

have remained central to the outcome. The only question, really, was which kind of racism was likely to show up most prominently on election day? Would it be the traditional old-fashioned kind, rooted in conscious bigotry and hate, the Racism 1.0, which historically has caused many whites to act toward black folks with suspicion, violence, distrust, fear, and anxiety, and which—if it is prevalent enough—could have resulted in Obama's defeat? Or would it be the newer, slicker, enlightened exceptionalism, or Racism 2.0, which still holds the larger black and brown communities of our nation in low regard but is willing to carve out exceptions for those who make some whites sufficiently comfortable? We now have our answer to that question, if we're willing to examine it. But one thing about which we should be clear as we conduct that examination is this: the election of Barack Obama was not the result of a national evolution to a truly antiracist consciousness or institutional praxis. And this we know for reasons we shall now explore.

### **SAME AS IT EVER WAS: BARACK OBAMA AND THE PROBLEM OF WHITE DENIAL**

That white folks would find it tempting, in light of Obama's mass appeal and his ascent to the presidency, to declare the struggle against racism over should surprise no one.

As we'll see below, even when the system of racism and white supremacy was more firmly entrenched, white folks by and large failed to see what all the fuss was about. So needless to say, with Barack Obama now in the nation's top political position, it is to be expected that once again white America would point to such a thing as firm confirmation that all was right with the world. Indeed, the day after Obama's victory, the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page intoned: "One promise of his victory is that perhaps we can put to rest the myth of racism as a barrier to achievement in this splendid country."<sup>3</sup>

In fact, even before Obama had been declared the winner of the election, proclamations of racism's early death were becoming ubiquitous. And so, ten days before the vote, columnist Frank Rich, writing in the *New York Times*, declared that concerns about white racism possibly sinking Obama's ship were so obviously absurd as to indicate evidence of "prevailing antiwhite bias" on the part of the media types who continually raised the subject. He went on to explain that white America's distrust of blacks "crumbles when they actually get to know specific black people."<sup>4</sup> Though Rich's point about the willingness of whites to open up to individual blacks once they become familiar with them may be true for many, he, like most commentators, ignores the fact that most black folks will not get the chance to be known in this way by the average white person. As such, to proclaim a phenomenon ob-

servable in the presidential race (whites, getting to know Obama and choosing him in the voting booth) as common or likely to obtain in everyday situations and encounters seems a bit far-fetched.

Then there was columnist Richard Cohen, who said in the *Washington Post* on the morning of the election, "It is not just that he (Obama) is post-racial; so is the nation he is generationally primed to lead," and then closed his piece by suggesting, in a bizarre appropriation of civil rights movement language, "we have overcome."<sup>5</sup>

On a personal note, about a week before the election I received an e-mail from a young white man who proclaimed his desire for Obama to win so that the nation would finally be able to "stop talking about racism, and move on to more important subjects," and so that "blacks would have to stop whining about discrimination, and focus on pulling themselves up by their bootstraps instead."

On election eve, before Obama had accumulated enough electoral votes to be proclaimed the winner, former New York City mayor (and Republican presidential candidate) Rudy Giuliani had made clear what an Obama victory would mean for the nation. Speaking of what appeared at that moment to be a sure Obama win, Giuliani noted that if the trend at that point in the evening held up, "we've achieved history tonight and we've moved beyond . . . the whole idea of race and racial separation and unfairness."<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, not only did none of the

other commentators challenge Giuliani's formulation, but they also failed to note the obvious irony of his comment. Namely, if an Obama win by necessity would indicate the veritable death of racism in the United States, then would an Obama loss have suggested deeply entrenched bigotry in the eyes of Giuliani and others making the same argument? Had McCain won, could we have expected these prophets of achieved color blindness to condemn their fellow voters for being so obviously racist as to vote against a black man? After all, if voting for Obama means people have put away racism, by definition, voting against him would have to mean they had not, right? Actually no, of course, but such a conclusion is where arguments like that of Giuliani necessarily lead.

In truth, such a proposition (that the victory of one person of color signifies a victory over racism aimed at nearly 90 million) is very nearly the definition of lunacy. And note, it is the kind of proposition one would never make regarding sexism in a place like Pakistan, just because Benazir Bhutto was twice elected prime minister of the place; or in India, Israel, or Great Britain, by virtue of all three having elected women as the heads of their respective states. Surely, had Hillary Clinton captured the nomination of her party and gone on to win in November, no one with even a scintilla of common sense would have argued that a result such as this signaled the obvious demise of sexism in the United States. But that is essentially

what so many would have us believe to be true of racism, thanks to the national effort that elected Barack Obama.

What white America has apparently missed, in spite of all the Black History Month celebrations to which we have lately been exposed, is that there have always been individually successful persons of color. Their pictures adorn the walls of our elementary school classrooms; their stories get told, albeit in an abbreviated and sanitized way, every February, when corporations and the Ad Council take to the airwaves to tell us about so-and-so great black inventor, or so-and-so great black artist, or so-and-so great black literary giant. What remains unsaid, but which forms the background noise of all this annual praise for the triumphs of black Americans (or, at other times, Latinos and Latinas, Asian-Pacific Americans, or the continent's indigenous persons), is the systematic oppression that marked the society at the time when most of their achievements transpired. In other words, even in the midst of crushing oppression these hearty souls managed to find a way out of no way, as the saying goes. But that hardly suggests that their singular achievements, even multiplied hundreds of times over, actually rendered the system any less oppressive for all the rest. Thus, Madame C.J. Walker managed to become a millionaire developing and selling beauty products to black women in 1911. This achievement, though of importance in the history of American entrepreneurship, and to the narrative of black success, nonetheless fails to

alter the fact that, on balance, 1911 was not a good year to be black in the United States, Madame Walker notwithstanding. Though I am hardly so naïve as to suggest that nothing has changed since 1911, the point still holds: the triumph of individuals of color cannot, in itself, serve as proof of widespread systemic change.

Although it is possible that the political success of Barack Obama could serve to open the minds of whites as to the potentiality of effective black leadership, it is also possible that it might deepen the denial in which so much of the white public has been embedded for generations. And although Obama's success has had a measurable effect on young men and women of color, who appear empowered by his example—and this could lead to greater levels of accomplishment for still more persons of color, thereby producing a ripple effect when it comes to collective racial uplift—it is also possible that this sense of pride may be stalled if Obama is unable to deliver on his promise of "Change We Can Believe In," thanks to the exigencies of Washington politics. Long story short, what the rise of Obama comes to mean, regarding race or any other subject, remains to be seen.

But what we can say, without fear of contradiction, is that it does not signify, as some would have it, a fundamental diminution of institutional racism in the United States at present. Contrary to the proclamations of conservatives, both white and of color—such as Abigail Thern-

strom and Ward Connerly, who have been among the chief critics and organized opponents of affirmative action programs since the mid-1990s—Obama's ability to attract white votes (and even then, let us remember, a minority of those) hardly suggests that we can put away various civil rights remedies and proclaim opportunities to be truly open and equitable. That white America may desperately want Obama's success to serve as the final nail in the political coffin of civil rights activism—and even the media seems to have evinced this hope, as with the August 2008 *New York Times* article that asked whether Obama marks the “end of black politics” altogether—hardly speaks to whether it should be used as that nail, or whether there is evidence to support the notion that his individual victories are proxies for institutional transformation.<sup>7</sup>

Though the evidence about our nation's progress says something else altogether, it turns out that white folks have never paid much attention to the evidence, and so denial has long carried the day. This, of course, is no shock in 2009. After all, it is not only the age of Obama, but the age of Oprah Winfrey, Denzel Washington, Colin Powell, Tiger Woods, the Williams sisters, J-Lo, Jackie Chan, Lucy Liu, Russell Simmons, P. Diddy, and any number of dizzyingly successful folks of color in the worlds of entertainment, sports, and politics. Hip-hop is, for most youth of whatever race, at least part of the sound track of their lives. With such apparent signs of progress, who can blame

white folks for thinking the work has been done, and that it is now time to move on to other subjects, leaving the stale topic of racism in the dustbin of history?

Given such a transformation of popular culture as we have seen in the past few decades, it should hardly surprise us to read that according to a summer 2008 Gallup/*USA Today* poll, more than three in four whites say that blacks have “just as good a chance as whites to get any job for which they are qualified” (a proposition with which fewer than half of African Americans agree). Likewise, it can't be much of a shock to learn that 80 percent of whites polled say blacks have “just as good a chance as whites to get a good education,” while fewer than half of blacks agree. Or that 85 percent of whites claim blacks have “just as good a chance to get any housing they can afford,” while only 52 percent of blacks agree. Or that only about a third of whites accept the proposition that discrimination has played a major role in producing income disparities between whites and blacks.<sup>8</sup> Or that, according to a survey for CNN and *Essence* magazine, only one in nine whites believe racial discrimination against blacks is still a very serious problem, while nearly four times that many say it's not a serious problem at all.<sup>9</sup> And all this, despite a July 2008 *New York Times*/CBS poll, in which seven in ten blacks said they had suffered a specific discriminatory incident (up from 62 percent who said this in 2000).<sup>10</sup> No, there is nothing particularly surprising about any of this.

The outward trappings of major transformative change appear to be everywhere, causing whites and blacks both, in the wake of Obama's victory, to announce their hope and expectations that race relations will improve in coming years.<sup>11</sup> So white denial (and perhaps even a bit from persons of color themselves) makes sense. It fits the visuals beamed into our living rooms, incomplete as they are.

But as predictable as this denial may be today—and however maddening it must be to the persons of color whose very sanity and judgment, indeed life experiences are being called into question by such denial—it is far more enraging to realize that the inability or unwillingness of white America to see racial discrimination as a problem is a pathology with a lengthy and disturbing pedigree. Putting aside the fact that, as with the examples above, we seem to be able to name all the really powerful black and brown folks on a couple of hands—and this, one might suggest, indicates that they are, by definition, exceptions to a much different-looking rule—the bigger problem with white denial is that it isn't a modern malady.

Though whites may now be seeking to use Obama as evidence of racism's eradication, let us remember that long before he burst onto the national scene—indeed, even at a time when he was an infant, well before anyone could have foreseen what he would become, and even before the passage of modern civil rights legislation—white Americans were fairly nonchalant about the problems facing

persons of color, choosing in most cases to deny what all their senses (and surely their eyes, fixed on the television as most already were by the early 1960s) had to be telling them: that they were living in an apartheid nation; that theirs was no land of freedom and democracy, no oasis of liberty, but rather a formal white supremacy, a racially fascistic state for millions of people.

