

The Audacity of Post-Racism

By Adam Mansbach

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I watched Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union" in my living room, on a laptop computer with tinny speakers. Like millions of other Americans, I felt a surge of amazement, a sense of expanding possibility, at the sheer fact that a black man with a good chance of becoming president was speaking about race and racism on national television for half an hour. Such an eloquent and thoughtful discourse on *any* topic far exceeds what we have come to accept of American politics; to hold forth on an issue so pernicious and so seldom approached with honesty is remarkable.

My enthusiasm held until Obama let white people off the hook. Though I grasped the political necessity of the move, my expectations of this man were sufficiently high that it was disheartening to hear him fudge the difference between institutional racism and white bitterness. Three weeks earlier, I'd felt a similar sense of letdown when, challenged at a debate in Ohio to further denounce Minister Louis Farrakhan, Obama responded by articulating the need to mend black-Jewish relations, then proceeded to reinscribe the very paradigm that has served to rend them.

I say this as a white person, a Jew, and an enthusiastic Obama supporter. My reaction, it also bears mentioning, was colored by the fact that when the Ohio debate aired I had just published a novel entitled *The End of the Jews*, which chronicled three generations of a Jewish-American family and also took as its subject the evolving relations between black and Jewish artists throughout the 20th century. "A More Perfect Union" marked the first time I'd sat on my couch in weeks; I had just returned from a book tour speckled with dates at Jewish Community Centers and synagogues, in addition to the standard bookstores and universities.

This level of interaction with Jewish communities was utterly new to me. No one had ever considered me a Jewish writer before, except the white supremacists who'd protested the speaking gigs for my previous novel, *Angry Black White Boy*, and accused me of "masquerading as white." I was raised by secular parents raised by secular parents, and at the age of twelve I was expelled from the Sunday School And Half-Price Car

Wash For The Children Of Agnostic Cultural Jews after getting into a fight with my teacher about whether Satch Sanders of the 1940s Boston Celtics was the only black person in history not to abandon his community after achieving success. It was the culmination of a lesson devoted to the great Jewish Exodus – from Roxbury, Massachusetts in the 1950s, when the blacks moved in.

I won't blame the encounter for souring me on Judaism; more accurate would be to say that as a kid growing up in a largely Jewish suburb, I simply conflated Jewish with white, and thus my frustration with the complacency and hypocrisy of white liberals (I didn't know any conservatives) extended automatically to Jews.

The pervasiveness of injustice was something I had always intuited; obsessing over fairness on a personal level is a childhood instinct that can remain personal and fade, or broaden into an analysis of the world and grow stronger. But my absorption in the still-underground culture of hip-hop was what allowed me to confirm that things were not well, very close by and yet in another world altogether.

I believe the music to which one is exposed at twelve is the most important one will ever hear; I was that age in 1988, when Public Enemy, Boogie Down Productions, Stetsasonic, The Jungle Brothers and N.W.A. were articulating the insidious realities of police brutality, a Eurocentric school system, American collusion in South African apartheid, and ghettos ravaged by crack and guns – all over unbelievably dope beats. Thanks to METCO, a busing program that constituted Boston's uni-directional form of school integration, these tapes made their way to the suburbs and to me.

Hip-hop, at the time, was one of the only sites in American life to dislocate whiteness from its presumed position of centrality. By listening, I was listening in. And only by physically seeking out the parties, the shows, and the record stores that sold 12" singles – all located in the aforementioned Roxbury and other equally un-white neighborhoods – could I hope to participate. Doing so meant venturing outside of comfort zones, rendering myself visible as different.

Soon, it also meant a chance step away – semantically, momentarily – from the nimbus of skin privilege and the complicity in injustice it afforded me. This is to say that hip-hop became a different kind of comfort zone: contested, and all the more beloved for it. Hip-hop demanded that I cast off romantic notions of colorblindness and investigate

oppression. Not just as a relic of the past, as it was presented in school. Nor as something held at bay by regular donations to the NAACP or the Southern Poverty Law Center. But as something monstrously alive, a fact of life even a fool could see – so long as that fool knew where to look.

