Cashmore, Ellis. "Obama believes in *Obama*." *Beyond Black: Celebrity and Race in Obama's America*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012. 22–34. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781780931500.ch-003>>.

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Obama believes in *Obama*

'Obama was selling a new configuration, an arrangement of familiar elements in an unfamiliar form: a black politician who defied the usual color-coding.'

Racism has a ghost: an apparition of something that died, but becomes manifest to the living, typically in the form of a menace. Barack Obama was used to ghosts. So when the so-called “birthers” raised questions about the president’s origins and religion, it must have seemed like just another spooky visitation.

Donald Trump, real estate tycoon, host of *Celebrity Apprentice*, and, at one stage, potential Republican presidential candidate, was a flagbearer for the birthers – a group questioning the President’s origins – and publicly announced he wasn’t convinced that Obama was born in the United States. If he were not, Obama would not have been constitutionally eligible to occupy the White House. Even the original birth certificate, produced by an exasperated Obama in April 2011, didn’t silence his detractors; a *USA Today* poll revealed that only 38 percent of Americans believed Obama definitely was born in the US.

No sooner had the controversy simmered down, than another came to the boil. Obama’s father, Barack Obama Sr., was a serial womanizer and polygamist whom government and university officials were trying to force out of the country, it was claimed. Obama Sr. married Stanley Ann Dunham, a white student from Kansas, not only when he was said to have already been married to a woman in Kenya, but at a time, in 1961, when interracial marriages were still illegal in many parts of the US. Obama’s approval rating (which gauges public support for presidents during tenure) slumped to an unimpressive 46 per cent (this was only temporary: his approval rating jumped 11 points in the wake of the military mission, which he authorized and which resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden).

Obama, for his part, expressed puzzlement about the fixation on his origins and the willingness of many to keep asking questions unrelated to his political behavior. Perhaps he shouldn’t have been surprised. From the moment he was elected president there had been a persistent questioning of his citizenship and other credentials. As Julianne Malveaux wrote for *The Scanner*, in 2010: “The election of Barack Obama in 2008 seems to have uncorked a virulent racism among folks who are hatefully resentful of the fact that an African American man now leads our nation” (p. 5).

In contrast, the election campaign was almost devoid of racial issues. None of Obama's rivals in the primary or general elections was prepared to risk introducing race into the discourse. Risk? Yes, any politician contemplating raising an issue that either was or could have been treated by the media as having a racial element would have been taking a chance. The race issue is, as I'll show in the chapters that follow, unpredictable.

Obama's ascent to the presidency effectively started in August 2005, when a weather system that had formed over the Bahamas moved west and then north, picking up intensity to become a category 3 hurricane as it entered the Gulf of Mexico. Katrina, as it was called, struck the Gulf Coast with devastating force at daybreak on August 29, 2005, pounding a region that included the city of New Orleans and damaging neighboring Mississippi. In all, more than 1,700 people were killed and hundreds of thousands displaced. More than a million people in three states were left without power and with submerged roads even hundreds of miles from Katrina's center. The hurricane's storm surge — the water pushed towards the shore by the force of the winds swirling around the storm — was, at 29 feet, the highest ever measured in the US. Crucially, levees failed in New Orleans, resulting in political and social upheavals that continued for years.

New Orleans is an especially poor city: 27.4 percent of its inhabitants lived below the poverty line at the time of Katrina. The hurricane wreaked destruction disproportionately on African Americans, who constituted about two-thirds of the city's population: black people represented 45.8 percent of the population of the damaged areas, compared to only 26.4 percent of the populations of areas left untouched. De facto segregation meant that the city's black population lived in distinct areas. The exodus out of the city left behind a predominantly black group of survivors. The images relayed from helicopters by journalists were raw. "What a shocked world saw exposed in New Orleans last week wasn't just a broken levee," wrote the *New York Times*' Jason DeParle on September 4, 2005. "It was a cleavage of race and class, at once familiar and startlingly new, laid bare in a setting where they suddenly amounted to matters of life and death."

On the day Katrina hit New Orleans, President George W. Bush was nearing the end of a month-long break at his ranch in Crawford Texas. After being told of the hurricane, Bush decided to inspect the devastation personally. Two days after the hurricane had hit, on August 31, Bush flew over New Orleans in Air Force One to inspect the wreckage. Much of the city was under water. It was a reconnaissance he later regretted, particularly as photographers captured the flight. "The photo of my hovering over the damage suggested I was detached from the suffering on the ground," wrote Bush in his 2010 memoir, *Decision Points*.