And so, in 1963, roughly two-thirds of whites told Gallup pollsters that blacks were treated equally in white communities. Even more along the lines of delusion, in 1962, nearly 90 percent of whites said black children were treated equally in terms of educational opportunity.<sup>12</sup> All of which is to say that in August 1963, as 200,000 people marched on Washington, and as they stood there in the sweltering heat, listening to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech, most whites seeing the news that evening were, in effect, thinking to themselves, what's the problem, exactly? Dream? Why dream? Everything is just fine now. Isn't it?

Or consider the 1950s, and the way in which white denial manifested so prominently among the very persons who had been most implicated in the maintenance of white domination. So, for instance, when racist forces in Congress issued their "Southern Manifesto" in response to Supreme Court rulings invalidating racially separate schools, they noted with no apparent misgiving that the push for desegregation was "destroying the ami-

cable relations between the white and Negro races that have been created through 90 years of patient effort by the good people of both races. It has planted hatred and suspicion where there has been heretofore friendship and understanding.”<sup>13</sup>

Although modern polling techniques weren’t in place in the 1930s one can imagine few whites at that time seeing racism and the oppression of black people as a major concern. Likewise, even at the height of overt white supremacist rule in the United States—during the 1890s, as Black Codes and massive violence against post-emancipation blacks were reaching their zenith<sup>14</sup>—one can read editorials in newspapers all around the South in which it was proclaimed how well whites and blacks got along, and how everything would be just fine if those “yankees” would just stop messing with Dixie. And of course it was in the mid-nineteenth century that a well-respected physician of his day, Dr. Samuel Cartwright, opined that enslaved blacks occasionally ran away due to a mental illness, drapetomania, which apparently rendered them incapable of fully appreciating just how good they had it. In short, at no point in American history have whites, by and large, believed that folks of color were getting a raw deal. That we were wrong in every generation prior to the current one in holding such a rosy and optimistic view apparently gives most whites little pause. And so we continue to re-

ject claims of racism as so much whining, as “playing the race card” or some such thing, never wondering, even for a second, how a bunch who have proven so utterly inept at discerning the truth for hundreds of years can at long last be trusted to accurately intuit other people’s reality.

Of course, Obama’s own tendency to de-emphasize racism and ongoing social injustice hasn’t helped. It may have helped Obama’s campaign, make no mistake. In fact, had he spoken with any regularity about the frightening reality of U.S. history and the legacy of racism today, there is little doubt that he’d never have found himself so much as a contender for the presidency, a subject about which I’ll have more to say below. But as astute as the political judgment of Obama’s campaign team may have been on these matters, the general avoidance of race as an issue on his part does tend to feed mainstream white denial.

#### THE EVIDENCE OF THINGS NOT SPOKEN: RACISM AND WHITE PRIVILEGE TODAY

And so it is worth taking note of all the things Barack Obama never mentioned on the campaign trail, but which confirm the salience of racism in the modern era. As a well-read, highly versed (and by his own admission, once racially obsessed) man of color, there is little chance that

he fails to know any of the following, and yet he mentioned none of it, at least not in public.

Even after he was forced to address race in the wake of the dust-up over remarks made by his former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, Obama played it close to the vest, talking more about how the historic legacy of racism had shaped the contours of racial inequity and had fed the black anger expressed by Wright, which anger was seen as so threatening to much if not most of white America. By speaking in terms of past injuries and the lingering grievances generated by the same, Obama deftly managed to speak about racism without forcing white folks to confront just how real and how present-day the problem is. Sure, speaking of racism even in the past can be risky, especially when you mix it with any discussion of what our obligations are today to address the legacy of that racism. But to make an issue of ongoing racism and presently dispensed privilege—which, after all, would seem to implicate the current generation of white Americans more than is suggested by a backward-looking historical point—would have been infinitely more risky. It is one thing to note that the legacy of slavery, segregation, and other forms of racism has been a massive racial wealth gap—indeed, the typical white family today has about eleven times the net worth of the typical black family and eight times the net worth of the typical Latino/a family,<sup>15</sup> and much of this gap is directly traceable to a history of unequal access to capital<sup>16</sup>—but it

is quite another to point out that this wealth gap continues to grow, not only because of past unequal opportunity, but also because of present-day institutional racism.

And so rather than speak of these matters, Obama avoided them, and when he did engage them, he did so in a way that tended to paper over the ongoing racial inequities that beset the nation, in favor of a narrative far preferred by white folks: the narrative of the color-blind society achieved, or at least, very nearly so. In his book, *The Audacity of Hope*, for instance, Obama speaks of the obstacles facing black and brown America as little different from those facing working-class and middle-class whites. To hear Obama tell it, all are in the same boat, and as he would explain during a speech in Selma, Alabama, during the campaign, the civil rights movement, or what he called the “Moses generation,” had brought the nation 90 percent of the way to racial justice. It was now, according to Obama, time for the “Joshua generation” to carry the load the last tenth of the way.<sup>17</sup>

### *Income and Jobs*

But in a land where the average black family has less than one-tenth the net worth of the average white family, and the average Latino family has about one-eighth as much, it's hard to square Obama's mathematical calculus of progress with the facts. So too when other data is considered,

such as the fact that black high school graduates actually have higher unemployment rates than white dropouts;<sup>18</sup> or the fact that white men with college degrees earn, on average, a third more than similar black men;<sup>19</sup> or the fact that only 7 percent of private sector management jobs are held by African Americans, and another 7 percent by Latinos, while whites hold over 80 percent of all such positions;<sup>20</sup> or the fact that middle-class black families have to put in approximately 480 more hours per year—equal to twelve work weeks—relative to similar whites, just to make the same incomes as their middle-class white counterparts;<sup>21</sup> or the fact that blacks, Latinos, and Native North Americans are 2.5 to 3 times more likely than whites to be poor, while Asian Americans are about 30 percent more likely than whites to be poor.<sup>22</sup> In the case of Asians, higher poverty rates and lower incomes often remain the norm, despite higher, on average, educational attainment than whites', thanks to high-skilled immigration. And so, as one study of Asian mobility in Houston, Texas, discovered, although Asian Americans in Harris County are 50 percent more likely than whites in the county to have a college degree, they have considerably lower incomes and occupational status than the lesser-educated whites with whom they compete for opportunities.<sup>23</sup>

And given some of the data suggesting that things are getting worse for blacks—and in particular for black men—it is especially troubling to think that the public

may come to believe the rhetoric about racial equity having been essentially achieved. So consider that at the same time America can make a black man president, data from the labor department indicates that for average young black men today, things are not nearly so rosy. Indeed, the typical young black male growing up today will earn 12 percent less than his father did a generation ago. Furthermore, the data suggests that while most middle-class white kids will grow up to do better, economically, than their parents did at the same age, most middle-class black kids will grow up to find themselves having fallen backwards and actually doing worse than their parents. Indeed, the numbers show that black youth from solidly middle-class families are nearly three times as likely as similar whites to fall to the bottom of the income distribution, and nearly half of all black middle-class youth will do so.<sup>24</sup>

Naturally some will suggest that this data, however troubling it may be, has little to do with institutional racism in the United States today. Perhaps non-discriminatory factors such as differential qualification levels, unequal educational backgrounds, or family composition could explain economic disparities between whites and people of color. But while it is true that earnings disparities, wealth gaps, and differences in occupational status are not only the result of racism perpetrated by whites, the evidence that discrimination contributes to the phenomenon indicated by the data is strong. Even after controlling for such



ostensibly race-neutral factors as differential test scores and grades, family background, and other variables that can impact income levels, white males still receive about 17 percent more than their otherwise identical black male counterparts.<sup>25</sup> But beyond mere income disparity data, direct evidence of ongoing racial discrimination is also plentiful, however much President Obama may have finessed it on the campaign trail.

So what does it say about how much we've transcended race, or rather, failed to do so, that according to a study from just a few years ago, conducted by economists at MIT and the University of Chicago, job applicants with white-sounding names are 50 percent more likely to be called back for a job interview than applicants with black-sounding names, even when all relevant qualifications and experience are indistinguishable?<sup>26</sup> Or that, according to the same study, for black-named applicants to have an equal chance at a callback, they must actually have eight more years of experience than those with white names? One thing it surely says, but which has gone unremarked upon by most pundits, and which remained unspoken in the presidential campaign, is that white fears about so-called "reverse discrimination" are based on irrational and nonsensical delusion. After all, if it were really white folks who couldn't catch a break when looking for a job, then a study such as this would have come to the exact opposite conclusion of what it actually found. When the researchers sent

out the résumés to prospective employers, it would have been all the "Tamikas" and "Jamals" who got called in by enthusiastic companies bent on hiring black folks, and it would have been the "Connors" and "Beckys" left out in the cold to wonder what in the world had gone wrong. But this didn't happen, because it never does. And yet, not only did Obama not speak this fundamental truth—that it is still very much the usual suspects who face the obstacles of race-based discrimination—rather, he pandered to the lie in his Philadelphia speech on race, wherein he mentioned, as though it were perfectly valid, white anger over losing out on a position because of a preference given to a minority.<sup>27</sup>

What does it say that, according to another study conducted by Princeton sociology professor Devah Pager, white males with a criminal record are more likely than black males without one to be called back for a job interview, even when all credentials, experience, demeanor, and communication and dress style are the same between them?<sup>28</sup> Or that according to a massive national study conducted by legal scholars Alfred and Ruth Blumrosen, who examined tens of thousands of businesses, at least one-third of all employers in the nation are racially biased and discriminate regularly against job applicants of color, and at least 1.3 million black and brown job-seekers will face racial bias during their job search in a given year?<sup>29</sup> Other research would suggest far higher rates of discrimination

than even the Blumrosen study was able to find. So, for instance, according to data from the mid-1990s, compiled by the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs, as many as three-fourths of all businesses covered by civil rights and affirmative action laws were in “substantial violation” of those laws, because of ongoing discrimination against persons of color and women of all colors.<sup>30</sup>

What about the fact that according to study after study for years—not to mention a healthy dose of common sense—most jobs, especially the most lucrative ones, aren’t filled based on qualifications anyway, or open competition, so much as by networking and word-of-mouth? And what of the racial impact of this truth: namely, that it is disproportionately folks of color who end up “out of the loop” when it comes to such networks, thereby scratched from the start of the race and afforded less opportunity to demonstrate their abilities.<sup>31</sup> Indeed it is the matter of social and professional networking that explains, in large measure, why persons of color with the same educational background as whites, and of the same age, doing the same job, so often earn much less.<sup>32</sup> So, for instance, a recent study found that Chinese Americans in the legal and medical professions earn, on average, about 44 percent less than their white counterparts, despite equal qualifications and educational attainment.<sup>33</sup> Whereas white job-seekers are able to access more lucrative positions, be they

professional, managerial, or even blue-collar, thanks to the networks within which they so often find themselves, black and brown Americans, equally qualified as their white counterparts, have to take positions with less capitalized firms and companies, with the resultant lower pay, because they simply aren’t in a position to network with the right people. Although this form of exclusion is not illegal, it does amount to institutional racism—a kind of racism that is perpetuated within structural settings, even without deliberate and bigoted intent, due to the normal workings of long-entrenched policies, practices, and procedures. And for whites, the privileges that flow from the arrangement are substantial.

