

Obama, Africa, and the Post-Racial

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Abstract: In his article "Obama, Africa, and the Post-Racial" Michael Janis examines aspects of U.S. president Barack Obama's election in the context of the epistemology and history of racism. Following an introduction to the history of racism in Europe and in the U.S., Janis discusses the media in the U.S. and in Africa in relation to African American and African politics. The debates on race ignited by the campaign are considered in the light of Africana perspectives on relations between Africa and the West and on the history of slavery and colonialism. Based on selected data in the media of the U.S. and Africa, Obama's critical reception reveals that the "post-racial" remains contingent upon reparations and the historical contextualization of Western hegemony. What remains to be seen is the extent to which Obama's vision of the U.S. will draw from the African internationalist perspectives with which he is aligned.

Michael JANIS**Obama, Africa, and the Post-Racial**

"It was into my father's image, the black man, son of Africa, that I'd packed all the attributes I sought in myself; the attributes of Martin and Malcolm, DuBois and Mandela" (Obama, *Dreams* 220), writes US-America's first African American president in his "story of race and inheritance." While the presidential candidacy of Senator Barack Obama sparked numerous debates on the concept of "race," including the notion of the "post-racial," scant attention has been paid to Obama's possible treatment of the tragic history of relations between the West and Africa. The lack of any serious engagement with reparations for slavery and colonialism on the part of the U.S. and most West European governments is arguably an all too often unacknowledged sign of the ubiquitous persistence of racism and an obstacle blocking the way to a vision beyond race. If Obama has only just begun to formulate his views on reparations and has just begun to implement foreign policy that would encompass a long view of Africa and the diaspora, he already has an important, complex relationship to Africa -- a profound understanding of Maafa (African Holocaust), as well as of the contemporary dynamics of neocolonialism -- that merits investigation into the possibilities an internationalist, even pan-Africanist, ethos would bring to the White House.

While the U.S. media was locked in debates about the presidential candidates, significant historical issues on the subject remained at the margins of political discourse. Because of the history of racism and the hegemonial status of the U.S., the victory of Barack Obama was without question one of the most important signs of social progress in modern times not only for the U.S. but also globally. At the same time, from a contemporary perspective, US-Americans remained mesmerized by a myth, which James Baldwin saw all too well as the midpoint of the "Reagan Revolution" -- the first simulacral US-American regime -- when he quipped that "As long as you think you're white, there's no hope for you" (90). Today, both the sciences and humanities have discredited the very concept of race -- from the mapping of the genome, which demonstrates genetic variation is superficial and common variations are transracial, to the academic institutionalization of critical race theory and postcolonial theory; however, although it is widely recognized that the world's distinct cultures, not races, are responsible for difference and diversity, we are surrounded by social and political conflicts that are based on race, or the guise of race.

Race has been recognized as an atavistic form of oppression, an invention by thinkers such as Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, described by Jean-Paul Sartre as the "father of racism" (qtd. in Miller 16), who wrote *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853-55; *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*), a work that ranks Africans at the bottom of the racial hierarchy (while granting them artistic and creative merit). Gobineau distorted the title and project of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755; *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*), an inquiry into the humanist concept of "natural law" that reflects a proto-anthropological search to understand distinct societies on their own terms. The Haitian intellectual Anténor Firmin responded to Gobineau with *De l'égalité des races humaines* (1885; *The Equality of the Human Races*), on African and diaspora intellectual history and classical foundations. Despite the presence of Firmin's formidable challenge to Europe (and his status as the only African-descended member of the faculty of Paul Broca's emerging science of anthropology in Paris), European colonialist ideology elected to follow the racist strains of physical and cultural anthropology, then emergent disciplines fraught with theoretical contradictions based on race. Africa has been the crucible of the intellectual battle about race. Firmin was at the forefront of critical inquiry into the subject in the nineteenth century, as he advanced the monogenist perspective on the evolution of humans when most European thinkers maintained a polygenist theory, which argued that the races evolved separately, not from a single source. It turns out, of course, that current theories hold that the single source is Africa. Among bitter ironies of the

second half of the twentieth century is that even as this knowledge gained widespread acceptance among scientists and the public, the social ramifications of which are that all humans are originally African, the West did very little to oppose apartheid in South Africa. The apotheosis of modern racism, often considered to be the Jewish and African Holocausts (the genocides of slavery and colonialism), was extended into the late twentieth century in Asia, Africa, and Europe, which reminded the world once again of the connection between racial fetishization and fascism.