For some, it suggested more than that. Kanye West, in a bitter verbal attack, memorably declared, "George Bush doesn't care about black people." The context of the assertion is often erased: West was talking without autocue to NBC cameras, making an appeal to raise money for the victims in

New Orleans. He singled out the media for his initial broadside. "I hate the way they portray us in the media. If we see a black family, it says they're looting. See a white family, it says they're looking for food."

In the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, a survey (reported by Howard Kurtz in the *Washington Post*, September 9, 2005), found that 71 percent of African Americans believed the disaster showed that racial inequality remained a major problem in the USA, while 56 percent of whites felt this was not a particularly important lesson of the disaster. This was not the only perceptual discrepancy: 66 percent of blacks maintained the government's response to the crisis would have been faster if most of the storm's victims had been white, while 77 percent of whites disagreed.

Katrina left 60,000 people homeless, though the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) refused to pay for their temporary accommodation. Most public schools were closed. "Low- and moderate-income African-American students are most affected by these school closings," reported Julianne Malveaux in her article "Is the Department of Justice at war with diversity?"

In her 2010 article "Rebuilding the Park," Farah D. Gifford, of Xavier University of Louisiana, reflected: "Almost 3 years after the storm, Black victims were more likely to be still living in trailers" (p. 386).

Ten months before Katrina struck, Obama had won a seat on the US Senate: he'd defeated the last-minute Republican candidate Alan Keyes, taking 70 percent of the vote. The winner of the Republican primary had resigned after accusations that he took his wife to a sex club against her wishes.

Obama was only the fifth African American in history to win a seat in the US's highest legislative body. Biographical details began to filter through: son of a Kenyan politician, his mother a white American anthropologist, Obama had studied at Columbia University and Harvard Law School. He had been the first African American to be president of the *Harvard Law Review*.

In a praiseful article for the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, Kenneth W. Mack, himself from Harvard, coined the term "the Obama phenomenon," and predicted he could turn into "an African-American politician who changes the nature of black politics, and American politics as well" (p. 101).

Within a week of Katrina and with the relief effort creaking into life, Obama made a speech, in which he addressed allegations that the laggardly response of FEMA was attributable to the concentration of stranded African Americans. "There's been much attention in the press about the fact that those who were left behind in New Orleans were disproportionately poor and African American," Obama remarked, adding a sentence that encapsulated ideals that would guide him to the presidency: "I do not subscribe to the notion that the painfully slow response of FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security was racially-based. The ineptitude was colorblind."

And thus Obama began to break with the shibboleths of black politicians, at the same time assuaging whites' remorse, as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Dietrich explain in their 2011 article "The sweet enchantment of color-blind racism in Obamerica": "Unlike black leaders such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, he did not make them feel guilty about the state of racial affairs in the country" (p. 199).

Obama evacuated the potentially explosive race issue without defusing his own rhetoric on the necessity for change. But why did the "monumental change" have to involve putting a black man "in charge"? Unlike Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich, Shelby Steele believes whites already felt guilty and would have continued to feel this way with or without Obama. What's more, whites' persistent guilt was – and continued to be – a valuable resource. "Whites needed responsibility for our problems in order to gain their own moral authority and legitimacy," wrote Steele in his 2006 book *White Guilt* (p. 69).

Steele's argument runs as follows: over the decades, whites have been so obsessed with the virtues of owning up to the sins of history, they have actually become used to, even comfortable living with their own guilt and have learned to use it to their own advantage. Since when precisely? On Steele's account, the pangs started in the middle of the twentieth century.

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama – an act that inspired the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King (1929-68) organized boycotts and led the opposition to discrimination against blacks. After nearly a decade of boycott and protests, the 1964 Civil Rights Act made racial discrimination in public places, such as theaters, restaurants and hotels, illegal. Among its other provisions was a requirement that employers provide equal employment opportunities. Steele lived through this. "I didn't understand at the time that it was precisely the fact that King had won America's acknowledgment of racism's evil that, in turn, made racism so valuable to blacks" (p. 35).