Surely the old boys’ network (and the institutional racism embedded within it) explains the ongoing disparities in the awarding of government contracts to private businesses. Currently, about 92 percent of all municipal, state, and federal contracts are awarded to white-owned firms.<sup>34</sup> This result is not necessarily, or even likely, the result of overt racial bias; rather, it flows naturally from the way in which networking and connections are so central to the process of contracting and subcontracting. If a white-owned firm has subcontracts to offer, they will be most likely to turn to those smaller firms (also white-owned) whom they know, rather than to include black-, Latino-, Asian- or Native American-owned businesses, even when

the latter may be capable of doing equally good or even better work, simply because they are less likely to know of such firms to begin with.

In all, it is estimated that African American workers alone lose over \$120 billion in wages each year thanks to labor market discrimination of one kind or another: monies they would be paid if opportunity were truly equal, but which they do not in fact receive, much to their detriment, and much to the benefit of the mostly white employers for whom they work, and who get to retain the unpaid amount in their own coffers.<sup>35</sup>

### *Housing*

Or consider the arena of housing. Although much attention has been paid to the overall housing crisis in America, little of that attention has examined the way in which racial discrimination continues to limit where persons of color can live, and on what terms. On the one hand, of course, there is a long and pernicious history of race-based housing discrimination, which has culminated in many of the racially separate residential patterns we see today. From restrictive covenants that prohibited families of color from purchasing property in most white neighborhoods, to overt violence against people of color seeking to move into formerly white space, to efforts like the FHA and VA loan programs, which for the first thirty

years operated in a blatantly discriminatory manner, people of color have been deliberately deprived of assets, net worth, and housing equity that so many millions of whites have been able to take for granted. This history, the effects of which are transmitted intergenerationally (since assets or the decided lack thereof are typically handed down to one's children and grandchildren), has deprived people of color of hundreds of billions of dollars in housing equity over the years.<sup>36</sup>

But in addition to these accumulated disadvantages of the past—which Barack Obama actually has discussed, albeit briefly, in his speech on race delivered in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008—there are also significant barriers to equal housing opportunity today, which constitute still more evidence of the salience of race in twenty-first-century America. Indeed, according to recently released federal estimates, 2006 actually witnessed the largest number of housing discrimination complaints (including race-based complaints) on record.<sup>37</sup> Despite federal fair-housing laws, on the books since 1968, there was virtually no enforcement mechanism in place to make the law meaningful for nearly a quarter-century, and private studies have long estimated that there are at least 2 million instances of racial discrimination in housing each year, ranging from outright bias in mortgage lending or rental markets to more subtle forms, such as “steering” buyers or renters to certain neighborhoods, based on race and

whether they'll "fit in."<sup>38</sup> Other estimates place the number of race-based housing discrimination incidents as high as 3.7 million per year.<sup>39</sup> One study in 2001, which sent out matched and paired "testers" to look for rental housing in Houston, found that discrimination occurred in 80 percent of all rental attempts by black testers.<sup>40</sup>

When it comes to persons looking to purchase a home, research has found that lenders often provide less detailed loan information to black customers than to whites, are quicker to urge blacks to seek loans elsewhere, and are more likely to discourage black loan seekers by telling them how complicated and time-consuming the application process might be.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, according to data uncovered under the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act, while blacks and whites with excellent credit appear to be treated equally, there is a substantial gap between the way whites and blacks with questionable credit are treated by the banking industry. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported in 1995, nearly 70 percent of whites with poor credit are able to receive a mortgage, compared to only 16 percent of blacks with equally poor credit.<sup>42</sup>

And as the nation is increasingly introduced to the workings of the subprime lending market, let us not ignore the particularly racial component of the mess. As several studies have shown, banks often reject applicants of color, even when they have credit records similar to whites with the same incomes. Then, these rejected applicants turn to

secondary or subprime lenders, often owned by the very banks that turned them down (or which are subsidized by them in the form of credit lines), and which specialize in loans to persons who can't otherwise get financing. These subprime lenders then charge far higher interest than the banks that originally rejected the supposedly high-risk applicant. By doing so, the lenders make huge profits and place borrowers in jeopardy by driving up the amount they must repay, thereby increasing the likelihood of default, late payments, missed payments, and even foreclosure. Since the originators of the subprime loans (most often independent mortgage brokers, rather than regulated institutions such as banks) typically sell the loans to larger investors almost immediately after the paperwork is signed, they have little incentive to keep costs down for the borrower, since, if the borrower defaults, the lender, having already dumped the loan, will suffer no loss as a result.

A recent study of Citigroup (which includes Citi, the group's subprime lender) found that Citi in North Carolina charged higher interest even to borrowers who could have qualified for regular loans. In the process, more than 90,000 mostly black borrowers were roped into predatory loans, and as a result paid an average of \$327 more per month for mortgages than those getting loans from a prime lender. This added up to over \$110,000 in excess payments over the life of the loans, on average.<sup>43</sup> And at the same time that banks are steering blacks with good credit

to subprime lenders, whites with good credit who apply for loans with subprime lenders are routinely referred to prime lenders, who offer loans at lower interest rates. Evidence from one sizable study in 2000 indicated that blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans, and indigenous persons all pay higher mortgage rates, on average, than white borrowers, even when income, debt load, and several measures of credit history are the same.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, even high-income blacks are targeted for higher-cost loans, so that upper-income black families in black-majority neighborhoods are three times more likely than low-income white borrowers to have subprime, high-risk instruments for their home mortgages.<sup>45</sup>

The collective impact of this housing bias is enormous. Most obviously, it deprives families of color of billions of dollars in lost potential wealth and assets. Studies place the cost of present-day housing discrimination at over \$4 billion annually for people of color, and further estimate that today's black communities have been deprived of nearly half a trillion dollars in wealth due to past and present housing discrimination in the United States.<sup>46</sup> White folks should probably think about that the next time they feel like complaining about black folks soaking up government money or "looking for a handout," since these numbers suggest the real problem is the way folks of color have been collectively denied equity and wealth that they had earned and to which they are entitled.

### *Education*

Consider education. Even as much is made of America's "failing" schools and the often significant racial achievement gaps between whites on the one hand, and blacks and Latinos on the other, little attention is given to the way in which the policies, practices, and procedures within schools often perpetuate those racial inequities and even make them worse.

To begin with, and in part related to the ongoing de facto housing segregation patterns so common in the nation, students of color start out with substantial disadvantages relative to whites. The average black student, for instance, attends a school with twice as many low-income students as the typical white youth,<sup>47</sup> and schools that are mostly attended by black and Latino students are more than ten times as likely as mostly white schools to be schools with concentrated levels of student poverty.<sup>48</sup> In fact, even black kids with family incomes higher than those of whites are more likely to attend concentrated poverty schools.<sup>49</sup> This concentration of poverty in black and brown schools magnifies any number of social problems within the school environment, including inadequate nutrition and health care, family crises like long-term unemployment, and the emotional and material toll of growing up in marginalized spaces cut off from access to the social and professional networks so important to success among middle- and upper-middle-class families. It

isn't that black and brown kids need to sit next to white kids in order to learn—and indeed, anyone who supports integration for such a “rub-off” purpose is guilty of crass and paternalistic racism—but simply that when kids who are poor are crammed in buildings, given the impression that they don't count (because they know they don't have the resources that exist in suburban and private schools), and then expected to learn and achieve at the same level as the kids in the neighborhoods that are economically viable, they figure out the game pretty quickly, and then proceed to fulfill every prophecy about them already held by far too many in the adult population.

Then, as if access and privileges denied to students of color—and, on the flip side, the advantages enjoyed by whites—weren't bad enough, schools serving mostly white and affluent students are able to spend considerably more, on average, per pupil than schools serving mostly lower-income students of color. In large measure, the financial imbalance stems from the principal funding mechanisms for education, such as property tax revenues, which result in more affluent areas having more to spend than working-class and poor communities. Even additional funding from state government to make up for the property tax shortfalls can't equalize opportunity: at best, such efforts result in formal parity, but given the greater challenges facing lower-income neighborhoods and the inability of poor families to kick in additional monies for

the operation of their schools (something that is taken for granted in communities where affluent families live), this parity exists in name only. In practice, the funding gap, relative to need, remains substantial: on the order of roughly a thousand dollars per pupil, per year, between schools serving mostly white children and those serving mostly students of color.<sup>50</sup> With fewer per-pupil resources, such schools then have a harder time attracting highly skilled and qualified teachers, which has an especially pernicious impact on student learning. In fact, high-poverty schools (disproportionately serving a large number of students of color) have, on average, three times as many uncertified teachers, or teachers who are teaching outside of their field of study, as teachers serving low-poverty and mostly white schools.<sup>51</sup>

Predictably, those on the right argue that money doesn't matter, and that what really makes the difference to a child's education is personal motivation. Yet one might take note of just how insincere such arguments sound, coming from people whose every other move in life is predicated on the notion that money does matter, and that it matters quite a lot. After all, these are the same folks who tell us they need tax cuts, so they can keep more of their money, presumably because it matters, and will lead to greater levels of investment and “trickle-down” benefits for all. These are folks who read the daily stock reports, presumably because money matters (and they want to know

how much they have every single day). These are folks who send their kids to outrageously expensive schools if they can afford to do so. Either this means that money does indeed matter, or it suggests that persons such as this are ridiculously wasteful with their resources, squandering tens of thousands of dollars each year when they could do just as well sending their children to the public school down the street. Unless those who claim money doesn't matter decide to shut down their prep schools, forswear tutors and test prep classes for their kids, and announce to the world that they will be shuttling their children off to community college in lieu of the Ivy League—since, after all, why waste all that money?—the rest of us should probably remain skeptical of their assurances that money doesn't make much difference in the education of children.

