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Conclusion: A Paradigm Shift in Fits and Starts

In the introduction to *Dreams from My Father*, Barack Obama recalls that he was given the opportunity to write his memoir based on the publicity that he received after he became the first black president of the *Harvard Law Review*. Obama recognized that the larger reasons for the invitation had more to do with, as he explained, “America’s hunger for any optimistic sign from the racial front, a morsel of proof that, after all, some progress has been made” (*Dreams* viii). Obama is right: There is nothing that Americans love more than a happy ending—the more improbable, the more unlikely, the more far-fetched, the better. As American novelist William Dean Howells once said, “what the American public always wants is a tragedy with a happy ending” (qtd. in Gurganus, epigraph).¹

For African Americans, there has been no shortage of tragedy. These tragedies originated in the long history of enslavement; the broken promises of Reconstruction; the personal, political, economic, and social violence of the Jim Crow regime—typified by daily indignities; limited opportunities; and most terrifying, images of the lifeless, lynched black bodies, set against the proud and unashamed faces of murderers and reveling crowds. More recently, the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina and the federal government’s slow, stumbling, and indifferent response; the vast inequalities in education and income; and the skyrocketing rates of incarceration of African American and Latino men, have offered stark reminders of just how deep our racial wounds are and just how harrowing our tragedies continue to be.

For these reasons, it is logical that there was an impulse, a desire, and a powerful yearning to believe that Barack Obama’s historic elec-

¹ Howells tried to console a young Edith Wharton with this statement after *The House of Mirth* failed as a play.

tion signaled a paradigm shift and a meaningful redemption. Perhaps Dr. Martin Luther King's dream had, at long last, been realized; perhaps America had finally provided sufficient funds to cash the "bad check" that African Americans had been saddled with for centuries. According to a CNN poll, before Obama's election in 2008, only a third of the country believed that the aspirations specified in King's "I Have a Dream Speech" had been achieved. After the election, that number rose dramatically to 49 percent ("CNN Poll"). Perhaps Obama's election was, as Henry Louis Gates wrote, "a magical transformative moment... the symbolic culmination of the black freedom struggle, the grand achievement of a great collective dream" (qtd. in Sugrue 12). Perhaps the encouraging reports that white voters willingly crossed the racial divide to vote for Obama resulted in Gallup poll findings that more than two-thirds of Americans perceived Obama's election as "either the most important advance for blacks in the past 100 years, or among the two or three most important such advances" (qtd. in Sugrue 12).

Barack Obama's biography reverberates with hope, promise, and the theme of American exceptionalism. When Obama, a candidate for the US Senate from Illinois, shared his story before cheering crowds at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, he connected his family history to broad American themes, to an indebtedness to the achievements of civil rights activism, and to the possibilities offered exclusively in the United States: "I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible" ("Transcript"). Obama transformed his story into "our story," as historian Thomas Sugrue has written (55). To create "our story," Obama appealed to common values, shared understandings, and a sense of collective purpose. Exemplifying these themes in the 2004 speech, Obama expounded on his vision of national unity with his oft-repeated observation: "There's not a liberal America and a conservative America; there's the United States of America. There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America" ("Transcript").

Even as a community organizer in Chicago nine years earlier in 1995, Obama had scolded those who "believe that the country is too racially polarized to build the kind of multiracial coalitions necessary to bring about massive economic change" (Sugrue 79). And in his blue-

print for the 2008 campaign, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, Obama argued that “an emphasis on universal, as opposed to race-specific, programs isn’t just good policy; it’s also good politics” (247). He was clear, however, to disabuse those who believed that his success symbolized the arrival of a “postracial politics”: “To say that we are one people is not to suggest that race no longer matters—that the fight for equality has been won...” (232).

