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Commentary, analysis and investigations
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May 15, 2008 - Issue 277

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Bubba in the Backyard: The Politics of Race and Gender in Campaign 2008

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Ragtime

"The struggle for freedom in America is a struggle to free Black men's bodies and white men's minds!"

-Frederick Douglass

In director Milos Forman's 1981 movie adaptation of the E. L. Doctorow classic novel, *Ragtime*, Howard Lee Rawlings plays the suave Coalhouse Walker Jr., a dapper, sophisticated, and well mannered jazz pianist caught driving a fancy car through notorious Sundown Town in the middle of the afternoon. It is a violent tragedy set upon a strange dichotomy of race and class in the segregated turn of the century Apart-hate American state. The direction is superb, back of a script that pushes the actors to the emotional depth of their characters.

Immediately, the quickening pace of this tragic life and death saga turns upon the queer and bitter hubris claimed by a local white blue collar worker (the fireman), who becomes incensed upon the abrupt encounter of a Black man in such fine clothes driving such a fancy car. His actions make a bold and blatant statement back of the pedagogy of oppression, and the ritual perception of white supremacy and Black racial inferiority, measured during a rude era of psychopathic racist violence. It was an age of pogroms, terrorism, and ritualistic mass murder. It was a time when Blackfolk had come to expect little justice, if any at all. And, it was Bubba's greatest time in the sun.

The fireman's rage is fueled by his unique sense of entitlement. This was a day and age that would produce a long and bitter painful series of Red Summer seasons that brought inconceivable misery and death to Black people. Today, this seminal age in American history still lives and breathes, unreconciled in the not-to-far-removed subconscious life of this nation. The mad rush of brutish indignities hurled directly upon this man's life, along with the senseless murder of the mother of his newborn child, the woman he loves, in the midst of an anxious white mob, pushes Coalhouse toward revolutionary violence.

Watching as the fireman's actions instantly alight such a horrible series of atrocities, we are reminded of this same unique sense of entitlement as we witnessed in another character - this time in the movie *Rosewood*. In this biopic of the very same era, one white man actually becomes terribly upset with the knowledge that a Black man in a Black community nearby actually has a piano in his house, while he of course does not; even though he has absolutely no idea how to play one, nor any desire at all to learn. Both of these narratives speak loudly to a shocking era of brutal wholesale terrorism. It was the First Evil Birth of Jim Crow. Behind the Black Codes, the discriminatory ordinances, and Jim Crow laws, *Apart-Hate* in America existed as a brut social order, cloaking the ever-present threat of death.

Thousands of innocent Black men, women, and children would die painful, senseless deaths for absolutely no reason whatsoever. Numerous independent Black communities would literally be burned to the ground, and millions of dollars in property would be lost, simply due to the arbitrary whim of white accusation. All across the nation, Blackfolk were once again forced upon a woeful Trail of Tears. This was during an era that was but half a century removed from the Civil War and the First Reconstruction, and many people still ask of those macabre decades of rope and fire, of broken flesh and wonton bloodlust, just how on earth could this have happened?

The answer, long neglected, may sound rather complicated, however, it is actually quite simple. It involves the intergenerational transmission of cultural codes and mores, vigorously and sometimes violently re-enforced in ritual play. Today, it remains an aggressive virus that feeds off the fragile political ether, while hiding within the easy quicksilver transmission of physis memory. It is that very buoyant part of American life and culture that is kept hostage, as if stolen to a psychological lockbox that buffers the political discourse preventing each generation from truly developing an honest and open discussion of race.