Of course it's true that money or the lack thereof isn't the only issue. Additionally, there is the matter of how teacher expectations influence student outcomes, and how these expectations are often tied to race and class stereotypes. It is commonly believed, for instance, that blacks and Latinos are not as committed as whites to education and academic achievement, this despite multiple studies showing it is whites who manifest the most cynicism and nonchalance about doing well in school, and that black students are every bit as academically inclined and motivated as their white counterparts.<sup>52</sup> As a result of the stereotypes however, which persist despite

the evidence to counter them, teachers and counselors end up assigning students to certain classes—honors or advanced placement, standard, or remedial level—based more on their own internalized biases about student ability than on anything objective. Black and Latino students, nationwide, are about half as likely as whites to be found in upper-level classes and twice as likely to be in remedial classes. Even when their prior performance would justify higher placement, students of color are still significantly less likely to be given honors or advanced-placement opportunities than whites, even when the latter have lower grades or test scores.<sup>53</sup> Partly this is due to educator bias, but it is also in part the result of systemic inequity: schools serving mostly white students have about three times as many advanced-level courses offered as schools serving mostly students of color. Thus, even in the total absence of racial bias on the part of school officials, the lack of certain course offerings deprives capable and hard-working students of color of equal opportunity with their white counterparts.<sup>54</sup> Evidence then suggests that children who are tracked lower tend to suffer a downward spiral in terms of performance, in part because of a lowered sense of self-efficacy, in part because of not being challenged, and in part because of their own withdrawal from work they find stultifying and meaningless, unlike the more engaging curricula offered to those—mostly whites—in the advanced-level courses.<sup>55</sup>

Then, in a move that certainly contributes to glaring racial inequities in higher education, colleges tend to over-rely on standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT, even as these instruments have been deemed inadequate to the task of truly selecting more qualified students, and have proven time and again to disproportionately limit opportunities for students of color, who, through no fault of their own, haven't been exposed to the same material and degree of instruction as most whites.<sup>56</sup>

Beyond course offerings and the inequity generated by certain forms of testing, there is also widespread disparity in terms of school discipline. As Indiana University's Russell Skiba has found after examining years of research on school disciplinary actions, students of color are considerably more likely than whites to be suspended or expelled, even though there is no statistically significant difference between the rates at which white students and students of color break serious school rules, for which such punishment could be the result.<sup>57</sup> Although most Americans appear to believe that black and Latino students have far higher rates of drug possession, or weapons possession, or fights in school, over a decade's worth of data from the Department of Education suggests otherwise: in most years, racial differences in fighting are not dramatic; whites are equally or more likely to use or possess drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes on campus; and whites are equally or more likely to carry a weapon to school.<sup>58</sup> Yet because of racial

stereotypes, it is students of color who are suspected of these things and therefore searched, detected, and punished.

Not to mention, as Skiba explains, the disparate punishment that is especially a problem for offenses at the lower end of the seriousness spectrum. So while teachers may respond to rude or disrespectful in-class behavior by whites with a warning or a call to parents—because they are less likely to view such children as irredeemable threats to their safety and classroom order—the same behavior by students of color is regularly met with referral to the principal's office. And with enough referrals, suspension or expulsion typically becomes mandatory. So racially biased perception leads to initially disparate discipline, which then is followed by disparity at greater levels of discipline, which then not only reinforces the stereotypes that gave rise to the disparate punishment, but also breeds frustration and resentment among students of color. This frustration is then directly correlated with a withdrawal of academic effort, followed by a greater risk of academic failure, which is then followed by greater likelihood of economic hardship and even criminal activity in later years. By allowing racially disparate discipline to continue, the nation's educators literally create a school-to-prison pipeline, by virtue of marking certain kids as “bad” before they are even in high school in many cases. In such a setting as this, education becomes less a liberating force than one that reinscribes existing hierarchies of domination and



subordination, less a “great equalizer” as it is often called, and more a terrible unequalizer for millions of youth of color across the nation.

### *Criminal Justice and the Law*

Or consider the criminal justice system, perhaps the one arena of national life where racial disparities are most stark, and where evidence of unequal treatment is the most dramatic. In 1964, just three years after Barack Obama was born, about two-thirds of all persons locked up in the nation’s jails and prisons were white, while a third were persons of color, mostly African American. By the early 1990s, those numbers had essentially flip-flopped, so that today, nearly two-thirds of persons locked up are persons of color while only a third are white,<sup>59</sup> a number that has persisted into the twenty-first century.<sup>60</sup>

There are only two possible theories to explain this inversion of incarceration data. The first would be that sometime around 1965, white folks awoke from a deep criminal slumber, in which sleepwalking state we had been committing all kinds of crimes, and said to ourselves that the time had come to retire from our criminal endeavors. Corollary to this theory, one would also have to imagine that around the same time, black and brown folks, hearing the news that whites were getting out of the crime business, decided to fill the gap left open by the white deci-

sion to walk the straight and narrow. In other words, white folks shaped up, while folks of color went on a criminal spree unparalleled in the history of humankind. The second theory would be that although the percentages of crime committed by whites or by folks of color remained roughly the same throughout this period, law enforcement resources tilted heavily in favor of catching, prosecuting, and incarcerating people of color. Indeed, a look at the evidence makes quite clear that the latter is far and away more accurate than the former as an explanation.

Nowhere is this truer than with regard to the so-called war on drugs: so-called because rarely is the war fought on the front lines of where the drugs actually are. Contrary to popular perception—so popular that when asked to envision a drug user, upwards of 95 percent of whites say they picture a black person<sup>61</sup>—most drug users are white, and indeed, on a per capita basis, whites actually have an equal or higher rate of use than either African Americans or Latinos.<sup>62</sup> This means that if you were to randomly drug test 1,000 whites, 1,000 blacks, and 1,000 Latinos, in most years you would end up with at least as many, if not more “hits” in the white group. This is especially true among the young, where drug use is typically far higher among whites than youth of color.<sup>63</sup> And yet, when it comes to who is being searched, arrested, prosecuted, and incarcerated for drug activity, the picture looks far different than the usage rates would justify. So, in spite of whites comprising

more than seven in ten drug users, and despite blacks and Latinos combined representing less than 25 percent of all users, the latter comprise nearly 90 percent of all persons locked up in a given year for a drug possession offense, while whites represent less than 10 percent of drug possession incarcerations annually.<sup>64</sup> Nationally, black youth are forty-eight times more likely than whites to be incarcerated for a first-time drug offense, even when all factors surrounding the crime are the same.<sup>65</sup> In all, black drug users are nearly twenty times more likely than anyone else to spend time in prison for their use, and in fifteen states, the rate of black incarceration for drug offenses is anywhere from twenty to fifty-seven times greater than for whites, despite equal or greater rates of drug law violations by whites.<sup>66</sup> When all other factors surrounding an arrest are the same, black cocaine offenders are twice as likely to be sent to prison and will serve, on average, forty months more than white offenders.<sup>67</sup>

Partly, the disproportionate incarceration of folks of color for drugs stems from the racially biased practices of law enforcement in terms of who is searched in the first place. According to Justice Department reports dating back almost a decade, black and Latino motorists are far more likely than whites to have their vehicles stopped and searched for illegal contraband, even though whites, when searched, are typically more likely to be found with drugs or other illegal items in our possession.<sup>68</sup> Likewise, a study

by the General Accounting Office early in the decade found that although black women were nine times more likely than white women to be searched for drugs coming through airport customs checkpoints, white women were roughly twice as likely to actually be caught with drugs in their possession!<sup>69</sup> Most recently, a study of stops and searches by the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) found that blacks are three times more likely than whites in L.A. to be stopped by police, and significant racial disparities remain even after things like differential crime rates and neighborhood demographics are taken into consideration. Interestingly, those whites searched by the LAPD were actually more likely to be found with drugs or other illegal items in their possession, suggesting that cops there have a higher threshold for suspicion when observing whites, and are quicker to suspect people of color, on much weaker evidence or probable cause. In all, blacks frisked by police were 42 percent less likely to be found with a weapon than whites, while Latinos frisked were a third less likely to have a weapon on them. In consent searches, blacks were one-fourth less likely to have drugs in their possession than whites, while Latinos were a third less likely to possess narcotics.<sup>70</sup>

In other words, racial profiling is real, it's racist, and it's not particularly intelligent as a method of law enforcement. At least, that would be the case if the purpose of the war on drugs were really to get drugs off the street. But

given the apparent ineptitude with which the battle has been waged, one has to seriously wonder if that were ever really the purpose at all.

So too with racial profiling of Arabs and Muslims (or those thought to be either) in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—another issue that received no attention whatsoever during the 2008 presidential campaign. Although many have suggested such profiling is rational, and indeed something of a moral and practical imperative, in truth such a practice is bad law enforcement and inherently unfair. As a law enforcement tool, so-called terrorist profiling based on perceived geographic origin or religious background is likely to fail. Al Qaeda, for instance, is active in several dozen nations, and many of its operatives would not fit a particular profile in terms of appearance. Furthermore, people conspiring to commit acts of terrorism would know the profile and work hard to go around it, while law enforcement would be so focused on one type of threat they might well let down their guard to other dangers. As for fairness, such profiling is obviously both racially and religiously selective. After all, no such calls for profiling emerged in the wake of terrorist acts by white Americans, such as the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building by Tim McVeigh and Terry Nichols in 1995, or after the two decades of bombings by the Unabomber, Theodore Kaczynski, or after the Olympic Park bombings of 1996 in Atlanta, carried out by Eric Rudolph,

or after the more than 200 bombings or arsons at family planning and abortion clinics in North America since the mid-1970s.<sup>71</sup> That persons of Arab, Persian, North African, or South Asian descent, and others presumed to be terrorists because of the color of their skin, their accents, or their perceived religious beliefs, are currently facing such hostile treatment suggests that whatever progress may be signified by the victory of Barack Obama—Barack Hussein Obama no less—it has hardly translated into equitable treatment for all.<sup>72</sup>

### *Health Care*

Moving on, consider health care. Although there was much talk during the 2008 presidential campaign about the lack of affordable coverage for more than 40 million Americans, little if any attention was paid, either by media or the candidates, to the emerging research as to the health consequences of racial discrimination. Likewise, when racial disparities were discussed, they were inevitably reduced to matters of economics—so, naturally, since folks of color are on balance poorer, they will suffer worse health outcomes—but the evidence of racially disparate health care provision was essentially ignored.

As regards this first matter, there have been dozens of studies in the last few years indicating that negative health outcomes for persons of color are highly and directly con-

nected to experiences with racism perpetrated by whites: such experiences raise stress levels, leading to hypertension, which in turn is correlated with heart disease and other maladies.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, not only are hypertension gaps between whites and blacks widened by black experiences with racism, they appear to be related far more to racism than to economics. And so, as evolutionary biologist Joseph Graves has noted, when whites and blacks at the highest levels of income are excluded from hypertension data, racial disparities between the two groups entirely disappear.<sup>74</sup> This means those gaps manifest exclusively due to the experiences of affluent blacks; and among those experiences, one would have to include their constant awareness of the potential for being viewed through the lens of a racist stereotype, their real experiences with racist mistreatment (as chronicled in several volumes),<sup>75</sup> and the daily struggle of continually having to prove themselves—especially when they have managed to obtain a measure of success—in a society where racism remains quite prevalent.

