Barack Obama and African American Empowerment

The Rise of Black America's New Leadership

Edited by Manning Marable and Kristin Clarke

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CHAPTER 13

SOVEREIGN KINSHIP AND THE PRESIDENT-ELECT

JOY JAMES

> This election had many firsts and many stories that will be told for generations. But one that's on my mind tonight's about a woman who cast her ballot in Atlanta. She's a lot like the millions of others who stood in line to make their voice heard in this election except for one thing: Ann Nixon Cooper is 106 years old.
>
> She was born just a generation past slavery; a time when . . . someone like her couldn't vote for two reasons—because she was a woman and because of the color of her skin. . . .
>
> In this election, she touched her finger to a screen, and cast her vote, because after 106 years in America, through the best of times and the darkest of hours, she knows how America can change.
>
> —Barack Obama, November 4, 2008

A CENTENARIAN BLACK WOMAN AS REPRESENTATIVE OF AMERICA'S NEW MULTIRACIAL consciousness is a powerfully poignant depiction of democracy born in a former slave state. Barack Obama's narrative in his "This Is Your Victory" speech displays popular sovereignty emerging from the biography of a subordinated citizen-in-waiting (albeit an elite one given that Mrs. Cooper came from a privileged black family). Political elites and politicians, however, wield a sovereign kinship that does not easily share power with the populace.

There is evolving multiracial and gender-inclusive popular sovereignty, as represented by Ann Nixon Cooper; and there is emergent multiracial sovereign kinship, as represented by the president-elect. The story woven around Ann Nixon Cooper filtered one hundred years of U.S. American history, culminating in the election of its first black president. Its symbolism sweeps past distinct differences between voters and the political class they install in a representative (rather than a direct) democracy. This symbolism deflects attention from the contradictions of inequalities and dominance in a democratic nation.

Sovereignty is the ability to determine political destinies, one's own and those of others. Popular sovereignty is the myth and matter of modern democracy. In a

representative democracy dominated by a two-party system, wealth and remoteness infuse the national political class. The sovereignty of the poor, the colored, the female, the queer,[1] the ideologically independent—as non-elites and non-"mainstream"—is rooted in their agency and autonomy, their ability to lead politicians rather than follow them. Although their more talented and ambitious members may join the ruling elites, historically disenfranchised outsiders to the political realm have had no inherent kinship with the dominant political class. Possessing no sovereign powers stemming from an autonomous political base, they control no governmental, police, military, or economic institutions; through such structures, traditional sovereign kinship exercises its aspirations and will.

Politically marginalized groups might fare less well in a direct democracy; but in such a system, recognizing themselves as the true agents for change, they may more often seek sovereignty to resist both repression and the political class that represents them. Historically excluded from voting, blacks organized economic boycotts to end lynching and segregation. Their contributions to democracy worked beyond electoral politics from which they were often barred. The end result is that U.S. representative democracy has become more "participatory," as defined by a more diverse electorate and its desire to elect representatives who reflect that diversity. Out-groups remain hopeful that elected officials will function as their advocates rather than pursue conventional power shaped by a two-party system and sovereign elites.

Yet, in 2000, the U.S. Supreme Court demonstrated its sovereign kinship against the majority vote. The political class designed the Electoral College to override the popular vote. However, by installing George W. Bush as president, the Supreme Court intervened in the Florida recount to determine the electoral vote. The failure of the defeated party to contest this suggests that these battles for high office are intrasovereign affairs. Even if the "improbable journey" of the president-elect seems at odds with that interpretation, one should note how singular and symbolic representation of blackness remains within federal government. Among its three branches, only the Supreme Court and executive branch have surpassed the Senate in racial segregation.