Let me locate for you the space from which I am speaking. During slavery, a Black man's desire to make a strike for freedom was often rationalized and even seriously argued in the courts, as some sort of mental disorder or disease. 'What in the world could be much better than what they have here?' They would say. After slavery, white men cowardly came to project the almost Jack-the Ripper-like attention they had once wantonly displayed toward Black women's bodies, on to the Black male. From this moment on, as the nation was once again on the brink of remaking itself, suddenly ingrained into the substance of American culture, and constantly re-enforced through ritual play, down on through that vicious period in which Coalhouse Walker endeavored to play jazz and raise a family, roughly a century ago, when conservative newspapers like the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* basically poised as bulletin boards

directing the latest surge of white bloodlust running rampant and unchecked; until, as recently as the O.J. Simpson trial and the downfall of Mike Tyson, the specter of a brutish Black male rapist violently on the prowl for the chastity of white woman, has been a lucrative commodity for the American corporate media. It is that part of the conversation on race that has been made mute and unspeakable. It is what keeps us from healing and moving on as a nation. It is like the restrained conversation that you sought to have with your child that ended up only helping her to get pregnant far too young in her life.

Nonetheless, culturally, nation-wide it remains a deep and incessant subconscious utterance, woefully stolen from death detritus and surviving through decades of dishonesty and neglect. It remains as if secreted away in the far off basement of honest political discourse. Today, it remains extant in our world as a powerful lingering metaphor. However, truth be told; Black men were never on the prowl for white women. During the days of Jim Crow, thousands of successful deeply stratified self-sustaining independent Black communities existed throughout the United States. More often than not, the media-crafted image of a fiendish Black man only served to mask the real true overwhelming desire of Whitefolks to acquire Blackfolk's land. It is from this painful trough of hidden emotion that sits upon the battered landscape of a shameful aspect of America's past that much of Barrack Obama's opposition has fed.

The Black Candidate

"I think it would be a great thing if we had an election between two people who loved this country and were devoted to the interests of the country and people could actually ask themselves who is right on the issues, instead of all this other stuff that always seems to intrude itself on our politics."

-Bill Clinton

By December of 2007, HRC was still polling an overwhelming majority of Black voters; roughly 57 to 32%. Iowa however would change all of that. Immediately, Barack Obama had passed something akin to the Apollo Ballroom Test, and he was now easily seen by an overwhelming majority of the Black community as more than just a symbolic candidate. Suddenly, his enormous crossover appeal had afforded him 'viability' in the eyes of the world, and now the giddiest spotlight was turned directly upon the talented political golden child from Chicago. Although Hillary Clinton's forged 'tears for racial fears' did have some measurable effect in New Hampshire, still an evolving cross-cultural swath of the nation's electorate, young and old, would remain forever smitten with the candidate who actually embodied the true nature of change.

After what had become nearly eight miserable years, whence a stolen election, a terrorist attack, and a devastating alienating war abroad had suddenly thrown open the whole nature of what it actually means to be an American, finally there had emerged a candidate who actually manifested the audacity of hope. It was a brand that spoke to the best in all of us. For his opponents though, the playbook had long ago been written and culturally set in stone, and there remained an ironclad reliance upon the lingering perception of Black racial inferiority. This would continue to linger on a course extant within the malignant zeitgeist of an inadequate and ill advised century of protracted concentrated Civil Rights discourse. Thus for them, quite

another political narrative remained aggressively at play.

Within the Clinton campaign this would continue to evolve, concurrent with a rather odd and sporadic babble, opting to serendipitously arise from what appeared to be sidelined cadres of the legendary Civil Rights-Integrationist Talented Tenth Cabal (the New Tenth). Many of them had inevitably thrown in their support to HRC early on. More than half of the Congressional Black Caucus supported her, and many members of this forty year old cabal would now seem to arrogantly interpose their very own estranged cultural worldview into the discourse of the campaign. Perhaps it was because Barack Obama had not come out of the pedagogy of any of their institutions. Nonetheless, they would seem to act as if seeking to muddy the political waters by childishly tossing out reckless thoughts into the stiff racial ether, using such cleverly concocted tricknology as: "Well, he's just not Black enough!" and then, "Oh, he's just too Black!" These were comments, thoughts, and ideas that actually hearken us back to their very own bizarre black skin color-caste pedagogy, the strange and the familiar Brown Paper Bag Test and such. Today, this too remains a recalcitrant pathology whose viral effects have surly evolved. It lives, culturally re-enforced throughout the generations and evidenced now in a plethora of corporate media concocted 'Leading Blacks' who often appear to be Black Leaders in blackface alone. They perform right before our eyes like players in some grotesque vaudevillian opera; the cast, for the most part culturally disoriented and culturally suicidal, presenting a strange performance of Al Joelson on the flip side! Curious, isn't it?