What, then, is "race"? An extrapolation of a worldview based on the superficial differences found across all human cultures, race is a myth that is both ancient and modern. There is much evidence to suggest that the ancient Mediterranean world may not have held the same prejudices against Africans, as Frank Snowden demonstrates. From Hume and Kant to Hegel, the anti-African, or anti-black racism of European philosophers reflects the enigmatic and multifarious presence of psychopathology in Western thought (on this, see, e.g., Eze). As Eric Williams argues in *Capitalism and Slavery*, Enlightenment-era trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism were the very conditions of possibility for the modern world-system of European and Euro-American capitalist exploitation; slavery built commercial capitalism and the end of slavery became the impetus for formal colonialism during industrial capitalism. Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* reveals the processes of development in pre-colonial Africa and the processes of underdevelopment in Africa wrought by slavery and colonialism. Most African nations have not yet had independence from official colonial rule for fifty years.

The modern history of racism, from the genocide perpetrated against Native Americans to the slaver labor of Chinese in the U.S. at the turn of the twentieth century, from the Jewish Holocaust to Bosnia and Rwanda, is not behind us. Obama makes this point in his Speech on Race: "As William Faulkner once wrote, 'The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past.' We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country. But we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow" (Obama, "Obama's Speech" 5). Obama's reading of history translates into a new vision, for the US-American government, of the historicity of race. Even his choice of the words of Faulkner is significant. The southern Nobel Laureate was resistant to desegregation, yet Faulkner authored novels that reflect the subtleties of race relations in the south. Embedded in Obama's words is a critique not only of the tension between the races in the U.S., but also of the tension between US-American mythology and history, part of the hermeneutic excavation of the racial palimpsest.

If race is a myth, it has the sense of both a culturally embedded narrative of origins and widely disseminated rhetoric of mystification. "Race" refers "to nothing that science should recognize as real" in Kwame Anthony Appiah's words (277). From a literary perspective, the genesis of racism appears as the most dangerous abuse of fiction: "Fictions can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive ... In this sense anti-Semitism is a degenerate fiction, a myth ... Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change" (Kermode 39). Scholars and critics from Norman Cohn to Umberto Eco have shown how fiction written by turn-of-the-century Russian and French anti-Semites were believed throughout Europe, to the point that Hitler could use them as mobilizing myths. In the case of anti-Black racism, as with anti-Semitism, Western literature is incomprehensibly vast including icons such as Uncle Tom or pop-culture inventions such as Jim Crow -- from the 1838 song -- that was one of the first U.S. exports of a cultural product to reach a global audience, the term that would stand for apartheid in the U.S.

Literature and literary criticism, along with many other disciplines of humanist inquiry, have advanced complex readings of "race," as a historical signifier, as mythology and metaphor. A term first used by Frantz Fanon on racial pathology in the colonial situation in *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961; *The Wretched of the Earth*), "racialization" signifies the pervasive effects of the hegemony of European racism and the effects of internalized racism in non-European, often (formerly) colonized groups. An-

gela Davis summarizes the contemporary moment in race theory: "Yet we continue to use the term 'race,' even though many of us are very careful to set it off in quotation marks to indicate that while we do not take seriously the notion of 'race' as biologically grounded, neither are we able to think about racist power structures and marginalization processes without invoking the socially constructed concept of 'race.' Obviously there is a reason we are stuck with the term 'race,' and that has to do with the persistence of racism and processes of racialization that perpetuate race-based oppression, even as they appear to move beyond it" (44). The 1980s marked a turning point for critical theory on the social construction of "blackness" and "whiteness." In "Preface to Blackness: Text and Pretext," Henry Louis Gates suggests that, in contrast to the essentialist view that reifies and restricts ontology, "blackness" is a metaphor; further, he later writes that "one must learn to be 'black' in this society, precisely because 'blackness' is a socially produced category" ("Loose Canons" 101). Polyvocal and polysematic, racial metaphors, employed in the name of oppression or liberation, remain living languages, conscious and unconscious, both functions of the myth of race and tools for the deconstruction of the myth.