Polymorphous politicians seek to represent all things good to all people voting. Their purpose is to consolidate and exercise power. As "centrists" synthesizing two powerfully entrenched parties, they can ignore critical third parties while skillfully transferring agency to a kinship of political insiders. Electoral politics is a marvelous route by which sovereign kin pose as "outsiders." On the campaign trail, they become "regular" folks—intimates with Joe six-packs and plumbers, churchgoers, hockey moms, beer guzzlers, and misguided bowlers. The difference between grassroots activism and Astroturf organizing is that the primary role of activists is to determine policy—not to elect politicians. Activists seek sovereignty, not representatives of it. The mobilization of the "grass roots" or "Astroturf"—Internet-based communication that simulates or stands in for a mass movement—permits voters to relinquish or transfer agency to elected officials. A less controlled democracy ensues from mass participation that is not reduced to mass rallies, technological social networking, national days of service, or mobilizations to buttress state policies. The seductive appeal of U.S. democracy lies in its ability to make the electoral changing of the guard synonymous with political power in the mind of the citizen. The power of seduction depends on the desire to surrender; in the absence of that, it is just political rape.

Voters can select from among the political class to replace sovereign kin. The tyranny of the majority—portrayed by a homogenized mainstream that provided the "darkest hours" for Ann Nixon Cooper's kin—has often been directed or manipulated by its representative political class. With social and ethnic minorities within its ranks, the multicultural majority in making history on November 4, 2008, appears to have vanquished racial tyranny. America can and does change.[2] Its dependence on political elites and restrictive right to rule may not. Rather than enable independent political parties and populist self-rule, sovereign kin promote a more diverse or multiracial political class.

As a member of this political class, the president-elect becomes progenitor and founding father of a millennial multiracial democracy. That impressive feat is not necessarily synonymous with "power to the people." Of the varied independent or outsider spaces to be corralled under one flag, the president-elect represents the one that, more than class, gender, sexuality, or political ideology, became the defining mark for the failure and promise of American democracy—race. The phenomenon of the 2008 election may not be the electoral victory understood as a triumph over racism, but the sovereign kinship and the sovereign whiteness that permitted this achievement. Lacking poverty, queerness, femaleness, and ideological independence, Barack Obama's form of blackness became an asset, an embraceable opportunity traceable through improbable political bloodlines.[3]

A GENEALOGY OF THE POLITICAL CLASS: A FORTY-FIVE-YEAR MARCH ON AND TO WASHINGTON

Barack Obama debated Hillary Clinton at the flagship university. But he did not campaign in the home place of the men who contributed most significantly to his becoming America's first black president-elect. (Refusing to credit them, he instead invoked Kennedy and Reagan.) Perhaps in 2008 Obama knew he could lose a red state not quite ready for purple, yet sweep the Electoral College. Texas had not gone for a Democratic presidential candidate since Lyndon Baines Johnson's election in 1964.[4] The conservative state prides itself on having been the residence of three presidents: Johnson (1963–68), George H. W. Bush (1988–92), and George W. Bush (2000–2008). The first president led the nation deeper into an unpopular war with genocidal results: 58,226 Americans died while contributing to the deaths of more than two million Vietnamese. The United States escalated the war in Vietnam based on Johnson's deception about a fabricated August 4, 1964, attack on U.S. naval destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin. President Johnson built up John F. Kennedy's war and, in turn, was surpassed in mass casualties by President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who expanded the war with secret bombings of Cambodia. Although Johnson's interventionism squandered American wealth and lives, that did not stop two other Texans from emulating him.

Unlike his foreign policy violations of the human rights and national sovereignty of nations resisting colonizers, Johnson's domestic policies promoted democracy and economic opportunities for the formerly enslaved. His presidential alter ego propelled the 1960s civil rights agenda and antipoverty programs. He witnessed the assassinations of John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr.: two sovereigns and one

agitator who disturbed his equilibrium. Nonetheless, while King built the moral pillars, Johnson installed the legal foundation—as he strong-armed the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act through Congress—for a foreseeable Obama victory. Liberal sovereigns and progressive activists created new expressions of democratic rule, incorporating fictive kin to create a future multiracial political elite. This elite though would emerge at the expense of a broad-based pacifist insurgency against repression.

Reverend King would stand beside President Johnson as he signed key legislation that transformed the political and electoral landscape. He had also stood behind this sovereign leader as he deflected television cameras from Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activist Fannie Lou Hamer at the 1964 Democratic National Convention (DNC). As a member of the multiracial Mississippi Freedom Party (MFDP) delegation, attempting to unseat Mississippi's official white supremacist delegates, Hamer's impassioned demand, "Is this America?" seared the airwaves, leaving little room for centrists and accommodating political operatives such as the president's media spokesman, a young Bill Moyers; his vice presidential running mate, the seasoned Hubert Humphrey; and the venerated Christian leader. The three would work to force Hamer and the MFDP delegation into a compromise, with full recognition that the alternative progressives demanding a full franchise lacked the sovereign power to win a presidential election but possessed enough transformative power to destabilize a major party at the polls.