Obviously, one would have to assume that this elite political intelligentsia (the New Tenth) did not even bother to read either of Barack Obama's celebrated best selling books; *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), and *Dreams From My Father* (1995) where he writes: '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.' Later on, he fondly recalls the admonitions of his father saying to him: 'You do not work hard enough, [Barack]. You must help in your people's struggle. Wake up, black man!' In time of course, ironic as it would seem, it would be Barack Obama who would continue to be accused of just not having a "Black agenda". However, in both Jessie Jackson's presidential campaigns (1984, 1988), and in that of Al Sharpton's (2004) were we not stridently informed: "Just simply being Black and in the presidential race means itself that issues of concern to the Black community shall automatically rise to the surface!" If this is so, then what for them has actually changed in 2008? Why has Barack Obama seemed to raise the cautious ordure of so many of today's selected, groomed, and often perfectly projected Leading Blacks? The answers may lie not too far from King's Tomb. Perhaps Memphis was simply no place for him? Doesn't it all just make you wonder?

The Eloquent Trickster

"In the end of the day, you don't hire a president to make speeches; you hire a president to solve problems!

-HRC

In a rare interview, just days before the primary season had begun in earnest; Tavis Smiley was quick to remind the viewers of Meet the Press that the old Southern

Strategy [of racial politics] would not play well as a part of the presidential campaign. On January 26th, voters in the South Carolina Primary proved Smiley right. The Bubba politics of Bill and Hillary Clinton, along with that of quite a number of their most anxious surrogates, was resoundingly sat down in South Carolina. Yet, old habits do often die hard and henceforth flying neatly below the radar, yet unfailing in its resolve would be the never-ending effort to paint Barack Obama as "The Black candidate" This is what lies behind the "Electability" argument. Of course, this would rely solely upon the deeply pessimistic hoped for signs of a lingering existence of a still vast and recalcitrant perception of Black racial inferiority. After the Palmetto defeat, now forever conspicuously driving the narrative, would be the effort to present the picture of a Black man of very little substance.

From Super Tuesday until the Philadelphia Speech on Race (A More Perfect Union), no matter how replete his speeches on the stump, no matter how articulate and comprehensive his language, despite his academic and political credentials, along with two rather well written and well received books, a picture was to be painted into the minds of the American people that he was still simply 'Jive Talk'n!' He was to be seen in classic Negro caricature, in the stereotypical guise of the Black man 'On the Take'; the Eloquent Trickster and the Con Man, like Hollywood's contemporary version of a loud talking Martin Lawrence, Eddie Murphy, or Chris Tucker. He talks a good game, but he surly cannot be trusted, and besides, there's just not much there.

So it was that Bubba would continue to hone his skills finding a new-fangled brand of southern comfort in his very own backyard. He was all too well aware that racism in America is like the deformed child kept hidden in the basement. We all know that it is there, but 'we really not supposed to talk about it!' This has left a woeful physic byproduct, betrayed in a rigid social contract uniquely reinforced within the subconscious collective through a stark ritual play. It is the mute state of racial discourse in America. It remains true as well that even for the most righteous mass of the American population, it is a conversation that has been vigorously manufactured, shaped and molded for them. On the other hand, let us understand that racism is not simply the occurrence of a harsh grammatical event which fractures the protocols of what is considered politically correct. It is not the language itself, but it is a psychopathology back of the human discourse.

Thus far, the boldest racist language during the period of this campaign would not actually come directly from Bill or Hillary Clinton. It would arrive in the words and speeches of Bob Johnson, Pat Buchanan, Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, and Neo Nazi Hal Turner (who actually suggested that someone should simply assassinate Barack Obama). And, it would come in the words of an anchor on the Golf Network who casually stated that maybe Tiger Woods should simply be: "taken out back and lynched!" And then, in the words of a Hilary Clinton supporter in Texas who unabashedly stated that: "Barack Obama's problem is that he is black;" whatever that was supposed to mean. For two weeks the American public was even unwittingly forced to sit as an involuntary focus group for the mere purpose of gauging Obama's appeal in Muslim garb.