The political goal of the deconstruction of the myth of race is for diverse constituencies to learn to resist seeing the U.S., and the world, in black and white terms, as Obama has advocated in his books and speeches. This turn is a crucial strategy for the oppressed, which must above all create solidarity among diverse ethnic groups. David Roediger's *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* responds to this persistent need throughout working class history in the U.S. One of the epigraphs to a section in the book is from *The World and Africa* in which W.E.B. Du Bois laments the process of racialization in working class history, the adoption of ideologies of whiteness of new immigrants in the U.S., which in turn bred contempt for what should have been their African American comrades in a common struggle. In particular, as Roediger's study shows through the investigation of historical documents and juridical policy, the Irish, Jews, Italians, and Greeks were not regarded as "white," but they, among other immigrants of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were eventually able to adopt this identity. Malcolm X was also a keen observer of this process of racialization that led to the insidious spread of white supremacy among diverse groups. For Roediger, coming to terms with Baldwin's injunction to dismantle the delusive idea of "whiteness" serves as a point of departure: "To make its fullest possible contribution to the growth of a new society, activism that draws on ideas regarding the social construction of race must focus its political energies on exposing, demystifying and demeaning the particular ideology of whiteness, rather than on calling into question the concept of race generally ... whiteness is now a particularly brittle and fragile form of social identity and that it can be fought" (12). Along with the recognition of the strategic necessity of recognizing the category of race and the social construction of "race," it should be noted that the category (or the myth) of whiteness is not required to accomplish the important goal of global social justice for Africa and the diaspora; the West can stand trial regardless of (mis)conceptions of race. Hence the paradox of "race" today: the post-racial requires the recognition of the history of racism and the call for reparations.

What we are witnessing in a new form in Roediger's theory, the tension between race and class in the quest for social equality, is also embedded in the issues of solidarity of the African revolutions -- for example, in Fanon's strictures on Sartre's conception of *négritude* in his 1948 essay "Orphée Noir." The historical problem of the Left, of collapsing the problems of race into those of class, has been to ignore the complexities of the oppression of African Americans, Africans, and Africans of the Caribbean. The kind of accusations by African American leadership that Obama is "not black enough" reflect a regressive use of the language of racialism, but this usage is in many ways the metaphorical guise of concern over a new post-Civil Rights agenda. In his 2008 speech on race in Philadelphia, Obama pointed to the paradox of "race" in that "some commentators have deemed me 'too black' or 'not black enough'" ("Obama's Speech" 2), yet he urged his audience to consider the roots of the anger in the African American community, reflected in the sermons of Rev. Jeremiah Wright, for "to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists be-

tween the races" (6). His speech recognized that the post-racial era has not yet arrived, that it is part of his vision of hope.

As Obama chronicled his journey to an African American identity in his *Dreams from My Father*, the question his identity and the social construction of race came into play before the debates in the media and before commentators' efforts to define "black" and "African American." Popular discourse on the race question in the election, of course, is far too extensive to treat adequately, but for our purposes, the new visions of the Du Boisian problem of the "color line" must be briefly addressed. Defending Obama against Black critics who question Obama's "blackness," criticize him for his Ivy League background, and push him outside the category of Black US-American, restricting it to those who descended from slaves brought over in the Middle Passage, John K. Wilson summarizes the political and identitarian conundrum of Obama's "whiteness": co-opted by Euro-Americans and the status quo, grounds for suspicion in the African American community, at best a strategic advantage. In Matt Bai's article "Is Obama the End of Black Politics?," the headline evinces the media's addiction to "spin." The rather confusing nature of the headline is revealed by the third paragraph as majority whip James Clyburn ruminates on the staggering significance of Obama's ascendancy in the context of the suffering of the Civil Rights Movement, which Clyburn experienced at Martin Luther King's side. Like Representative John Lewis, however, Clyburn initially supported Hillary Clinton. This dynamic is part of the "end of black politics" angle, but the eye-catching, false "end" also has to do with the generational rift in African American leadership.