The ideological focus and direction of the post-civil rights era were unmistakable. The discriminatory laws that denied African Americans their rights as citizens were repealed after a torrid fight: those who fought for more enlightened legislation marched, rallied, sat down in protest, while police officers clubbed them with batons and let loose their dogs. After the tumult, white Americans' attempts to dissociate themselves from the racist past of their homeland took many forms, many of them tangible. Affirmative action, racial quotas and contract compliance were among the policy initiatives designed to give African Americans assistance. The post-civil rights respect for individual rights and freedoms was abandoned as white society endeavored to detach itself from a past pitted with slavery, segregation and all manner of subjugation – as well as an ill-judged war in Vietnam, which ended in 1973 and left 58,200 US soldiers and up to 250,000 South Vietnamese dead or missing in action. Steele writes of the quest for a "'dissociated man,' someone so conspicuously

cleansed of racism, sexism and militarism that he would be a carrier of moral authority and legitimacy” (p. 150).

By the end of the century, the racist laws had gone and black people had progressed to all levels of society. Inequalities in employment, education, and housing indicated the persistence of racism, but remedies were nowhere near as obvious as they once were. The guilt shared by whites for the inhumanity and injustice of the past ensnared them in an obligation not to philosophical principles, but to black people – as a collectivity. Steele argues that whites’ protracted attempt to dissociate themselves from America’s shameful history has conferred on them a sense of moral authority.

There are profound implications for blacks. For Steele, African Americans, or at least some African Americans, became complicit in this enterprise, unwittingly aiding whites by accepting a role of intractable inferiority and trading with white guilt. While he doesn’t include black celebrities in his arraignment, a case could be made. In one startling passage, Steele writes of how “even the most gifted and affluent blacks ... must pull on the Sambo mask and reinvent themselves as the sort of inferiors that will trade well with white guilt” (p. 134). In other words, whites license the liberties of black artists and entertainers, but only on strict conditions. This is a hefty proposition and I’ll return to it. For now, I want to view the post-Katrina period through the lens of *White Guilt*, which was published a year after the hurricane but which makes no mention of the disaster.

Katrina issued an unwelcome reminder that, far from dissociating itself from the past, America – specifically, white America – was tormented by it. The hurricane, or more accurately the response to its calamitous effect, forced race back to the forefront of the popular imagination, though not in a straightforward way. “Mainstream America too often demonizes the Other because, well, we’ve been conditioned to do so,” wrote Lynne Duke and Teresa Wiltz for the *Washington Post*, in 2005 (September 4). The Other, in this instance, refers to something that is distinct from or opposite to oneself. “And because it’s easier to put people in a box and then shove it in the corner, away from view. Then it becomes *their* problem, not ours. To talk about race, for those who are weary of it, is to invite glazed-over eyes and stifled yawns – or even hostility. But Katrina blew open the box.”

Linda Chavez, then president of the Center for Equal Opportunity and former head of the US Civil Rights Commission, came close to castigating the victims when she said: “This is a natural disaster that is exacerbated by the problems of the underclass. The chief cause of poverty today among blacks is no longer racism.” Her reasoning was not unlike Steele’s: “People who don’t have jobs, are not used to getting up and organizing themselves and getting things done.”

Sharing this perspective was African American actor Terrence Howard, who suggested that Katrina victims were accustomed to waiting for help rather

than helping themselves (quoted by Yvonne Bynoe, in her 2005 article, “After Katrina – Is there justice or just us?”).

By contrast, many agreed with Kanye West’s crisp denunciation. Accusations of wantonness and indifference came from, among others, Radhika Parameswaran, who, in a scholarly article for the *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, argued that the catastrophe showed how “Dr Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream of economic and social justice for those living in the peripheries of American prosperity” had been “perverted” (p. 202).

Whatever absolution America earned, or thought it had earned, since the 1960s was thrown into doubt in the trail of Katrina. The race issue was renewed. In the 1960s, King’s incomparable disquisitions on civil rights provided both analysis and program, and a Democratic administration (1917–63) led by a sympathetic John F. Kennedy was responsive. But, in the 2005, four decades after civil rights legislation, with a Republican government led by George W. Bush in power, there was no public figure with the visibility or gravitas to make credible pronouncements.

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“Obama isn’t black.” A puzzling assessment, but one buttressed by Debra J. Dickerson in her 2007 article “Colorblind”: “‘Black,’ in our political and social reality, means those descended from West African slaves. Voluntary immigrants of African descent (even those descended from West Indian slaves) are just that, voluntary immigrants of African descent with markedly different outlooks on the role of race in their lives and in politics.”