Johnson was so consumed by a devastating and unpopular war that he declined to run for a second term. He would not be the last Texan to leave the Oval Office disgraced in wartime by low approval ratings. Johnson had sold Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac to private interests in order to pay for the war in Vietnam. Bush-the-son would theoretically buy the mortgage lenders back in a $750 billion bailout, ballooning the national debt, after squandering a trillion-dollar surplus inherited from President Bill Clinton. Invading a country his father had stormed a decade earlier to vanquish a foreign enemy that the elder Bush as director of the Central Intelligence Agency had helped to install, Bush-the-son pronounced "mission accomplished" in 2003. That defeated country held no weapons of mass destruction and no ties to al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, or the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States. The invasion of Iraq would help make the United States an internationally recognized human rights violator and debtor nation, as war costs spiraled to more than a $1 billion a month. It would also give in 2007 a novice public servant but shrewd politician a major peace platform by which to differentiate himself from his fellow senators and presidential rivals. Senators Hillary Clinton and John McCain had voted for what would become an unpopular war leading to mass death and genocide.

Between the 1960s retirement and political murders of national leaders and the 2009 retreat by Bush-the-son to Dallas—a city that gained notoriety when Kennedy was shot in his motorcade—Bush-the-father defeated a Democratic rival by running one of the most racist campaigns in the post–civil rights movement era. George H. W. Bush allowed Republican National Committee chair Lee Atwater to make good on his 1988 campaign promise to position convicted black rapist Willie Horton as the running mate of presidential candidate Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis. Although Bush deployed the "southern strategy"—where whites vote against their economic interests based on their social fears and antiblack animus, he was routed

in 1996 by a husband whose wife's future presidential campaign would be supported by xenophobes and racists among "hard-working whites" and "Hillary Democrats."

Racism's psychosexual politics was increasingly becoming an inside joke for sovereign whiteness. The most incendiary racial baggage tied to the candidate who would be president were (a) President Johnson's former medical attendant, a black marine and Vietnam veteran turned pastor who castigated U.S. racism and imperialism; and (b) false allegations of the politician being both the national and international bête noire. With the economic downturn, the public became disinterested in racial and political outcasts, including an affluent white radical who used mass casualties in Vietnam to justify Weather Underground domestic bombings against government targets. The southern strategy had become an unpredictable regional phenomenon. An electorate going bankrupt can distinguish between Willie Horton and Jeremiah Wright and find both increasingly irrelevant to their pressing economic crises. The violent criminality attributed to the domestic bête noire, now extended to the Muslims,[5] and the political incivility of the preacher were less pressing concerns for mainstream America. Neither the Clinton nor McCain campaigns could foist a faux running mate onto a black candidate who had already established kinship ties with DNC leadership.

DNC CONVENTIONS AND THE FAMILIAL PARTY

After he won the Iowa caucus, America began to take Barack Obama seriously as he continued to campaign against an unpopular war that led the nation toward moral and economic bankruptcy. When he won the North Carolina primary, despite the Clinton surge, it became evident that the notion of race-based sovereignty and familial ties were forever splintered by the autobiography of the candidate: white mother, black African father, devoted maternal white grandmother, loyal Ivy League-educated, Southside Chicago girl-turned-political wife. Read by millions, Barack Obama's *The Audacity of Hope* and *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* made consistent claims, echoed insistently on the campaign trail: "nowhere but in America" and "my life is an American story." In gratitude to the nation, the candidate increasingly dismissed charges of antiblack racism against its racial majority and its institutions. Thus, he revealed himself as self-made, aligned with traditional political power rather than sovereign blackness (the existence of the latter is generally doubted). Mixed-race black, unwed mother, abandoned by father—pariah became parvenu through sovereign kinship. Winning more primaries and the delegate count, Obama traveled to Denver to accept the nomination at a skillfully organized DNC.