As for the second issue, access to care, even when health care is available, studies have found that doctors are less likely to order a full range of diagnostic tests and treatments for black patients than for whites, even when these patients' finances and insurance coverage are comparable to their white counterparts.<sup>76</sup> Even when comparing blacks and whites of comparable age, sex, severity of disease, geo-

graphic location, and other factors that could influence the quality of medical treatment, blacks are 60 percent less likely to receive a coronary angioplasty or bypass surgery to relieve a serious heart condition, for example.<sup>77</sup> And as one study found, doctors presented with identical patient histories and symptoms overwhelmingly refer whites for more advanced treatment. According to the study, which presented doctors with videotaped interviews featuring actors trained to pose as patients with identical medical histories and symptoms, doctors were far less likely to refer black women for aggressive treatment of cardiac symptoms than white women. When asked to give their impression of the actors (whom they believed to be real patients), doctors routinely said they perceived the black "patients" as less intelligent, less likely to follow doctor's recommendations and thus cooperate with a treatment regimen, and more likely to miss appointments: this despite the fact that the actors had made identical comments and had presented identical symptoms.<sup>78</sup>

Additionally, studies have long demonstrated a direct linkage between the percentage of persons of color and low-income persons in a neighborhood, and the likelihood of the community being the location of a hazardous waste site or industrial facility that contaminates the surrounding air and water. This exposure then inflates the risk of disease for persons living in those communities, including the risk for cancer, asthma, and lead poisoning,

the latter of which can directly impair cognitive function.<sup>79</sup> Although these waste sites and plants are likely not placed in these communities deliberately to harm persons of color—rather, they are likely sited there because of the lower cost of doing so and the relative political weakness of the persons in the community, who lack the clout to block such actions—the consequences are hardly different for lack of intentionality.

Yet, during a 2007 AFL-CIO forum in Las Vegas, candidate Obama demonstrated little desire to tackle directly the issue of racial disparities in health. When asked about health care for minorities, Obama spoke not of discrimination, or the way that toxic dumps and incinerators or lead-infested buildings predominate in black and brown communities, or the way that racism itself has contributed to the negative health outcomes experienced by millions of persons of color. Rather, he replied with an answer about the need for black people to have better nutrition, to eat less fast food, and to have better places to exercise.<sup>80</sup> all important to be sure, but hardly the key to reducing racial disparities in life expectancy, low birthweight, or infant mortality.

That such discrimination and widespread racial disparities as are documented above can exist and yet not become a campaign issue during a presidential race suggests how dangerous it is for politicians, especially those of color like Obama, to raise the subject. If honesty would result in

an electoral smack-down (and make no mistake, it likely would), then honesty can conveniently and unceremoniously be relegated to the status of the proverbial illegitimate stepchild, passed over and regularly dissed on behalf of its favored sibling, which happens to be a lie—in this case, the lie of equal opportunity, one to which candidate Obama had little choice but to tether his campaign ship.

*Racism, Hurricane Katrina, and the Post-Disaster Recovery*

And it's a lie we seem compelled to keep repeating, even when the evidence of its deceptiveness is staring us in the face. So just three years after the world watched one of the great cities on Earth, New Orleans, nearly turned into a modern-day Atlantis, candidate Obama rarely discussed the veritable ethnic cleansing that has marked the post-Katrina rebuilding process. Oh yes, he mentioned Katrina, but only so as to make a point of the ineptitude of the Bush administration and its former FEMA chief—in other words, only insofar as mentioning it could score partisan political points by making the tragedy about corrupt and venal Republicans.

But nowhere did Obama discuss the decision at both the federal and state level, and by members of both parties, to prevent the Red Cross from entering the city to provide relief to people who were suffering for days without

help.<sup>81</sup> Nowhere did he discuss the way in which mostly black New Orleanians were forced back across a bridge they were trying to cross to safety, blocked in their escape from the chaos by white sheriff's deputies from across the Mississippi river on the city's west bank. Nowhere did he discuss the way in which white tourists were rushed to the front of bus lines once relief came, while locals, mostly of color, had to wait. Nowhere did he discuss the rescue of approximately 7,000 whites in neighboring St. Bernard Parish by Orleans Parish school buses, even as 30,000 or more black folks languished in the heat of the convention center or Superdome.<sup>82</sup> Nowhere did he discuss the way in which Democrats and Republicans have conspired to tear down 5,000 units of perfectly usable public housing, or blocked any economic relief for renters in New Orleans for over a year. Indeed, as I write this, not a single person who was renting at the time of Katrina—people who are disproportionately of color, and certainly lower-income—has received a single penny from the \$10 billion post-Katrina rebuilding program, known as the Road Home Community Development Block Grant: this compared to well over 100,000 homeowners, who are disproportionately white and affluent. Nowhere did he mention that after three years, of 10,000 rental units that had been projected to be rebuilt to house displaced persons of lower income, only 82 had been constructed as of summer 2008.<sup>83</sup>

That the purging of tens of thousands of lower-in-

come black folks from New Orleans has happened, and yet there is no discussion at all of the blatant racism that has characterized so much of the city's rebuilding process is testament to how constrained candidates like Obama are as they seek national office. To discuss the racial implications of Katrina and its wake would be to bump up against the ever-present force of white denial: a force that led most whites, when polled three months after the event, to say that what had happened in New Orleans had no lessons at all to teach us about racial inequality in America.<sup>84</sup> To mention the evidence of widespread post-flood housing discrimination by white landlords, documented not only in Orleans Parish, but in surrounding mostly white parishes like Jefferson and St. Bernard,<sup>85</sup> would have been to signal a sympathy for the African American community that could only have damaged Obama's chances at victory in November. And so candidate Obama remained silent, and white denial went unchallenged. Indifference to the ongoing suffering of black New Orleanians—an indifference perpetuated by the silence of politicians, unwilling to clearly and accurately name what has been happening there—is, as Lance Hill, Executive Director of the Southern Institute for Education and Research has put it, the new face of racism in the twenty-first century. New or not, however, the impact is much the same as with deliberate injury. As Michael Eric Dyson explains:

In a sense, if one conceives of racism as a cell phone, then active malice is the ring tone on its highest volume, while passive indifference is the ring tone on vibrate. In either case, whether loudly or silently, the consequence is the same: a call is transmitted, a racial message is communicated.<sup>86</sup>

In this case, the message being transmitted, of course, is that some lives are distinctly worth more than others, and that the algebra of relative importance does not favor the black and brown.

That anyone could deny the salience of race to the Katrina debacle is, of course stunning, especially as we have now learned that the reports of mass violence in the shelters—murders, rapes and molestations—were false. After all, to the extent the media reported on these claims of animalistic depravity without any proof, and to the extent white folks (and sadly, even lots of black and brown folks) believed the claims, without any proof at all, surely says something about race and racial inequality in America, does it not?<sup>87</sup> Surely it says that we are quick to believe the worst about poor black folks, in ways we never would were such absurd claims made about whites. Honestly, does anyone believe that if a hurricane took out Nantucket next year and someone started a rumor that whites were raping and killing people in the basement of the local Episcopal church, the media would report such a charge?

To ask the question is to answer it, and tells us all we really need to know about racism and its flip side, white privilege, in modern America.

Ironically, it was New Orleans-area whites, not blacks, who participated in the most disturbing post-Katrina violence. Although it was largely ignored at the time, false claims of mass black violence in the evacuation centers fed a siege mentality among the area's white population, which then precipitated real terrorism—including, it appears, several killings—by armed gangs. According to a December 2008 investigative report in *The Nation* magazine, as the floodwaters rose, residents in Algiers Point (a mostly white enclave on the city's west bank) began stockpiling weapons, including Uzis, and then, by their own admission, threatened blacks who they found in their neighborhood, including those who lived there. On several occasions, more than threats were issued.

Donnell Herrington, 29 at the time, lived about a mile from Algiers Point and was walking with his cousin and a friend through the area, hoping to reach the local ferry terminal where they could catch a bus out of town. A mob of whites who viewed any blacks in the community as interlopers shot at Herrington and hit him in the throat. As he got up and ran, a white gunman yelled after him, "Get him! Get that nigger!" The other two black men ran and were cornered by members of the mob who threatened to tie them up and burn them, but ultimately allowed

them to flee if they promised to tell their friends not to set foot in the area again. Herrington, for his part, tried to flag down two white men in a truck to help him as he lay bleeding from his neck wound, but rather than assist him, the two men told him to stay away from their truck, called him a nigger and threatened to kill him. He survived only after being taken to the hospital by an African American couple on whose porch he collapsed after walking back to his neighborhood.

At least eleven men, all black, were shot by whites in the days following the flooding, a fact that no one—including the men who were doing the shooting—seems particularly afraid to acknowledge. Several of the perpetrators admit to seeing black men shot and admit to personally shooting at them. One of the white terrorists, Wayne Janak, brags about keeping the bloody shirt of one victim as a trophy, and cheerfully recollects seeing three black men shot in one day. In a telling comparison, Janak likened the actions of the white gunmen to “pheasant season in South Dakota.” As Janak put it, “If it moved you shot it.”

A. C. Thompson’s investigative report on the terrorist activity of the white thugs included descriptions of racist depravity almost too extreme to fathom:

Some of the gunmen prowling Algiers Point were out to wage a race war, says one woman whose uncle and two cousins joined the cause. A former New

Orleanian, this source spoke to me anonymously because she fears her relatives could be prosecuted for their crimes. “My uncle was very excited that it was a free-for-all—white against black—that he could participate in,” says the woman. “For him, the opportunity to hunt black people was a joy.”

“They didn’t want any of the ‘ghetto niggers’ coming over from the east side of the river,” she says, adding that her relatives viewed African Americans who wandered into Algiers Point as “fair game.” One of her cousins, a young man in his 20s, sent an e-mail to her and several other family members describing his adventures with the militia. He had attached a photo in which he posed next to an African American man who’d been fatally shot. The tone of the e-mail, she says, was “gleeful”—her cousin was happy that “they were shooting niggers.”

An Algiers Point homeowner who wasn’t involved in the shootings describes another attack. “All I can tell you is what I saw,” says the white resident, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals. He witnessed a barrage of gunfire—from a shotgun, an AK-47 and a handgun—directed by militiamen at two African-American men standing on Pelican Street, not too far from Janak’s place. The gunfire hit one of them. “I saw blood squirting out of his back,” he says. “I’m an EMT. My instinct



should've been to rush to him. But I didn't. And if I had, those guys"—the militiamen—"might have opened up on me, too."