Obama never claimed to be black; maybe his experience in the spring of 2000 taught him not to. Obama lost the Democratic nomination for a seat in United States House to incumbent Bobby L. Rush. It was a political miscalculation and perhaps a personal misjudgment. Obama’s allies cautioned him about taking on incumbent congressman Rush, who had a stronghold on the South Side of Chicago, an area that was 65 percent black, overwhelmingly Democratic and solidly working class. Commenting on the election in winter 2000, the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* recorded the bare facts: “The district has been represented by a black congressman since 1928. Rush received the support of President Clinton and defeated Obama by a large margin” (p. 25).

Rush was born in Georgia, but had grown up in Chicago, enlisted in the Army, joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and helped found the Illinois faction of the Black Panthers (originally, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense) in 1968. The Black Panthers were established in Oakland, California in 1966, their aim being to patrol black ghettos and protect residents from police brutality. Its creators, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seales, urged members to arm themselves. In many senses, the Panthers were the yang to Martin Luther King’s yin: they spurned the nonviolent disobedience favored by King. “We were reacting to police brutality, to the historical relationship

between African-Americans and recalcitrant racist whites,” Rush reflected. “We needed to arm ourselves.”

Rush coordinated a medical clinic that pioneered mass screening for sickle cell anemia, which disproportionately affects blacks. In 1992, as an alderman, he had ousted Charles A. Hayes, a veteran of the civil rights and labor movements who was something of a political legend in Chicago. Yet Obama shrugged off Rush, claiming he represented “a politics that is rooted in the past, a reactive politics.”

Obama, at 38, was 15 years younger than Rush, and had been in Chicago since his twenties after growing up in Hawaii and Indonesia. He worked as a community organizer on the South Side for three years, and then returned to the city after graduating from Harvard. He ran a voter registration drive, joined a law firm, taught constitutional law and had been elected to the state Senate from Hyde Park in 1996. The stinging defeat by Rush was the first reverse in a hitherto lustrous career. But a valuable reverse. Presumably, Obama was frustrated with his state Senate job and wanted to flex his muscles in the real political world. But, as Melissa Harris-Lacewell and Jane Junn wrote in their 2007 study “Old friends and new alliances”: “Obama had faced serious racial credibility problems. In 2000, compared with Rush, he looked woefully ‘inauthentic’ racially” (p. 38).

Obama grew less concerned with “racial credibility” or “authenticity,” and more concerned with broadening his appeal to all ethnic groups and across the class range. Harris-Lacewell and Junn call this “deracializing.” It’s possible that Obama could not find a grammar with which to communicate with black voters. Rush was well versed in this respect. In the aftermath of the election, Jenny Scott, of the *New York Times*, recorded Rush’s perception of his rival. “Obama has never suffered from a lack of believing that he can accomplish whatever it is he decides to try,” said Rush, stirring in a sardonic, “Obama believes in Obama” (September 9, 2000).

Scott also quoted Eric Edelstein, a media consultant who worked on the Rush campaign: “Certain Democrats in Chicago say it’s the best thing that ever happened to him, not winning that race – that he couldn’t have been positioned to run for the US Senate from that district ... you get pigeonholed pretty quickly as ‘an African-American congressman,’ not as a more transcendent congressman.”

By this, Edelstein meant Obama intended to rise above, or cut across, ethnic groups. To win Chicago South Side, Obama would have had to work on expanding his support among blacks, including the older, church-going, Rush loyalists who vote disproportionately in primaries. Obama was struggling to find a place on a wider horizon and either couldn’t or just didn’t want to overdo his appeal to black voters in his bid for transcendence.

Five years later, just before Katrina arrived, it would have been possible to argue that racism had lost its convulsive potential. No one would seriously contend it was not still a fault line, a fracture across the surface of America.

But, after the Rodney King riots of 1992, there had been no major upheavals to occasion screaming headlines around the nation and, indeed, the world. Plus, there had been new arrivals at the top: Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice were key figures in the Republican cabinet. Black people had never had such a central role in policy-making and strategic political thinking.

Paradoxically, the attacks of September 11, 2001 had unleashed centripetal forces that thrust Americans of all backgrounds towards a common center. "Like an overwhelming majority of Americans, blacks reacted to the heinous crime of September 11 with outrage and demands for revenge against those behind it," wrote Mali Micah, of *Green Left Weekly* (February 20, 2002). "They backed Bush's new 'war on terrorism' and joined in flag-waving and other outward signs of patriotism that have become common place across the country."