In Denver, DNC sovereign kin staged a party that surpassed all previous conventions. Before cameras, the Democrats posed as a functional and disciplined family, generations beyond the 1968 Chicago riots and 1972 hawk-and-dove infighting over the war that contributed to their defeat and the election, twice, of Richard Nixon. In 2008, unity and goodwill were such that no discernible fractures shaped by ideology, gender, race, or sexuality (class seemed to have disappeared) showed. On the convention platform, the future first lady, Michelle Obama, who had earlier stated her uncertainty about voting for the former first lady as nominee given the attacks against her partner, thanked Clinton for the eighteen million cracks in the glass ceiling. One-third of those eighteen million voters were male and perhaps not all were

pro–women's rights; some were against gay and lesbian rights; a small number publicly indicated that they could never vote for "a black." That all became irrelevant as Michelle Obama's speech displayed a humility and gratitude—as well as a pride in being American—absent from Hillary Clinton's cautious concession. Having sovereign whiteness, Clinton did not need to demonstrate patriotism or belonging when she emphatically stated that she would vote for Obama while releasing her delegates to vote their conscience. The following evening, with extemporaneous remarks fired by the rousing ovation for the former president, Bill Clinton's eloquence overshadowed her reticence to instruct everyone to vote for the president-elect.

A predecessor of Ann Cooper Nixon appeared in Hillary Clinton's concession. Calling out Harriet Tubman as an expression of populist belonging, Senator Clinton, though, did not mention Tubman's specific history in radical politics. Illiterate in antiracist history, most Americans could perceive Tubman as a symbol yet remain unfamiliar with her improbably journey. Just as with Ann Nixon Cooper, there was the burden of slavery (although with closer proximity to violent trauma). While Cooper survived discrimination and hardships long enough to vote for the first black president, Tubman stole and liberated herself. Electing sovereign kin and opposing sovereign powers are both political acts. Yet only the latter is an expression of defiance against injustice through independence from institutional power. Tubman's national political life began as an outlaw freeing slaves, what her detractors and the law defined as looting property.[6] A conductor on the "underground railroad" and supporter of the insurrectionist John Brown (with his sons, the white abolitionist was executed at Harper's Ferry for violent opposition to slavery), Tubman saw her reputation augmented as a distinguished militarist and spy who fought with the Union Army with 200,000 other African Americans to defeat the Confederacy.

Thus Clinton could name her, a black woman who also organized in the suffrage movement, but not cite Tubman's political lineage, as would be done for the white suffragette Susan B. Anthony. To present her with specificity, as more than a symbol, would enable the rebel to appear as a sovereign, in control of her own life and those lives entrusted in her care—even as they wandered, hunted in the wilderness. At the 2008 DNC convention, Tubman would be the first but not last black (female) political figure stripped of agency in opposition to a repressive American democracy.

The democratic presidential nominee chose the forty-fifth anniversary of King's "I Have a Dream" speech and March on Washington as the backdrop to showcase the new multicultural Democratic Party. The final night of the Democratic convention was held on August 28, the anniversary of the 1963 march and the great, hopeful sermon of Reverend King, whose oratory had helped Johnson in his presidential bid. Perhaps seeking inspiration and electoral uplift without the weight of antiracist activism, Obama invoked "the preacher" in his 2008 acceptance speech. Rendering King nameless, he embraced him as an abstraction. The label "the preacher" is conveniently worn by white evangelical conservatives and black liberationist pastors alike. With black liberationists as one-dimensional illustrations, with no acknowledgment of their opposition to state violence, King joined Tubman as symbolic representation of a multiracial democracy embodied in the Democratic Party. Denver's football stadium hosted a political pageant that appropriated political activists who had enabled that historic moment to unfold in time.

During the 2008 democratic primaries, Martin Luther King, Jr., had become a touchstone; he was portrayed as a key relation for Obama and Clinton. April of that year marked the fortieth anniversary of his assassination in Memphis, Tennessee, where he had gone to support striking sanitation workers. The presidential inauguration would take place the day after the national holiday commemorating King's birth. During the primary debates, Obama insisted that activism abolished American apartheid. Clinton maintained that the government, through the Johnson administration, was the enabler of King's legacy and the demise of segregation. When asked which of the two Democratic candidates King would have endorsed, Obama replied, "Neither." Yet, that did not prevent the candidates from appending "the preacher" to their campaigns.

