

The Post-Racial Saint: From Barack Obama to Paul of Tarsus

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There is no such thing as a racial saint. There are only post-racial saints. Saints access the universal through the particular. Through a specific life, through a specific body, the saint participates in the transcendent, in the holy. Not just participates: makes accessible for the rest of us. This is precisely the meaning of the post-racial as it is used today in the contemporary United States. A racially marked life, body, is seen to participate in a world transcending race – and so to make that world accessible to all of us. While the post-racial seems to describe a state of affairs, a world where race no longer matters, in fact it describes a specific narrative, often with a protagonist. This protagonist is never white. He or she is always racially marked. Furthermore, the plot of the post-racial narrative sanctifies its protagonist. The transcendence of racial divides is not merely a conceptual operation. Because of the richness of the world that race constructs – a world of bodies, myths, institutions, technologies, habits, and taboos – transcending race is a religious plot, and its protagonist is a religious figure. Its protagonist is the post-racial saint.

Reading the post-racial as a narrative, the continuing pull of race is the post-racial's prerequisite. The post-racial saint lives in a world chronically infected by race. Indeed, read as a religious narrative, a post-racial world is eschatological, impossible to access from within our world. The post-racial saint offers a glimpse of the eschaton. Devotion to the post-racial saint means commitment to that other, impossible world. Emulation of the post-racial saint means lifting up our world closer to the world of our deepest desires. It is not only narrative structure that elicits this religious reading. St. Paul functions as the paradigmatic post-racial saint, racially

marked as a Jew but proclaiming an end to the distinction between Jew and Greek under the reign of Jesus Christ.

The post-racial saint is no messiah (nor is she, I will argue, a prophet). In narratives of the post-racial, the protagonist is incapable of single-handedly transforming the world. The protagonist proclaims, and embodies, transcendence of racial difference. Such narratives are told by champions of the post-racial world (sometimes by post-racial protagonists themselves). They can be read as hagiographies, offering sacred stories that confirm belief in the possibility of racial transcendence to a wavering public. They introduce readers or listeners who have never encountered the post-racial before to its possibility.

Contemporary secularism forces post-racial hagiographers to disclaim the theological dimension of their narratives. The attempt to disarticulate the religious and the racial results in idolatry; it results in transcendence, *contra* St. Paul, based on the false premise that the racial component of our worlds is an isolated problem, with an isolated solution. Peddlers of the post-secular are selling late modern capitalism's story of transcendence, rooted in a simulacrum of hagiography, in the false appearance of the universal and the particular conjoined. To reach this critical conclusion, this chapter starts by considering the figures of the racial prophet, the racial messiah, and the (post)racial saint – the last being illusory. Then, it examines the most famous post-racial narratives of our moment: those surrounding Barack Obama, including those he tells, those told about him, and those somewhere in between. With these narratives in mind, the chapter concludes by reading Obama with St. Paul, reflecting on the antinomies produced in the dialectics of secularization – and the ideological, or idolatrous, figures of sainthood that result.

There is something religious about Barack Obama, but no one is sure quite what. Hortense Spillers refers to the “sacralization of the secular” found in images of the Obama inauguration: images of prayer, reverence, and thanksgiving.¹ There was the rabid devotion of young people during his campaign, volunteering because of their faith in candidate Obama. There were the excited commentaries hailing the momentous transition from one epoch to another in American history. There was the *Rolling Stone* cover with Obama’s head against the background of the presidential seal, forming a halo.² There was Obama’s invocation of the fullness of time, his refrain that “now is the time.” There was his start: the speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention where Obama’s invocations of faith and hope promised to break the right’s monopoly on religious language in politics. And of course there was the opposition: the demonization of Obama as Muslim, or Communist, or foreign-born, all with a fanaticism that cannot but evoke the religious.

The American presidency necessarily carries religious overtones. As metonym for sovereignty, the growing scholarship on political theology reminds us that leaders of nations, both subject to law and creators of law, occupy a space in the social imagination that can be traced back to the sacred kingship of the middle ages, sovereign ruler aligned with sovereign God.³ American civil religion, too, sacralizes the presidency as it does the national spirit, with elections functioning as rituals of acclamation.⁴ Moreover, Max Weber’s characterization of the

¹ Hortense Spillers, “Destiny’s Child,” *boundary 2* 39:2 (2012), p. 5

² The August 20, 2009 cover was designed by Shepard Fairey. The words that ring the presidential seal in the image are “Bold Action or Compromise?” *Time* also featured an evocatively haloed Obama on the cover of its March 10, 2008 issue. *Newsweek* featured Obama with a rainbow-colored halo, captioned “The First Gay President,” May 21, 2012.

³ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

⁴ Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96:1 (1967), pp. 1-21; Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For A Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011, Chapter 7.

political change agent as necessarily charismatic, disrupting (before reinstating) bureaucratic rationality, and so necessarily tapping pre-modern, religious energies suggests that inhabiting at least a quasi-religious space is necessary for electability in a political culture with an insatiable appetite for *change*.⁵

In the case of Obama, these general religious overtones come together with the tropes of African American leadership. In the American cultural imaginary, the black leader, whether a preacher or politician, naturally blurs the sacred-secular divide. A charismatic speaker capable of mobilizing the masses, but also morally flawed and potentially misleading, this figure of the black leader holds sway from Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth to Jesse Jackson and Cornel West.⁶ This figure is the leader of a people, not of a nation. Because the people – the African American community – is outside the realm of bureaucratic rationality, not descriptively but ideologically, always coded as pre-modern, the transformative potential Weber attributes to charismatic leadership is often absent. From the inside, from the perspective of the black community, such leaders fit the Weberian category of the traditional authority, articulating and reaffirming a community's values. From the outside, from the perspective of whites, such leaders appear charismatic, posing a challenge to modernity's status quo – to the reign of white supremacy. But they only *appear* charismatic: the black leader serves as a symbol of the sovereign exception, representing the outside of the rule of law which makes the rule of law itself possible – the racial exclusion which is the foundation of American national sovereignty. As Giorgio Agamben has shown, the sovereign exception, who can be killed without the act

⁵ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978.

⁶ See Erica R. Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

being considered murder, is *homo sacer*, sacred man – the obverse of the sacrality of the sovereign.⁷ What seems to be disruptive charisma actually secures the status quo.

Focusing on the sacralization of Obama simply reinstates a post-Protestant mystification of the sacred. The religious aura of Obama need not be reduced to a knot of the inexplicable or irrational, alluring and dangerous and hinting at the transcendent. Rather, it manifests concretely in norm-governed religious roles. Just as political and cultural leadership are specific roles in American culture, inhabited and inflected in different ways in different contexts, the Christian religious context of modern Europe and the US offers a finite set of possible roles for religious figures to fit or resist. The sociological and phenomenological studies of these roles once brought with them universalizing ambitions that have now been discredited, but the roles that they limned remain pragmatically useful because of their traction in our present cultural landscape. Most relevant here, to help us understand Obama's place in the American religious imaginary, are three such roles: the prophet, the messiah, and the saint.

The scholarship and advocacy of Cornel West has popularized the association of prophecy with African American leadership.⁸ As he and others have explicated the office, prophecy involves appreciating tradition, discerning present social ills, underlining the seriousness of those ills, and pointing forward to a time when social harmony will be restored. In doing so, the prophet motivates others to do the concrete and burdensome labor of moving us from here to there, rectifying the social ills identified by the prophet. The prophet himself is merely a medium for a voice coming from the beyond, a god angered by the disobedience of his

⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*; George Shulman, "Schmittian Sovereignty in Racial Drag," unpublished manuscript.

⁸ Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982; Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989; See also George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008; Christopher Z. Hobson, *The Mount of Visions: African American Prophetic Tradition, 1800-1950*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Compare Max Weber's much more general account of the prophet as one who has a calling to proclaim religious teaching in *The Sociology of Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963.

people but promising rewards for those who will change their ways. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, understood both white and black American social worlds, saw the injustice of segregation, used his rhetorical talents to underline this injustice, and pointed towards his dream of a day when his children “will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” Indeed, the position of the race leader lends itself to the office of prophecy, for the very position entails a critique of social ills, particularly, racism.

Prophecy does not seem to be the right fit for the role Barack Obama occupies. The character, and body, of the prophet do not matter, just his message. In contrast, Obama’s story is an essential part of his sacralized representation: his African father and mother from Kansas, his community organizing background, his wife from Chicago’s South Side, his picture-perfect children, his thoughtfully written account of his journey of self-discovery. Where it is Martin Luther King’s children who, King hopes, will have the opportunity to transcend race prejudice, it is Obama himself who embodies the race-transcending world. While Obama on the campaign trail did use the word “hope” often, it was not part of a prophetic moral vision. Obama did not paint a picture of a world in which a certain grave ill, hitherto ignored, that threatened to destroy America would be repaired, and in which the world would be made well. Most certainly Obama did not discern a particularly dangerous social ill concerning issues of race. He addressed issues of race as some among the many moral complexities of the contemporary American landscape, and he did not offer any novel approaches or vocabulary for discerning these issues. In one of his few public remarks on race, his much vaunted speech on race after the Jeremiah Wright controversy, in March 2008, Obama proclaimed the message of his candidacy, “out of many, we are one,” and located racial animosity in an earlier generation, in his older black pastor and in his white grandmother. At most those problems of the past “haunt” the present.

