything right or achieve anything noteworthy, how the only things we seem to be good at are sports and music, how we generally do not compete well against whites in anything intellectual. “We accept levels of performances from our intellectuals, from our students, from many sectors of our cultural and civic life that are inferior,” Stanley told me in a phone conversation. He told me further that whites aid and abet this cult of mediocrity, indeed, they fund it. “When a white person tells you you’re good or great, you have no idea what that means,” said another friend who shall remain nameless, “Whether it’s patronizing or

sincere. You wonder if you had the same accomplishments as a white would these people be clamoring about how great you are.” I think the broad self-consciousness among African Americans about their sense of mediocrity has intensified since the advent of Affirmative Action, which has brought two old issues to light in new ways: 1) black people’s ability to compete against whites and their general competence as a people (Affirmative Action is, in one measure, a public policy controlled by whites that generally permits blacks to compete only against each other or only in a limited, compensatory way against whites); 2) the nature of merit as a social construction of seemingly objectively measured competence and the idea of some sort of normative black community as a emblem of civic virtue. (I cannot count the number of times that African Americans have spoken of the wonders of their urban neighborhoods back in the days of segregation when we had our own businesses, our own newspapers, our own colleges, our own civic structure. But segregation was not the glory days; they were as hard for black life as any others that have come since, indeed, harder in most instances.) Perhaps merit is nothing more than an ingenious way to hide a system of class patronage. Integration is hard, as I think most African Americans have discovered, and no one is sure what it is all supposed to mean for people to live in a society as equals when equality is the last thing most people want. Everybody wants to be better than his neighbor, not merely as good as. And here is another contradiction: what a black person may want for himself or herself and what he or she may feel obligated to want for the group as an expression of solidarity. What is good for me is not necessarily good for thee.

This combination of paranoia, anger, disappointment, and this sense of inferiority that afflicts blacks should hardly be surprising considering that African Americans have endured such virulent persecution and stigmatization. On the other hand, this same persecution and stigmatization has produced a sense of defiance, moment of tremendous courage, and an enormous, if sometimes highly sensitive, pride. So our nation, finally, has always been caught between yes and no, between being charmed and captivated by black achievement—from poet Phyllis Wheatley to television star Oprah Winfrey—and utterly dismayed or disgusted by black failure as a sign of dysfunction on somebody’s part. And it is between this yes and no that white guilt is expressed and manipulated (by both blacks and whites themselves) and white innocence is asserted and preserved. (And I am always bewildered by white people who come up to me and say, “What can I do as a white person to help race relations?” I usually want to respond by saying, “How the heck should I know? I’m not white. And don’t be so damn condescending and self-pitying as to ask me such a question!”) In the realm of either achievement or failure, blacks remain the exceptional people.

And it is into this heady brew of a social cocktail that democratic candidate Barack Obama has emerged. What does black exceptionalism mean and what does it mean for a black person to achieve anything noteworthy? What would it mean if he fails to become president? Perhaps 2008 shall be the year of the political apotheosis of the exceptional Negro, which clearly Mr. Obama is.

It is not unreasonable to imagine that some other white politicians in the Democratic Party might be doing as well as Hillary Clinton is in quest of the nomination: perhaps

Diane Feinstein or John Kerry or, almost assuredly, Al Gore, who would probably be doing better. So, Mrs. Clinton is clearly a good, disciplined, capable politician but not an exceptional one. But as Abigail Thernstrom has pointed out, there is no black politician in either party who would be doing remotely as well as Mr. Obama, probably not even Colin Powell, the one black person reasonably thought of as having a reasonable chance to achieve the presidency. In this sense, Mr. Obama is exceptional. He is a perfect storm of great qualities: movie star looks, golden tonsils, a biracial background (with an African father, no less), a childhood abroad (this makes him less provincial than the average American in this age of our global obsession), a good-looking, educated black wife (black women would not be nearly so enamored of him if his wife were white), a product of an integrated age of multiculturalism, a black person with a high-toned education. It hardly matters that he has achieved little as an elected official (Mrs. Clinton hasn't either), we are entranced with his autobiography, not his policy positions or his experience. He is the new, our future of post-racialism and post-partisanship and our past through the evocation of John F. Kennedy, the last president we had who seemed to make a significant portion of the public swoon. Mr. Obama is an ingenious combination of the brilliant and the mediocre. He is lovely symbolic way to make a historically unwanted, troublesome people positively vibrate for the majority with delightful inclusivity.

But it is his exceptionalism in the end that is troubling because it is a fact that no other black politician, who looked more ordinary and had a less romantic background, would stand a chance of being chosen by the Democratic Party to run for president. He is, as I have called him frequently, the Sidney Poitier of American politics, the incredibly good, nice-talking, handsome black man, the black man who makes whites feel supremely good around him because he does not remind them about the "problems" of being black, the black man who brings white and black together. So many whites have said that this is why they are voting for him, because he can bring people together. (So far, he hasn't even brought his party together but he may in the end. Let us hope for his sake.)

*Washington Post* columnist Robert Samuelson wondered if this was a good enough reason to vote for someone, were we even being rational in thinking that all of our problems collapse into the one problem of the racial divide, that he who supposedly conquers the racial divide conquers all. And should we imagine that some black hero, looking as if he came straight from central casting in Hollywood, will absolve us of our racial past simply because he says voting for me is tantamount to doing just that. It seems too romantic for its own good. And a little bit too easy. Is it racist to even have these expectations of a black candidate as no one would think of having them for a white one?

In the March 29-30 issue of *London Financial Times*, Rock artist Patti Smith explains her support of Mr. Obama in this way: "I think it would be a nice thing for the world if Obama became president. It's very difficult to be honest in politics but someone who has at least not sold their soul completely should get elected. And I think Obama's hands are relatively clean." Can you only partly sell your soul to the devil? Is this like Pudd'nhead Wilson's observation about owning half of an invisible dog so he could kill his half? Can you sell-out somewhat but not entirely? Can you be "slightly scarlet"? Or is this a pass we offer to black candidates like Mr. Obama who seem to generate an air of unreality

about them. Well, the devil has half of my invisible soul but the rest belongs to Jesus. That may be the best any of us can hope for. You can be bought by some big money interests as Mr. Obama apparently has but, after all, not as many as Mrs. Clinton who is, in the morality play of the Democratic nomination process, the devil incarnate, King Arthur's power-mad sister, the destroyer of Camelot. (It clearly isn't as bad in our world of racialized ethics for Mr. Obama to remind black voters that Mrs. Clinton is white as it is for her to remind white voters that she is white, which is why, I guess, he is only half bad for being the bruiser that he is, hidden as it is by his race and his profession of reformism.) Hmm, I guess Mr. Obama's relatively clean hands can still cleanse us of our racial sins and make the United States the vanguard country again because we have had the vision to elect a black man, for noble reasons, if not entirely for realistic ones. But race has always been a form of fantasy and delusion that has afflicted our nation for a long time, a strange bubble of cruel unreality. We have been killing half an invisible dog since the beginning of the republic.