

The Meaning of Freedom

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ELEVEN

Democracy, Social Change, and Civil Engagement

*Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania
February 2, 2009*

Thank you for inviting me to speak here at Bryn Mawr during your celebration of Black History Month.

As everyone is aware, this is a very special moment in the history of our country—the only Black History Month that will have been celebrated in the immediate aftermath of the election, for the first time, of a black president who identifies with the black radical tradition of struggle for freedom. It has been barely two weeks since the inauguration of Barack Hussein Obama, which means that the experience of having a president willing to make bold progressive moves is still very new.

But you have asked me to speak on the topic: “Democracy, Social Change, and Civil Engagement.”

In pursuing this question, I want to first examine the most extreme proposition that has emerged during this period of celebrating the ascendancy of Barack Obama to the U.S. presidency. Many people have said that Martin King’s dream has been realized. They have said that the very last barrier of racism has been overcome. They say that a black person can be anything! This must mean that U.S. democracy has reached a

zenith, that change has come to America, that the dream has been realized.

Could it be that a black man is elected to the presidency, and all the barriers of racism come crashing down? Some mainstream media appear to think so. According to the *New York Times*, for example, Obama managed to “sweep away the last racial barrier in American politics with ease as the country chose him as its first black chief executive.”

The election of Barack Obama may not be such an extraordinary phenomenon for young people who have been shaped by popular visual culture. How many black presidents have they already experienced? Dennis Haysbert was president in *Twenty-Four*; Morgan Freeman, Danny Glover, and others have also been cast in the role.

But where is the logic here? A black man is now the president and commander in chief of the United States of America. All people who suffer the effects of discrimination according to race, gender, sexuality, disability, etc., have experienced progress; but have they been magically released from the conditions of their subjugation?

So what is the significance of Obama's election?

Something quite earthshaking has occurred—but it is not that the Obama presidency can miraculously transform the material conditions of poor people, black people, other people of color, immigrants, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender and intersex people. It has not brought liberation to us. But it does tell us what kind of political and ideological environment we now inhabit. It tells us something about this historical conjuncture.

The election of Barack Obama did not prevent a BART police officer in Oakland, California, from shooting an un-

armed black youth. But it does give us hope that we have a more hospitable terrain for the struggle against police violence.

What many of us used to call the “Other America,” the America descended from Harriet Tubman and John Brown, from Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, and Cesar Chavez, and Joe Hill, and the Haymarket martyrs, the America that historically experienced slavery and colonization and economic exploitation, that Invisible America is finally the America that can potentially provide the leadership we need during these difficult times.

Let us say it loudly and proudly: *President Barack Hussein Obama.*

I do not want to gloss over the challenges of the moment. In fact, I do not think I would be respecting the import of Black History Month that we celebrate if I portrayed this election and this inauguration as the panacea to all our problems. But I do want us to relish this victory, to celebrate this moment, this historical conjuncture, to ride for a moment the wave of collective, global emotional solidarities occasioned by this triumph. I want us to relish it, not for what it portends, not for its consequences, but for what it means at this moment in history. For what it means to generations of people of African descent, generations of people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds here and abroad who learned how to place justice, equality, and peace before economic profit, before ideologies of racism.

Many people assume that the current election represents the final victory of the civil rights movement. So let me talk about civil rights.

As we all know, the term “civil rights” refers to the rights of citizens, of all citizens, but because the very nature of citizenship in the United States has always been troubled by the

refusal to grant citizenship to subordinate groups—indigenous people, African slaves, women of all racial and economic backgrounds—we tend to think of some people as model citizens, as archetypal citizens, those whose civil rights are never placed in question, the quintessential citizens, and others as having to wage struggles for the right to be regarded as citizens. And some—undocumented immigrants or “suspected” undocumented immigrants, along with ex-felons or “suspected” ex-felons—are beyond the reach of citizenship altogether.

We still live with this two-tiered notion of citizenship.

The punishment of imprisonment is predicated on the assumption that people have rights and liberties that can be taken away from them. Think about a photographic positive and negative—the prison is the negative of the larger liberal democracy.

Because of the long history of black people’s campaigns for equality, the term “civil rights” has become a synonym for those legal measures that assure racial equality. Because the history of the quest for “civil rights” dates back to slavery, there has been a tendency to assume that black people are the representative subjects of “civil rights” and that “civil rights” are affirmed through legislative and judicial processes, which attempt to assure racial equality before the law.