Another religious vocation that might seem relevant to an analysis of Obama is that of the messiah. Where the prophet points to a better world ahead, the messiah announces the better world himself. The messiah not only represents but embodies divinity. His whole body is filled with divinity: every word and act is divine. He has unlimited capacities – unlimited knowledge, unlimited power. And he brings redemption. Humans can only be made right if they give their allegiance to him, setting aside all other worldly obligations. A racial messiah would have a body marked by race but also, with the same body, transcend race. This is the account offered by Albert Cleage and James Cone of Jesus as black, accounts that utilize the racial messianic role.⁹ Wallace Fard, founder of the Nation of Islam and considered an embodiment of God, reversed the American racial hierarchy, associating white America with sinners and redeeming, by their race, black Americans. Perhaps Jim Jones offered a variation on this messianic role, pastoring a multiracial community and evincing commitment to racial transcendence though acknowledging the whiteness of his own redemptive body.

Shortly after Obama's election, Ta-Nehisi Coates worried in *Time Magazine* about those who think that Obama is "a God-child descending from the heavens to teacheth benighted African Americans." He concludes, missing the real power of metaphor, "Barack Obama is a black President, not black Jesus."¹⁰ Cultural theorists have also, loosely, found messianic overtones in Obama's peculiar location at the supposed change of epochs, announcing the significance of the present moment, as a time outside of time, leading crowds in chants proclaiming their own ability to take advantage of that moment – "yes we can."¹¹ But the role of

⁹ Albert B. Cleage, *The Black Messiah*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968; James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*. New York: Seabury Press, 1969.

¹⁰ Coates, "Obama and the Myth of the Black Messiah", November 13, 2008. But see Corey Walker's provocative suggestion that "Obama is the messiah without messianism" – for white Americans. Walker, "Barack Obama and the Crisis of the White Intellectual," *Counterpunch*, January 12-14, 2008.

¹¹ Spillers, "Destiny's Child"; Donald Pease, "Black Orpheus: Barack Obama's Governmentality," *Other Modernities* (2011) <http://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/AMonline/article/view/1290>.

the messiah does not seem to fit Obama any better than that of prophet. Obama himself is not seen as racially transformative. It is his election that signifies an epochal shift. Further, it is not the entire character and body of Obama that are infused with divinity, with omnipotence and omniscience. His life story is powerful, but not because it is the life story which all should seek to reenact. Rather, his life story is powerful because of what it represents. Both the image of Obama “descending from the heavens to teacheth” and Obama conjuring the fullness of the present moment are suggestive of the prophet more than the messiah, as the former brings extra-worldly insights to worldly problems and demands response. The messiah does not need to bring something or demand something because he embodies all that is needed, and he demands total allegiance. Obama merely demanded a vote, a donation, and perhaps some volunteer work. (Note how, after the election, there were not legions of devotees volunteering their lives for government service).

In our contemporary world, saturated with media and capital, there is a new variation on the messiah, and particularly on the racial messiah. This is a role that emerged before Obama, and with which his media image often seems to resonate. The most admired black person in America, according to polls, is Oprah Winfrey. Her followers are devotees; she staged redemption on live television; her own black body, having suffered racial and sexual abuse, is the instrument of salvific hugs and tears. Kathryn Lofton’s *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* reads Oprah as a signal confluence of religion and consumerism: “It is Oprah’s world. We’re just buying in it, buying into it, and believing it.”¹² Oprah elicits devotion, in the form of purchases, through her corporate media empire. She at once rejects the category of religion and performs religious authority, drawing her audience towards her with centripetal spiritual force. “Oprah is an instant of overflowing cultural iconography, providing stuffing for every nook and cranny of

¹² Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011, p. 19.

your psychological gaps and material needs,” Lofton writes.¹³ In other words, Oprah organizes the array of contemporary culture in a spiritually comforting manner (this has always been the role of the messiah). Race is just one piece of culture to be comfortably arranged.

