

CHAPTER EIGHT

OBAMA'S 'WHITENESS' AND THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION: HYBRIDIZING WHITE SPACES AND PROBLEMATIZING BLACKNESS

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In January 20, 2009, Barack Hussein Obama became the forty-fourth President of the United States, and the first African American to hold the office. One of *The Boston Globe's* photographs on the inauguration ceremony was a testimony to Obama's "global endorsement"—the presence of people across the globe who watched the ceremony verified "the cultural production of blackness as a global celebrity" in the domain of politics, which indeed meant "a departure from the more widespread global commodification of American Black masculinity in the arenas of sports and entertainment" (Parameswaran 199). This visual representation of Obama as a leader united "global audiences" in their act of witnessing a major event in American history, while at the same time producing a discourse of global community transgressing racial boundaries of nation. At a moment when the post-9/11 world was marked by an obsessive engagement with violence and terrorism, the black body (of Obama), violated through stereotyping in its historicity, enters the White House as a non-threatening black *individual*. Excluded in both its historical configuration and its current materiality but included in the norms, Obama's black bodily text defines "a mode of 'self-ownership'" (Cohen 104), a disruptive moment for the white public imaginary, when a black body does not need to be regulated and governed. Starting with the Inaugural Address, and his subsequent ordeal in the White House, he has come to represent a challenge to the white dominant definitions of blackness in diverse ways. As he looks elsewhere (beyond the white-black

binary) for alternative foundations for black subjectivity, he articulates his biracial identity and multi-ethnic lineage within the borders of the white dominant culture, a discursive practice of his “mixed-race identity politics” (Everett 193). Since the ideology of whiteness is embedded in the highly racializing structures of ‘recognition,’ maintained by the attempt for the enclosure of “scripted” or “socially prescrib[ed]” (Jackson II 11) blackness, Obama’s revisionary discourse on, and redefinition of, his ‘hybrid’ identity does not fit into the white normative frame of recognition.

Judith Butler claims that since the human has traditionally defined “the norm of recognizability,” it is important to call into question the discursive processes of “how existing norms allocate recognition differentially” (*Frames* 6). Michel Foucault also claims that “a regime of truth” offers the norms through which a frame of reference for self-recognition takes place that determines who will be recognizable. The available norms for the act of recognition make it possible for the ‘regime of truth’ to set a frame of reference for recognition. It is “in relation to this framework,” Foucault maintains, “that recognition takes place or the norms that govern recognition are challenged and transformed” (Butler, *Account* 22). The Canadian philosopher and political theorist Charles Taylor, in his influential article, “The Politics of Recognition” (1992), explores the theoretical underpinnings of identity politics. He suggests that each one of us has an ‘authentic’ identity just as cultures and nations we belong to, bearing the right to be recognized for who we are, or in Anthony Appiah’s words as a response to Taylor, “to be acknowledged publicly as what [we] *already really are*” (qtd in Markell 40). In her discussion of Taylor’s thesis, Lois McNay considers “the discourse of recognition [as] a way of framing claims about the individual” (63). Positioned as over against the former ‘white’ Presidents of the US, Obama is bombarded with ‘framing claims,’ while he obviously challenges the white normative recognition of blacks as a mere stereotype, never as an individual. His revisionary discourse on race(lessness) not only offers a public example of how “paradigms must shift” (hooks, “Introduction” 11), but also positions him as, David R. Roediger suggests, “the embodiment of hopes that the nation was moving beyond race” (“Introduction” ix).

Obama employs a discourse that takes black life as a subject and not as the object of discursive practices. While performing his radical otherness, he opens a space where everyone can recognize the profoundly human beyond what his black body represents to the white public imaginary. He crosses the line between white hegemonic discourse and black action, and hence acts as a (trans-)discursive body in a society in which race still operates as the “norm of recognition” (Butler, *Precarious* 43). Unlike the

'other' black people in the white mind, it becomes difficult to see him as "reducible to the corporeal, or racial" (Dyer 14-15). While he, the son of an immigrant Kenyan father and a white American mother, presents the hope that interracial encounters may dissolve the racial boundaries, his 'whiteness,' rather than his blackness, becomes the real challenge for the white dominant culture. A black man with white blood, he calls into question whether or not whiteness can be more open, turning its historical experience of supremacy into a form of diversity so that it does not "inevitably invoke current and past fault lines of racialised privilege and disadvantage" (Knowles 198). Obama, in other words, is not inscribed within normative cultural scripts of racial identity in the American (and global) imaginary. A black man who does not address the issue of race (but more often ethnicity) creates serious recognition difficulties. In 2007, Joseph Biden, a white Senator, publicly described the Senator Obama as "'the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy'" (qtd in Applebaum 7). This racist remark that caused harsh criticism in the media demonstrates the white supremacist view that race is a biological given: What Biden recognizes as a neat black man emerges out of the 'norm of recognition' that shapes 'framing claims' on all blacks.

