On Post-Racial America in the Age of Obama

Amina Gautier

AMINA GAUTIER is an Assistant Professor of English at DePaul University. She has published short stories in the *Antioch Review*, *Iowa Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and *Southern Review*, among others. She received the 2010 Flannery O'Connor Award, and the University of Georgia Press will publish her short story collection, *At-Risk*, in September 2011. She has written critical essays for *Libraries and Culture* and *Whitman Noir* and is currently working on a monograph, *Wielding the Stronger: Charles W. Chesnutt and the Politics of Gender*.

I had the chance to travel to Washington, D.C., to witness the moment when U.S. Senator Barack Obama became President Barack Obama. Regrettably, I passed up that opportunity to attend the inauguration of our forty-fourth president, a chance many I know would have immediately leaped upon. The offer to attend dropped into my lap at almost the ninth hour and was tenuous at best, resting on the whims of three people (only one of whom I knew) and on a road trip from the Midwest to the East Coast. Furthermore, my native New Yorker's sensibility – ever-present despite having lived away from home and in numerous other cities for more than a decade – argued against the idea of joining record-breaking numbers in a D.C. crowd. Real New Yorkers leave the crowds, parades, and New Year's Eve ball-drop to tourists and New York transplants, knowing that monumental events lose nothing by virtue of being televised and that watching a televised parade or national observance is much safer than subjecting oneself to a crowd's tramplers and snipers. Indeed, despite being the nation's capital, Washington, D.C., has never struck me as particularly safe. (There is, after all, a reason the Washington Bullets changed their name to the Washington Wizards.)

I did not share with many others I knew the same level of enthusiasm that would have compelled me to ride halfway across the country in a car with one friend and two strangers only to arrive and stand outside for hours on a blustery cold day. I would

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be huddled among strangers, blocked by much taller people in front of me, all to see something I would almost certainly be standing too far away from to see in the first place. Unlike the dignitaries, I would not have heating devices sewn into my clothing (as Michelle Obama did) to keep me warm while I kept vigil. Therefore, I reasoned that if I had to watch the event on a screen, I might as well watch it on television from the safety of my own home, surrounded by such creature comforts as food, heat, and an easily accessible restroom.

So, on January 20, 2009, I sat in my living room in my small apartment in St. Louis for most of the morning and watched the inaugural proceedings while preparing the class I was to teach later that day. In the middle of the afternoon, I went to the university (Washington University in St. Louis, where I was on a temporary postdoctoral fellowship) to teach my class on African American literature written after the Reconstruction. I returned home afterward to watch more inaugural proceedings.

My lack of enthusiasm to stand in the crowd on Inauguration Day in no way reflected a lack of enthusiasm for the incoming president. More important than the thoughts of inconvenience and potential danger to my person were other thoughts, deeply embedded in my subconscious that encouraged my refusal to attend and, ultimately, led to the missed opportunity. Unlike many white Americans, I had not been surprised by Obama's candidacy or election to the presidency (nor would I have been surprised by any other black person's election). I was, however, at turns fearful that the inauguration would go wrong and the new president would be the victim of a violent melee. My sense of being both nonplussed and fearful derived from one source: the cultural memory that has been bandying about the idea of black presidency for more than thirty years.

For African Americans of my generation (those born in the late 1970s), having a black president signifies something entirely different than it does for African Americans born earlier. On the night of his presidential election, Barack Obama spoke anecdotally about Ann Nixon Cooper in his acceptance speech. One hundred and six years old at the time she cast her vote in the 2008 election, Ann Nixon Cooper was used to symbolize the idea of change. Having lived more than one hundred years, Cooper exemplified the scope and nature of change in our nation. She represented how much can change in one's lifetime, how one can be born into a certain kind of life, molded and influenced by the policies of the day, and yet live through them to see change that heretofore had been unimaginable. Ann Nixon Cooper lived to see something my great-grandmother could not fathom. A woman who marveled at the new "trend" of babies being born with their eyes open, who was warily perplexed and distrustful of the invention of Pampers in the 1970s, my great-grandmother lived long enough to hear only the rumor of black presidential candidacy.

In April 1984, when I was seven years old and in second grade, my great-grandmother lay dying in a Brooklyn hospital. While visiting there, my mother told her the news she had recently read in the newspaper.

"Mama," my mother said to her, using the endearment by which we all called her. "Guess what?"