Whereas King failed to lead a dominant political class to which he did not belong, Obama forty years later successfully morphed into it as fictive kin. King's diminishing popularity stemmed from his resistance to the Vietnam War, which he described as imperialist, and his critiques of racism and capitalism. His prophetic voice became an anathema to those pursuing imperial powers, and the *New York Times* castigated King for his opposition.[7] Obama's growing popularity and endorsements stemmed from his advocacy of a unified state and the restoration of its imperial might (to be used only for good). Both men understood and acquiesced to America's selective notion of elite leadership and sovereign kinship. Only King would later repudiate the sovereign elite in favor of another form of kinship. That kinship was partly forged in antiblack repression and terror and partly forged in a spirit or spirituality for liberation.

It is unclear if the president-elect, in choosing the anniversary of the March on Washington for his acceptance speech, was aware that the march, largely organized by labor activists such as A. Phillip Randolph, took place on the anniversary of the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till, a black teen from Chicago visiting Mississippi who allegedly whistled at a white woman on a dare. A fourteen-year-old boy from Obama's adoptive hometown, Till's torture, murder, and open-casket funeral would galvanize the civil rights movement that produced Martin Luther King, Jr., as an international human rights icon.[8] From the floor of the Denver stadium, only Jesse Jackson, Sr., also a Chicago adoptee, publicly recalled the Till tragedy in his August 28 interview with *PBS News Hour* correspondent and anchor Gwen Ifill.[9] Few may have heard or remember Jackson's reflections[10] as they uncovered Emmett from anonymity and Americans from amnesia.

While Emmett's lynching was given limited recognition at the DNC, the "four little black girls," immortalized as a nameless collective, received none. In 1963, bombings followed the historic march. The one placed in Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist church killed children activists. Lacking sovereign kinship, these black girls' names, like Emmett's, would not be spoken from a stage in which the contemporaneously slain, sovereigns such as President John F. Kennedy and Senator Robert Kennedy would be honored. Yet, Denise McNair (11), Addie Mae Collins (14), Carole Robertson (14), and Cynthia Wesley (14), and the other teens who would die in the Birmingham riots following the bombing, contributed dearly to this multiracial democracy. Few Americans would have any idea of the price paid so that two little black girls could join their parents on the Denver platform to present themselves to an approving American electorate.

CONCLUSION: HAGAR'S KIN AND BLACK SOVEREIGN RELATIONS

> [In the Hebrew Testament, as the African owned by Abraham and the barren Sarah] Hagar's predicament involved slavery, poverty, ethnicity, sexual and economic exploitation, surrogacy, rape, domestic violence, homelessness, motherhood, single-parenting and radical encounters with God. . . . Paul [in Galatians 4:21–5:1] relegated her and her progeny to a position outside of and antagonistic to the great promise Paul says Christ brought. . . . Hagar and her descendents represent the outsider position par excellence.
>
> —Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*

At the 1964 Democratic convention, dispossessed activists risked their lives to dispute the claims and qualifications of political elites. Former sharecropper, forcibly sterilized, Fannie Lou Hamer was crippled by a savage beating when jailed for trying to vote. She was fired from her job, and kicked out of her home because of her organizing for a greater democracy. Without radical activists such as Hamer, there would be no franchise for Ann Nixon Cooper and millions of others, and no black president-elect. Positioned by the political class, along with SNCC, as divisive and antagonistic to the promise of an American democracy manifested through Democratic Party victories, Hamer would not be validated by any president. Ideological arborists severed Tubman, King, and Hamer from the political tree, only to selectively graft branches for politicians seeking symbols to stir a populace.

In 1964, President Johnson was so unsettled by a crippled but not yet beaten black woman exercising political power through antiracist and black sovereign relations that he called a press conference to draw away cameras, hoping that Hamer would not touch the screens of American households. At the 1964 Democratic Convention, Hamer demanded that America oust, not forgive, an unrepentant white supremacy and its official delegation. Her ability to galvanize America—not reassure it of its moral standing—by exposing violent repression through personal and collective narratives threatened the power of politicians. Forty-four years after Hamer disturbed America, Ann Nixon Cooper, in a mesmerizing presidential victory speech, comforted us.

