

From Martin Luther King Jr. to Barack Obama: The Long March of Blacks for Justice

Curtiss Paul DeYoung

November 2008, Guadeloupe

On November 4, 2008, history was made in the United States with the election of Barack Obama as the nation's first African American president. This was a moment of great pride and celebration for the citizens of the United States. Many of us are still celebrating.

In March 2008, then U.S. presidential candidate Barack Obama made what many have called a historic speech on race and reconciliation. He said that given the history of slavery and racial injustice from the very formation of the United States, which stood in contrast with founding documents that spoke of liberty and justice for all, what was needed, and I quote, "were Americans in successive generations who were willing to do their part—through protests and struggle, on the streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience and always at great risk—to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time."

Senator Obama continued: "This was one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this campaign—to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America. I chose to run for the presidency at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together—unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction—towards a better future for of children and our grandchildren."

The long march of blacks for justice in the United States began when the first Africans arrived on the shores of North America. There has always been resistance to oppression. First it was resistance to slavery. Then there was the struggle against legalized discrimination of black people which culminated in the victories of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. This liberation struggle occurred daily through protest marches in the streets, legal challenges in the courtroom, and prayer meetings in church sanctuaries. Martin Luther King Jr. was at the forefront of this movement for change. He was its foremost spokesperson and most recognized leader. Dr. King was the one who came to best symbolize the long march for justice, which included many before his time, thousands during his time, and has continued since his time.

By the time of the death of Martin Luther King Jr. forty years ago, the legalized forms of discrimination against blacks in the United States were nearly ended. With voting rights protected, more and more African Americans were registering to vote and revising the political map. Dr. King had also inserted into the imagination of the country's citizenship a vision of a just and reconciled United States. The United States of America should be a place where people were judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

The time period that followed Dr. King's death saw a fusion of King's activism and Malcolm X's cultural empowerment. The late 1960s and 1970s were years when blackness was celebrated by African Americans. Blacks in the United States embraced the essence of what you call here in the Antilles, "Negritude." Aimé Césaire could have been speaking of African Americans when he said "the first fact of our lives (is) that we are black; that we were black and have a history; a history that contains certain cultural elements of great value; and that Negroes were not, as you put it, born yesterday, because there have been beautiful and important black civilizations."

Unfortunately, the legacy of slavery and racial discrimination was not easily lifted off of the backs of blacks in the United States. In his March 2008 speech on race and reconciliation Barack Obama realized that the U.S. "was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery." He noted that "so many of the disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow." He continued, "Segregated schools ... and the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today's black and white students. ... Legalized discrimination—where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African-American business owners ... meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations. That history helps explain the wealth and income gap between black and white, and the concentrated pockets of poverty that persists in so many of today's urban and rural communities."

Some things have changed for the better. There is a growing black middle class in the United States which experiences a portion of the dream of Martin Luther King. Racial classification is less of a determining factor in some avenues of opportunity. In U.S. history, blackness was often defined as a person having any discernable trace of African heritage. This was called the "one drop rule" and was law in several U.S. states. That definition of blackness determined one's rights and status. In 2007 I discovered through genealogical research that I have an African ancestor named Thomas Bedoona. Under the one drop rule I would be classified as black. In the Southern United States of the 1950s, that fact would have changed my racial status and life circumstances. Today I proudly announce my ancestry but have yet to see any affect on my life possibilities.

Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement did their part to secure rights and further equality on the long march of blacks for justice in the United States. The voting rights protests in Selma, Alabama, and elsewhere across the United States in the 1960s and the passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 prepared the way for the presidential election of Barack Obama. There could not have been a Barack Obama presidency without the registration of millions of black voters. So what does Obama's election mean for the long march of blacks toward justice?

The election of Barack Obama as president of the United States gave African Americans "the audacity to hope" as Obama's former pastor, Dr. Jeremiah Wright, proclaimed in a sermon so many years ago. People of African descent in the United States can now believe that it is possible to achieve even the most powerful positions. Hope is essential for progress toward justice.

That last project that Martin Luther King was working on at his death was the creation of a multicultural coalition to address poverty. President-elect Obama put together a truly multiracial and multicultural coalition in his long march to the presidency. African Americans in the United States watched as whites in large numbers voted for a black man

for president. This was a witness to the possibility that some whites are letting go of racist attitudes and stereotypes in order to judge persons on the content of their character rather than the color of their skin. The vision of a unified country where justice for all people is an important value, proclaimed by Martin Luther King over 40 years ago and reclaimed by Barack Obama, is now a step closer to reality.

Perhaps there is yet something else waiting in the near future for the United States of America. Barack Obama states, "I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest nations. 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. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents."

