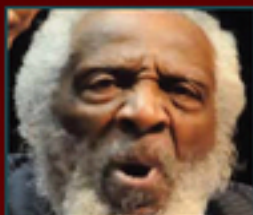




FOREWORD BY **Marc Lamont Hill**

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READING AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCES IN THE OBAMA ERA



THEORY, ADVOCACY, ACTIVISM



EDITED BY **Ebony Elizabeth Thomas** AND **Shanesha R. F. Brooks-Tatum**



Reading African American Experiences in the Obama Era

An Introduction



***Shanesha R. F. Brooks-Tatum &
Ebony Elizabeth Thomas***

*“Black Americans need a new story. The old
one no longer fits a Barack Obama world.”*

—Cover headline, *The American Scholar*, summer 2008

Seven years after the Twin Towers fell, a post-9/11, postmodern nation was invigorated by the prospect of Barack Obama, the junior senator from Illinois, becoming the first non-White presidential nominee backed by a major political party. If the American dream had seemed under siege ever since that tragic September day in 2001, by 2008 the public was ready to dream old dreams once again. The moment was right for this landmark event. By the end of President George W. Bush’s second term, a significant majority of U.S. citizens had grown weary—wary of endless wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, weary of a declining standard of living, and weary of the interminable cultural conflict that had mired public discourse since the 1960s human rights movements and the contested war in Vietnam. Americans were ready to feel American again—optimistic and freed from the recent turbulent past.

It was in this historical moment that the *American Scholar* magazine published their summer 2008 issue. On the cover, the man who would be president was depicted, in profile and shadowed, with the headline quoted at the start of this chapter. Ebony first noticed this magazine cover at a cafe newsstand. A few weeks later, her dissertation advisor forwarded her the article inside. Written by notable African American literary scholar and novelist Charles Johnson, “The End of the Black American Narrative” declared in its subtitle that “a new century calls for new stories grounded in the present, leaving behind the painful history of slavery and its consequences” (p. 32) As an experienced teacher and beginning scholar who came of age long after the civil rights movement, Ebony felt intrigued, thrilled, and challenged by this new charge

to her generation. While she agreed that the collective African American narrative had changed, she wondered whether the collective trauma of slavery *could* ever be disregarded. At the time, she had just finished reading Antonia Darder and Rodolfo Torres's *After Race: Racism After Multiculturalism* (2004) as part of the research for an article on transatlantic children's literature and biracial identity. Over the next year, she kept noticing that some of America's most prominent thinkers and cultural critics were struggling with how to talk about race during this new cultural and political moment. More specifically, there was a lot of wrestling with the idea of what it meant to be Black in America after the ultimate African American "first"—the presidency—had been achieved and inscribed in the history books.

At the same time, Shanesha was writing her dissertation on performances of race, faith, and gender when then-Senator Barack Obama announced that he was running for president. As she was engrossed in writing and research on performance and co-facilitating an arts-based social justice program in Detroit, she became particularly interested in how Obama would perform his Blackness, his maleness, and his mixed-race identity as a presidential candidate. Clearly, the entire campaign and electoral process were marked by tenuous racial and gender politics, from the question of "who should be first?"—Barack Obama or Hillary Rodham Clinton—as the Democratic nominee, to if and how Obama would attend to the particular needs of Black communities throughout the Diaspora (Guy-Sheftall & Cole, 2010). As a symbol of racial advancement, hope, and change, suddenly President-elect Obama became many things to many people. Shanesha read countless articles, blogs, and forum posts and listened to many news pundits and street conversations about what President Obama would do for the "Black race." She began to reflect on critical race theory scholarship and the work of activists and community leaders with whom I was familiar, in order to begin to take stock of the critical retheorizations of race and Black racial identity that would be marked in large part by the politics, emotional responses, and expectations surrounding Barack Obama's presidency.