"What?" my great-grandmother asked, dispirited, weary, and in incurable pain.

"A black man is going to run for president!"

"Really? He *is*?" my great-grandmother asked in a voice filled with wonder, her pain momentarily gone.

My great-grandmother died on Easter Sunday in 1984. She did not live to see the Reverend Jesse Jackson run for president, but she died in awe of the imminent possibility.

I knew of many stories like the one that occurred in my family, of African Americans who held out hope for a black president, yet who did not expect ever to see such a momentous event occur within their own lifetimes.

I was not one of those folks. Unlike those born before the 1970s, I never asked *if* I would be so lucky as to live long enough to see the first black president in my country. Instead, the way playmates and classmates of mine calculated how old we would be when the millennium came, I asked myself how old I would be *when* my country inaugurated our first black president. What existed as possibility in the eyes of my ancestors was an inevitability in mine. I did not take the occasion for granted, however. I fully understood that the moment, when it came, would not have materialized out of thin air. Indeed, the idea of a black president is one that has been circulating in popular culture since the beginning of the post–civil rights era, of which I am a product.

The idea that a black president was on the way had been planted – undoubtedly – by the seeds of the civil rights era, nourished in American popular culture of the 1980s and 1990s, and watered to grow tall and willowy in African American cultural memory. We (black Americans) had spoken about the idea for quite some time. Whether in seriousness or jest, we knew it to be a real possibility.

On the political front, three black Americans paved the way. Dick Gregory's 1968 campaign as a write-in for the Freedom and Peace Party, the 1972 bid by Shirley Chisholm – the first black woman elected to Congress – for the Democratic presidential nomination, and Jesse Jackson's 1984 and 1988 bids for the Democratic presidential nomination accustomed America to the idea of a black president in the post–civil rights era. Media and popular culture went one step further, embedding the idea of a black president in the consciousness of African Americans. On the airwaves, hip hop verses testified to rappers voting for Shirley Chisholm (Biz Markie and LL Cool J, among others, have lyrics that directly refer to Chisholm's candidacy), and running commentary on black presidential candidates loomed large on the silver screen.

As early as 1974, the pilot episode of *Good Times* mentions such a possibility. When the Evans family must raise the rent money necessary to prevent them from being evicted, all the Evans children offer to contribute their meager savings. The youngest, Michael (Ralph Carter), tells his father, "I'll give you two dollars I've been saving up for law school." Although grateful and humbled, James Evans (John Amos) refuses his children's money. In response to Michael's dream, James pushes him further: "Boy, I believe you can skip lawyer and go right on to president!" On August 17, 1983, clad in a red leather jacket and matching pants, Eddie Murphy delivered his *Delirious* comedy routine at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. In his performance, he referred to Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign: "Jesse knows that it can happen. I see him running around the track – I said 'why are you getting in shape?' He said 'Because I'm about to be the first black president. I'll have to give my speeches like this. My fellow

Americans, as your president I feel . . . .'" Impersonating Jackson, Murphy runs back and forth across the stage, pivoting several times, making quick reverses, revealing quick and fancy footwork. He then switches characters and, holding an imaginary firearm in his hands, squints one eye shut and cries, "He won't stand still" – an impersonation of a white sniper attempting to target Jackson and assassinate the first black president.

In 1989, an episode of *A Different World* titled "Citizen Dwayne" (the show was a spinoff of *The Cosby Show*) juxtaposed Dwayne Wayne's (Kadeem Hardison) run for student body president with the Reverend Jesse Jackson's unsuccessful presidential bid. Running on a campaign devoted to such issues as the need to charge admission to student dances in order to fund scholarships and maintain the campus paper and film society – to "party with a purpose," as he puts it – Dwayne is smeared by his opponent Teressa, who warns students, "Don't vote for Dwayne; he's a wallet drain!" Appearing as himself, the Reverend Jesse Jackson tells Dwayne not to withdraw his name from the race, despite Dwayne's belief that "no one on this campus cares about the issues. This is the ME generation." Jackson relates his own unsuccessful first campaign, reminding Dwayne that the only reason people listen to him when he speaks is because "I wouldn't give up." He tells Dwayne, "You must stand up if you want to be a leader. You can't cook with cold grease. A man can't be heard if he stops talking." Dwayne doubts the effectuality of just one individual, but Jackson assures him, "[I]t was always started by some young person who thought they could make a difference. One person can make a difference. Hands that picked cotton can now pick presidents." Jackson leaves Dwayne with a message about the power resulting when hope and determination are forged together – a combination called change.