By taking casual and institutional racism for granted, hip-hop created space for follow-up questions – quintessentially hip-hop questions like *how do we flip this?* Well, by exploiting exploitation: by using the black kid as a decoy in the art supply store, while the white kid steals the spray paint. By having the black kid buy the beer in the white neighborhood, since the old white store owner can't tell fifteen from twenty-one so long as fifteen is darker than blue.

Of course, nobody ever got carded at Giant Liquors in the 'Bury; you could ride in on a tricycle and leave with a case of Olde English 800. The realization was sobering, and it was not the only one.

Though it opened my eyes, hip-hop also let me deceive myself. It permitted me to believe that the opposite of white privilege was not working to dismantle that privilege, but embracing and being embraced by blackness. Thus, as long as my friends were black people who didn't like white people, I figured I was doing my part. The experience of being a token whiteboy was one of being identified, tested, and ultimately accepted; it was about feeling exceptional, in the word's truest sense. Had I pondered my status a bit harder, I might have concluded that it was not to be attributed to an uncanny understanding of the plight of black people and the true nature of racism, but rather to the fact that I was a little less oblivious and smug than the average white kid, a little more willing to put myself on the line. Also, I could rap.

It would take me years to realize the flawed nature of some of the racial equations by which I lived, but one thing I did grasp immediately, given the company I kept, was the unspoken difference between the political and the personal. Between Whiteness, as a concept that engendered fury and pointed jokes, and an individual white person, who would be judged on his merits – if he stuck around long enough to realize that a rant about The White Man didn't mean he ought to leave before he got his ass kicked, but rather the opposite.

I delve into the race politics that marked my adolescence (and hip-hop's) because the manner in which their sharpness has blurred is the backdrop for "A More Perfect Union." Hip-hop is now America's dominant youth culture. It still dislocates whiteness, but in a way far less conducive to personal growth or rigorous assessment of injustice. White hip-hoppers of my era constructed elaborate rhetorical structures intended to accommodate paradox, to acknowledge the devilishness of white supremacy without condemning ourselves. Today, white youth are confounded by a different paradox: the divergence of cultural capital and hard capital in American life.

Largely because of hip-hop, American coolness is coded and commodified more than ever as American blackness. White kids all over the country believe, based on the pixilated signifiers on their TV screens, that blackness equals flashy wealth, supreme masculinity, and ultra-sexualized femininity – interrupted occasionally by bursts of glamorous violence, and situated in a thrilling ghetto that is both dangerous and host to a constant party. They feel locked out of the possibility of attaining that lifestyle, because of the color of their skin. They don't know where to find a workable identity, unless they embrace the "I'm a fucking redneck" ethos of Levi Johnston, Sarah Palin's former future son-in-law. All this strikes them as oppressive, and their resentment is compounded by the fact that they possess no language with which to discuss it.

Were any of this utterable, one could present them with reams of evidence demonstrating that in all the important ways, white people in America are anything but marginal. Traditional markers of prosperity – the inheritance of wealth, the rates of home-ownership, the comparative levels of education and income and incarceration – reveal just how privileged whites remain relative to blacks. A recent study conducted at Princeton University revealed that a white felon stands an equal chance of being granted a job interview as a black applicant with no criminal record, and there are dozens of other studies that each speaks volumes.

Nonetheless, confusion persists even among the kind of coast-dwelling, liberally-raised, relatively well-educated white kid I once was about the basic facts of racism today – to say nothing of everyone to their ideological right. They want to know if the playing field is level; they can't tell, and they've got their fingers crossed that it is because if it's

not they've got to confront things no one has prepared them to face. Many of them would rather believe, and in fact suspect, that it is slanted in black people's favor.

At the very least, they're eager for a kind of moral compromise, one with an air of the fairness so appealing to young minds: *racism cuts in both directions. Anyone can be its victim, just as anyone can refuse to perpetrate it.*

This is what Barack Obama provided on March 20th in Philadelphia. After a succinct but powerful summary of institutional racism's history and its practical and psychic effects on black people, he added that

“a similar anger exists within segments of the white community. Most working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race... as far as they're concerned, no one's handed them anything.... So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear that an African-American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed; when they're told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time... to wish away the resentments of white Americans, to label them as misguided or even racist, without recognizing they are grounded in legitimate concerns – this too widens the racial divide, and blocks the path to understanding.”