During his Presidency, however, Obama embodies, to adapt the words of behavioral scientist Hazel Markus and literary theorist Paula Moya, a call for "a paradigm shift from thinking about race and ethnicity as something we *have* to understanding them as something we *do*" (qtd in Ruiz 1). Emphasizing his hybridity, Obama appeals to the commonly accepted sense that "race is now, more than ever before, about choice, and less about status ascribed by the state" (Roediger 218). Ironically enough, his hybridization of whiteness disrupts the attempts to preserve the fantasy of whiteness in constructing the 'norms of recognition' to re-define ideological (mis)recognition of black people. In some of his speeches such as "A More Perfect Union" (2008), "The Inaugural Address" (2009), and in his book *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), the historical configuration of blackness, associated with "restricted opportunities, economic disadvantage, and community disorganization," gives way to forms of socioeconomic disadvantages among blacks (and other non-whites), showing that the social construct of a monolithic blackness is now replaced by the concept that identity, because it is "multi-faceted, fluid, and dynamic" (Brunsma & Rockquemore 103), is negotiable. Obama envisions an American society of, what Shannon Sullivan calls, social "transactions" in which the distinctive white and black identities are preserved in "a relationship of dynamic connection" (*Living* 158). If race is transactional, Sullivan

continues, whether or not the preservation of whiteness is conceived “negative” or simply “beneficial” (*Living* 159) is called into question. Along the same lines, the social meaning of blackness is also interrogated: The acknowledgement and positive affirmation of racial difference, as “positive and human” (hooks, *Teaching* 163), is a disruptive narrative of blackness, an open challenge to a white dominant structure that has long constructed blackness in terms of negative connotations. I explore these issues in this article from the perspective of a Turkish academic, who teaches on race, racialization and the African American novel on the other part of the world.

Even though he was careful in not playing the ‘race card’ in his Presidential campaign, Obama discussed his views on race and racism in America earlier in a book he wrote, when he was a Senator. In his criticism of democracy, in *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama’s discomfort with the word “postracial politics” (232) underlies his depiction of socioeconomic indicators of the gap between the whites and non-whites, because he believes that racial attitudes play a considerable role in these disparities. Although he is aware of not being one of the disadvantaged blacks, he identifies with them about how being black affects their lives, particularly in those moments of “security guards tailing me as I shop in department stores, white couples who toss me their car keys as I stand outside a restaurant waiting for the valet, police cars pulling me over for no apparent reason. I know what it’s like to have people tell me I can’t do something because of my color, and I know the bitter swill of swallowed-back anger” (233). There is no space for despair for him, because he, a product of 1960s, has seen the shift in race relations for the better. Some white Americans are now capable of looking at black people beyond race, even if they may continue to hold “preconceived notions” about them (235). The impact of stereotypes on all non-whites, including blacks, is damaging to the individuals, because each minority group is “measured largely by the degree of our assimilation” (235) in terms of how it conforms to the white dominant culture. The stereotypes affect the way people are hired and promoted in the workplace; consequently, there needs to be more effort to have an equal society.

Obama also addresses not only the issue of black victimization by a racist socioeconomic structure, but also the phenomenon of white guilt: In his years as a senator in Illinois, he remembers his white Democratic colleague, who felt guilty because an African American Senator was angry on the “blatant racism” related to the elimination of a certain program: “Whenever I hear him,” said the white Senator, “he makes me feel more white.” Obama makes a distinction between racist whites and those whites

who “genuinely like to see racial inequality ended and poverty relieved.” Even the latter, as he writes, react to any suggestion of “racial victimization,” which can be related to the conservatives’ investment in producing “the politics of resentment” in their overemphasis of “the adverse effects of affirmative action on white workers” (247).