All of these instances of xenophobic cynicism were made by people who today portray themselves for the most part, as unapologetically racist. Back of the words and events however, it is the queer psychopathology of human negation that is important here,

with its collateral sense of white entitlement. Like the fireman's hubris simply knowing that Coalhouse exists in his world. It is reflective of both the failure of, and this nation's unwillingness to truly tackle the issue of race.

So too, it is a result of the legendary philanthropic co-opting and foreign occupation of the Black community through the explicit use of agents in blackface, who were never really educated and or groomed to consider but a marginal 'Tenth' of their own African Village. It was W.E.B. Dubois who said that ... "the purpose of the education of the Talented Tenth was to keep the best amongst us, away from the worst!" It was a philosophy completely antithetical to the African Cultural Worldview. Nonetheless, they showed up about a century ago in the midst of a true human rights dilemma, prepared with a philosophy that was never really constructed to address the whole of the human being. At the turn of the previous century, philanthropic Civil Rights discourse immediately took us backward, from three-fifths of a human being, to what eventually became less than one-eighteenth! No longer a precious commodity, Black flesh became an easy scapegoat.

Even further, back of the effort to paint Barrack Obama in the pessimistic ritual perception of black racial inferiority, was the shameless yet blatant plea from the carders of American feminism (Gloria Steinem, Geraldine Ferraro, et al), claiming that a white woman must always stand first in the accent of power; and they are not at all afraid to admit it. One can here the echo of Fredrick Douglass, arguing with the Grimke Sisters, and Susan B. Anthony. Nonetheless, whatever its myriad desperate contortions, the legendary Southern Strategy would still remain the same. "To make a poet black and bid him sing!"

Manufacturing Scandal and Consent

"...Blumenthal is exploiting that same right-wing network to attack and discredit Barack Obama. And he's not hesitating to use the same sort of guilt-by-association tactics that have been the hallmark of the political right dating back to the McCarthy ...

-Peter Dreier, The Huffington Post, May 1, 2008

"To say the news media's coverage of Reverend Wright has been exhaustive is like saying that Us was mildly interested in Brad Pitt's split from Jennifer Aniston. Or, as Chris Rock said recently, "It's like they gave [Wright] his own channel." More accurately, they gave him several channels. His diatribes were on a never-ending loop and the networks unleashed an army of pundits to discuss whether the connection to Wright made Obama inherently unelectable.

...The true hallmark of sensationalized journalism is ginning up controversy to drive sales, and for the mainstream news media Wright was a tailor-made tabloid icon. With newspaper sales at record lows, network news ratings tanking and 24-hour news channels desperate to fill up all 24 hours, Wright's outbursts were the mainstream media's equivalent of Tom Cruise jumping on Oprah's couch - a train wreck no one could turn away from. And so they milked it, regardless of the impact on the very race they were

supposedly covering objectively..."

-Lara Cohen, Us Magazine

By the middle of March, almost overnight this covert effort on the part of the Clinton campaign to paint Barrack Obama in the stereotypical guise of an eloquent trickster of little substance, was suddenly extinguished by his historic, spiritual, and engaging, ground breaking speech on race in America, in response to the aggressive high-tech lynching of his former pastor Reverend Jeremiah Wright, led by Sean Hannity of Fox News. Reverend Jeremiah Wright emerged from being a cleric with an obscure moderate popularity in a few circles, to an instant household name. From this moment on, no longer could anyone ever again accuse Barack Obama of simply being a man of little substance.

Sean Hannity would eventually find himself having to quickly deny and then having to ultimately admit his long association with Neo Nazi Hal Turner - courtesy of the leader of the New Black Panther Party. Little else has been made of this incident. In a manner of hours though, this obscure Black preacher from Chicago was receiving death threats. His congregation was being harassed and bomb threats were being reported at his church. The story behind this story is the enormous unchecked power of the corporate media to manufacture scandal whenever they choose. This time, they would put a preacher's life in danger, along with the lives of more than ten thousand of his innocent parishioners. No one seemed to notice.