Both of our experiences engendered the following questions: How did our "Obama generation" of scholars, teachers, professionals, community workers, and activists perceive their experiences and the collective experience of African American communities at this juncture in American history? Did this now mean that distinct African American identities were passé? Outdated? An unfortunate relic of previous centuries? How, then, would our scholarship, teaching, and activism proceed in this new world? Intrigued by these questions, and not finding many answers, we began to deeply consider what it meant to be Black in America at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century. Together, we began to read research and public intellectual scholarship

on race in the Obama era, to listen to pundits on the cable news channels, to watch documentaries, and to chat with mentors, advisors, colleagues, family, and friends about what it means to be Black today, on the eve of the 2012 elections. Essentially, we wanted to connect the present moment to both Black futures and pasts. From those interactions, this collection was born.

Situating This Volume

This edited volume, *Reading African American Experiences in the Obama Era: Theory, Advocacy, Activism*, grapples with what it means to do scholarly, critical, and activist work in a purportedly postracial society. At a time when the White–African American wealth gap has grown exponentially over a single generation; at a moment when crises in education, the environment, and the economy are large and wide-reaching, threatening everything that previous generations knew and took for granted; in a space where racialization of the nation’s problems and discrimination against people of color persists in our present, the authors in this volume question what it means to be Black in America within the context of the fraught beginning of a new century.

There is no doubt that today there are more opportunities for African Americans to achieve success in a variety of career, educational, and social arenas. However, our authors keenly question what these gains mean as they advocate for new theorizations about race and racialization in the Obama era. The chapters in this volume illustrate continuity across time and contexts, in terms of racial representation and the lived realities of being African American in the fields of literacy, pedagogy, cultural studies, composition, rhetoric, sociology, public health, and higher education. Interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary by nature, this volume showcases emerging scholars and community practitioners in these and other fields and disciplines. These chapters represent a new focus in Black studies and research on the issues of central importance in Black communities, from the need for new metanarratives about Black people to post-trauma photographic representations to engaging faith claims in the classroom.

Race is a social construct that has real implications for the lives of the students, educators, and institutions we engage in this volume. While we use “Black” and “African American” interchangeably, we are centrally concerned with African American experiences in the United States (our rationale is elaborated in the later section on theory). However, we wish to position this text in close dialogue with other key texts in education, literacy, and cultural studies that engage Black identities and experiences, as well as those explicitly concerned with people of African descent in the larger diaspora.

Our targeted audience includes not only academics and scholars, but also students, teachers, activists, and all members of the general public interested

and invested in questions around what constitutes Black communities and Black racial identities in the so-called “postracial” era during and beyond President Barack Obama’s tenure in the Oval Office. While this is a moment pregnant with possibilities for change, it is also a moment wherein racial backlash is occurring that threatens—and has impeded—the progress that has been made in the educational, socioeconomic, and environmental arenas for people of African descent and for all people in this country. As we inhabit an increasingly globalized society, we must examine what our actions at home mean for those abroad as well. While this international concern is not the explicit focus of this text, many of the chapters are inscribed with the understanding that we must understand this change and these challenges at “home” in order to understand why and how we must engage on an international level around the critical questions of Black identity, racialization, and neoliberal rhetoric—issues that extend beyond America’s borders.

Reading African American Experiences in the Obama Era: Theory, Advocacy, Activism privileges the personal experiences of the authors, students, community activists, and others and grounds them in scholarship and social theory to understand how we can unpack the diversity of racial experiences in this unsettling moment in America. While hailing from disparate fields and disciplines, frameworks, and regions of the country, we found that common themes emerged as we read across chapters. In the next sections, we expound upon these theoretical perspectives, positions on advocacy, and activist stances.

Theory

Shifting Strategies of Black Selfhood

In the Obama era, the lives, experiences, and bodies of people of African descent continue to be hypervisible nationally and internationally. Black Americans count among their number some of our postmodern world’s most noble and admired citizens and, at the same time, some of the most despised. High-profile Black athletes and entertainers are elevated by our digital-age media to fantastic heights, many only to become mired in scandal and public disgrace. Black politicians and pundits are prominent online and on CNN, MSNBC, and FOX News, even while local newspapers and daily newscasts sensationalize Black men, women, and children as the ubiquitous face of crime, poverty, and dysfunction. These and other performative aspects of Blackness are not new. Performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson suggests that there is a dialogic and dialectal relationship between Blackness and performance, “a sense of split identity in a context where one’s experience of living Blackness (i.e., one’s politics, class position, gender, etc.) and the ‘fantasy of Black life as theatrical enterprise’ are at odds” (Johnson, 2003, p. 8).

