

THE WONDER OF OBAMA, SIGNED, SEALED AND DELIVERED by E. Ethelbert Miller. Speech delivered at the Hotel Mundal in Fjaerland, Norway, August 15, 2009.

My friend Jabari Asim, the editor in chief of *The Crisis*, the magazine of the NAACP, recently published the book "WHAT OBAMA MEANS...For Our Culture, Our Politics, Our Future." After reading Asim's first paragraph I couldn't stop laughing. Here is how his book begins:

When I visited my mother last May, much of her living room had been converted into what I half jokingly called a Barack Obama shrine. Since Obama had declared his candidacy for president, my mother had diligently collected everything about the man that she could get her hands on. Magazines, newspaper articles, and T-shirts formed the bulk of her collection, all of it in pristine condition and not to be handled except with utmost care. Almost overnight, all things Obama had become a staple of my mother's conversation. Her message of unity and transcendence, his unwillingness to be cowed by "a chorus of cynics," all of this inspired in my mother a late-life surge of confidence. It had even led to her changing the way she answered her phone. Instead of her usual "Hello," she took to lifting the receiver and announcing. "This is our moment."

Jabari Asim's mother's house is much like my own. My wife has redecorated our home, with Barack and Michelle Obama faces in almost every room. One day she even gave me a chocolate candy bar called Presidential Inauguration 09. I keep the wrapper near my desk at work.

The last black political figure to create this much excitement (in my lifetime) would have to be the South African leader Nelson Mandela.

The election of Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States is still creating political and cultural tremors around the world. Many people are trying to assess just what the Obama election means. Is it a way of measuring the racial climate and change in America? Does Obama's success have everything or perhaps nothing to do with race? Do we see in Obama what we fail to see in ourselves? What series of political and cultural events are responsible for Obama winning the White House? What has Obama actually won? Is he a transformative figure in American history or simply the latest American idol? Will the cultural impact of Michelle Obama be more significant than any law the new president passes? How does the First black First Lady redefine the concepts of beauty and blackness? These are just a number of questions that create a new paradigm.

Barack Obama is here. Signed, Sealed and Delivered.

In 2007-2008, when a number of individuals decided to run for the presidency of the United States, I made the decision to support former senator John Edwards of North

Carolina. I did so primarily because he was speaking out on the issue of poverty. This was the topic Martin Luther King, Jr. was addressing during the last year of his life. His Poor People's Campaign was an attempt to place the issue on the national agenda. Poverty in America was also a concern of Robert Kennedy and much later Senator Paul Wellstone of Minnesota.

When John Edwards announced his candidacy in December 2008 for the Democratic Nomination to be president, he did so in New Orleans., drawing attention to the devastation created by Hurricane Katrina. The images of poor people, primarily African American, pleading for help in New Orleans was a living testimony to the unfinished agenda of the Civil Rights Movement. It also marked the political low point of the Bush Administration. Edwards to me was addressing a major obstacle to King's Beloved community.

Many of my friends, especially those who were activists were supporters of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Clinton as a strong female candidate was very appealing to women as well as people who were supporters of her husband. Obama was seen as the person who was the most outspoken on the war in Iraq. To the extent that the war dominated much of the discussion during the political primaries, and people sought an end to the conflict, this all seemed to benefit Barack Obama.

It's important to view Barack Obama as an anti-war candidate and not a peace candidate. Countless times Obama would tell audiences that he felt America was fighting the wrong war. Instead of being in Iraq, we should have been in Afghanistan. I instructed many of my radical friends to listen very closely to what Obama was saying in order to avoid possible disappointment with him in the future. Currently there has been an unfortunate increase in the death of American troops in Afghanistan. If this continues for the next three years, by the next election we will be talking about "Obama's war."