The example of Oprah suggests that the role of the messiah today may look quite different than what we were expecting. Still embodied and still redemptive, the role of the messiah becomes that of transforming beliefs and desires that are now monetized. In a sense, this describes Obama well, as he sold himself to the market of voters. Like the modern, capitalist messiah, he is immanent, not orthogonal, to the plane of culture. His understanding of the policy issues of the day, his narration of his life, his self-presentation, and his conception of race all trade in contemporary cultural currency. None are particularly surprising. All would be publishable in the *New York Times*. The exception, Obama’s relationship with Jeremiah Wright, whose racial views were out of bounds, was quickly neutralized with a heavy dose of eloquently arranged conventional wisdom. This is precisely Obama’s *modus operandi*: reconfiguring the cultural landscape with magnetic performances so as to reorient the preferences of voters. But Obama lacks Oprah’s complete immersion in the plane of popular culture. Obama’s performances are more clearly performances. A remainder of inwardness remains, manifesting as what the commentariat has labeled his coldness. Obama’s body is an integral part of his sacral performance, but it is not one with his public. An Obama hug always seems awkward, the polar opposite of an Oprah hug.

The body of a messiah is supersaturated with her religious role; there is no religious role beyond her overflowing person. The specificity of the saint’s body and story point to the universal, to the transcendent. They point rather than embody: the saint is still human, and like all humans the saint struggles with obstacles and battles vice, but unlike other humans the saint

¹³ Lofton, p. 8.

does an exemplary job of seeking the good, the true, and the beautiful. In this way the saint, in the Christian tradition, models her life on the life of Christ, the paragon of goodness, truth, and beauty, but does so in a manner specific to her place, time, and circumstances. The saint actively shapes her life, restraining some of her desires and cultivating others, in light of her overarching desire to participate in the transcendent.¹⁴ The transcendent shines through in the saint's life, visible to those she encounters, manifested in the miracles she causes, and recorded in hagiographic literature as well as in iconic representations for a broader community and for future generations to venerate.

All of these features remain with the role of the saint in the contemporary, post-Christian context. The saint's piety, once directed at Christ, now turns to some other worthy cause, or some amorphous set of ideals. Gandhi fits the role of saint because of his selfless devotion to a certain set of values paired with Indian self-rule. The physician Paul Farmer, founder of Partners in Health, works medical miracles in Haiti, lives ascetically to maximize his time in service to the poor, and was even the subject of a *New York Times* bestselling hagiography.¹⁵ Sometimes the word saint is used more loosely, to include venerated celebrities such as Elvis Presley or Princess Diana.¹⁶ But such figures do not fill the role of saint because they lack both the single-minded commitment and the rigorous self-fashioning entailed by that role. Single-minded commitment to worldly success does not a saint make (Steve Jobs was no saint).

A racial saint could mean a saint who happens to be racially marked, or it could mean a saint committed to something race-related. In the former case, race is merely one aspect among

¹⁴ Contra Susan Wolf, every choice the saint makes is not dictated by a normative program; rather, the desire for the transcendent shapes the saint's life in broad strokes. Wolf, "Moral Saints," *Journal of Philosophy* 79:8 (1982), pp. 419-439.

¹⁵ Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. New York: Random House, 2003.

¹⁶ See the scope of chapters included in *Saints: Faith Without Borders* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

many of the saint's particularity, the particularity that provides a bridge to the universal. In the latter case, that to which the saint is devoted must be a world transcending race because any other object of devotion (such as one's own racial community) would suggest, like in the case of the celebrity, worldly rather than other-worldly commitment. In both cases, what seemed like a racial saint is actually a post-racial saint, for race is not determinative. This is perhaps why the prophet and the messiah are much more familiar characters in the African American cultural-religious landscape. It has only been recently that a discourse in the United States that includes race, but where race is not determinative, has emerged.

There is one African American saintly figure that does turn up repeatedly, particularly in films. Originally described by Anthony Appiah, who called it "the Saint" and took Whoopi Goldberg in *Ghost* as paradigmatic, Audrey Colombe added details to Appiah's account, describing a moment of proliferation of the "magical Black man" in films such as *The Legend of Bagger Vance* and *The Matrix*.¹⁷ More recent scholarship has settled on the term "Magic Negro" for this figure, and has constructed a longer genealogy, from the unequivocally moral and non-threatening characters of Sidney Poitier through *Six Degrees of Separation* and up to Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*.¹⁸ In each case, the black character is articulate, asexual, and self-sacrificing, with supernatural powers used to help a film's white protagonist. Magic Negro characters have no history or future and no community, they have some threatening aspect, and they play merely instrumental roles in a film's plot. In short, they seem to have overcome American racism by

¹⁷ K. Anthony Appiah, "'No Bad Nigger': Blacks as the Ethical Principles in the Movies" in *Media Spectacles*, ed. M. Garber, J. Mallock, and R. L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 1993), 77-90; Audrey Colombe, "White Hollywood's New Black Boogeyman," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 45 (2002), <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc45.2002/colombe/index.html>

¹⁸ Forest Whitaker in Jim Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog* is a particularly rich and complex example, with the saintly black man as protagonist, explicitly committed to an other-worldly moral code.

depicting likeable and helpful African Americans, but actually they perpetuate racism by relegating blacks to subordinate roles in a white world, concealing black community and history.