All the whites’ complaints about the crime rate and drug use in the black ghetto are also shared by black people. Obama expresses his hope that racism will not be effective, if socioeconomic structural problems can be resolved with “a renewed effort to tackle the problems of inner-city poverty” (255). He takes the black ‘problem’ as part of the broader picture of discriminatory practices against all minorities: “But ultimately the danger to our way of life is not that we will be overrun by those who do not look like us or do not yet speak our language. The danger will come if we fail to recognize [their] humanity.” He also points to the danger that awaits American society, if social inequality remains as it is— “[I]f we stand idly by as America continues to become increasingly unequal, an inequality that tracks racial lines and therefore feeds racial strife and which, as the country becomes more black and brown, neither our democracy nor our economy can long withstand” (268). He wants people of all minorities and their children, including his daughters, to cherish American society as a “precious” gift given to them, for “America is big enough to accommodate all their dreams” (269). He maintains this constructive view of a more progressive American society in the Inaugural Address: He sees the Inauguration Ceremony as an occasion that exposes how the meaning of liberty manifests itself in different forms of experience where “every race” can get together to celebrate this occasion. That is why, he admits, “a man whose father less than sixty years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath” (“Inaugural” 13).

In his response to the divisive attacks from Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the former pastor of the Church Obama attends, during his campaign in March 18, 2008, Obama delivered an effective speech in Philadelphia, “A More Perfect Union,” addressing the race issue. His attempt to dissociate Wright’s ideology from his individuality demonstrated that times have changed since the Jim Crow frustrations of the former black generation. He revealed that his presidential campaign set forth the task of struggling for “a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America,” a call to the nation that racial/ethnic differences could still foster “common hopes” in an attempt to “perfect our union” (“Perfect” 1). His speech became a political act of denouncing some commentators’ remarks on his campaign, the acts of racialization that “deemed [him]

either ‘too black’ or ‘not black enough,’” extended even into “black and brown” (“Perfect” 2). The postcolonial critic Gayatri C. Spivak asserts that the race issue in the presidential campaign and elections made “visible both the positive and negative poles of racialization” (192). W. J. T. Mitchell argues that Obama’s effect as a “cultural icon” promised that he would be a symbol “of frustrated desire for peace, hope and change” (126) across the globe. His strong reaction to racism and colorism, which were also enacted by Wright, meant there was no need for ‘divisive’ remarks “at a time when we need unity” (“Perfect” 2). In contrast to Wright’s harsh critique of the legacy of white supremacy, which Obama seemed to ‘ignore,’ he suggested the forging of different forms of alliances, regardless of race and/or ethnicity, in a united attempt to move on to a more ‘perfect union’: “This time we want to talk about the shuttered mills that once provided a decent life for men and women of every race ... every region, every walk of life” (“Perfect” 8). His critique of racial politics shows that he does not represent “the triumph of an advancing anti-racist movement but rather the necessity ... of abandoning old agendas, largely by not mentioning them” (Roediger 227).

His speech shows his willingness not merely to break with past concerns about racism but also to make a call—to adapt Simon Drichel’s words here—for a “post-*the other*” (588) America in the future. In this respect, he indirectly questions the white supremacist politics of recognition, which “excludes everyone who does not neatly fit into the ideal whole it defends,” while demanding that Americans establish a just society based on “mutual recognition” (Leeb 70). In this context, Obama’s presidency becomes, unlike the tenure of earlier Presidents of the US, a paradigm-changing event in that Americans look at him “both to recognize him and be recognized by him” (Radhakrishnan 153). As the thinker Simon Critchley claims, “the community remains an open community in so far as it is based on recognition of difference or the difference of the Other” (*Humour* 219). In fact, Obama addresses the lack of feasibility of identity politics in the 21st century, which demands new solutions to age-old problems of racism. What came out of his speech, as a discursive response to Wright’s divisive racial ideology, was the image of a ‘President,’ “who is not afraid to complicate the truths of the present moment in the name of history and its various trajectories” (Radhakrishnan 151).

Obama refuses to reinforce the positing of black people as victims of the system, Wright’s discourse suggests. Instead, he posits blackness as a hybrid identity, whose ‘racial’ problems have to be solved by a transformative social change to enable a more progressive discourse of

recognition (of differences). The issues he raises in the speech represent the values he embodies as a black President: He does not use the word 'black' in association with being oppressed. He attaches, to use Alain Badiou's words in a different context, "a progressive meaning to [the] particularities" of being black, which means for him that it cannot be reduced to being an oppressed victim, and therefore he defines himself as an "irreducible particularity" ("Interview" 109, 110). The Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero claims that "we are *exposed* to one another, requiring a recognition that does not substitute the recognizer for the recognized" (Butler, *Precarious* 48). Similarly, Obama here emerges as an individual for whom the word "black" functions in a progressive fashion. Hence, he is not 'intelligible' (or recognizable) as a black individual to Wright, for he opens up a space for dialogue with white Americans as well as with everyone. Consequently, where he locates his particularity becomes the crucial question. He situates his particularity within the domain of a conquering African American subjectivity, which cannot be considered in isolation from (multi-racial and multi-ethnic) American cultural identity. In his refusal of complete assimilation, "the erasure of African American otherness" and "victim discourse" (Nealon, *Alterity* 123, 141), he declares racial politics as the failure of white normative frame of recognition. He, in fact, makes visible that all racial/ethnic identities are performative, and hence the real source of action depends on how Americans can respond to the race issue "otherwise" (Nealon 170).