As a child, I grew up with the understanding that a black American, male or female, could indeed become the president of the United States. It was not a hope as it was for my great-grandmother born in the early twentieth century. It was not a wish and the punch line of a joke as it was for those – like my mother – who matured in an era of war, national crisis, and the seemingly never-ending assassinations of civil rights leaders. It was a reality, a truth, a part of my life, something I understood would happen just as I understood that I would attend college upon graduating from high school. Because I had internalized this expectation, I understand the 2008 election as the start of a new discussion on race relations in America rather than the end of a discussion that has only ever been had in whispers and hushes and not full voices, through monologue and soliloquy rather than dialogue, through allegory, metaphor, and figurative language rather than direct speech. Therefore, I must admit to being utterly confounded by the claims that President Obama's election signifies the beginning of a "post-racial" America.

I find the term *post-racial* to be not only problematic and disconcerting, but grammatically incorrect. As elementary school students learn in language arts classes across the country, *post-* is a Latin prefix meaning "after"; it is the opposite of the Latin prefix *ante-*, which means "before." In order for something to come "after," something else must have come "before." Thus, *post-* always has something previous in mind. As a professor of African American literature and, by extension, a student of history, when I hear the term *post-racial* I am immediately reminded of other terms that invoke the prefix: post-Reconstruction, post-feminism, post-colonialism, post-World War, post-Cold War, post-civil rights. As becomes quickly apparent, all other *post-* designations follow the rules. They are temporal and finite, referring to a clearly defined movement or historical era by which they were preceded. For example, the post-Reconstruction era is easily definable as the period after Reconstruction, ushered in by the Compromise of 1877, which secured the presidency of Rutherford B. Hayes and saw the removal of remaining federal troops from Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina.

The term *post-racial* seems an errant phrase. In order for there to be a "post-racial" America, there must previously have been a "racial America." To affix the prefix *post-* to a word implies a completion, hence the strident debates over the use of the term *post-feminism*, which many have argued diminishes the importance of feminism by implying that the movement is over, though its goals have not been met. As history will attest, the freedmen suffered terribly in the "post-Reconstruction" era, left as they were for another one hundred years without any real enforcement of the civil rights that would have given meaning to the word *freedom*. Indeed, reformers (convinced that the good fight was over now that the slave was free) turned their focus to other projects, and the freedmen's rights were repealed and repressed during "Bourbon-led Redemption."

One recent experience brought home to me very clearly the fact that we are not actually "post-" anything. At the beginning of the Fall 2009 semester at the small liberal arts college where I was then teaching, students clamored to join clubs and recruit members for their organizations. They turned to advertising and marketing strategies to distinguish themselves and attract members, using the usual methods of offering T-shirts and free food. Nearly every flyer I saw plastered to a pole or posted on a corkboard promised free pizza and soda for all who came. One student group, however, did not use free goodies to tempt the masses. A poster for the College Republicans depicted President Obama as the Joker from *Dark Knight*, the 2008 film that is part of the Batman film series.

Arriving early to teach my class, I overheard one student discussing the poster with another classmate. "It's just the Joker," she said. "It's no big deal. It's not even racial." Her willful resistance to consider what the Joker represents in the film struck me as particularly ignorant and deliberately naive. The poster was – and is – as undoubtedly "racial" as any picture of a black man in whiteface must be. The wide red lips and greasepaint recall minstrelsy, and invoking the Joker as he appears in *Dark Knight* is an allusion to terrorism. The Joker of the *Dark Knight* is not the joker of a deck of playing cards: not the prank-playing court-jester type of joker, but unquestionably a terrorist; a man who disguises his face while he commits acts of robbery, burglary, and murder, a man who attacks agents of law enforcement, assaults innocent men and women, partners with crime lords, and prefers anarchy to democracy. That the white students could design and defend the poster seems not only racial, but treasonous. The use of the poster to attract students, the approval of the poster by residential life staff, and the denial of the poster's inappropriateness and offensive nature assure me that – even if the rules of grammar would sustain the terminology – the age of Obama is not a "post-racial" age by any definition whatsoever.