A *New York Times*/CBS News poll in three months after 9/11 found three-quarters of African Americans supported the war on terrorism. Blacks became more self-consciously American: much-quoted immediately after the attack was the "I've never felt so American" proclamation of African Americans. Reports of the Stars and Stripes flying in the hood were commonplace. Coinciding with this was a change in the accent of racial profiling – Muslims, or persons who appeared to be Muslim, becoming targets.

Evidence of a nascent consciousness lay in the silence: there were few, if any incidents to compare with the litany of racial episodes leading up to the King riots: the beating of King himself in 1991, the Central Park jogger case of 1989, and the Tawana Brawley hoax of 1987, to name but three. Steele wrote of whites: "They struggle, above all, to dissociate themselves from the past sins they are stigmatized with" (appendix, p. 6). But this seemed less of a struggle, more a painless separation.

Then came Hurricane Katrina. It issued a reminder that America's race issue had been obscured and, to repeat Jason DeParle, laid bare the racial and class divide of contemporary America. Obama, by then a Democratic senator, was beginning to emerge as a possible candidate for the presidency. He had rebounded from his defeat by Rush and, far from narrowing his appeal, had remained vigilantly free of any trace of factionalism. This made him unique, as Charlton D. McIlwain recognized in his 2007 article "Perceptions of leadership and the challenge of Obama's blackness": "Obama has been distinguished from previous Black candidates such as Jesse Jackson and Shirley Chisholm, and others because of his firm support among African Americans and his broad appeal to White Americans, and his message and approach, which, different from the others, is not premised on the pursuit of racial group interests" (p. 64).

Theodore Cross, the editor of the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, cast his publication's vote for presidency in an article "Barack Obama is the

superior choice for African-American voters” and, in one evocative passage, suggested: “After the long nightmare years of slavery, lynchings, Jim Crow, and enduring race discrimination, one would expect that, in the upcoming presidential primary contest, Illinois Senator Barack Obama would be the overwhelming choice of black American voters” (p. 68).

Despite Cross’s expectation, “the first broad discussion of the ‘race issue’ was not whether white Americans would accept Obama as an African-American president but if blacks would,” as Michael C. Moynihan pointed out in his review “A transformation on race.”

In summer 2007, Hillary Rodham Clinton and Obama were neck-and-neck in the contest for the Democratic presidential nomination and there was a genuine possibility that a black man or indeed a woman could become president. But Hillary was holding her own among African Americans. Her husband Bill Clinton, who served as 42nd president (1993–2001), had wooed black voters and was memorably described by Toni Morrison in 1998 as “our first black president. Blacker than any actual black person who could ever be elected in our children’s lifetime.”

Hillary had earned the endorsement of Morrison, along with that of other influential black figures, including Quincy Jones, Robert L. Johnson, and Maya Angelou. So, when the opportunity to introduce race into the political discourse presented itself, Hillary accepted the invitation. “There are no qualms about playing the race card,” judged Cross at the time (p. 68).

During a debate on health care at Howard University, Washington DC, in June 2007, Hillary contended: “If HIV/AIDS were the leading cause of death of white women between the ages of 25 and 34, there would be an outraged outcry in this country.” (At the time, the rate of new HIV infection for black women was nearly 15 times as high as that of white women and HIV/Aids was a leading cause of death of African-American women. It remains so.)

“The powerful political impact of her statement was not diminished by the circumstance that her facts were incorrect,” Cross soberly reported, pointing out that, a year before, “Clinton was the only one of 20 senators of the Senate Health, Education, and Labor Committee to vote to gut a plan that would have redirected more AIDS funds to mostly black communities in the South” (pp. 68–69).

Obama didn’t rise to what some might have considered bait, and Hillary’s credibility among blacks strengthened. Obama’s studious refusal to allow ethnically specific issues to affect his broad-brush approach won him applause from whites. But, as a black candidate, it was inevitable that he would, at some point, face a typically unpredictable issue over race. This was delivered courtesy of Obama’s one-time pastor, Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., who, following the 9/11 in attacks in 2001, had paraphrased Malcolm X: “America’s chickens are coming home to roost.” His words insinuated retributive justice for the evils practiced on blacks by whites. In a later sermon, he referred to the USA’s complicity in a genocidal program targeting African Americans with the Aids

virus, and finished with: “*God damn America*, as long as she tries to act like she is God, and she is supreme. The United States government has failed the vast majority of her citizens of African descent.”