The Magic Negro fulfills the first type of post-racial saint role, and shows the limits of this role. As portrayed on film, it just happens to be that the Magic Negro is black, it is one of her characteristics, part of her particularity that provides a bridge to the transcendent (think Morpheus in *The Matrix*), but it does not seem essential to her sainthood. In fact, stepping back from the internal logic of the Magic Negro narrative to the way that it is deployed, race is essentially tied to sanctity, in a very old-fashioned way: the racial other is depicted as a repository of authentic religious wisdom and practice.¹⁹

Early in Obama's first presidential campaign, David Ehrenstein argued in the *Los Angeles Times*, "Obama also is running for an equally important *unelected* office, in the province of the popular imagination – the 'Magic Negro'."²⁰ According to Ehrenstein, Obama was seen, and perhaps aspired to be seen, as the essentially moral, unthreatening helpmate of the white man, complete with supernatural powers to overcome adversity and garner support. On this reading, Joseph Biden's infelicitous description of Obama as "clean and articulate" was not problematic because it suggested most African Americans are dirty and inarticulate, but because it casts Obama in the role of holy helper, as post-racial saint. Ehrenstein concludes that, cast in this role, "Obama is there to help, out of the sheer goodness of a heart we need not understand.

¹⁹ See Curtis Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

²⁰ David Ehrenstein, "Obama the 'Magic Negro,'" *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 2007, <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-ehrenstein19mar19,0,3391015.story>. Ehrenstein's comment resonated with conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh, who discussed it on air and the, repeated during the campaign season, aired a song called "Barack the Magic Negro," to the tune of "Puff the Magic Dragon." A singer mimicking the voice of Rev. Al Sharpton complains about Obama's appeal to white voters, attributed to his lack of racial authenticity. The song went largely unnoticed outside of the world of conservative talk radio until Chip Saltsman, a candidate for chairman of the Republican National Committee, distributed CDs containing the song. Competing candidates for the chairmanship criticized Saltsman, making the song a national issue.

For as with all Magic Negroes, the less real he seems, the more desirable he becomes. If he were real, white America couldn't project all its fantasies of curative black benevolence on him."²¹

But the Magic Negro version of the post-racial saint role does not quite fit Obama. He does have a history and a community, and they are essential to his sanctity. They are key aspects of his particularity that allow transcendence to shine through. Further, self-sacrifice and asceticism are not essential aspects of Obama's image. Quite the opposite, his story is one of ambition fulfilled, the promise of America realized. Obama does not talk about long hours in the library studying or summer jobs in the factory. He describes a series of desires and opportunities. He does not talk about his own failings in moralistic terms. His encounters with drugs and lethargy are merely stages in his journey. If Obama exhibits self-discipline, often read equivocally as "coolness," it is because it is part of his nature, not through effort. Moreover, the transcendence suggested by Obama is not a general holiness or otherworldliness but the specific transcendence of a racialized world. Obama's ascendance allows the promise of an alternative, post-racial world to shine through to our world. In short, Obama seems to be the second type of post-racial saint, not the saint who happens to be raced but the saint committed to a post-racial world, with faith in that world. But as we will see, this narrative, just like the Magic Negro narrative, is not as redemptive as it seems.

A saint is neither created by the holy actions of a person nor by representing a person as holy. Sainthood involves a complex interaction between saintly actions and representation (or, more precisely, between various gradations of mediation) against the background of the norms governing the role of saint in a culture. Furthermore, if that to which the saint is committed is the transcendence of the racialized world, the saint must be particularly astute at predicting the ways her story and body will always already be racialized, and she must offer a personal performance

²¹ Ehrenstein, "Obama the 'Magic Negro'."

of sanctity that is not overdetermined by the racialization of the culture in which she lives. The post-racial saint will succeed only by living a life that allows the post-racial world to shine through, offering a stark contrast with the racialized world that surrounds her. And she will succeed only if that life is legible to the media-savvy public, and so capable of soliciting veneration and imitation.

Obama wrote a book, *Dreams From My Father*, before he was a political figure. But it is hard not to read this book as a post-racial auto-hagiography. Obama prefaces the book by telling readers that he had initially planned to write about public policy, but then he realized it was important to share his own personal story first. That story is one of a humble, pensive young man coming of age in a world where race is determinative. The young man's biracial body and multicultural soul do not fit the racialized world, and he remains an outsider, an observer, wherever he finds himself. Because of his non-racial identity, he is always in but not of the worlds he navigates: Muslim Indonesia, his white grandparents' home in Hawaii, black nationalists in California, an Ivy League university in Harlem, the South Side of Chicago, and, finally, his father's homeland, Kenya.