Nevertheless, by the end of the week, two ironic outcomes would emerge. Suddenly, with almost no effort on their part at all, the controversy had actually netted the Clinton campaign their main strategic goal, and Barrack Obama could no longer avoid his role of the pre-eminent "Black candidate". Yet, poll numbers initially suggested that the controversy did little to affect his overall favorability rating. In fact, it was Clinton's favorability rating that would actually begin to plummet in the polls for a second time at this moment. Since the previous summer, her percentage of the Black vote had dipped 36%, and after the Bosnia debacle, her unfavorability rating would never really seem to recover. More than two thirds of the country simply does not trust her.

This would suggest that the increasing racial conflicts of the democratic campaign were seen by many to be the result of the continuing presence of Bubba, engaged in mischief in the backyard. At the same time it was revealed that the Clinton's were none too professional in paying their bills, for a moment it actually appeared as if HRC was blamed for the controversy itself and not Reverend Wright. In February, Obama had netted an amazing string of victories. March rolled in like a lion and moved out like a lamb, with Bubba remaining steadfast in his resolve, only to shape-shift and emerge in the guise of a hoard of network commentators, now overtly fronted by Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly and Fox News.

The Angry Black Man

"You can mock certain people and get away with it!"

-Laura Inghram on the O'Reilly Factor, April 17, 2008

With a clever slight of hand, Bubba had metamorphosed into the newsrooms of self-righteous cadres of the rightwing media, feigning patriotic hubris as if they alone held hegemony on just what is truly racist in our world. With the overwhelming power of their massive tell-a-vision movie making machine, the right wing media was instantly successful in turning the enormous contributions of an highly successful American patriot into thirty second sound bytes, sensationalized into a deranged almost Manson-like traitor out for the blood of the good white people of America, along with quite a few of what had better be smart-thinking Blacks and progressives as well. It is the politics of racial fear over and over again - a ritual as old as the brutal aftermath of the Nat Turner Rebellion (1831). It was a vicious season of blood and retribution, foretelling the future of hooded posses on the prowl throughout the country.

However, truth be told, the Ku Klux Klan (1864) was never simply a rag-tag scallywag bunch of poor white trash, who coalesced when feeling threatened by Blacks in the competition for labor. Quite to the contrary, this organization has always been a deeply connected and highly evolved secret society; its far flung cadres fully entrenched within the highest echelons of the nation's media. Something that would surely make Albert Pike rather proud. What better way to marshal the hungry masses for yet another carnival of bloodlust, rope and fire, if only presented today as a virtual reality?

These were the hidden sentiments played upon during campaign 2008. As far as we know, not one individual member or spectator of any one of those many thousand known and unknown mad white riots ever received a moment of counseling for their madness. Is it legitimate to ask, just what kind of children they may have spawn? Despite the widespread concerns of the Black community, no one over the nation's airways would ever seem to have an opportunity to question the continuing presence of Mark Furman, Bill Bennet, Pat Buchanan, Oliver North, and others famous for their blatant racist statements. They would continue on as ever to be portrayed as genuine American heroes, intellectuals, and well paid unapologetically racist media consultants. No one would ever hear a politician today asked to disavow the Catholic Church for the most inconceivable revelations of pedophilic criminal behavior. Yet, by all means and at every turn, Reverend Jeremiah Wight must be soundly repudiated and condemned.

Unfortunately, it would become obvious that three factors would bode not too well for this nation's ability to actually conduct an honest discussion on race.

First, race exists today yoked to a psychopathology that is multi-layered in ritual deception. It is an American ritual as old as the first foundational notion that it was even plausible to enslave humanity. Its strident inter-generational transmission has left the conversation naggingly mum.

Second, as stated above, the corporate media tell-a-vision industry has an extraordinary un-checked ability to manufacture reality. This continues on with reckless abandon.