In their contrasting rhetorical analyses of Obama's address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention in a co-written article, David Frank and Mark McPhail provide a telling example of the split on these issues among the Left. While Frank praises Obama's conciliatory rhetoric on race, McPhail contrasts his speech to that of Rev. Al Sharpton and accuses him of betraying the "racial contract" in favor of an "abstract social contract" (a distinction between the contemporary Charles W. Mills and the Enlightenment-era Rousseau), claiming that "Obama *resigns* race for his audience, and eliminates any need for Americans to address the symbolic and social pathologies of white privilege and power" (573; emphasis in the original). It seems that few theorists -- Paul Gilroy is an exception -- employ critical theory to think beyond race, but one wonders if, at this political juncture, it could have been otherwise: the campaign clearly became a racial state of the union, a "talking cure" for the political unconscious.

No president in U.S. history has been prepared like Obama to come to grips with the legacy of slavery, with postcoloniality, and with the inequities of Western-dominated globalization. In *The Audacity of Hope*, in fact, Obama supports affirmative action as a contemporary mode of understanding African American history. In *Dreams from My Father* he examines his African heritage, encounters Africa not just in terms of his personal return to Kenya and the memory of his father, but on its own terms, demonstrating an historical understanding of what has happened since revolutions from Kimathi and Mau Mau to the socialism of Nyerere and Nkrumah. He articulates a postmodern "double consciousness," African and US-American, that takes on an internationalist perspective, which its theorist, Du Bois, also embraced. Few analysts reinforce the connection -- necessary for the purposes of political solidarity -- between slavery and colonialism and the internal colonialism of the U.S., discussed by critics as diverse as Fred Hord, Robert Blauner, Cedric Robinson, and bell hooks. Fanon's psychoanalysis of the colonial situation does not completely apply to the present: Africans and African-descended peoples have liberated themselves from the paralyzing position in the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, altering the relevant dynamics of Alexandre Kojève's analysis of the relationship's ontological reciprocity, which Fanon applies: "The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation" (*Black Skin* 60). The diseases of inferiority and superiority have not been eradicated; the "racial narcissism" that pervaded the colonial condition remains as a syndrome, along with global inequities along racial lines, that calls

for the interrogation of the "post" of postcolonial -- and begs the question of the psychology and politics of reparations.

It is not yet certain that the election of Obama has sounded a prelude to reparations, but such assumptions will be made, whether in the name of resentment or in the name of hope. The groundwork for actual reparations has been theorized but not yet put in place on a grand scale. If the world were to learn of Obama's interest in such a program, the reactions would be diverse, without a doubt, and the debates torrid. Reactions to Obama in the African press reveal both a widespread fervent support for an African American U.S. president and a healthy skepticism concerning Obama's commitment to foreign policy dedicated to African internationalism, as well as to reparations (see, e.g., Namanya; Katito). In the U.S. and in Africa, Obama is frequently compared to Martin Luther King, Jr., and it is this linkage that begs the question of the relationship to King's commitment to non-violent social change, to his philosophy of intercultural reciprocity, and to his critique of US-American capitalism and imperialism in his later years. The political contexts of relations between Africa and the West reflect the historical ethical impoverishment of the West, which contemporary Western leaders often counter with accusations of the contemporary ethical impoverishment of African leadership. However, as Jean-Marie Teno advances in his films, European slavery and colonialism destroyed democratic institutions in Africa, putting in their place campaigns of genocide and totalitarian regimes; then, at the moment Europe reluctantly granted independence -- only after Africans had won it, often at the high cost of their own blood -- European leaders argued Africa was not ready to establish democratic institutions. Europe's answer was neocolonialism, just as the U.S.'s answer to abolition was not only Jim Crow, but also internal colonialism. Africa-West relations can only be seen in terms of what Wole Soyinka has called a "culture of impunity in race relations" (37). While lamenting that "the crimes that the African continent commits against her kind are of a dimension and, unfortunately, of a nature that appears to constantly provoke memories of the historic wrongs inflicted on that continent by others" (19), Soyinka argues that "reparations are -- at the very least -- a useful critique of Eurocentric historicism" (57). The West's destruction of Africa is extended by, and thus mirrored in, the significant number of contemporary kleptocratic regimes and the concomitant baroque abuses of power that result as a form of escape from state hegemony, as Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* demonstrates. However, the contemporary situation cannot be understood outside of the context of the European pillaging of the continent at the cost of tens of millions of African lives.