Barack Obama simultaneously claims himself to be African, black American, half white, biracial, and a citizen of the world with family on three continents. Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant write in their book *In Praise of Creoleness*, "Neither Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creoles. This will be for us an interior attitude—better, a vigilance, or even better, a sort of mental envelope in the middle of which our world will be built in full consciousness of the outer world." Could it be possible that the election of Barack Obama will open the doors in the United States to new and more authentic ways of understanding culture and cultural diversity? This new millennium requires a comfort and competency with extremely diverse worldviews, as well as a razor sharp focus for interpreting the meaning at the intersection of these viewpoints. I think that this Antillean contribution to the créolité movement might offer some cultural wisdom for a very diverse United States.

The demographic realities are rapidly changing in the United States. Whites are presently two-thirds of the population. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that by 2042 whites will drop below 50% of the population and there will no longer be a racial majority. By the mid-point of the twenty-first century whites will only be 46% of the population with 54% being persons of color. Already by 2023, fifteen years from now, half of all children under the age of 18 years old in the U.S. will not be white. And by 2050 two-thirds will be children of color. At the mid-point of the twenty-first century the United States of America will be a culturally diverse and pluralistic nation with no racial majority. The population will be 46% white, 30% of Latin American descent, 15% black or African, 9% Asian, and the remainder Native Americans, multiracial people, and others.

Obama claims both his identity as a black person with origins in Africa and his identity as a person who is racially and culturally mixed. He values and embraces his blackness and African-ness as in sync with Negritude. And he exalts and celebrates his multiracial and multicultural family lineage and history as a sort of creoleness in the process of development. Perhaps Obama would echo the sentiments of the authors of *In Praise of Creoleness* when they write, "Césairian Negritude is a baptism, the primal act of our restored dignity. We are forever Césare's sons." The authors understand that their ability to pursue a Creole vision of their humanity is the result of the prior process of Negritude. Obama's ability to embrace his culturally diverse heritage stands on the foundation of the celebration of blackness and the embrace of African heritage promoted by Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States.

The election of Barack Obama could be a transitional moment in how race is understood and how culture is negotiated in the United States. Given the demographic realities, a shift is needed away from the dominant melting pot imagery of racial assimilation in the United States where everyone is stripped of as much of their culture as possible and are remade into an Anglo-Saxon thinking and acting person. Those who resist this process sink to the bottom of the pot. Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant note, "Americanization ... describes the progressive adaptation, and with no real interaction with other cultures, of Western populations in a world they baptized as new. Thus, the Anglo-Saxons who formed the thirteen colonies, embryo of the future American state, displayed their culture in a new environment, almost barren, if we consider the fact that the native Indians, who were imprisoned in reservations or massacred, did not virtually influence their initial culture."

I find it interesting that the authors of *In Praise of Creoleness* foresaw in 1989 the possibility of a creolization process in the United States. They wrote, "After the abolition of slavery, however, and the rise of black people in the North, and during the twentieth century arrival of Italians, Greeks, Chinese, and Puerto-Ricans, one might rightly think that the conditions are ripe for a process of Creolization to start presently in New England." Perhaps they were just twenty years ahead of schedule in their prediction.

I do think the authors' notion of creoleness has something important to offer us in the United States. They write, "Creoleness encompasses and perfects Americanness because it involves a double process: the adaptation of Europeans, Africans, and Asians to the New World; and the cultural confrontation of these peoples within the same space, resulting in a mixed culture called Creole. ... Each culture is never a finished product but rather the constant dynamics on the lookout for genuine issues, new possibilities, and interested in relating rather than dominating, in exchanging rather than looting."

Whether or not a creolization of culture and race occurs in the United States during the Obama presidency, I do think his campaign has posited a new opportunity for racial justice. President-elect Obama himself stated: "Contrary to the claims of some of my critics, black and white, I have never been so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy—particularly a candidacy as imperfect as my own. But I have asserted a firm conviction—a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people—that working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union."

If President Barack Obama will provide leadership for a deeper and more complete healing of racial wounds in the United States, then he will have honored the life and message of Martin Luther King Jr. He will also have pushed forward not only the long march of blacks for justice, but progress will be made towards greater unity for the entire human family.

There are many challenges facing our new president in the United States including a global financial crisis, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, environmental problems, the need for leadership in the Israel/Palestine peace process, and the restoration of the United States as a moral voice on human rights issues. One could also add to the list many domestic issues. Yet the very fact that Barack Obama was elected the 44th president of the United States of America is a significant and historic step in the long march of blacks for justice.

Martin Luther King Jr. often said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." On the 40th anniversary of Dr. King's death this past April, President-elect Obama said that the arc "doesn't bend on its own. It bends because each of us puts our

hands on that arc and bends it in the direction of justice. So let's each do our part to bend that arc. Let's bend that arc toward justice. And if we can do that and march together—as one nation, and one people—then we won't just be keeping faith with what Dr. King lived and died for, we'll be making real the words of Amos that he invoked so often, and 'let justice roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.'"

Curtiss Paul DeYoung