By way of defining himself as a hybrid black, Obama considers himself as both black and white, thereby challenging the legacy of one-drop rule: "I can no more disown [Wright] than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can disown my white grandmother" ("Perfect" 4). In this context, he liberates the concept of racial identity from "a narrow form of Blackness" (Coleman 93). David Hollinger notes that Obama's "white ancestry is ... visible in the form of the white woman who, as a single mother, raised [him]." Hollinger further suggests that Obama's race is represented in close relation to being "*immigrant* rather than U.S.-born" (qtd Smith 130, 132). Shawn Michelle Smith sees Obama as "a key transitional figure between the racially divided generation of the Baby Boomers and the future generations "that will witness the decline of white majoritarian identity in the US through hybridity on account of immigration." Perhaps, this is the context which causes his whiteness to matter as much as his blackness: "If, as the son of an immigrant Kenyan man, Obama represents a new kind of blackness, perhaps he also represents a new kind of whiteness—a mixed whiteness to be sure, but for now a whiteness that is tentatively

maintaining its hold on an anxious American immigration (or at least its ‘white half’)” (Smith 133).

Because Obama speaks of whiteness from within its social domain, it becomes both visible and non-threatening to the dominant culture that has perpetuated white anxiety about the policing of purity. In other words, he performs his blackness within the normative ideals of progress, being a memorable example that “America has essentially contained the evil of racism to the point at which it was no longer a serious barrier to Black advancement” (Metzler 403). While he implies blacks can succeed in a racist society, he expresses his faith in a truly functioning democracy, which is not to say that he overlooks how America still continues to be a racialized society. This faith in democracy is implicit in Obama’s invitation of Professor Henry Louis Gates and the police officer, who racially profiled and arrested him, to the White House. His careful strategy of making the race issue alive in the context of the White House demonstrates powerfully that there is considerable need for dialogic space in the House of America. The politics of recognition that enabled the officer to do racial profiling now makes it possible for him to ‘recognize’ Prof. Gates as an individual; hence, Obama reveals how face-to-face problems in social encounters can be handled through dialogue. Unlike Christopher J. Metzler, who believes that his invitation “relegated discussions of racism to interpersonal clashes that can be solved by talk” (408) with no serious action taken, I do believe this was an effective political message that white-on-black misrecognition was at the root of the problem in everyday life.

Since difference elicits fear and hatred within and between groups of people, the white recognition of blacks (and non-whites) as individuals will open up new spaces of understanding in the ‘norms of recognition.’ What Naomi Pabst says coincides with Obama’s discourse of change: “If we are to have any hope of bringing about social change and ending local and global antiblack oppression, then we have to contend with the complexities of the racial reality in which we are immersed. This will have to include dealing with the tremendous diversity within the category *black*” (113). Her observation plays into Obama’s deconstruction of black identity as diverse.

Obama’s anti-racist, anti-discriminatory discourse operates in subtle ways *within* the white dominant cultural terms of value, rather than positioning himself *against* it. It is an act of discourse that dispels white anxieties about blackness without reifying the old racial stereotypes; at the same time, it unhinges the ideological presumptions of white supremacy. His ultimate break with a past “whose historical meaning is inseparable

with the semiotics of race" (Radhakrishnan 153) seems to cause a considerable number of Americans to see race differently. Obama's own inscription of his blackness within "a hybrid cosmopolitan sensibility" (Parameswaran 199) produces black identity as a fluid concept much like the white identity itself, making Obama appear as human rather than as a mere black. Since white anxiety about racial mixing "lies at the foundation of white racism" (Romano 289), Obama's use of his biracial identity as a 'privilege' opens up a space of possibility for change. Knowing that hybridity problematizes racial (racialized) boundaries, he celebrates that a 'perfect union' of souls in and outside the United States will change the meaning of race. In doing that, his presidency ultimately marks a historical moment in its potential impact on white normative constructions of blackness. Moreover, it bears the hope of transforming white supremacist discourse into those discursive practices that will eventually produce perceptible non-racializing effects on current domestic and global politics.

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