Wright, a charismatic church leader from the fire and brimstone school, was an incendiary and unapologetic critic of American values and practices, especially in regard to blacks who had been treated as “less than human.” In Wright’s worldview, the US was treacherous, venal and endemically racist. His church was in Chicago’s South Side (where Obama had met his first political setback, remember). Obama had been a church member and spiritual mentee of Wright for 20 years. When American news organizations explored the relationship between Wright and Obama, they discovered an uncomfortable closeness between the man Obama likened to an uncle and who had performed the Obamas’ marriage ceremony and the prospective president.

Initial attempts to put distance between Obama’s own political beliefs and Wright’s seemed ineffective and Obama faced Hillary’s shot: “You don’t choose your family, but you choose what church you want to attend.” For a while it must have seemed like Obama’s own chickens were coming home. His otherwise surefooted avoidance – or transcendence – of the race issue could have had woeful consequences. In the event, the Wright contretemps was alchemized into precious metal.

Under pressure, Obama, on March 18, 2008, delivered arguably his most powerful address to date. He opened with words extracted from the Preamble to the United States Constitution, “We the people, in order to make a more perfect union,” and went on to chronicle his own interconnected ethnic heritage: “I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas.” Then he moved to his personal progress: “I’ve gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world’s poorest nations.” In an inspired and redolent passage, with a sure nod to his African American doubters, Obama reminded his audience: “I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners – an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters.”

The repudiation was as unexpected and as startling as a thunderclap: “Reverend Wright’s comments were not only wrong but divisive, divisive at a time when we need unity; racially charged at a time when we need to come together to solve a set of monumental problems.” Followed by a proviso: “I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community.” An intellectual curvet: “It’s a racial stalemate we’ve been stuck in for years ... working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds.” And a gentle swipe at older blacks, whose primary allegiances were forged in the 1960s: “We have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union. For the African American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past” (full text at: <http://on.msnbc.com/-MorePerfectUnion>).

The speech was a tour de force. Of that there is no doubt. But was Obama baring his soul, as the *New York Times* editorial of March 19, 2008, conjectured? Or was he orchestrating a favorable response from the media and, indeed, the voters? The stage-management, the movement, position and tone could not have been better. It was a speech calculated to assuage the fears of blacks and palliate the nervousness of whites.

David Bradley, in a 2010 review “Misreading Obama,” reflected on the multiplex impact of Obama’s ascent. “To some, it was the realization of Martin Luther King Jr.’s not-by-the-color-of-their-skin-but-by-the-content-of-their-character Dream,” Bradley began. “To others, it was the actualization of J. Edgar Hoover’s creeping-philosophical-communist nightmare.” And: “To some, it was an international relations marketing coup ‘redefining the American “brand”’” (p. 91). Or maybe the Obama brand. Recall Bobby Rush’s verdict from a decade before: “Obama believes in Obama.”

What did Rush mean exactly? If he had added “... for Obama,” an inference could be drawn, though it would be harsh – and, in 2000, premature – to sneer at an ambitious politician’s self-serving streak. He could have been referring to Obama’s self-confidence, which was abundant even at the start of the millennium. Or perhaps his comment was a sly exposition, the meaning of which becomes clear if we punctuate it thus: Obama believes in “Obama.”

All politicians sell wares, by which I mean goods, articles, services, commodities, even if they are designed and packaged as ideas, policies, programs and the other staples with which they trade. Often, their most valuable wares are their personae, those aspects of their character that are presented and perceived by others. Obama was selling a new configuration, an arrangement of familiar elements in an unfamiliar form: a black politician who defied the usual color-coding. Who had interests in housing, education, crime, transportation and the economy as they affect everybody. Who refused to address the African American population as a homogeneous entity with unchanging interests. Who hadn’t risen from the pulpit, earned his stripes in the struggles of the 1960s and purported to speak for all black people. Did this make him a brand?

Certainly some critics believed so. Of them, Christopher Hedges was one of the most scathing. Writing not so much a critique as a dismissal in the Jewish magazine *Tikkun*, Hedges proclaimed: “Brand Obama is about being happy consumers. We are entertained. We feel hopeful” (p. 33).