The United Nations has been instrumental in laying the groundwork for claims for reparations, ever since the Statement on Race in 1950, in which scholars in the humanities and social sciences refuted all notions of racial superiority and promoted modern theories of human equality. In Durban, South Africa, in 2001, the United Nations (U.N.) held the "World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance." While 168 nations ratified the document that advocated reparations for the transatlantic slave trade, the low-level officials sent by the U.S. walked out of the meeting. Until Italy agreed in 2009 to pay US\$ 5 billion to Libya in reparations, no such formal proclamations by a government had been advanced, and even admissions of guilt for colonialism and slavery have been rare and muted. There have been successful lawsuits for gains made by slavery against companies like Aetna, Lloyd's of London, CSX, R.J. Reynolds, and many others, but since the "Millions for Reparations Rally" in Washington, D.C., in 2001, there has been only limited action, by groups like N'COBRA, the National Coalition for Blacks for Reparations in America, and the bill for reparations known as HR 40, introduced every year since 1989 by Congressman John Conyers of Michigan. The formal movement in the U.S. can be traced to James Forman's "Black Manifesto" of 1969. Haiti's compelling case for reparations is based not only on practices of slavery and colonialism, but also on the fact that the newly independent nation (1804), the first black republic in the Americas, was forced to pay 150 million francs in 1825, under threats of invasion, for recognition by France, against which it had just won its freedom. Almost 200 years after independence, in 2003, Jean-Bertrand Aristide -- removed from power by George Bush, reinstated by Clinton, and removed again by George W. Bush --

issued a demand to France (never addressed) for the price of the nation's freedom, adjusted to modern currency, of \$21 billion.

Africans since independence have advanced the claim that slavery and colonialism are crimes against humanity unparalleled in human history, crimes that must be redressed in a systematic way to compensate those who suffer to this day from the effects of the history of genocide, oppression, and racism. On the continent claims have been diverse, characterized by efforts made on the part of individual nations, such as Congo's or Namibia's attempts to prosecute Belgium and Germany for the genocide of millions during the colonial era, as well as pan-African endeavors. The Organization of African Unity (OAU), formed by independence-era presidents in 1963, today the African Union (AU), met in Abuja, Nigeria, in 1993, at the behest of Bashorun Abiola (the legally elected President of Nigeria subsequently imprisoned by the dictator Sani Abacha), to form the "Pan-African Conference on Reparations" and the Group of Eminent Persons. In 1999 the Africa World Reparations and Truth Commission produced the Accra Declaration. Other pivotal moments in the recent African reparations movements are chronicled in Ali Mazrui's 2002 *Black Reparations in the Age of Globalization*. While these African movements seemed to have lost momentum and coherence, after making demands for reparations of \$777 trillion at the Accra conference ("Reparations to Africa" 5), for example, the claims are valid, as are those in the Americas. The traditional comparison made between reparations of \$65 billion paid by Germany to Holocaust survivors and their descendants (Biondi 9) often amplifies the controversy, as a distinction often has been made between the immediacy of post-war reparations to documented individual Jewish victims and the juridical complexity of reparations for the slave trade and colonialism; however, Germany also paid reparations to the state of Israel, setting a precedent for a reparations project of great breadth.

The fact that slavery and colonialism were not abolished until the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, that these forms of brutality and oppression were not illegal in the West, does not negate their status as "crimes against humanity," as some critics have argued and as documented in histories of genocide. If this question of legality for claims necessitates they be made before international bodies such as the U.N., the groundwork has been put in place. What African American leadership, including Obama, has stressed for more than a century is the connection between slavery, racism, and the present-day oppression of African Americans in the U.S. The case of Africa turns upon the understanding of the connection between the trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonialism, and neocolonialism. According to Africa Action, every year forty-eight sub-Saharan African countries pay \$13.5 billion in foreign debt (Biondi 16), crippling their economies, limiting their abilities to meet spending needs for basic social services, and stunting all possible growth.