Supporting a black person for president was not new to me, and perhaps that was why I didn't automatically feel a rush to support Obama. I was very excited when Jesse Jackson ran for president in 1984. One had the feeling that he was undertaking a crusade. I don't think we sat around thinking about who would be in the Jackson cabinet, because although we thought a miracle could assist him in winning the Democratic nomination, getting the majority of Americans to vote for him seemed impossible. Maybe this is why Jesse Jackson was crying when he stood in Chicago and witnessed the victory of Barack Obama.

For many of us, including Jesse Jackson, what Barack Obama accomplished was the impossible dream. At a time when Americans are thinking about going back to the moon in a few years, the idea of a black president still seems unbelievable. Even for Obama one at times could sense his own amazement. Go back and look at footage of his first press conference, where he walks into the room and everyone rises. For a moment Obama is taken aback.

Of course looking around at the state of the world, the awful economic conditions, the wars, the various natural disasters, one might ask – why would anyone want to be president of the United States at this time in history? In the early days of the Obama Administration it was not unusual to hear remarks or see political cartoons suggesting that the presidency of the United States was now a black man's job .With nothing working, one looks to a black person to clean-up the mess. How much of America is broken? Isn't this what happened to black people when it came to schools and neighborhoods? Didn't we almost always seem to get the leftovers?

One could question today if the presidential office of the United States is as strong and as important as it was in the past. How much power does the president have? Is it influence or real power? I mention this in light of other very important positions African Americans have recently held in the United States Government. In no way could we say that Condoleeza Rice and Colin Powell were as influential as Henry Kissinger, when he served as Secretary of State.

What I want to talk about today are the cultural convergence of things responsible for Obama's election. I want to also examine who Obama is and mention briefly the literary significance of his memoir, "REAMS FROM MY FATHER" published in 1995. I believe Obama has made eight key speeches in his political career, and when viewed together define what he believes in. A critical examination of these speeches will show a consistent beat which soon becomes predictable. In some ways the rhetoric of Obama is not as dynamic and changing as the music of Stevie Wonder.

Yet when I examine Obama's memoir, I am struck by how remarkable it is. It should be required reading for anyone wishing to understand this man. I was dumbfounded by stories in the media during the presidential campaign claiming that Obama was a mystery and no one truly knew what made him tick. Who was this man? Was he secretly a militant or Muslim? The media tried to define Obama's blackness as a mystery and unknown. This despite the writing of an honest and revealing memoir. I think "DREAMS FROM MY FATHER" should be incorporated into the curriculum of English and African American Studies classes. It should be taught alongside: "Up From Slavery" by Booker T. Washington, "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," "The Big Sea" by Langston Hughes, and "The Making of Black Revolutionaries" by James Forman..

The subtitle of Obama's memoir is "A Story of Race and Inheritance." He writes:

To be black was to be the beneficiary of a great inheritance, a special destiny, glorious burden that only we were strong enough to bear. (page 51.)

In "DREAMS FROM MY FATHER," Obama provides us with a close examination of the black male. This book is about the searching for meaning in one's life. It is divided into three sections: Origins, Chicago and Kenya. I highly recommend the reading of "Chicago" the second section. In 1983, the year Obama decided to become a community organizer, Harold Washington came to power as mayor of the city of Chicago. This gave Obama an introduction into black political power. The Chicago Obama writes about is

also the Chicago of novelist Richard Wright. I like how Obama “listens” and tells the stories of the community; especially the lives of women and older black people. One finds Obama not helping to organize a community, but instead discover one. For a person of mixed race, it represents an opportunity to return home. Obama confronts the fear of not belonging. He listens to the Black stories of hardship, migration, and the overcoming of obstacles. They are survival stories. Blues stories. Obama understands the anger of his race; his insight into race matters are similar to James Baldwin. He is critical of male images including his own father. In the second section of his memoir, one finds Obama gaining his balance and reaching a spiritual transformation in which he realizes that he can do what he pleases; and that his destiny is his own.

If we have any doubt or questions about Barack Obama’s relationship or ties to the African American community, they should all be put to rest after reading “DREAMS FROM MY FATHER.”