Obama's insights about white anger are salient, but to characterize ire at affirmative action and at *the thought that others might think them prejudiced* as 'similar' to the frustration felt by the victims of entrenched structural racism is disingenuous, and even irresponsible. I don't dispute that white resentments should be addressed, if only because white people will refuse to grapple with race unless they are allowed to centralize themselves. But to begin such a discussion – the mythic National Dialogue on Race – without acknowledging that structural racism is a cancer metastasizing through every aspect of American life is impossible. Call it, to borrow a catchphrase from the foreign policy side of the election, a precondition.

Implicit in the resentment Obama identified is whites' belief that they *should* be significantly advantaged because of their race. They are not angry because people *think* they're advantaged when they aren't, they're angry because they don't feel advantaged *enough*. The essence of white privilege is not knowing you have it; white people in America are bicyclists riding with the wind at their backs, never realizing that they owe part of their speed – whatever speed that is – to forces beyond their control. By no means does this guarantee success. But few whites are conditioned to contemplate how much worse off they might be if they had to grapple with factors like police profiling and housing discrimination, in addition to the other travails of being an American in 2008.

To place the experiences of white and black Americans on an equal footing, Obama must abandon the empirical and speak the language of the emotional. Hence, the focus on how people 'feel' – privileged or not, racist or not – rather than on the objective realities of what they have and do and say.

The soft-focus abstraction of racial realities goes beyond Obama's speech. It has been a hallmark of the entire presidential campaign, with its musings on whether Obama is too black, black enough, or 'post-race.' Naturally, one must be black to be 'post-race,' for the same reason that no one thought to ask whether Hillary Clinton or Mitt Romney was too white or not white enough. The purpose of abstracting race is to obscure racism, to elide the fact that a black person is never so lacking in blackness – culturally, personally, politically, or by any other standard – to find himself exempt from discrimination.

The desire for personal post-race status is an impulse I encounter frequently. Without fail, it comes from well-intentioned white people looking to be absolved of whiteness – not through their politics, but their biographies. They listen studiously to my take on race privilege, then raise their hands to identify themselves as white but gay, or white but Irish and thus part of an ethnicity that was once considered nonwhite, or white but from an all-Dominican neighborhood.

My response to such statements is always the same. I have no desire to belittle any aspect of your identity, I say, but either you walk through this world with white skin privilege or you don't. There's no such thing as being pulled over for Driving While Wanting To Be Black. Sometimes how you 'self-identify' is irrelevant. You could be a

gay Irish dude from the heart of Washington Heights, with a Senegalese lover and a degree from Morehouse to boot. The cop and the judge and the loan officer and the potential employer are only going to check one mental box. And when they do, you're going to benefit from the way they see you, like it or not.

'Post-race' suggests, not without an air of self-congratulation, that we are moving toward an acceptance of the multifaceted nature of identity – learning to assimilate, for instance, the idea that a human being can be both Kenyan and Kansan. This may be true. The problem is that post-race inevitably implies post-*racism*. To conflate the two ignores the very nature of oppression.

I witnessed this perspective recently at a talk I gave in Minneapolis. A woman in the audience stood up to explain that racism would soon be vanquished without any concerted effort on our part, and cited the infant on her hip as proof. She was Korean, she said, and her husband black and Italian. Their son was all three. Any machine that attempted to categorize him would explode.

The sad truth that this child will someday be forced to color in a single bubble on a Scantron form like everyone else speaks to the particular insidiousness of race. It is a construct, not a question of biology or self-image. It will not vanish in the face of multi-ethnicity, because it exists for a purpose, and that purpose is hierarchy.