Soyinka sees reparations as a gesture that is the "condition of coexistence," the accountability that "carries with it a hands-across-the divide global comprehensiveness in our quest for the resolution of a bitter passage of our interlocked histories" (82-85) -- suggesting the cancellation of African debt. The gesture of reparations leads not only to crosscultural reconciliation but also to a political recognition of the significance of the African diaspora as a cultural entity and as a repository of intellectual history. In June of 2005, when the G-8 Summit announced debt cancellation for fourteen African nations, Soyinka's prescription seemed to have been filled. However, the approximately \$40 billion of \$300 billion in debt was cancelled for eighteen countries, effectively leaving future generations to pay for loans that never reached the public sector. As a staff editorial of the *New York Times* in 2005 pointed out, the U.S. contributed 0.16 to 0.18 percent of its national income to poor countries; France and Britain gave 0.34 and 0.41 percent (see "Thousands Died"; see also the dramatization of foreign debt in Abderrahmane Sissako's film *Bamako*).

While Presidents Clinton and Bush, during state visits to African countries in 1998 and 2003, have admitted to the role of the U.S. in the evil perpetrated during the slave trade, there has been no official apology or discussion of reparations by the U.S. government; in 2001 France classified its colonial practices as crimes against humanity, but did so without offering an official apology (see "Framing

Reparations" 37). The debate about reparations in most West-based scholarship suggests the curious claim that "there is little support for reparations for colonialism because there are few, if any, condensation points around which to rally Western public opinion" (Howard-Hassmann and Hassmann 39; the authors of the article, Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann and Anthony P. Lombardo, mention Adam Hochschild's best seller *King Leopold's Ghost* and later make reference to Alex Haley's *Roots*, but almost incomprehensibly, they proceed as if the entire history of African, African American, and Caribbean literature did not exist. The abolitionist narrative *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano of 1789*, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass of 1845*, and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart of 1959* were in fact also "best sellers" -- not to mention thousands of works on slavery and colonialism in libraries and on university syllabi all over the world).

Western governments have had only sparse diplomatic relations with African nations in recent years; in fact, the West continues to demonstrate that reparations, for the most part, are not on the minds of those in power. While the Bush administration, through initiatives like the Millennium Challenge, attempted to increase aid to African nation, there is little sign of significant change. While aid to Africa tripled during the Bush administration, only a fraction of the funds pledged to African nations has reached the countries. According to Celia Dugger, the budget for the Millennium Challenge Corporation is less than ten percent of the U.S. foreign aid budget. Despite many shortcomings of its Africa policy -- its negligible response to the genocide in Darfur, for example -- the government of George W. Bush has gained an undeniable popularity among certain African leaders, but Ghanaian President John A. Kufuor concluded, "The aid is spread so thin that at the end of the day the necessary difference is not made" ("The Agency's"). If in the post-9/11 climate Africa has been seen as a necessary target for diplomacy by the U.S., Africa also continues to represent the North-South immigration crisis for European nations such as France, where the issue is among the motivations for the rise of neo-conservatism.

President Nicolas Sarkozy's 2007 speech in Dakar, many African commentators fear, represents the views held by many Western Europeans and their elected officials; the French as an example of African-European relations remains particularly relevant, with its formerly vast empire in West Africa, its residual ideology of *francophonie*, and its African immigration controversies, one the one hand, and its anti-colonial intellectual traditions, including the stronghold of "black Paris," on the other. In his speech Sarkozy denied that France had any responsibility for colonialism in Africa, underscoring instead "a history of 'pacification'" ("un histoire de la 'pacification'"), "the improvement of vacant and ungoverned regions" ("la mise en valeur de teritoires vacants et sans maîtres"), and "improvements such as widespread education, modern medicine, and infrastructure in the form of railroads and highways" ("la diffusion de l'enseignement, de la fondation d'une médecine moderne, de le mise en place d'infrastructures routières et ferroviares") (Sarkozy qtd. in Mbembe; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). Although Sarkozy acknowledged that slavery is a crime against humanity, his historical approach to Africa, while recognizing the continent's diversity of languages and cultures, committed the grave Hegelian error of claiming that "the African man has not sufficiently entered history" ("l'homme africain n'est pas assez entré dans l'histoire"), calling the continent trapped in cyclical time, basking in the glory of a golden age that never existed -- "a great continent that has everything it needs to succeed yet does not succeed because it has not been able to liberate itself from its own myths" ("un grand continent qui a tous pour réussir et qui ne réussit pas parce qu'ilo n'arrive pas à se libérer de ses mythes") (Sarkozy qtd. in Mbembe).