We all know that here in the United States, black people are not the only ones who have been denied full rights of citizenship. Other racialized communities have been and continue to be denied citizenship; full rights of citizenship are denied by virtue of gender and by virtue of sexuality. Some people react negatively when they hear about the struggle for the civil rights of LGBT communities regarding things like the right to marry (and this tells us nothing about the patriarchal and heterosexist nature of the institution of marriage itself).

The problems that emerge from this tendency to equate civil rights with African American subjects are many. For example, during the 2008 presidential campaign, I was struck by the racially inflected anxiety that emerged among McCain-Palin supporters and by the discourse of citizenship that drives it. During one of the televised McCain-Palin rallies in Minnesota, a woman said: “I can’t trust Obama. I have read about him and he’s not, he’s not uh—he’s an Arab.” At this point, McCain took the microphone from her and said: “No ma’am. He’s a decent family man [and] citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues and that’s what this campaign’s all about.”

Why did it not even occur to McCain to say that although Obama is not an Arab, there would be nothing wrong with an Arab running for the presidency? If you consider the woman’s rather incoherent remark, she could have just have easily substituted “Negro” at a different historical moment, or “Jew.”

But the point is this: In his response, McCain implied that had he really been an Arab, he could not have been characterized as a “decent family man,” he could not have been characterized as a “citizen.” Embedded in his response was the notion that Arabs are excluded from U.S. citizenship as well as discourses of heterosexism, that citizenship itself is racialized and sexualized. It would be interesting to consider how the word “decent” has come to stand in for the differentiation of those who would otherwise be associated with criminalized communities. Therefore, while poor black communities are still systematically criminalized, there are those who have risen “above race” and are therefore “decent.”

I am extremely concerned that Obama has not found a way to challenge the anti-Arab racism and the implicit Islamophobia.

But it is important that he gave his first interview to *Al Arabiya*.

We are celebrating Black History Month. Revisit what is now officially known as the civil right era, and let us invoke the Freedom Movement for which Dr. King gave his life—especially all those—like Fannie Lou Hamer, Rev. Ralph Abernathy, James Foreman, Dorothy Smith Robinson, Ella Baker, and Joanne Robinson—who did not live to see this day.

They did not know what they were unleashing; they believed so strongly in justice, and equality, and in their own collective ability to eradicate an important structure of racism in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, that they inspired people all over the South, all over the country, and throughout the world.

Fifty years ago, the evocation of “race” by drum majors for justice (as Dr. King called them) signified equality, hope, and change. Of course, when it was raised by believers in segregation forever, it represented the status quo.

Today, many aspects of our society have changed. It is not the same world I knew as a child growing up some nine miles from here in Birmingham, when I was horrified to hear about Emmett Till, and overjoyed to hear about the boycott.

Change has come in some respects, as Obama himself pointed out in his speech on race, yet racism is far from fully eradicated. Why, then, was it so difficult to have a sustained conversation on race during the election campaign? Why did “race” signify negativity, why did it signify chaos? Why was it not possible to pursue some of the questions that Obama himself raised?

The work that race does—the work that it has done historically, and the central place it occupies in the collective psyche of this country—is very complex and has many dimensions. But in all this, perhaps its historical dimension is most central.

We live in a country whose population has not acquired the habit of taking historical memory seriously. And therefore we tend to assume that something that happened ten years ago or twenty or thirty years ago is a part of a history that remains securely in the past.

But histories never leave us for another inaccessible place. They are a part of us; they inhabit us and we inhabit them even when we are not aware of this relationship to history.

In his now famous speech on race, Obama identifies with the historical struggles against racism, and I think this is what has generated so much excitement across generations and across racial and ethnic identifications.

If we have discarded anachronistic notions of race that are grounded in pseudoscientific classifications of humanity that are hierarchal by their very nature, if we have discarded these notions of race, we cannot discard the work that race has done to shape our histories.

So many of us have said that we did not expect to see a black president in our lifetimes. This phrase has been repeated so many times, especially by people of African descent, that I think we should stop and reflect on its meaning.