The witness shows me a home video he recorded shortly after the storm. On the tape, three white Algiers Point men discuss the incident. One says it might be a bad idea to talk candidly about the crime. Another dismisses the notion, claiming, "No jury would convict."<sup>88</sup>

As predicted by this member of the Algiers Point terrorist squad, no one has been punished for these crimes. Indeed, no official investigation by law enforcement has occurred at all.

But beyond evidence such as this, to understand how prevalent racism and white privilege remain in the nation one need look no further than the presidential campaign itself, during which any number of fairly blatant examples managed to manifest.

### *Racism in the Presidential Campaign*

From racist and religiously bigoted e-mails claiming Obama to be a "Muslim terrorist," who wasn't really born in America and who was viciously anti-white, to T-shirts with racist caricatures of the Senator, to video footage of whites spouting racist calumny upon him, evidence of raw

and unfiltered Racism 1.0 was ubiquitous. Likewise, white denial about that racism was also in full effect. So, for instance, when the Chaffey County, California, Republican Women's Club sent out a mailer to its members called "Obama Bucks," in which the senator was featured on the front of a food-stamp certificate, surrounded by pictures of fried chicken and watermelon, the president of the club insisted there was nothing racist about the mailing at all. Another member, defending the mailing, explained that "everyone eats those foods," and so the fact that they have long been stereotypically associated with African Americans was a mere coincidence.<sup>89</sup>

Attempts by Obama's opponents and their surrogates to inject race into the campaign and to play upon white racial fears and resentments were also common. Although the far right was especially implicated in such efforts, these thinly veiled racial buttons were first pushed during the primary season, by Senator Hillary Clinton's campaign. So in the spring of 2008, when former congresswoman and vice-presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro (a key Clinton supporter) remarked that Obama wouldn't be where he was were it not for his race, she was dipping into the well of white racial resentment and racism, whether or not that had been her purpose. It wasn't that Ferraro's remark was racist in the traditional sense, for in that regard it wasn't. There was no apparent bigotry behind it, no implicit assumption, for example, that it would be bad for

the United States to have a president of color. Yet—and this is a point that goes to the very heart of the difference between the way that white folks and folks of color understand the concept of racism—Ferraro’s intent is not what mattered. What mattered then, and matters now, is that by suggesting Obama’s success has been due solely, or at least mostly, to his race, Ferraro directly played into, perpetuated and stoked the flames of one of the dominant narratives about race in the white community: namely, that blacks are getting things they don’t deserve and for which they aren’t really qualified. It was to suggest, however unintentionally, that Obama was little more than an electoral affirmative action case.

Likewise, when Senator Clinton slapped Obama with the tag of “elitist” for noting that rural folks often cling to guns and religion when times are tight economically—a point that white author Thomas Frank had made in his best-selling book *What’s the Matter With Kansas?* in 2005, with very little objection from anyone—she was, whether deliberately or not, feeding into white racial resentment and ultimately, racism itself. To paint a man of color as “elitist” and out-of-touch with average people (and this coming from a Wellesley grad) is to push all the “up-pity Negro” buttons that have been among the favorites of white bigots for years. Given the long-standing racial order, in which whites have been able to take for granted that even if they didn’t have much “at least they weren’t

black,” to now be confronted with a black man who has more education than they do, and has accomplished more than they have in a professional sense, is to have the “psychological wage of whiteness,” as W. E. B. DuBois called it, reduced in real dollar terms. It is to upset the applecart. And to then push the elitist button—in effect, to remind white voters that this black guy is not like you, in fact he looks down on you, and how dare he—is one of the oldest and most predictable plays in the racist playbook. In the past, this kind of invective precipitated white riots against black communities, as with the destruction of the Greenwood district in Tulsa in 1921. Now, it may not lead to such orgiastic displays of violence, and it may not even be sufficient to derail a campaign the likes of Obama’s (as it clearly wasn’t), but it certainly created additional hurdles for Obama to leap, and could create a latent resentment that could re-emerge in years to come.

As Obama clinched the nomination and the country moved into the height of the general election campaign, things only got worse. Thus, the constant stream of rhetoric from the McCain/Palin camp, aimed at whites, which said, in effect, “We’re one of you,” and he (meaning Obama) is not. He’s the East Coast educated liberal elitist, while we are a ticket made up of a fighter pilot and, don’t forget, former POW, and a hockey mom. He’s a self-appointed messiah, while we are the arbiters of small-town values. He’s the arrogant “cool kid,” while we’re like your neighbors.

That none of these arguments may seem racial in nature only speaks to how little whites—with no experience being subjugated by another race—understand the underlying psychology of race, and the way that language and symbols take on meaning individually and socially in ways that often go unacknowledged. So the hockey-mom label for Sarah Palin, while seemingly innocent, perfectly primes a white racial frame of “she’s one of us,” even for those whites who don’t play hockey. Hockey couldn’t be a whiter sport in the eyes of most, and indeed it’s even better for this purpose than soccer, which is played mostly by folks of color the world over. So when you play up a vice-presidential candidate’s credentials as a hockey mom (which has no relevance to her fitness to help run a country), what you’re saying is, “Vote for these folks because they are like you.” That many whites interviewed shortly after the Palin selection remarked upon how they liked her because she’s like the mom next door (not that the mom next door has any qualifications to potentially become president) suggests that the frame had a certain salience, and for many was effective in reassuring white voters that the GOP ticket was “looking out for them,” while those other guys were dangerous interlopers from whom they needed to be protected.

Similarly, the media framing of Governor Palin as an outdoorsy, gritty, moose-hunting pioneer, while perhaps accurate (if a bit overplayed), was almost certain to trigger

any number of racial associations in the minds of white voters: the pioneer narrative (which a white Alaskan conjures almost by their mere existence) is, after all, one in which brave white folks are seen as conquering the wilderness and the unknown by dint of our hard work, determination, and strong values. It is part and parcel of the founding mythos of the United States, and at a time when whites are exhibiting increasing anxiety about demographic change, immigration, and a popular culture that many see as having been virtually hijacked by celebrities of color, it is a mythos that provides comfort, the hopes of a return to normalcy, and a sense of belonging to the dominant group, whose members fear their dominance is slipping.

When *Newsweek* can put a picture of Sarah Palin on its cover holding a rifle, as it did in its September 15, 2008, edition, and millions of white folks can find that image reassuring, we know whiteness is being played to, and deployed, quite effectively. After all, were Michelle Obama to be pictured with a gun, any gun, it is doubtful that white readers would find such an image to be little more than a patriotic hat-tip to the Second Amendment. Black people with guns scare most white folks. White people with guns are the first line of defense against the dangerous “other,” and so Sarah Palin and her pugnacious white-guy running mate (who, recall, also knows how to fire a weapon, or at least how to drop bombs from planes) can be viewed as

our protectors, and those who will guard us from the outside enemy: the terrorists, the domestic thugs, or the black presidential candidate who's getting a little too big for his britches.

And speaking of thugs, just two weeks before the election, McCain staffers were pushing a story to the media about Ashley Todd, a McCain volunteer from Texas, who allegedly had been mugged by a dark-skinned black man at an ATM machine in Pittsburgh. The man, according to Todd, scrawled a "B" on her cheek (presumably for Barack) after seeing her McCain bumper sticker. That the story turned out to be totally false—and Todd later admitted to having concocted it—didn't alter the fact that the McCain camp had been willing to believe the lie and circulate it to journalists like Jonathan Martin of Politico.com, in a way calculated to play to white fear.<sup>90</sup>

Likewise, radio commentator Rush Limbaugh spent the better part of three days insisting that Colin Powell's endorsement of Barack Obama had been merely an act of racial bonding. Powell, the lifelong Republican and confidant to both Presidents Bush, had chosen to support Obama simply because of a shared skin color, to hear Limbaugh tell it. That Powell could have believed Obama the better candidate was not conceivable to Limbaugh, even as several white Republicans and conservatives also endorsed Obama, such as Christopher Buckley (son of the late William F. Buckley, the godfather of the modern con-

servative movement); Susan Eisenhower, granddaughter of the late president Dwight D. Eisenhower; neoconservative hawk Kenneth Adelman; and ultra-conservative talk show host Michael Smerconish.<sup>91</sup> That Limbaugh would seek to racialize the Powell endorsement, given the other endorsements by white Republicans and conservatives mentioned here (and there were several others), suggests that he actually knew better, but also felt confident that pushing the button of racial resentment with his mostly white audience would pay dividends, if not on election day, at least down the line. By fostering a siege mentality whereby people of color can be viewed as "ganging up" on white Americans, conservatives like Limbaugh—or others who intimated that Obama's virtually unanimous support in the black community was "reverse racism" rather than the result of blacks identifying with the Democratic Party—can seek to exploit white fears in response to an Obama presidency. Though the pushing of this button failed to pay off for the right in 2008 as it had in prior elections (such as 1988, with the infamous "Willie Horton" ad used against Michael Dukakis), priming the pump of racial resentment could yet create greater racial tension in the future.

Along these same lines, right-wing commentators including Limbaugh, Neil Cavuto of Fox News, columnist Charles Krauthammer, and others spent the latter part of October seeking to pin the blame for the nation's housing

and financial crisis on poor folks and people of color, and thereby push racial anger buttons as voters prepared to go to the polls. This they did by suggesting that the responsibility for the mess lay almost entirely with laws like the Community Reinvestment Act (which seeks to steer investments into previously underserved neighborhoods and ensure that credit is available to persons in such communities who can qualify for loans) and groups like ACORN, which work at the grassroots level to open up credit access for lower-income folks in cities across the country. To hear these commentators tell it, had it not been for ACORN “forcing” banks to give loans to people in “bad neighborhoods” who had no business being homeowners, or if it hadn’t been for laws like CRA and the civil rights groups who pushed for their implementation, requiring loans to “minorities and other risky folks” as Cavuto put it, the subprime mortgage mess and the full-scale financial collapse it has triggered would never have occurred. To wit, the *Wall Street Journal*’s editorial page on September 27, 2008, which chimed in to suggest, “ACORN has promoted laws like the CRA, which laid the foundation for the house of cards built out of subprime loans.”<sup>92</sup>

But in fact, almost nothing the right has said about CRA or ACORN has even a remote resemblance to the truth. To begin with, the Community Reinvestment Act only applies to federally insured depository institutions such as banks and thrifts (like savings and loans). It does

not apply at all to independent mortgage brokers, and yet it is these brokers who are responsible for the vast majority of subprime loans. Furthermore, the loans written under the CRA actually perform well, in part because the underwriting standards are fairly stringent and, unlike many of the subprime loans written by mortgage brokers, do require verification of income and ability to repay the loan in question. In fact, loans written by the institutions not covered by CRA have foreclosure rates four to five times higher than those for CRA-covered institutions, suggesting that if anything, CRA engenders responsible lending, rather than its opposite.