In his address in Philadelphia in March 2008, after the explosion of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright controversy, Obama, once again, relied on the language of opportunity and possibility. Obama spoke candidly about the historical reasons for racial resentment among both blacks and whites, but he optimistically reminded his audience of the inexorable march of American progress:

What’s remarkable is not how many failed in the face of discrimination, but rather how many men and women overcame the odds, how many were able to make a way out of no way for those like me who would come after them. (“Race Speech”)

Obama’s message underscored his belief in the inevitability of Americans moving “toward a more perfect union”; a national mission that could heal the nation’s deepest divides and mend the past’s painful wounds.

But these images of progress and momentum are rendered problematic by stark racial disparities in education, wealth, and income, and complex structural inequalities in housing and employment. Perhaps the most incorrigible inequalities are found in housing and education. Between 1920 and 1990, housing segregation hardened in the United States even as white attitudes began to soften about the presence of black neighbors; this process continued apace after the passage of local and state antidiscrimination laws and the enactment of Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act in 1968, which prohibited housing discrimination nationwide (Sugrue 101). Sugrue writes that there have been some hopeful signs in the late twentieth century of racial integration around military bases, college towns, and the new exurbs in areas of the Sun Belt. Locales with the most promise have had little or no previous history of racial antagonism, nor did they have metropolitan or regional governments that allowed whites to cross municipal boundaries for towns with better schools and public services. Racial segregation rates

have remained especially high in the Northeast and the Midwest, reflecting the historical impact of discriminatory patterns that began in the early twentieth century and which were perpetuated by the Federal Housing Administration's inequitable policies of limiting federally supported mortgages to racially homogeneous neighborhoods.

This long history of housing discrimination has severely restricted African Americans who are house hunting or shopping for home loans. As sociologists Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton have found, these problems persist regardless of class position; middle-class or upper-middle class blacks are no more likely to live near whites. According to Massey and Denton, "Even if black incomes had continued to rise through the 1970s, segregation would not have declined: no matter how much blacks earned, they remained spatially separated from whites" (qtd. in Sugrue 104).

Educational inequities are equally dispiriting. A stark achievement gap exists between white students and students of color, and many metropolitan-wide school desegregation plans have been overturned or rolled back by federal courts since the 1990s. Recently, in 2007, in the *Parents Involved* case, the conservative majority on the Supreme Court declared voluntary school desegregation programs unconstitutional in Louisville, Kentucky, and Seattle, Washington. Majority-minority schools are often underfunded in comparison to those in majority-white districts. These schools must weather higher teacher turnover and they are more likely to have antiquated facilities and outdated classroom materials (Sugrue 101–03). Without question, we have a long way to go before we enter a "post-racial age." Instead, these manifest social and economic polarities challenge us to take account of the stubborn realities and the jarring racial conditions in twenty-first century America.

The election of Barack Obama does not represent an unmistakable paradigm shift or a happy ending. But many Americans did breathe a heartening sigh of relief as they watched Barack and Michelle Obama dance to Beyonce's soulful rendition of Etta James' classic "At Last," at the Neighborhood Ball on the night of the inauguration (Griffith 131–32). We can acknowledge that Obama's presidency does indeed represent something undeniably and unmistakably different.

There is no question that race remains a divisive and thorny issue in both the United States and Germany. Perhaps, then, a more appropriate description of the current historical moment is to consider Obama's

election as part of a paradigm shift that is occurring in fits and starts, or to borrow the words of historian Waldo Martin, a moment of “renewed hope and persistent frustration” (Martin 72). Accounting for the ambiguities and the complexities in the meanings of Obama’s election enables us to have a clearer angle of vision on the actual outcomes of the election and preempts us from making incorrect pronouncements that forms of institutional racism are on the decline, and, even more wrong-headed, that American society has entered a “post-racial age.”