This book should serve as a companion guide to the collection of his speeches. In many ways the life of Barack Obama begins a new American narrative. The problematic question is whether it’s an extension of the existing narrative or one that measures a departure and complete break with the past.

If we define Barak Obama using his own words, then along with “DREAMS FROM MY FATHER” and his second book, “THE AUDACITY OF HOPE” (which reads more like someone running for office) there are eight key speeches:

1. Democratic National Convention Speech (July 27, 2004)
2. Speech Announcing his run for the Democratic Nomination (February 10, 2007)
3. The Iowa Caucus Victory Speech, January 3, 2008.
4. Speech on January 21, 2008, Ebenezer Baptist Church
5. Philadelphia Speech on Race, “A More Perfect Union.” March 18, 2008.
6. Acceptance Speech in Colorado, August 28, 2008.
7. Victory Speech in Chicago, November 4, 2008.
8. Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009

When looking at these speeches one needs to look at the audience that Obama is speaking to. With the exception of the speech given at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta in 2008, all the speeches were given to mixed audiences. Depending on his audience, Obama can slip back in forth between being a college professor or a preacher.

Many of Obama’s speeches are similar and not much has been added to them since 2004. It was the 2004 speech before the Democratic National Convention that launched his career. How could one speech do it? Very easy. The public speaking talents of American politicians have declined considerably since the 1950s. The last great orators might have been John Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey. Former New York State governor Mario Cuomo became a presidential contender after his, July 16, 1984 Democratic Convention Speech, know as “The Tale of Two Cities”

In his 2004, speech Barack Obama introduced himself. He explained how his name Barack means blessed. He talked about his father and his grandfather. The public was told about their character and their dreams. Obama acknowledges the diversity of his roots; an improbable love between a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. This story could only take place in America. Here marks the genesis of the narrative Obama will repeat over and over again. He weaves his personal story into that of American history. Obama claims Lincoln, as his intellectual father. In his DNC speech he reminds the public that government cannot solve all the problems of society. He feels that with a slight change of priorities Americans can do better. In 2004, Obama talked about energy independence, support for military families, and the realization that we have real enemies in the world.

It is when Obama talks about unity that he appears to echo Lincoln. The key point in his 2004 speech is his emphasis on America consisting of one people, not liberal, or conservative; a nation not politically divided by red and blue states. A country that can be a home for a kid with a funny name. Obama recognizes differences between people and his 2004 speech introduces the politics of hope, not blind optimism. But a belief that there are better days ahead. I found only one new thing in this speech and that was when he mentioned a concern about the civil liberties of Arab Americans. Too often American politicians seem to be reluctant to talk in a positive way about Islam, Muslims, Arab Americans, or Palestine. One will hear reference to the Middle East and Israel but seldom the use of the word Palestine. In 2004, it was good to see Obama making reference to Arab Americans. In 2004, Obama was just three years away from changing American history.

On Saturday, February 10, 2007, Obama announced his candidacy for presidency, he did so in front of the Old State Capitol in Springfield, Illinois. This was where Abraham Lincoln served as a legislator. Obama's entire run for the presidency was done within the framework of Lincoln's image and legacy. When Obama connects himself to Lincoln it's not around the issue of race, slavery or freedom; instead it has to do with Abraham Lincoln's struggle to keep the union of Northern and Southern states together. Obama in his speech announcing his run for the presidency underscores that America consists of one people.

For Obama, American history is a journey, race relations and certain ideas are not static. He acknowledges that America is not perfect and that there is work to be done. This point became the center point of his March 2008, Philadelphia speech on race.

In his first speech as a candidate however Obama spoke about achieving better health care not within his first year, but his first term. He talked about bringing the troops home from Iraq. He mentions that he opposed the war in Iraq from the start. But it's important to notice that Obama strongly felt that America should have been fighting in Afghanistan. The war in Iraq was the wrong war. The attacks on 9/11 were not planned in Iraq but had been linked to militant bases near the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In his Springfield speech, Obama talked about the power of words, the power of conviction and the power of hope. This word hope would serve as a crossover opportunity to a new generation of young people. The word hope would embrace Hip Hop culture as well as the new technology.