In this coming of age journey, the most pages are devoted to Obama's time in Chicago. He went to Chicago seeking redemption as an advocate for disempowered communities and seeking to find a racial community with which he could identify. Before he decided to go, he would lay in bed at night viewing, in his mind's eye, images of the civil rights movement, from lunch counter sit-ins to voter registration drives to jails filled with the songs of protest. "Such images became a form of prayer for me," he reflects (134).²² Yet the images remain distant. They took place before his lifetime, and he does not feel connected to the world of blacks. In his hyper-reflective but also emotionally distant style, Obama recalls his thoughts at the time, "I saw

²² Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. New York: Times Books, 1995.

the African-American community becoming more than just the place where you'd been born or the house where you'd been raised. Through organizing, through shared sacrifice, membership had been earned" (134-5). Obama moved to Chicago to become a community organizer: it held for him "the promise of redemption" (135).

In *Dreams From My Father*, Obama expresses his own weakness and doubts, wondering whether the community-building work he is engaged in really is worthwhile. But in typical hagiographic style, humility and self-doubt ultimately function to confirm holiness. Obama's discerning eye points out the flaws of those around him, narratively positioning Obama himself as the only three-dimensional, self-aware, and so efficacious character. On the one hand, there are the male leaders of Chicago's black community, each of whom is tragically flawed. Harold Washington managed to achieve political victory with his election as Chicago's first black mayor, but his celebrity distorted his ability to help communities, and his death revealed that no lasting infrastructure was in place to permanently secure black political gains. Black male leaders in the neighborhoods coveted power, promoting their own interests to the detriment of those they supposedly represented. On the other hand, the ordinary women who were the leaders of the community organization with which Obama worked were versed in folk wisdom and exhibited virtue aplenty, but needed an outsider's direction and motivation to get anything done. Although it remains unsaid in the narrative, the figure who takes the best from these two types is Obama himself. He is capable of identifying with the ordinary women but also capable of navigating the world of politics. He is thoughtful and articulate (his prose and reported speech is unmarked; the reported speech of other blacks is often in dialect). While Obama realizes that politics are based on assertively and sometimes cunningly advancing one's interests, Obama's interests are entirely identified with those of the ordinary black resident of Chicago's South Side.

The promise of redemption that motivated his Chicago sojourn turned out to be false. At this point in the narrative, Obama has not yet realized his own identity as an apostle of the post-racial. He seeks a racial community, but he seeks to enter it as an outsider, as a paid worker helping the locals. Even if the community will embrace him, he does not fit comfortably into it. His identity is constantly being confused. One day he is thought to be Irish, the next day Muslim, the next day a black American. Unmoored, Obama reflects on what he was missing. He realizes that he had been brought to Chicago not just by a search for personal acceptance but by a “demanding impulse” – a religious impulse. What was needed to make the necessary “sacrifices,” what was needed “to be right with yourself, to do right by others, to lend meaning to a community’s suffering and take part in its healing,” was “faith” (278-9). Obama had skills and talent, but he lacked faith in anything larger than himself. So he went out to find faith, and succeeded, in Jeremiah Wright’s church. He went, and he listened, and he wept, and he left a convert. What he found was not the militant Afrocentrism that has more recently come to be associated with Wright and his congregation. Rather, what Obama found were stories of Ezekial and David and Moses, stories “of survival and freedom, and hope” that “became our story, my story” (294). This was not the honorary blackness of the South Side. It was something more, something more universal. “Our trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal, black and more than black... I also felt for the first time how that spirit carried within it, nascent, incomplete, the possibility of moving beyond our narrow dreams” (294). The spirit of the service, of Christian worship, could no longer be dismissed as merely provincial or as a symptom of false consciousness. Obama could now see how the religious spirit was aligned with the post-racial, and how the particularities of racial identity all opened up to the post-racial horizon. He could now see how each step in his own personal journey was a step in a spiritual journey. Each

racial affiliation he tried on, when understood rightly, offered a glimpse of that post-racial eschaton. Obama had finally found faith in something more than himself, and he had realized that his life, and body, were already oriented by that faith.