We are primarily referring to people of a certain generation who have said that they did not think they would live to see this day (although Martin Luther King said in the 1960s that it should take not forty, but twenty-five years).

How many times have you heard someone say, “I didn’t think I would see an African American president in my lifetime.” That a black president was indeed elected was so momentous that huge numbers of people were drawn to Washington to witness for themselves, or at least on the big screens on the mall—the swearing in of President Barack Obama.

How do we define “black” or “African American”? Our

definition is a political one; it is one that is first and foremost associated with the struggle for freedom. The meaning of blackness in historical context is inexorably linked to the meaning of freedom—to the meaning of democracy.

If the black person elected had not identified with these struggles, with the authentic expansion of freedom in the country and the world, if the black person had been a Clarence Thomas-type figure, then I do not think we would have responded in the same way. If there had been a black candidate who vowed to continue the Iraq War, who placed the needs of corporations over those of people, who wanted to continue the old Bush policies, then we would not have responded in the same way.

Orlando Patterson points out in his monumental study of slavery that freedom was first imagined and invented by slaves; it was first imagined by those whose lives were the negation of freedom.

So let us remember enslaved women and men who imagined and struggle for freedom. Let us remember the many activists in the 1930s and 1940s who paved the way for the freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s, those who dared to imagine a better place, a better world.

We have heard Obama talk about the economic crisis and we have heard him make a commitment to move boldly and firmly. We have heard him commit to ending the war in Iraq, but I am not so sure we need an accelerated war in Afghanistan. We have heard Obama say that our public safety should not require the sacrifice of our principles and ideals. And we expect that the military prison at Guantánamo will soon be shut down. And we expect him to move swiftly to save the planetary environment.

But I also want to hear Obama commit to ending racial profiling and police violence. And we need to develop strate-

gies that do not require us to reinvent the wheel every time a young person is killed by the police.

I want to hear Obama commit to ending the imprisonment binge. There are more than two million people behind bars, many only because they are young and black or Latino and poor. If there is a commitment to fix the educational system, there must also be a commitment to abolish the existing prison system.

Racism has not ended because one black man now occupies the highest office of the land, or because one black family is in the White House. As we celebrate their ascendancy, let us not forget the millions of families that have been disrupted because of the institutional racism that structures the criminal justice system.

Obama has committed to a new policy toward the Muslim world. In supporting him in that venture, we ask that he acknowledge the violence and oppression that has been visited upon our Palestinian sisters and brothers—especially now those who live in Gaza.

Bishop Gene Robinson's Prayer

Bless us with tears — for a world in which over a billion people exist on less than a dollar a day, where young women from many lands are beaten and raped for wanting an education, and thousands die daily from malnutrition, malaria, and AIDS.

Bless us with anger — at discrimination, at home and abroad, against refugees and immigrants, women, people of color, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.

Bless us with discomfort — at the easy, simplistic “answers” we’ve preferred to hear from our politicians, instead of the truth, about ourselves and the world, which we need to face if we are going to rise to the challenges of the future.

Bless us with patience — and the knowledge that none of what ails us will be “fixed” anytime soon, and the understanding that our new president is a human being, not a messiah.

Bless us with humility — open to understanding that our own needs must always be balanced with those of the world.

Bless us with freedom from mere tolerance — replacing it with a genuine respect and warm embrace of our differences, and an understanding that in our diversity, we are stronger.

TWELVE

Difficult Dialogues

*National Women’s Studies Association Conference, Atlanta
November 12, 2009*

One of the organizations with which I work and which has served as the terrain on which some of the collective insights I will share with you have grown is Sisters Inside, an abolitionist organization that focuses on women in prison. Attending meetings and conferences in Australia, where Sisters Inside is headquartered, I have learned that before anything else can proceed, we always acknowledge the traditional holders of the land.

Here in Atlanta, Georgia, I want to acknowledge the original inhabitants and holders of the land on which we gather this evening, recognizing that Native men and women have been and continue to be the most consistently excluded from circles of justice. I have vowed to myself to make this ceremonial acknowledgement each time I speak at a public gathering in order not to assent to the discursive genocide that continues to affirm the genocide of colonization.

It has been thirty-two years since the founding of the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA). For those of us who have been teaching and writing in and around the fields of women’s and gender studies, of feminist studies for the duration of the NWSA’s existence, it is very difficult to believe