The face of Barack Obama should be placed alongside that of Tiger Woods and Derek Jeter, two sports stars whose biracial roots are linked to the economic market and packaged to consumers. The success of the crossover upholds the image of the new America. In music it's a sound that appeals to blacks as well as whites. If one can win the battle for the consumer, then the winning of the hearts and minds of the average voter becomes easier. The Rev. Al Sharpton at Michael Jackson's funeral service linked the King of Pop to Obama's success. Sharpton said the following about Jackson:

He created a comfort level, where people that felt they were separate became interconnected with his music. Those young kids grew up from being teenage, comfortable fans of Michael's to being 40 years old and being comfortable to vote for a person of color to be president of the United States of America. Michael did that. Michael made us love each other: Michael taught us to stand with each other.

If anyone thought a black person becoming President of the United States was impossible during one's lifetime, it all changed in Iowa in January 2008. In his Iowa Caucus Victory Speech, Obama viewed his race for the presidency as a defining moment in history. It's in his Iowa speech that he elaborates on the concept of hope. Like a black preacher, he uses repetition to define his message:

Years from now, you'll look back and say that this was the moment – this was the place – where America remembered what it means to hope.

For many months, we've been teased and even derided for talking about hope.

But we always knew that hope is not blind optimism. It's not ignoring the enormity of the task ahead or the roadblocks that stand in our path. It's not sitting on the sidelines or shrinking from a fight. Hope is that thing inside us that insists, despite all evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us if we have the courage to reach for it, and work for it, and fight for it.

In many ways the Iowa speech echoes the corporate principles of Nike or Gatorade. Like an ad for a soft drink or sneaker, emphasis is placed on work ethic, and overcoming the odds.

This success against the odds is what makes the Obama story so appealing. It also opens the door to distortion and misconceptions. The major misconception is that Obama's political success is a way to measure racial progress within the United States. A term like post-racial is foolish to use because it ignores all the statistical evidence of poverty, poor education, police brutality that exists within the African American community today. Solving these problems will probably still be with us even after four or eight years of Obama in the White House.

Obama's presidential campaign and his election to the office of the presidency created a series of cracks within African American intellectual thought. If the idea of a black president seemed to be an impossible dream to many, it definitely created a new paradigm on how to view blackness. Obama's contribution to our lives is that he has made blackness very visible (especially to white people); he is also responsible for connecting blackness to power as well as beauty.

If one needed a new definition of Black Power and a new meaning of Black Is Beautiful, Barack Obama would be responsible for creating a new vocabulary. Where concepts of blackness operated with certain philosophical restrictions, the Obama presidency offers countless new possibilities. Consider, what it means for a dark-skinned woman like Michelle Obama to now be called the First Lady. Where black was once pushed to the back it's now first. One can only wonder, what's going to happen next? How does blackness, for example begin to shape a new US foreign policy?

Obama understands that people don't walk alone. If Americans are to work towards building a more perfect union, they must do it together. The change undertaken must come from the bottom up and not from the top down. Critical to this is the role of government.

When one listens to Barack Obama he is not simply a black man speaking, but rather a black man who represents a government. He is an elected official and therefore different from Civil Rights leaders. He is president of the United States and therefore has greater responsibilities (and power).

When he stood in front of the large cheering crowd in Chicago, on November 4, 2008, Barack Obama, was like a character in a Star Trek movie. He had gone where no black man had ever gone before. He was beginning to move into uncharted territory.

One thing we know for certain is that Barack Obama put together one of the best political campaign teams in U.S. history. He organized a movement among working men and women. He mobilized and inspired young people. He called upon volunteers and asked for a new spirit of service and sacrifice.

On January 20th, 2009, a black man raised his hand and took a sacred oath. It was a moment in which we could all acknowledge the distance traveled by men and women of all races and backgrounds.

Obama's slogan, "Yes We Can" was a challenge to the status quo and a reminder that change has come to America.

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