Repudiating in part the compromise that left the MFDP unable to unseat white racism, in 1972, Democratic presidential nominee Senator George McGovern and other party reformers ensured that the DNC would never repeat 1964 or mirror the Republican Party. (Current demographics and diminishing numbers have led some to mock the GOP as "the part of [old] white men.") However, disciplining intraparty independence before his stunning defeat to Richard Nixon, McGovern with other liberals worked to destabilize Brooklyn Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm and her supporters. The Chisholm campaign sought political power without loyalty to sovereign elites. Again, the independent leadership and free politics of another black woman "maverick" proved problematic to party regulars.

In order to defeat Hubert Humphrey, his real rival, McGovern needed Chisholm's delegates, whom she refused to release. Although they had initially supported Chisholm's candidacy as empowering all women, white feminists insisted that the black woman defer to the white male standard bearer. (In 2008, white feminists would not insist that the white woman candidate relinquish her delegates to the black male standard bearer.) As the first black woman elected to Congress and one of its

most progressive members, Chisholm recognized she would be outside of sovereign kinship. Yet, when fellow black Congressman Ron Dellums defected from her camp to endorse McGovern at the convention and urge that her delegates do likewise, the betrayal stunned Chisholm. She had assumed that Dellums shared her desire for independent black sovereignty. Documentary footage shows the congresswoman in tears saying, "tell Ron to come home" and that she is not angry.

Years later, Chisholm's bid for redistributive economic and political power would be rendered into a symbolic tale serving simultaneously multiculturalism and white supremacy. In Chisholm's 2005 *New York Times* obituary, Gloria Steinem selectively quoted the congresswoman to write that Chisholm had run for president to prove that any girl could attain the highest elected office. In fact, Chisholm had stated, decades earlier, that she ran so that any *black or Puerto Rican* girl would have presidential aspirations. Perhaps Chisholm would not have endorsed either Clinton or Obama. No matter. Few seemed to remember her candidacy during the 2008 Democratic primaries, in which pundits heralded the "first black" and the "first woman" as presidential contenders in the Democratic Party who inspired American voters, failing to note the first black woman to run for president on a major ticket. Unlike Clinton and Obama, Chisholm was an outspoken supporter of feminism. Ulike Clinton and the president-elect, she lacked ties to the Democratic machine and sovereign whiteness. Although offering limitless opportunities for political agency and moral and social transformation, there is little political wealth and personal gain in belonging to outcast struggles. Hence, belief in the value of black sovereign relations is difficult to sustain.

Still, certain facts remain. Activism and creativity, not elected or appointed officials, establish the conditions for political cultures that expanded democracy and civil and human rights. Historically, compromises with sovereign whiteness and sovereign kinship have denied impoverished children and families a viable future.[11] For centuries, popular and political cultures recycled antiblack stereotypes to create an apartheid-based democracy. Today, public and private agencies continue to disproportionately discipline and disenfranchise black life. Black women are selectively monitored for drug use in prenatal and delivery care; black families receive minimal public assistance in housing, health care, food subsidies, and counseling; black children are disproportionately held in foster homes and detention centers under the most substandard conditions. Yet, mainstream democracy, like mainstream Christianity, asks much from subordinated social sectors, providing few guarantees of restorative justice.

December 2008 news featured poverty and genocide: the 40 percent rise in murder rates by and of young black males in the United States; hundreds of Palestinian civilian deaths as Israel bombed Gaza (with weapons financed by the United States) as a way to "signify" to Hamas. Simultaneous news focused on the millions planning to converge on Washington, D.C., for the historic January 2009 inauguration, and the hundreds of parties and balls to follow. The spectacle of American democracy's unique beauty and might overshadows mundane and traumatic suffering. Any popular sovereignty that emerges to keep faith with our highest aspirations for sustainable life will have to create its own compelling expressions of transformative agency.

Having created the conditions for a centrist-liberal black president-elect, progressive activists will have to determine how best to influence a multiracial democracy. Popular sovereignty may yet offer a popular narrative of a great, independent democracy, one in which even the most dispossessed see themselves as directly participating in citizenship and social justice. Such possibilities rest in the wisdom of slave-turned-liberator Frederick Douglass: power concedes nothing without demand and struggle.