Third, ripped from the bosom of an African mother so long ago, today Black

America exists in the midst of a monumental class based civil war of its own; born of generations of self-deception and cultural suicide that issued directly from Dubois' pen. "The [New York] Boulee was formed in order to steal the Black professional away from the Garvey Movement!"

With the Black elite once again on the offensive, and working aggressively against the greater masses of their own people, as if engaged in a bizarre form of crabs-in-the-barrel-in-reverse, the nation's deep dark secret shall remain safe and sound, hidden in the basement coffers of what is today regarded as polite and civilized political discourse. Words in the public sphere are often constructed as nothing more than shrewd 'tricknology', code words made to direct, concentrate, and contain public discourse. Language is often used to oppress, by confining the entrance to where one buys into an idea.

So it was that Bubba took off his overalls and put on a suit, a tie, and a flag pin. Just like the fireman in Ragtime, James Carville's seething Good Old Boy image would seem to become a most fitting poster child for the new effort. "I said it, I meant it, and it had the right impact!" This was his mantra. With new powerful allies, Bubba would remain in the backyard and continue to have wayward ideas of his own. Together, they would continue to shamelessly mine and exploit the deep racial sensibilities still left dormant from nearly a century ago. Their strategic effort would continue to be emboldened by a classic manual of racist innuendo, while the campaign to make Barrack Obama the 'Black Candidate' would now deliberately be fronted by the media elite. Their methods were clearly anchored upon an alliance to a script written decades ago.

The Elite Uppity Negro Has Arrived

"In this particular reality show, they've decided who they want voted off the island next!"

-RJ ESKOW, The Huffington Post May 2, 2008

In New Hampshire, watching her once inevitable rise back into the White House suddenly slipping from her grasp, her tears for racial fears brilliantly betrayed upon her face, HRC aptly played the victim; and she won. Who could say that this was not still a deeply powerful image? Yet, by the South Carolina primary, Bubba had grown quite beside himself, and voters there had decided to sit Bubba down. We were reminded that Americans as a whole are indeed generally decent people, and they do truly hunger for a new era of progressive ideals. They have simply tired of the Southern Strategy of old. Their initial efforts were unsuccessful and the Clinton Campaign upon its own was never really able to successfully paint Barrack Obama as the "Black Candidate". Fortunately for them, they would gradually gain the aid of one of the most virulent and voracious forces in American politics; the right-wing media.

Eventually, the conservative press would completely take over the reigns, driving the narrative with the awesome power of their movie making machine. Fox's tagline is 'Fair and Balanced'. But, their behavior throughout this campaign would make it plain that this was their code word for 'Unapologetically Racist'.

Make no mistake about it. The creation of the fanatical image of Reverend Jeremiah

Wright by Fox News, Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, et al, was invented in order to immediately link Barack Obama with the terrifying image of an angry Black man. As stated above, it is an image that is at least as old as the aftermath of the Nat Turner Rebellion, and we would see its bloody tentacles explicit in the bizarre adolescence of Jim Crow; during those horrible days of rope and fire nearly a century ago. The speech on race (A More Perfect Union) had forced a tactical change in the overall strategy once more, as Barack's image as a simple trickster was no longer viable.

Obama's speech in March was uplifting and engaging. He appeared at times cerebral, as he called out loud for the best within all of us. No other candidate had begged to answer that central nagging question which seems to have burst from out of nowhere nearly eight years ago 'What does it truly mean to be an American?' This was inherent in his appeal, and now a new narrative had to be created. Shamelessly, it was curried directly out of the macabre era of Ragtime. The campaign of the Uppity 'Elite' Negro began to develop its prominent role hidden behind the odd grin on that fireman's face, and the violent psychopathic lexicon of mute racial discourse left dormant and unreconciled since that shameful season in American History. Barack could no longer become a Martin Lawrence character, in the guise of the easy buffoon. This was Coalhouse Walker Jr. The classy Black man too unique to easily characterize, a brilliant tactician apparently making his own choice between slavery and freedom, the creative intelligence in the person of the anomaly; he is a Black man, "Something must be wrong with him!" Karl Rove would take over from there.


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