Had Obama not lent so much currency to the notion of a kind of equality of racial bitterness, enacted on a field that everyone thinks favors the other team, the case of Geraldine Ferraro might not have played out as it did: as a spectacular example of racist action forgiven because racist 'feeling' is not found, and an abject, to-the-political-death refusal to acknowledge the difference between structural racism and white resentment.

The former Congresswoman and vice-presidential nominee forfeited her place in the Clinton campaign when she told reporters that "If Obama was a white man, he would not be in this position," just as she would not have been tapped for the vice presidency by Walter Mondale had she not been a woman. The difference between being appointed to a ticket and winning a record number of primary votes across the entire nation seemingly escaped Ferraro, who elaborated on her remarks a few weeks later in a stunning *Boston Globe* op-ed:

“Since March, when I was accused of being racist for a statement I made about the influence of blacks on Obama's historic campaign, people have been stopping me to express a common sentiment: If you're white you can't open your mouth without being accused of being racist. They see Obama's playing the race card throughout the campaign and no one calling him for it as frightening. They're not upset with Obama because he's black; they're upset because they don't expect to be treated fairly because they're white.”

Contrary to Ferraro's recollection, the most striking aspect of the media's response to her initial comments was the consistency with which pundits and commentators across the ideological spectrum fell all over themselves to *avoid* accusing her of racism. Seldom, in political life, has the sinner been granted such immediate distance from her sin.

But this has become the blueprint for public figures who make inflammatory remarks about race – as long as they're white. First comes the claim that their words do not reflect their hearts. This puts the ball in the commentariat's court. The commentariat duly concurs that the figure is not racist, despite all evidence to the contrary. Then, after a probationary period of a few months, the figure quietly resumes his or her role in public life.

“I am not a racist.” So said Bill Clinton on ABC News shortly after the conclusion of his wife's presidential bid, defending himself against accusations of race-baiting.

“I'm not a racist, that's what's so insane about this.” So said *Seinfeld's* Michael Richards in 2006, explaining himself on *The David Letterman Show* after a video surfaced of him dropping multiple n-bombs on a black heckler at a comedy club. Mel Gibson, who disgraced himself with an anti-Semitic rant the same year, put forth the same argument: *I'm not a racist, merely a guy who said something racist. It came out of nowhere, for no reason, and it doesn't reflect who I am.* Ditto Don Imus, after his 2007 “nappy-headed hoes” remark. And Senator Trent Lott, whose pro-segregation comments cost him his role as Majority Leader in 2002, though not his job.

It is a dramatic reversal of the standard criteria for judgment. Usually, we seek to be judged by our actions, not our thoughts, and we accept that the former is a manifestation of the latter. The success of this strategy, it would seem, hinges on the fact that it has become more acceptable to spout racism in the public arena than to accuse someone else of spouting racism.

On to the thesis Ferraro put forth: that whites in America have been rendered voiceless, that to be black is to be 'lucky' (to paraphrase another of her comments about Obama), that whites are the new racial underclass, that "they're attacking me because I'm white." They are notions that rhyme neatly with the identity frustrations of white youth. And Obama's speech would seem to grant them legitimacy, if we accept the argument that whatever people feel about race must be treated with the same respect as the facts.

I have no problem believing that people have been stopping Ferraro – although I suspect 'sidling up to' would be more accurate – to voice this 'common sentiment.' One might well ask, though, how she has been so unaffected by the racial gag order against which she rails. One might wonder why her silent majority of whites can so readily muster outrage at their own 'unfair treatment,' yet remain so blissfully unruffled by anyone else's. If one is feeling particularly optimistic, one might contemplate how to turn such complaints into what's known as a "teaching moment." Could white America's cresting indignation at its own marginalization be the Rosetta stone that allows it to understand how other people in the country feel?

Eh. Probably not.

On the other hand, the pressure on Obama to denounce Minister Farrakhan – which directly preceded the pressure to denounce Reverend Wright – offered the candidate a chance to speak a difficult truth to a valuable constituency and play a role in genuine healing. Certainly, Obama's rhetoric spoke to such a desire:

"What I want to do is rebuild what I consider to be a historic relationship between the African-American community and the Jewish community. I would not be sitting here were it not for a whole host of Jewish Americans who supported the civil rights movement and helped to ensure that justice was served in the South. And that coalition has frayed over time around a

whole host of issues, and part of my task... is making sure that those lines of communication and understanding are reopened.”