In his article "L'Afrique de Nicolas Sarkozy," Achille Mbembe demands from Sarkozy that France assume responsibility for "a cruel enterprise, abject and reprehensible" ("une entreprise passablement cruelle, abject et infâme"), for "wars of conquest, massacres, deportations, raids, forced labor, institutionalized racial discrimination" ("les guerres de conquête, les massacres, les deportations, les razzias, les travaux forcés, la discriminacion raciale institutionnelle"). In demanding that the "illimitable irresponsibility" of French colonialism be held up to sustained criticism, Mbembe bemoans the fact that

"the intellectual armature that buttresses contemporary French relations with Africa literally dates from the nineteenth century" ("l'armature intellectuelle que sous-tend la politique africaine de la France date littéralement de la fin du XIX^{ème} siècle"). Making reference to the racism of Hegel and the "idiotic notions" of "the African soul" ("l'âme africaine") of ethnologists, Mbembe does not consider the possible influence of oppositional views of key twentieth-century figures with which anyone with a university education in France would be acquainted, for example, the Surrealists (who boycotted the Colonial Expositions) and the philosophers and poets of *négritude*. Clearly, it is not the radical and progressive trends of French avant-garde Modernism -- much less *négritude*, the Senghorian strain of which Mbembe attacks -- that prevail among key figures of the political elite, but the most pernicious form of imperialist indoctrination, the bourgeois illusion of the "civilizing mission."

The history of relations between Africa and the West in the twentieth century should serve to educate leaders of the twenty-first century; these leaders must take stock of the fact Jimmy Carter was the first U.S. president to visit the continent for diplomatic reasons -- and that Sarkozy remains trapped in the legacy that connects de Gaulle to Mitterand. While Anglophone and Francophone African intellectuals began to build bridges at the 1919 Pan-African conference in Paris, organized by Du Bois and Blaise Daigne, these beacons of world peace, gathering after the war, were seen by the Western powers as internal and external threats. Despite the strength of its literary and philosophical traditions, the French, while advocating *francophonie*, seem to lack a basic familiarity with the Francophone African intelligentsia, even the widely anthologized voices of *négritude*, such as Léopold Senghor (President of Senegal, Senghor was not only a poet and philosopher of *négritude*, but also, as a member of the French national assembly, was among the framers, in 1958, of the Constitution of the French Fifth Republic).

In *Discours sur colonialisme* (1950; *Discourse on Colonialism*), Aimé Césaire, educated, like Senghor, as an *assimilé*, wrote on behalf of the *indigènes*, the colonized who, under the French assimilationist system, were denied the rights of the *assimilés* and often were used as slave labor: Césaire points out in his book the most fundamental -- and the most subtle -- hypocrisies of French colonialism. In the early 1930s, the Surrealist Group in Paris led by André Breton, foreshadowed Césaire's *Discours* in their collective statement "Murderous Humanitarianism": "For centuries the soldiers, priests and civil agents of imperialism, in a welter of looting, outrage and wholesale murder, have battered with impunity on the colored races; now it is the turn of the demagogues, with their counterfeit liberalism. But the proletariat of today, whether metropolitan or colonial, is no longer to be fooled by fine words as to the real end in view, which is still, as it always was, the exploitation of the greatest number for the benefit of a few slavers" (352-53). The calls of the French avant-garde, of the theorists of *négritude*, of Pan-Africanists like Du Bois, and the of architects of the African revolutions against colonialism (from Lumumba to Cabral to Nkrumah) were directed at the colonized in Africa and the diaspora and to the exploited people and workers of the world; if these calls were not heeded, it has been a great boon to the redundant processes of racialization and the constant waves of neocolonialism.

I examine here only a sliver of the backdrop of recent relations between the West and Africa, as a means of adumbrating the trend against which Obama will have to fight if he is to move forward with projects that reflect the concern for Africa demonstrated by his work in the Senate. He has helped secure \$20 million for the African Union peacekeeping mission in Darfur and he wrote the Democratic Republic of the Congo Relief, Security, and Democracy Promotion Act, a bill authorizing \$53 million in assistance, which he helped pass. It is now estimated that the war in the Congo has the highest toll of human life since World War II. Obama has worked diligently on AIDS awareness projects and on advocating for the reduction of global poverty, pledging to double the contributions to the Millennium Challenge; further, he has come out strongly against corruption in Kenya and Zimbabwe and worked with international efforts to bring for Liberian President Charles Taylor to justice for atrocities in Liberia and Sierra Leone. President Obama has remained guarded on his view of reparations, reiterating

what he has written in *Dreams from My Father* at the Unity '08 Convention in Chicago: "The best reparations we can provide are good schools in the inner city and jobs for people who are unemployed" ("Obama Returns"). Will we see Obama revise this policy, and will he establish an unprecedented, socially conscious Africa policy as President?