NOTES

1. American progress remains framed by the compassion or cruelty of Judeo-Christianity as symbolic template. With California's electoral votes, Barack Obama surpassed John McCain just as California voters passed Proposition 8, which banned gay and lesbian marriage. The same white voters who touched their screens for a black president—one who simultaneously opposed both the proposition and nontraditional marriage—later used racial epithets to denounce blacks who alongside the majority of Californian voters supported the ban. Voters did not use racist language at public rallies against the president-elect when he selected evangelical pastor Rick Warren, a key opponent to gay, lesbian, and transgendered rights and women's reproductive choices, to give the invocation at the inauguration; but they did use such language against non-elite blacks.

   Days after the announcement of Warren's selection, Pope Benedict XVI pronounced from the Vatican that gender theory and gay marriage were threats to "human ecology." Placing progressive initiatives on par with the demise of the oxygen-rich rainforest, the pope asserted that feminism and unchecked homosexuality would end human reproduction, bringing death to the species. Professing a loving forgiveness, ecclesiastics fear and condemn female and queer sovereignty. A sophisticated political class secure in its patrimony, America's elite kin absorb female, queer, and colored sovereignty by assimilating members of out-groups into their ranks.
2. A black presence in the sovereign American body is not new. Public knowledge of Lynne Cheney's family tree, which includes the president-elect's family, led to campaign quips about Obama declining to hunt with her husband Vice President Dick Cheney. Madeleine Albright's adoptive parent was Bush Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice's professor and mentor in Eastern European Studies at the University of Denver. The former Clinton secretary of state has publicly joked about her admonition to Rice in the 1980s upon learning that she was a Republican: "Condi, how could you? We have the same father!" As the political class increasingly recognizes blacks as kinsmen and kinswomen, the independent black sovereign increasingly appears antiquated.
3. On the campaign trail, paternity manifests in religion (God the Father), and dead or ancestral presidents (political sires). Unsurprisingly the American archetype for both remains symbolized by white male authority. Invoking both can help to establish one's belonging to a ruling elite. Emulating Abraham Lincoln, Barack Obama announced his presidential candidacy in Springfield, Illinois, missing a televised state of the black union forum sponsored by Travis Smiley. African American pastors and theologians and academics including Michael Eric Dyson, Cornel West, and James Cone discussed Obama's candidacy and absence. Smiley read Obama's note of regret citing scheduling conflicts, yet panelists and some audience members seemed dissatisfied.

   To view the incident (discussed repeatedly in the black media) as perhaps more than political immaturity, we might consider the value of texts. The copy of the Bible that had not been used since Lincoln's 1861 swearing-in, Americans were told in December 2008, would be used for the president-elect at his January 2009 inauguration. In 1864, African

Americans gave Lincoln a Bible following his signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Despite Lincoln's uncertainty about whether emancipated or free blacks should remain in the United States or be "repatriated," and despite the fact that the 1864 Bible was cherished by those who most intimately understood the heavy burdens of fighting for freedom, Obama chose the1861 Bible. For only Lincoln's book possessed the gravitas worth holding. (After Lincoln's assassination, the U.S. Senate would alter and then ratify the Thirteenth Amendment to legalize slavery for those duly convicted of a crime, setting a template for disproportionate incarceration of blacks and new forms of labor exploitation.)