Notions of performative Blackness had their genesis in slavery, were continued in a segregated America—where, as Dunbar (2006/1896) stated so eloquently, African Americans had to wear “the mask that grins and lies” for survival—and continues in a post-Civil Rights Era that all too often rewards Black people on stage, while Black communities suffer collateral damage at the retreat from pre-Reagan-era commitments to social, economic, and racial justice.

These disconnections between an imagined Blackness that is authentic, unitary, and atemporal and the lived reality of a fragmented Blackness that has been irrevocably created by and reified through personal and collective cultural trauma and triumph can be found throughout the entirety of African American history. However, the collective work of this volume’s authors seems to suggest that Black identity may be one modern construct among many that is either becoming irreconcilable or becoming reconciled differently in postmodern times. We seem to be arriving at a *kairos* (opportune) moment that eminent postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha has previously theorized as “liminal” or “in-between” space. These spaces “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 1–2). Strategies of Black selfhood undertaken by post-Obama generations of African Americans may not be completely unrecognizable by their forebears but, by the same token, they must necessarily bear some marked differences. This is because despite the persistence of racial inequality and injustice, the United States *has* changed since the civil rights movement in ways that are both immediately obvious and often overlooked. The chapters of our volume delineate some of these changes.

Some, especially in the immediate aftermath of Obama’s election, exuberantly proclaimed the beginning of a postracial America. While this volume emphatically does not take the position that either the nation or the world are postrace, we seek to explicitly examine the trajectory of African American thought, education, and activism in the United States from the perspectives of emerging scholars and activists whose work has its genesis during the early years of the twenty-first century. We believe that race remains a salient social, cultural, and political phenomenon that exists and is discursive and interactively constructed in and through the individual and collective experiences of humanity. Furthermore, we believe that race—and more specifically, the ways that theory and research, advocacy and policy, as well as activist work are and continue to be raced—has real consequences and implications for our work. The shifting strategies of Black selfhood that all African Americans are engaged in during the Obama era are part and parcel

of our lives as scholars, teachers, and community workers. Across academic disciplines, institutions, geographical locations (primarily, but not intentionally, in the Eastern half of the United States), and theoretical and epistemological perspectives, we have converged to add our voices to the conversations about the Obama era.

Strategies of Black selfhood are contextually situated, and individuals and peoples of African descent are positioned differently across the social landscape and around the globe. With this in mind, all of this volume's authors are African Americans descended from enslaved ancestors who toiled in the fields, homes, and institutions of the antebellum American South. While we readily acknowledge the convergence of our collective experiences with American immigrants of African descent, along with colleagues and friends from other racial-ethnic groups, and absolutely value, treasure, and find essential the wonderful scholarship, research, teaching, policy, and advocacy from all allies, we are making the declarative statement that *being Black American still means something, and what that something is ought to be explicitly examined from the inside out, as well as the outside in*. The Black American cultures, communities, and folkways that we grew up inside of, study, and still treasure in our professional and personal lives are *our* homes, *our* families, *our* neighborhoods, and *our* people. We choose to identify this way in this historical moment, recognizing that the United States still officially and informally identifies, classifies, and categorizes us in ways that differentiate us from other groups, even our brothers and sisters from other parts of the African diaspora. We also recognize and honor other racial and ethnic groups, cultures, communities, and perspectives. Thus, we have made a conscious editorial decision to capitalize the categorical and phenomenological labels "Black" and "White" in all forms throughout this volume. These theoretical perspectives are connected to and situate both our advocacy and activist stances.

Advocacy

Policy for a Post-Brown, Post-Reagan, Post-Bush Nation

Many experts today are considering what kinds of social, economic, and political policies Black America should advocate for in a post-*Brown v. Board of Education*, post-Reagan, post-Bush II nation. Young African Americans are coming of age in a world that is supposedly without the kinds of restrictions, barriers, and unjust laws that their ancestors faced, yet the persistence of structural racial inequality has proven extremely difficult to alter via legislation. The pace of integration, equality, and parity has proven far slower than many of the most optimistic might have predicted in the 1960s. This may be because the crucible of the civil rights movement occurred during an American "high,"