Obama's piety was not pure as yet. A man, a mortal, stood in the way: Jeremiah Wright. While Obama understood Wright's church as offering a post-racial message, that did not stop Wright from preaching in racialized terms. When this came to the attention of the American public during the 2008 presidential campaign, Obama had to clarify to the world what his object of devotion really was. Obama explicated his object of faith in a much heralded speech, "A More Perfect Union," that quoted at length from his post-racial description of Wright's church in *Dreams From My Father*. The speech's name, and its opening line's citation of the Declaration of Independence, name Obama's theopolitical object of faith. His is a commitment, despite the evidence, to a world without division, most significantly without racial division. Obama locates himself in a tradition of devotees of this idea, though past devotees all have their imperfections. The Founders promised equal citizenship and freedom for all, but left "the original sin of slavery" intact. Obama's faith "comes from my own American story," he tells his listeners, recounting his multiracial, multicultural heritage. His personal narrative "has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts – that out of many, we are truly one." In other words, the saint's faith and story are inextricably bound together.

However, the fallen world is committed to seeing things in terms of black and white. Obama notes that he has been accused of being "too black" and of being "not black enough." Discussion of Obama's association with Wright had been "particularly divisive." The contrast between division and unity is the key theme of the speech. Wright's controversial statements "were not only wrong but divisive, divisive at a time when we need unity." Obama sets his own

story, and racially marked body, as the site of unity, a site that can become one with America to overcome division. After discussing the racial hatred of both Wright and his own grandmother, Obama writes: “These people are a part of me. And they are a part of America, this country that I love.” Obama is able to bring unity out of difference in his own life, incorporating and transcending the figure of Wright and the figure of his grandmother, foreshadowing a theological unity at the eschaton promised to America. Obama admits the impossibility of this promised world beyond race. He admits that the nation is mired in “a racial stalemate” that his candidacy will not solve. Yet there is work to do, for both blacks and whites, to achieve the post-racial – by imitating the work that Obama himself has done. Obama asserts that he has “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.” The faith Obama has is the faith of “all the world’s great religions” to treat others as we would have them treat us, which Obama evokes to mean an end to racial discrimination. Here again Obama’s religious and racial (and national) faith blend, and Obama himself models the piety he extols.

“A More Perfect Union” proceeds to discuss the “division” around race fueled by the media, which Obama dismisses as a distraction. Instead, Obama proclaims, we should be talking about education, health care, the economy, and other pressing issues. We should begin to act in this world as if it were post-racial, as if the actual existing divisions no longer mattered – a practice Obama himself will model. The speech closes with the tale of one of Obama’s devotees, a young white woman, Ashley, who worked building support among blacks for the Obama campaign in a South Carolina town. Obama tells the story of Ashley telling her own story, to a group of other volunteers. She speaks of her mother’s illness and her struggle with the broken

health care system. Then an “elderly black man who’s been sitting there quietly the entire time” was asked why he was an Obama volunteer. According to Obama, he responded, “I am here because of Ashley.” The presidential candidate concludes, “[T]hat single moment of recognition between the young white girl and the old black man” is the starting point in the quest for a more perfect union. The moment also represents proper devotion: the way to respond to the post-racial saint is to participate in the post-racial world: for a white woman to campaign for a black man in a black neighborhood, that is, to act as if the ills of racism are over, knowing that they are not.

The media coverage of Obama’s speech focused on its post-racial promise. Janny Scott’s analysis for *The New York Times* states that Obama “confronted race head-on, then reached beyond it to talk sympathetically about the experiences of the white working class and the plight of workers stripped of jobs and pensions.”²³ Commentators embraced Obama’s narrative structure, describing the speech as even-handed, offering an account of both sides of the problem of race in America – and so offering a way forward. Andrew Sullivan called the speech “searing, nuanced, gut-wrenching, loyal, and deeply, deeply Christian.” Jesse Jackson described the speech as “warm, filling, captive, reconciling, and comprehensive” and added that “it displayed real true grit.”²⁴ These responses indicate that the speech served its theopolitical purpose, not only distracting media attention from questions about the extent of Obama’s association with Wright, and not only offering a policy prescription for racial justice issues, but filling the hearts of listeners with a new vision of a post-racial world, a vision where all of the components of the old world remain, but with our affective investment rearranged, and so with the world entirely reconfigured.

²³ Janny Scott, “Obama Chooses Reconciliation Over Rancor,” *The New York Times*, March 19, 2008

²⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/18/jesse-jackson-obama-just-_n_92109.html

Alain Badiou's account of St. Paul closely matches this account of Obama.²⁵ For Badiou, St. Paul announces a transformation in the way things in the world fit together. St. Paul urges his audience to commit themselves to the new arrangement, even if what precisely it means remains obscure. On Badiou's account, we become subjects by having faith – faith in an event, in a transformative moment. Not only do we become subjects, we become equal. The previous status we held was secured by the old regime, the old way of organizing things, before the transformative event. All of that is up in the air with the event: the only thing that can be said for certain about subjects who accept the authority of the new regime is that they have faith. Thus, Badiou reads Paul's famous "Neither Jew nor Greek" imperative as a refusal of two, co-dependent discourses, Jewish and Greek, in favor of a third, novel discourse that is Christian. Instead of accepting humanity divided in two, with two separate structures of authority, Badiou is committed to universality, to a "universal logic of salvation [that] cannot be tied to any law."²⁶