4. The connections between the black president-elect and a southern president were noted during the campaign. In an October e-mail encouraging Texas democrats to vote and provide assistance to the Travis County Democratic Party, Luci Baines Johnson wrote, "Dear Fellow Democrat: 2008 marks the centennial celebration of my father's birthday. If Lyndon Johnson were still with us today, I know that he would be proud to cast his vote this year for Barack Obama for President, Rick Noriega for U.S. Senate, Lloyd Doggett for Congress, and every Democrat all the way down the ballot. Among his many accomplishments in office, President Johnson fought alongside Rev. Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders of the 1960s to pass landmark legislation that helped extend the American dream to everyone in our country. At the time, it was a historic struggle against the status quo. Today, Senator Barack Obama gives us all hope that America is once again ready to turn the page on the status quo and tackle the challenges of the 21st century. In 2008 we are closer than ever to achieving my father's vision—and ours—of a better tomorrow for our children and for our nation. But none of this can happen without you" (e-mail, author's papers).
5. Former Bush Secretary of State Colin Powell's late endorsement of Barack Obama included a condemnation of the Republican Party for inaccurately portraying the candidate as Muslim, and for GOP insults to Muslim Americans. Powell stated that any Muslim American boy should be able to grow up dreaming of becoming president of the United States. (For a transcript, see "Powell Endorses Obama for President: Republican ex-Secretary of State Calls Democrat 'Transformational Figure,'" http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/27265369 [accessed December 16, 2008]). Both Clinton Democrats and Sarah Palin Republicans challenged Obama's Christian authenticity. In response, the candidate distanced himself from Muslim Americans and Palestinian human rights. The point of asserting that Barack Hussein Obama was not Muslim was to reassure the sovereign whiteness as electorate that any Muslin American boy could *not* grow up to be president of the United States.
6. The complicated relationship of blacks to property bears serious scrutiny. The historical legacy of criminalizing blackness and equating it as having a strong threat to property endures to this day. For example, in 2005, following the breaking of substandard New Orleans levees in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, President Bush and Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco issued "shoot-to-kill" edicts for mostly impoverished black survivors; the government mandated "zero tolerance" even for those, in the words of 2008 presidential contender John McCain, who were trying to "get bottled water to babies."
7. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam," speech given at New York's Riverside Church on April 30, 1967. The Pacifica Radio/UC Berkeley Social Activism Sound Recording Project offers a full transcript of the sermon at http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificaviet/riversidetranscript.html.
8. Mamie Till-Mobley insisted on an open coffin in a public funeral for her son's decomposing body. White Mississippi officials had packed the casket with lye to accelerate its deterioration as it traveled back to Chicago. The mother demanded that the funeral home defy Southern officials' orders for a closed-casket funeral. The tens of thousands of mourners that passed before it and the millions more that saw the image in the black press (such as

Jet magazine) sparked the southern civil rights movement. Months later in Montgomery, Alabama, when Rosa Parks, Joanne Robinson, and E. D. Nixon asked a twenty-six-year-old preacher with a PhD in theology from Boston University to be spokesman for a bus boycott that they were organizing, Martin Luther King, Jr., agreed.

9. Jesse Jackson, Sr., wrote the foreword to Mamie Till-Mobley's memoir, coauthored by Christopher Benson, *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America* (New York: Random House, 2003).
10. This had its own sad irony, given that weeks earlier, not realizing that his microphone for a televised interview was still on, Jackson remarked, in cruder language, that he wanted to castrate Obama for dismissive treatment of the concerns of non-elite blacks.
11. During the 2008 campaign, to the consternation of Democratic Party loyalists and the confusion of many progressives, Barack Obama repeatedly cited Ronald Reagan—whose administration exploited racist stereotypes for political gains—as a presidential role model. The original southern strategy was crafted by Lee Atwater for Reagan, whose campaign used Philadelphia, Mississippi, the site of murdered civil rights activists Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney, as a rallying cry for the restoration of white rights. There are legacies. On the September 28, 2005, broadcast of *Bill Bennett's Morning in America*, William Bennett, Reagan's secretary of education, responding to a caller, observed, "If you wanted to reduce crime, you could—if that were your sole purpose, you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down. That would be an impossible, ridiculous, and morally reprehensible thing to do, but your crime rate would go down."

    Bennett's moral disclaimer following his final solution to criminality weakly serves as political cover against charges of racism. Nations have historically embarked on the "impossible, ridiculous, and morally reprehensible" in the name of "law and order" and ethnic cleansing; that is the illogic of genocide. Logically, the crime rate would go down if you abort all babies—including white sovereign ones. Yet, Bennett does not advocate multiracial abortions. Antiabortion Christian leaders failed to mount a campaign to force Bennett to apologize to the (black) unborn and their families. Bennett criminalizes not antisocial behavior but black kinship: families reductively understood as mothers warehousing and fathers abandoning children allegedly destined to plague a nation. Perhaps if Bennett had spoken of the first families much-loved young children in this fashion, the outcry would be greater. If so, then class and social standing shield the "new black" from the most excessive forms of rhetorical and physical violence, and shape their political views with increasing distance from non-elites.