A survey of recent opinion in the African press suggests that most Africans anticipate that Obama will bring a dramatic policy change to U.S.-Africa relations. One very telling recent article published in *The Nation* (Nairobi), "Obama's Victory in Democratic Party Poll Has Continent in a Spin" (Ashine <<http://allafrica.com/stories/printable/200806060089.html>>), records perspectives from around the continent. The very diverse opinions on race, on Obama as an African American candidate, take up much of the article. In Kampala, Uganda, a university lecturer claims that he "supports Obama for ethnic reasons. He is a black man doing something extraordinary." A businessman there echoed this sentiment when he said, "He makes you proud [to be] black." The Lagos State House of Assembly in Nigeria inaugurated an "Obama state" and website. The Vote Obama Initiative website, the article reports, places Obama in line with Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X., and Marcus Garvey, celebrating that "he has "successfully broken the color bar." A candidate who would "no longer ignore Afro-Americans and their electoral strength" is considered "a feat worthy of celebration as the dawn of a new era" (Ashine <<http://allafrica.com/stories/printable/200806060089.html>>).

While the article begins with a claim for a cultural connection—"Africans clearly seem ecstatic and the American with Kenyan roots has a huge fan club"—it also reveals that among Africans "race" is a deconstruction site: many of the comments do not refer to Obama as Black, African American, or of mixed race, but as a politician with African heritage, an aspect of his worldview that is not necessarily responsible for his emergent commitment to Africa. Abraham Kumela, a young NGO worker, comments, "Obama is bigger than just a politician with African roots; he is a symbol of tolerance and multiculturalism." Ghanaian columnist Godwin Yaw Agboka underscores that Obama "appeals to the youth" and "has transcended race." At the University of Dar es Salaam, lecturer Peter Tumaini-Mungu finds Obama's origins to be secondary, even incidental: "Being a person of African origin might not be that important. Obama's policies towards Africa are ambitious, and he has a keen interest in the continent. That is something a person of any origin can have" (Ashine <<http://allafrica.com/stories/printable/200806060089.html>>).

Continental opinion on Obama and race divides frequently along generational lines, as it does in the U.S., where post-baby-boom generations, often raised in intercultural families and educated with multiculturalist curricula, see the world increasingly in post-racial terms. In both settings, previous generations, who fought for civil rights or who fought against European colonialism, wonder if the younger generations are attuned to global injustices, if they are politically aware, or if they are anesthetized and deceived by an increasingly transnational, superficially post-racial mass culture of commodification. The technologically savvy Obama campaign understood postmodern politics as the domain of the hegemony of the image, but more importantly, the 2008 election showed that Obama spoke to voices in the U.S. and around the world, voices that have been calling for the analysis of the U.S.'s schizoid identity -- the philanthropist and emperor -- the contradictory values of a democracy that has been militarized, racialized, and commodified, in order to re-examine the project of pluralism, which must accommodate difference and hybridity.

The context of the history of Africa and the diaspora is essential to the analysis of the trajectory of the Obama years. Returning to the work of Anténor Firmin, whose nation was occupied by the U.S. for a decade after his death, we are called upon to think of the island that has become the symbol of the West's inhumanity -- and the diaspora's hope for change. In 1885, commenting on Haiti's influence on US-American abolitionism, Firmin advanced the argument that the United States was "destined to strike the first blow against the theory of the inequality of the human races ... It seems quite possible that, in less than a century from now, a Black man might be called to head the government of

Washington" (401). As the U.S. begins to reread its history, it will recognize in President Obama an allegory for future reparations, local and global: the narrative of the rise of an African American community organizer, the most cosmopolitan politician in U.S. history, who exists between generations and social classes, between races and cultures, between nations and continents.

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