So too is ACORN inaccurately blamed. Not only has ACORN not encouraged or forced irresponsible lending to the poor or persons of color, but indeed its mortgage assistance program only helps borrowers get deals if they first go through counseling on budget and credit issues, and if they have a demonstrated capacity to repay the loan taken out. This is likely why loans procured with the assistance of ACORN have a virtually nonexistent foreclosure rate of less than one-third of one percent, making it one of the biggest success stories in housing of the past half century.<sup>93</sup>

By seeking to blame poor folks, people of color, and the groups that advocate for them for the financial troubles of the nation—and especially when combined with their bogus claims that ACORN had engaged in “massive voter

fraud” so as to steal the election for Obama—the right may well manage to foster greater racial resentments and backlash against an Obama administration as we move forward.<sup>94</sup> That its efforts to scapegoat such persons as these failed to sink Obama’s campaign chances is perhaps reassuring, but the potential for the right to poison the well of race relations with such rhetoric remains quite real.

Indeed, immediately after Obama was elected a spate of overtly racist incidents suggests this backlash, cultivated by the right, may already be in full swing. Within two weeks of Obama’s victory, several stories about nooses hung on college campuses, or Obama effigies, or racist and anti-Obama graffiti, or death threats against the president-elect had surfaced. In Pennsylvania, a white teacher’s aide was suspended for telling a black student that Obama would be assassinated, that the country would be ruined with him in office, and that he would likely change the American flag to the KFC sign.<sup>95</sup> In one Idaho town, elementary school children on the bus chanted “Assassinate Obama” a week after the election, much to the chagrin of one student who told her parents,<sup>96</sup> and elsewhere, mostly in small towns, whites displeased with the election of Obama made their views known in terms that rarely sought to veil their racial animus.<sup>97</sup>

But in spite of all the racially coded campaign language, and even the blatantly racist appeals of others, one might argue—and I’m confident many will—that since

Obama ultimately won, this is yet more confirmation that entrenched white bigotry, though still present in small pockets, nonetheless is on the way out. Yes, white racism is still out there, but clearly not enough to stop persons of color from advancing and succeeding. Which brings us to the second question so often asked in the months leading up to the election.

### **WAS WHITE AMERICA READY FOR A BLACK PRESIDENT? THE TRIUMPH OF RACISM 2.0**

Given Barack Obama’s victory in November 2008, it might be tempting to conclude that the question “Was white America ready for a black president” has been answered, and with a resounding “yes.” And yet, a few words of caution are probably wise at this stage. Most importantly, it may be that rather than asking this question, the better question to ask would have been under what circumstances is white America ready for a black president? And what kind of black president are we prepared, collectively, to accept?

### **THE TROUBLE WITH TRANSCENDENCE**

Though it is important to challenge the kind of old-

just as unproductive or misdirected. And while he then spent a few seconds directly challenging perceived irresponsibility in the black community and calling for better parenting in black families, he didn't see the need to challenge white parents for passing along in many cases, the vicious pathogen of racism to their kids. Like so many others, Bill Cosby first and foremost, Obama's calls for personal responsibility were almost entirely one-sided, thereby allowing whites to feel a kinship with him and his approach to these matters, and ensuring that only the most reactionary white voter would think him a radical on race issues.

Whether or not one blames Obama for his approach here is not the point. Perhaps one could argue that as a politician, needing white votes, he had little choice. That may well be the case. But we must at least recognize what his need to pander to the perceived needs of the national white electorate means about race and racism in this country. It means this, nothing more and nothing less: White folks are still calling the shots. White folks still hold the power. White folks still get to call the tune. White needs, perspectives, views, and privilege still dominate, and until that changes, profound social injustices against people of color will continue to be perpetuated. The fact that there are some folks of color who can play the tune, and quite well at that, hardly alters the dynamic between those who call it and those who are forced to do the dance. And the

danger here is that if we are not extraordinarily careful, Obama's success on white terms may only reinforce the negative feelings that so many whites have about the larger black community, and other communities of color, whose members, on the whole, do not choose to play the game in the same way, or even if they try, fail to live up to the standard set by Obama thus far.

#### WHITE PERCEPTIONS OF NON-OBAMA-LIKE PEOPLE OF COLOR

That white folks view blacks, by and large, in terms quite different from the way so many of them view Obama is really not debatable, and is strongly confirmed by the results of opinion surveys for the past twenty years, which suggest that most whites hold any number of negative, prejudiced, and ultimately racist beliefs about black people.

Results on opinion surveys vary depending on the way pollsters construct the questions asked, but as a general rule, one thing has been consistent across each of the survey instruments: namely, somewhere in the neighborhood of 60 percent of all whites admit to holding racist views about African Americans. According to a National Opinion Research Center survey in the early 1990s, over 60 percent of whites said they believed that blacks are generally lazier than other groups, 56 percent say that blacks

are generally more prone to violence, and over half say that blacks are generally less intelligent than other groups.<sup>100</sup> A similar survey from 1993 found that three in four whites accept as true at least one racist stereotype about African Americans, regarding such items as general laziness, propensity to criminality and violence, intelligence, or work ethic. And according to a 2001 survey, 60 percent of whites, approximately, admit that they believe at least one negative and racist stereotype of blacks: for example, that they are generally lazy, generally aggressive or violent, or prefer to live on welfare rather than work for a living.<sup>101</sup> In fact, the belief in black preference for welfare over work is typically the most commonly believed of the stereotypes; this despite the fact that only a very small percentage of African Americans—and for that matter, a minority of even poor African Americans—receive public assistance.

One other way pollsters manage to demonstrate the racism of whites is to ask questions probing why they believe African Americans, on average, are doing so much worse than whites, in terms of income, education, or poverty rates. In these surveys, subjects are asked to choose from among several factors contributing to racial inequity. These include racism and discrimination by whites against blacks (either past or present), inherent inferiority on the part of blacks, and black characterological or behavioral flaws. In most cases, small numbers say they agree with the notion of inherent black inferiority, some-

what larger numbers blame racism, but the vast majority choose the “character flaw” option, which often amounts to a belief that blacks “lack the appropriate work ethic” to better their lives, or “just don’t want to try hard enough,” or lack the necessary motivation or values in some way. Two-thirds of whites in one survey said the disadvantages suffered by blacks are due to their dependence on welfare, which, again, is an odd claim, seeing as how five out of six blacks don’t receive any.<sup>102</sup>

Of course, the irony of these “explanations” for black disadvantage couldn’t be much clearer. By claiming that most blacks are morally and behaviorally defective (and doing so as an alternative explanation contrasted with the racism and discrimination option), these whites have embraced an argument that is by definition racist in that it treats millions of African Americans as a mass of pathology, casting a judgment upon them as a group that further stigmatizes them in the eyes of the larger society. If whites said they believed black genes were defective, that they were biologically predisposed to failure, we would immediately recognize such an argument as racist. That whites are now content to settle for explanations that focus on black character defects should hardly strike us as any less so. There is still, even in this claim, a sense of presumed inferiority and superiority, with blacks on the bottom and whites on top.

Other research has found that when whites are shown



pictures of black faces, even for only thirty milliseconds, the parts of their brains that respond to perceived threats light up almost instantaneously,<sup>103</sup> suggesting the connection between blackness and danger that continues to animate much white consciousness. That whites view blacks as dangerous, deviant, and criminal likely helps explain why it was so easy for whites, as mentioned previously, to believe the ultimately false stories coming out of New Orleans in the wake of Katrina concerning rapes, murders, and child molestation in the evacuation centers.

White bias toward average, everyday African Americans also helps explain the findings of a recent study from the University of Illinois–Chicago to the effect that whites rate neighborhoods as lower in quality and desirability based solely on the race of the area's residents, even when other factors such as class status and demeanor are indistinguishable. In the study in question, researchers surveyed over 600 randomly selected whites in the Chicago and Detroit metropolitan areas. They showed the participants video clips of neighborhoods, in which actors posed as residents. The actors engaged in the same activities in each clip, and were paired in each sample, so as to portray similar class statuses and backgrounds, leaving racial identity of the actors/residents as the only variable remaining. Some study participants were shown clips with only white actors/residents, others were shown clips with black residents, and some were shown clips with a mix of black and

white actors/residents. The participants were then asked to evaluate the communities on a number of factors, including safety, future likely property values, and the quality of the neighborhood schools. Whites who saw videos with white residents rated neighborhoods far more positively than whites who saw videos with black residents in the identical neighborhood, while whites shown a mixed community rated such neighborhoods in between in terms of desirability.<sup>104</sup>

In keeping with the notion that whites can often accept individual blacks—Obama, Oprah or others—while still holding onto hostile views of blacks generally, consider the implications of research by sociologists Joe Feagin and Leslie Picca in their book *Two-Faced Racism: Whites in the Backstage and Frontstage*. Feagin and Picca had 626 college students keep journals, at schools around the country, in which they recorded any and all incidents, comments or other actions that they personally witnessed, involving some kind of racial issue. In a fairly typical account from one of the journals, one white college student offered telling details about what goes on when he gets together with a certain group of his white male friends:

When any two of us are together, no racial comments or jokes are ever made. However, with the full group membership present, anti-Semitic jokes abound, as do racial slurs and vastly derogatory

statements. . . . A member of the group . . . decided that he has the perfect idea for a Hallmark card. On the cover it would have a few kittens in a basket with ribbons and lace. On the inside it would simply say, "You're a nigger."<sup>105</sup>

According to Feagin and Picca, they received roughly 9,000 accounts of racial events, with 7,500 of these involving blatantly racist comments, jokes, or performances by whites around their white friends and colleagues. That many of these racist comments and actions came from whites who likely socialize with persons of color, even have "friends" of color, celebrate black entertainers and athletes, and certainly wouldn't consider themselves racist, only further suggests the way that racism often remains hidden behind a veneer of tolerance.