But rather than turning to that task, Obama proceeded to do precisely what the current, sorry state of black-Jewish relations demands. He iterated his rejection of Farrakhan’s endorsement, citing the Nation of Islam leader’s anti-Semitism, and left it at that.

For twenty-five years now, the specter of black anti-Semitism has been used as the rationale for tremendous Jewish disinvestment – practically, emotionally, financially – from the black community and the legacy of progressive work that blacks and Jews once shared. A handful of comments from civil rights-era black leaders provide most of the evidence. For many in the Jewish community, Jesse Jackson will always be the man who called New York City “Hymietown” in 1984. Al Sharpton will always be the man who inflamed a tense situation in Crown Heights in 1991, and Farrakhan will always be the man who, in 1983, called Judaism a “gutter religion.”

The fact that all three have apologized, moved on, and made amends does not seem to matter – that Jackson was instrumental in restoring peace to Crown Heights, that Sharpton’s 2004 presidential run was an exemplar of inclusiveness, that Farrakhan has been meeting regularly with a group of rabbis for more than ten years now, in an effort to mend fences.

Nor does it seem to matter that none of these men speaks for the black community at large, or that Obama's candidacy and the emergence of hip-hop generation leaders and grassroots political organizations prove that the civil rights generation is no longer in the driver's seat. They remain central in the Jewish memory of my parents’ and grandparents’ generations. Their comments are frozen in amber, never to be forgotten or forgiven. Thus, denunciations of Farrakhan – despite the declining influence of his organization, and his own outreach to the Jewish community – remain red meat for many Jewish voters.

How can this be, when the Ferraros, Imuses and Lotts of the world tiptoe back into the mainstream after a few probationary months, their best intentions unimpugned? Even Gibson, whose anti-Semitic rant was truly epic, had his incoherent, responsibility-

dodging apology promptly accepted by the Anti-Defamation League, a Jewish watchdog group that has never stopped vilifying Farrakhan.

The story behind the story is complex, one of changing identity in a changing country. Perhaps no two groups in America share such an intimate history as Jews and blacks; by turns it has been beautiful and tense, unified and vituperative. Both groups have been shattered and scattered, displaced and enslaved, and both have made outsized contributions to the cultural life of America. Both communities, perhaps by the nature of diaspora, have wide margins, in addition to existing on the margins of American life. By this I mean that the ratio of people who feel ambivalent, ambiguous, full of unresolved questions about their blackness or their Jewishness, is high in relation to the number of people nestled snugly in the bosoms of those communities. The pain and perspective engendered by this double marginality are important ingredients for art, and in the desire for social justice.

Jews and blacks have been united by this shared Otherness, and also pitted against one another because of it. At the root of the Jewish retreat from the coalition of which Obama speaks is the way in which Jewish assimilation has relied on the immutability of black Otherness as a foil. It has been an Other more Other than their own, and sometimes one to measure progress by their distance from.

As the Jews have been accorded more and more of the privileges of whiteness, many have decided, consciously or otherwise, that it behooves them to change their bedfellows. Fifty years ago, it was far more difficult for Jews to be complacent or hypocritical about race: they didn't have the option to pay mere lip service to the cause because they understood that they were implicated in it, both as potential victims and potential oppressors. The benefits of whiteness were fewer for Jews, and more readily contested. Thus, the morality of allowing them to accrue was easier to address honestly, and find lacking.

There is, of course, much more to the story – more than I have the space to go into, and also more than I know. I realize, too, that I have addressed the reasons for Jewish pullback from Obama's "historic relationship," and said nothing of black actions or motivations. This is not because I wish to cast all the blame on one side, but simply

out of a desire to stick to what I know, as someone who has discussed race with Jewish audiences quite a bit lately.

One question I was asked regularly at JCCs, as I proposed that more disturbing than the pickled comments of Farrakhan, Jackson, and Sharpton was the reasons Jews held so dearly to them, was “What about Jeremiah Wright?”