A brand is, of course, a type of product, manufactured for a market under a specific name. “Like all branded products spun out from the manipulative world of corporate advertising,” writes Hedges, “this product is duping us into doing and supporting a lot of things that are not in our interest.” Leaving aside for the moment what Hedges assumes is in “our” (by which I presume

he means either all his readers, or, more probably, everyone) interest, there is a rational argument underlying the bluster. It is: “Brand Obama offers us an image that appears radically individualistic and new. It inoculates us from seeing that the old engines of corporate power and the vast military-industrial complex continue to plunder the country” (p. 33).

True, Obama rhapsodized over values which emphasized the agency, or potency of the individual in controlling destiny; he also championed initiative, self-reliance and responsibility – exactly the qualities that would encourage blacks to stop thinking of themselves as passive victims, or as vindictive nuisances, or as self-righteous gatekeepers of history. They were values adopted and embraced by the black bourgeoisie. Obama was no doubt mindful that almost 37 percent of black families fell into one of the three top income quintiles (i.e. the five equal groups into which a population can be divided) at the time of his political endeavors, compared with 23 percent in 1971 – the year, incidentally, in which Jesse Jackson established his People United to Save Humanity (later changed from “Save” to “Serve”), or PUSH, an organization “dedicated to improving the economic conditions of black communities across the United States.”

Obama never actually said: “I never felt entitled to anything because I was black,” but it was implicit in his brand, if we continue with Bradley’s and Hedge’s simile. That was certainly part of the brand image. He may have been a beneficiary of affirmative action, a key policy that involves preferential selection based on ethnicity and gender; but, on page 246 of his 2007 book *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on reclaiming the American Dream*, he damns the policy with faint praise: “A useful if limited tool to expand the opportunity to underrepresented minorities.” (I’d add that, if Obama gained admission to Harvard courtesy of such a program, he surely offers living evidence of its effectiveness.)

The position on affirmative action was part of the new configuration and, in effect, part of the new product brand Obama offered for sale. It infuriated the likes of Jackson, who extended his well-documented catalog of gaffes by accusing Obama of “talking down to black people” and expressing a desire to separate him from his manhood. Ironically, criticism like this burnished Obama’s appeal. “For a lot of younger African-Americans, the resistance of the civil rights generation to Obama’s candidacy signified the failure of their parents to come to terms, at the dusk of their lives, with the success of their own struggle,” discerned Matt Bail, in his “Is Obama the end of black politics?” The new struggle is “to embrace the idea that black politics might now be disappearing into American politics.”

Bail expands his point: “For black Americans born in the 20th century, the chasms of experience that separate one generation from the next – those who came of age before the movement, those who lived it, those who came along after – have always been hard to traverse.” It’s an arresting metaphor: a chasm,

or gulf, with veterans of the civil rights era standing on one side gawping incredulously at young celebrity aficionados and hip-hop fans sneering with affected arrogance and glorying in black signifiers – like jewelry, guns and canerows – that get procured by whites.

Remember: Obama's surge to power came in the post-Katrina period, a period of history marked by notable events and turning-points. As Michael Ralph understates in his *Public Culture* article in 2009: "Katrina inspired renewed discussion about what it meant to be African American" (p. 355). Even allowing for Steele's understanding of whites' "contrition and deference" and the historical power of white guilt, there is a sense in which absolution-of-sorts was in sight. Racism looked like old news: black, white and other ethnic groups seemed to have brokered a cultural rapprochement. Racial lines had softened. Katrina delivered a discomfiting dig in the ribs. The racism that progress was thought to have left behind was still lurking. Even if it appeared a flicker of a once-fearsome historical force, it warranted attention.

Obama's rise illustrates a major confluence of history and personality, a phrase I adapt from C. Wright Mills' "intersection of history and biography" to suggest how individual lives are shaped by historical circumstances and history is changed by individuals (p. 7). Obama was a very much product of his own time and, in turn, he affected that time. His public emergence at a time in history when America had been forcibly reminded that traces of the racism of yore remained was, in its way, serendipitous. The white guilt described by Steele as "one of the greatest social, cultural, and political forces in all of American history," and which had been dissipating, became dense after Katrina. Obama was cut from a different cloth from the older-generation black leaders. But he was black and he was a leader. And he did have something to sell.

Obama may not have been the man to purge America of its last vestiges of racism. But, brand Obama was a symbol of purification.