So while we can take some comfort in the way much of white America has embraced Barack Obama, and the way in which millions ultimately voted for him when given a chance to do so, we should exercise great caution in drawing broad and grand conclusions about white racism generally. That many whites view Obama as different, as non-threatening, as acceptable, nonetheless presupposes that those same whites continue to hold onto a range of negative beliefs about the larger black community. And so we have the evidence from the September 2008 AP survey, in which 60 percent of the white Democrats who admit-

ted to holding negative views about black folks in general nonetheless said that they planned to vote for Obama.<sup>106</sup>

While not wanting to overstate it, we might now revisit the previously conjured Cliff Huxtable analogy, for it applies in more ways than might be readily apparent, and the extent to which it does also points to the potential trouble posed by this fact. When *The Cosby Show* introduced the nation to the Huxtable family in the 1980s, it quickly became one of those rare programs to gain the loyalty of both white and black viewers. In its presentation of an upwardly mobile, professional black family (one parent a doctor, the other an attorney), *The Cosby Show* differed in many ways from earlier sitcoms featuring African American characters. A decade earlier, viewers may have watched *Good Times*, which revolved around a working-class family living in Chicago public housing; or *Sanford & Son*, whose principal characters worked in a junkyard in Los Angeles; or *The Jeffersons*, whose story line concerned a nouveau-successful if not entirely rich couple, and whose principal character, George Jefferson, ran a dry cleaning business on the upper east side of New York City. In each case, the black characters were both economically marginalized (or in the case of the Jeffersons, only newly monied, and somewhat out of place in their new digs) and far more stereotypical in their lexicon, demeanor, speech style, and mannerisms. Although these shows, contrary to common critiques, actually went

far to humanize their subjects (especially *Good Times*, whose Evans family forged a hard-working, stable, and loving home that in many ways could be read as counter to white stereotypes about folks living in so-called ghettos), because the characters were placed in more typical settings and roles, whites never fully took to them, and often had difficulty relating to their struggles.

Perhaps even more importantly, because these earlier shows often dealt with racial themes (and quite effectively it should be noted), they took a risk of alienating white audiences, who by the 1970s were already tiring of race talk, having come through a decade where such talk had been at the top of the national agenda. *The Cosby Show* deviated from the prior formula in multiple ways: by portraying a highly educated and successful upper-middle-class family, by having that family be identifiably black (Cosby's character, for example, was often seen wearing sweatshirts from historically black colleges, and the Huxtable home featured African art and listened to a lot of Charlie Parker) but yet not too black in the way whites were used to thinking of African American folks: as uneducated, dysfunctional and lower-class. Critically, race as a subject was never part of the Huxtables' life, much as it had never been a part of Cosby's comedy routines.<sup>107</sup> The Huxtable family's challenges were little different from those faced by any other American family, irrespective of color. Their kids talked back and engaged in fairly boilerplate teen hijinks;

they occasionally bickered, after which point they would make up, but never was there any indication that as a black family they confronted specifically race-based obstacles or concerns. That such a rendering would be an absurdist fantasy in the Reagan-Bush 1980s and early 1990s should be obvious, but it nonetheless proved certainly reassuring to white viewers.

And so it won't come as a particular shock to learn that when researchers from the University of Massachusetts convened focus groups of white Cosby viewers, they routinely, and with only a few exceptions, sang the praises of the program. White viewers regularly remarked upon how "normal" the Huxtables seemed, how their challenges as a family were so similar to those of their own families, and how they identified mightily with the Huxtable clan. They were often especially quick to draw a contrast between *The Cosby Show* and those earlier black-themed programs, usually holding the latter up to scorn while praising the former. As one focus group member explained, *The Cosby Show* "wasn't like a jive show, like *Good Times*. . . . Cosby is more of American down the line. . . ."<sup>108</sup>

A few things should be said about this statement in particular, in that it has considerable relevance for the 2008 presidential race and the way in which whites view Obama. To say that Cosby's character is more "American down the line" than the characters in *Good Times* is to equate, however implicitly, American with white, or, if not

white, at least a person of color whose life is a lot like that of a white person. Such a statement is quite revealing, in that it demonstrates a tendency for some among whites to view blacks who don't fit the Huxtable model as less than fully American. It's as if poor or middle-class blacks who don't speak in the dominant linguistic form of standard English have less claim on citizenship than the rest of us. The relevance of this kind of attitude to Obama's candidacy and the future of race relations in the United States should be readily apparent. While Obama may have succeeded in fitting himself within the Huxtable mold in the eyes of white America—or, whether or not he sought it, may now have been fit into that slot by others—the end result could well be the reinforcement of negative views toward those blacks who fail to attain the lofty pinnacle of “Huxtability” achieved by the new president.

This trade-off, whereby certain “acceptable” black folks are admired by whites, even as the larger black community is viewed negatively, did indeed manifest in the case of *The Cosby Show*, much as could happen in the wake of Obama's presidency. According to Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis in their 1992 book, *Enlightened Racism*, whites discussing Cosby often made comments suggesting “if the Huxtables can make it, anyone can.” Thus, for the mass of black humanity whom they had come to fear and loathe, that fear and loathing would only be reinforced, multifold,

given a glimpse into the way black folks could be, if only they'd put forth the effort to better themselves.

As the authors explained, “The acceptance of the Huxtables as an everyfamily did not dislodge the generally negative associations white viewers have of ‘black culture . . .’ [T]he price it pays for acceptance is that the Huxtables do appear ‘just like white people.’” And by showcasing a successful black family, they note, “*The Cosby Show* provides its white audience with relief not only from fear but also from responsibility.”<sup>109</sup> Much in the same way, by dint of his personal success narrative, his life story, and his studious finessing of race issues during his campaign, Obama managed to relieve whites of some of their anti-black anxieties, and certainly release them from worrying too much about black and brown folks, or their issues. Once relieved and mollified, whites were then free to support him in numbers they would never have delivered had he taken a different tack. While this paid substantial personal dividends for Obama, it remains to be seen whether it will merely create new obstacles, new barriers, and new hurdles for average, everyday black folks. If whites embrace Obama but then come to view non-Obama-like black folks even more negatively than before, little will have been accomplished on the racial front in a concrete sense, even as a black man commands the highest position of U.S. and, arguably, global politics.

Indeed, in the wake of Obama's victory, on election night, this precise comparison with Bill Cosby and his acceptable blackness was made, though without the recognition of its problematic nature, by none other than Karl Rove, who explained on Fox News that America had had a black first family before, referring to the Huxtables! Speaking of the fictional family, Rove noted, "It wasn't a black family. It was an American family," at once suggesting that that which is black is not really American, and contributing to the notion that the Huxtables, as with the Obamas, now, transcend their problematic blackness, to the benefit of the nation.<sup>110</sup> But in such a formulation, blackness remains very much a problem to be overcome, and as such, racism—even if it is of the 2.0 variety—remains in evidence.

### **RACISM 2.0 AND THE DANGEROUS MYTH OF MERITOCRACY**

In the days following the election of Barack Obama to the office of the presidency, it was common to hear black folks on television, radio, or in personal conversations saying how because of his victory, they now felt they could look at their children, tell them that they could "be anything they wanted to be," and, for the first time, really mean it. That such a meaningful feeling for millions is touching

cannot be denied. For those of us who are white, it may even be jarring to realize that for hundreds of years black parents have been unable to believe in this fundamental message of America, seeing as how it is one that most of us have taken for granted for just as long as folks of color have doubted it. And yet, because Obama's rise to prominence does seem to be a textbook confirmation of the meritocratic notion that is at the heart of the American narrative—the idea that if you work hard and apply yourself you can be anything you want to be—it may pose yet another challenge to the struggle against racism.

Since Racism 2.0 relies principally on characterological judgments about persons of color—they don't work hard enough, for example—the belief in meritocracy is central to its perpetuation. Whereas old-school rejectionism never really fit too well within the meritocratic frame, seeing as how it often rested on the notion that certain people were just superior and others inferior (and so hard work really wasn't enough for some people to succeed), enlightened exceptionalism is almost entirely bound up with notions of individual initiative. In that regard, 150 years after the Dred Scott decision, in which the Supreme Court averred that blacks had no rights that whites were bound to respect, Racism 2.0 has become the quintessential form of racism in the United States.

That Racism 2.0 so neatly dovetails with the myth of meritocracy will make it especially difficult to confront,

first because it fits so cozily within the dominant national narrative, and secondly, because in seeming so downright principled (and less blatantly racist than the old-fashioned racism, which holds that persons of color are biologically and genetically inferior to persons of European descent), those who adhere to such racism are far more able to content themselves with the notion that they are not racists at all. By believing that black folks and other folks of color could do better (if only they would try harder), whites hold out the possibility for black and brown advancement, which is something that, historically, white supremacists would refuse to do. What's more, the practitioner of Racism 2.0 can even position themselves as caring, concerned, and beneficent individuals who only want the best for folks of color, and who might even be willing to tutor them, help them, or provide some charitable assistance to their communities, so as to help them "help themselves." These are folks who will see in Obama the ultimate confirmation of their nation's goodness and greatness, the ultimate proof that the sky is the limit and that barriers of race are no match for the determined will, despite all the aforementioned evidence suggesting that it is, shall we say, just a tad bit more complicated than that.

But by reinforcing the perception of meritocracy as more than just a nice theory—by allowing folks to see it even more than ever as a descriptive truth—Obama's success could (again, if we are not extraordinarily careful)

make the fight against racism more difficult than ever, seeing as how meritocracy may be the cornerstone of modern racism itself. If we are taught—and we are, most all of us, irrespective of race or economic status—that anyone can make it if they try hard enough, then isn't it to be expected that those who haven't "made it" will come to be viewed as especially damaged, and as the source of their own sorry station in life? And if folks can then look around and see that among those who haven't "made it" are a disproportionate number of persons of color, doesn't it become almost logical (albeit horribly wrongheaded) to conclude that there must be something wrong with black and brown folks? Doesn't it become easier to rationalize racial domination and inequity, to rationalize white advantage and privilege, and to accept blatant injustices on a mass scale, since they can be written off to aggregate gaps in effort, ambition, or work ethic between whites on the one hand and blacks and Latinos on the other?

### **RACISM 2.0 AND THE PROBLEM OF STEREOTYPE THREAT**

And there is one final consideration here as well: namely, that Obama's success on white terms—and the emergence of Racism 2.0, which would create massive pressure on blacks to live up to the standard set by Obama and disprove

1. Jessie Daniels, "Ground Game in PA: Anti-Racist Organizing," *RacismReview.com*, November 5, 2008. Also, this author consulted with the Obama campaign in Ohio a few months before the election, specifically on how to address racism encountered by canvassers and phone bankers calling on behalf of Obama in working class communities. That the campaign was open to the suggestion that they couldn't merely "pivot" back to economics when racism was evident, but instead needed to confront it directly (albeit respectfully), suggests that the ability to turn the Obama experience for many volunteers into antiracist training may be stronger than many suspect.
2. I personally received several dozen e-mails during the 2008 campaign from Obama volunteers to the effect that they were often shocked by the extent of the racism they experienced during the campaign, and additionally heard stories to that extent from others across the nation who had worked for Obama, either as canvassers or phone solicitors.
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