The query was always met by nods and murmurs of agreement from the audience – which, I should add for the sake of context, tended to be made up largely of people born well before the Truman administration.

“What about him?”

“Well, he’s said some things... some anti-Semitic things...”

“Like what?”

Silence. Had my interlocutors responded that Wright’s church had honored Farrakhan as “exemplifying greatness,” that would have been something. But it never happened. Rather, the logic at work seemed to be that a black religious leader was in the news for inflammatory statements, and therefore he must be an anti-Semite. Even if no evidence to that effect came to mind.

What will it take, then, to reverse the “fraying?” What more could Obama have said in Ohio about blacks and Jews, or in Pennsylvania about the larger conundrum of race?

Any answer begins with radical honesty of the sort most politicians can ill afford to muster. In Ohio, Obama could have risked declaring himself committed to moving beyond the old politics of suspicion and condemnation, detailed the reasons for the splintering of the black-Jewish alliance, and laid out a plan for reestablishing trust and a commonality of purpose. In Pennsylvania, he could have framed the road to racial reconciliation in the same terms he has been brave enough to apply to climate control: as a journey that will require real sacrifice, profound reevaluation of our lifestyles and the unsustainable practices on which they’re built. He could have looked into the living rooms of white America and declared that institutional racism is alive and well – that it benefits all those considered white, and also exacts from them a high moral toll.

But the political costs of such statements would have overwhelmed Obama’s campaign. And while the senator’s commitment to presiding over a sea change in

America's racial climate appears to be perfectly sincere, it is the level of commitment for which he is willing to call that matters. Soft-peddling the reality of white privilege might help bring people to the table, but if they come under false pretenses, they won't stay.

All of this points up the fallacy of a national conversation on race led by a president, no matter how thoughtful or inspiring. Not just because political constraints prevent him from addressing the issue with the candor we need, but because a chief executive's role in moving the country toward a state of post-racism should be to address structural discrimination on the level of policy. Dismantling the system of racist policing and biased judiciary that has led to the epidemic incarceration of black men will do more to heal the nation's racial wounds than even the most compassionate and sustained dialogue. So will revamping a dysfunctional educational system that reinforces racial and economic disparities.

If President Obama wants to attack the issue on all fronts – as he must – then he should use his healing hands to sign over funding for a national program of community forums, to take place in town halls and high school gyms, JCCs and YMCAs, mosques and movie theaters. The structure and facilitation of these events would be delegated to people like Vijay Prashad, Tim Wise, Tricia Rose, Robin D. G. Kelley, bell hooks, Van Jones, Rosa Clemente, and hundreds of others who have made drawing people into compassionate dialogue on race their life's work.

There would be incentives for attendance: whatever it took to get people in the door, from parking-ticket forgiveness to free-cable vouchers. The conversations would need not tackle race head-on; the issue's pervasiveness is such that almost any topic of universal concern raised in a multi-ethnic setting will intersect with it, from law enforcement to primary school education to jobs. The appetite for dialogue is there, as surely as the bitterness; what we lack is the language and the context to engage. And nothing can tap the veins of goodwill running through the body politic quite like genuine interaction, particularly in this age of technological mediation and shrinking public space.

What's fascinating is how quickly the imagination falters in anticipating the direction these conversations might take. What happens, for instance, after a young black man in need of employment testifies about the difficulty of overcoming the perception that he's a thug, and a white soccer mom raises her hand to asks "well then, why do you

dress like that, with your pants so low and your T-shirt so big?” Who speaks next? Does the black man’s grandfather concur with the soccer mom? Does the woman’s fourteen-year-old son – attired just like the job-seeker – realize, at this moment, that black people don’t have it as easy as he thought? What do the local business owner, the high school guidance counselor, the policewoman have to say?

Our access to one another is so limited, so constrained, that the journey into uncharted territory is a swift one. It is a journey on which Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” is an important stop, but the road stretches well beyond it – toward racial critiques more daring, policies more radical, and healing more profound.