By no means does racial progress follow a linear path. There are the contradictions, the disheartening and depressing statistics, the vitriolic attacks and extremism, and the moments when we will struggle to comprehend and to confront the troubling loss of civility in our political world and in our contemporary public life. Obama’s Inaugural Address called for “an end to petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn-out dogmas that for far too long have strangled our politics” (Lizza 36). But, instead, we have seen the frightening rise of exactly this kind of divisiveness. The scores of contemptuous attacks—Joe Wilson, the Republican congressman from South Carolina, yelling out “You lie!” during Obama’s health care speech in September 2009; the acerbic words of Jan Brewer, the Republican governor of Arizona, and the disrespectful wagging of her finger in Obama’s face on a Phoenix tarmac; the lingering doubts that Obama is a Christian and not a Muslim; and perhaps most troubling of all, the assumption that Obama inherently lacks American values. Taken to the extreme, this has become the ideology of the “Birthers,” a fringe group that zealously believes that Obama is not a natural-born American citizen, making him ineligible for the presidency. Tea Party invective that Obama has a “deep-seated hatred for white people or the white culture,” and vehement calls to “take the country back” and “return the American government to the American people,” leave the impression that the United States has been seized by an alien power. According to these fanatical groups, Obama is a dangerous outsider who is so foreign and un-American that a terrible error, indeed, a crime must have been committed for this stranger to have been sworn in as President of the United States.

Some historians will argue that this is nothing new. Indeed, politics has always been an ugly business. James Callendar’s attacks on Thomas Jefferson during the election of 1800—especially his accusations that

Jefferson had fathered children by his slave, Sally Hemings—would make Karl Rove blush. Charles Sumner, the abolitionist, champion of black civil rights, and Republican senator from Massachusetts, slumped in his chair after he was caned mercilessly and nearly died at the hands of South Carolina senator Preston Brooks in 1856 as the nation lurched toward the Civil War. Sumner returned to the Senate on the eve of the War, after three years of medical treatment.

Some white voters may have difficulty believing that Obama's race-neutral measures are in fact just that. Conservative commentators including Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck repeatedly refer to Obama's policy proposals as "reparations," and Republican presidential candidate Newt Gingrich has labeled Obama the "food stamps President" (Smith et al. 131). This type of language increases racial resentment and creates an environment in which voters, particularly those who lean to the right, are encouraged to be suspicious of the racial implications and the beneficiaries of the Obama administration's proposed policies.

We might conclude, then, that if there has been a paradigm shift, it has been experienced more profoundly by those on the right than those on the left. For some Americans, Obama's presidency is not only unthinkable and unacceptable, but also illegitimate. The possibility that Obama's presidency could mark the beginning of a new form of interracial politics that diverges sharply from American political rule by white men only raises the stakes and makes the potential losses increasingly dire for Tea Party members and those on the far right (Walker 128). On the other hand, for those on the left, there is skepticism as to whether anything has changed at all.

It has been said that after President Lyndon Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, he put down his pen and made the prescient comment to an aide that the Democratic Party had "lost the South for a generation." Exit polls have confirmed Johnson's prediction: No Democratic presidential candidate has won a larger share of the white votes than the Republican candidate in any national election since 1964. This statistic includes two sons of the South, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton (Smith et al. 123–24). But, as political scientists Philip Klinkner and Thomas Schaller have argued, Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs began a transformation in the composition of the American electorate that made Obama's election possible. The 1965 Voting Rights Act led to the enfranchisement of millions of African American voters, and later, Lati-

no voters. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act ended national quotas and accelerated Latino and Asian immigration; it also played a critical role in expanding the electorate. In 1964, more than 90% of voters were non-Hispanic whites. By 2008, that number had fallen to under 75% (Smith at al. 123–24). Obama won 95% of the African American vote, 67% of the Latino vote, and 62% of the Asian American vote. These percentages, coupled with a significantly increased turnout among these groups, secured Obama's victory. Some social scientists have argued that while Obama fared marginally better among white voters than John Kerry did in 2004—winning two percent more votes than Kerry—he received fewer votes than predicted among Southern whites, given the conditions of the 2008 election, including the unpopularity of President Bush, the deepening financial crisis, and the apparently endless wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

President Obama is not the only piece in this complex puzzle. To take full account of the paradigm shift, we must also consider the role of First Lady Michelle Obama. Indeed, Michelle Obama—the first black First Lady—might offer more convincing evidence to signal the occurrence of a paradigm shift than the more celebrated election of her husband as president. In June 11, 2008, *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd made the perceptive point that Americans might have far more trouble accepting a black first lady than a black president. Americans had yet to see a black woman as the social face of the nation, or as Dowd wrote, “the national hostess who serenely presides over the White House Christmas festivities and the Easter egg roll” (Dowd). Unlike her husband, Michelle Obama could not “serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views” (Obama, *Audacity* 11). Instead, she would have to begin the work of contesting, and hopefully replacing, the centuries-old grotesque, flattened stereotypes of Mammy, the faithful, asexual, and nurturing caretaker; Jezebel, the hypersexual, “hot to trot,” lascivious seductress; and Sapphire, the brash, aggressive, emasculating matriarch (Harris-Perry 51–97). Michelle Obama—a Princeton-educated, Harvard-trained lawyer—would force a meaningful reconfiguration of the surfeit of these negative, degrading images of black women in American culture.

In measuring the paradigm shift, especially its fits and starts, Thomas Holt's groundbreaking book, *The Problem of Race in the 21st Century* (2000), and his thoughts about America's racial future offer a useful

framework. In the epilogue to that book, Holt writes, “only those acting outside the dominant racial ideas and constraints of their era can effectively seize the means of resistance to them. The tiny minority who act outside the constraints of their times in fact help to define those times.” Holt continues, “We must be able to imagine a different future if we are to be able to change the present and thus shape that future” (120). So perhaps this is in fact the best evidence of the paradigm shift: We can now imagine a very different future than previous generations could. My hundred-year-old grandmother and my seventy-year-old parents are candid when they say that they cannot believe that they have lived to see a black president in America. As my father remembers, when he was growing up, “everything was white.”

In taking stock of Obama’s election and presidency, we do not want to lose sight of the historic and inspiring aspects; for instance, the sense of an instant, multiracial, and multiethnic community that was formed among approximately two hundred thousand Americans of all ages, from all walks of life, who gathered together on an unseasonably warm evening in Chicago’s Grant Park on November 4, 2008. We also do not want to lose sight of what Obama’s presidency will mean for a generation of children who are likely to perceive a black president as unremarkable. The following poem became popular during Obama’s campaign; it captures Obama’s indebtedness to the long civil rights movement and signals Obama’s inspiration to future generations: “Rosa sat so Martin could walk.../ Martin walked, so Obama could run.../ Obama is running so our children can fly!” (qtd. in Sugrue 11, fl, 141).² We also should not underestimate the effect that Obama’s election has had around the world, as this volume has discussed, in changing assumptions that the United States is a nation with such an entrenched and intractable history of racism that a black man could never ascend to its highest office. As the French left-wing paper *Libération* wrote, “We also need to change our preconceptions about American prejudice. [...]. It seems like America could teach us a thing or two about democracy” (qtd. in Sugrue 12).

² Sugrue writes that the poem’s origins are unknown, however, the poem was popularized by a National Public Radio broadcast on October 28, 2008, and attributed to Ed Welch, a job trainer in St. Louis. See Sugrue 141.

It is still too soon to offer a thorough assessment of the extent to which Obama's election and presidency have created a paradigm shift. The future is unpredictable, race relations are ever changing and in a constant state of flux, and the most educated guesses are often proven wrong. As Sugrue writes, "The past is still a heavy burden on the present" (97). But we should consider Obama's election as a hopeful sign of increasing racial tolerance and improving—however slowly—race relations. Here, it is helpful to keep Holt's message in mind. His charge "to act outside of the constraints of our times" seems even more urgent now than it did in 2000. This theme echoes Dr. King's appeals to galvanize individuals to protest for a just and moral society. And it is unmistakable that the space for imagination has grown dramatically—seismically—even in the eleven years since Holt's book was published. We should not underestimate the importance of the expansion of our imaginations. If the question is, "Have we moved beyond racism in American society?" the answer will surely be no. Yet perhaps there are other, more revealing, questions to be asked (Hollinger 175). Indeed, perhaps, it is not where we are that matters most, but rather our widening vision of where we might go.

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