While Badiou regrettably does not ponder Paul's status as saint, focusing instead on his status as disciple, we can observe the logic of the post-racial in his account. Paul, as Jew, seeks to neither affirm nor reject his own Jewish affiliation. Rather, he seeks to render it obsolete through his own personal story (the road to Damascus) and bodily commitment to the new regime (his suffering and death). Obama, similarly, tells a story of two discourses, black and white rather than Jew and Greek, and seeks to overcome them with his own faith. Like Paul the Roman Jew, Obama the black American offers a path to the universal through his own particularity. Like Paul, Obama tells stories of followers rendered equal in their shared commitment to the project he announces: his presidential election campaign (Ashley and the unnamed old black volunteer, among others).

²⁵ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 42.

But this way of representing Paul leans on a history of Christian supersessionism, of the Christian effort to denigrate Judaism. This is a point made by Daniel Boyarin, who urges readers to pay attention to Paul's cultural context: "Pauline religion should be understood as a religio-cultural formation contiguous with other Hellenistic Judaisms."²⁷ Read in this context, Boyarin suggests that Paul is able to hold both literal and allegorical meanings together, in two registers. Ethnic and gender ("neither male nor female") identities remain in the literal register, but in the allegorical register, which is primary, identities are united in Christ. "By entering into the body of Christ in the spirit, people become one with the seed to which the promise was made and thus themselves heirs of Abraham and children of God according to the promise."²⁸ In other words, Paul was not rejecting his own Judaism but was adding another dimension to it, opening the allegorical register. While differing with Paul philosophically and theologically, Boyarin finds that Paul raises certain important questions that Jews must address about ethnic particularity and nationalism, especially in light of the contemporary religious-national project of Israel. Instead of the choice between identity based on genealogy (the racial state) and identity based on claims of universality (the modern liberal state), Boyarin urges disaggregating "people, language, land, and culture" in a "diasporic" Jewish identity.²⁹

If we are to jump again from the post-racial Paul to the post-racial Obama, and so from the supersession of Jewishness to the supersession of blackness, Boyarin's concerns seem well founded. As many commentators have noted, the "post-racial" often is politically problematic, concealing the continuing force of American racism.³⁰ Moreover, holding racialized identity

²⁷ Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994, p. 13.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 24.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 243.

³⁰ Toure, "No Such Place as 'Post-Racial' America," *The New York Times*, November 8, 2011, <http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/08/no-such-place-as-post-racial-america/>; Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Fear

together with, but subordinate to, post-racial identity, as Obama does seem to do, legitimates a liberal political discourse that relegates race to a matter of cultural difference and even personal taste, limiting the significance of race to little more than one among many identity boxes to check on forms. In light of Obama, it is unclear how the diasporic conception of identity that Boyarin proposes as an alternative to both Jewish and Greek conceptions (another supersession?) is less problematic. Obama would seem to be the paradigm of diasporic identity, with nation (his Indonesian and Hawaiian upbringing and Kenyan father) disaggregated from race (the blackness ascribed to him and the white institutions he navigates) disaggregated from culture (his Ivy League pedigree) disaggregated from language (his refusal, in *Dreams From My Father*, to write or represent his own speech in black dialect). Yet all of these features reinforce Obama's racial supersession. Indeed, they all add to his post-racial sanctity. The more diverse the components of his identity the more his own story, and body, allow the coming post-racial world to shine through. Yet, at the end of the day, Obama is still read as black, as a black man aspiring to the post-racial. Given the force of the American racial regime, no amount of identity disaggregation overrides racialization based on skin color. One wonders whether Boyarin's optimism about the potential effects of disaggregation of Jewish identity is warranted, given the similarly intensive regimes of racialization that have been imposed on Jews.

Obama himself has some thoughts on Jewish identity, linked with black identity - thoughts which he shares in "A More Perfect Union." Immediately after reminding listeners that he has condemned Wright's controversial remarks, he describes just how troubling these remarks were:

of a Black President," *The Atlantic*, August 22, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/09/fear-of-a-black-president/309064/>.

[T]he remarks that have caused this recent firestorm weren't simply controversial. They weren't simply a religious leader's effort to speak out against perceived injustice. Instead, they expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country - a view that sees white racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America; a view that sees the conflicts in the Middle East as rooted primarily in the actions of stalwart allies like Israel, instead of emanating from the perverse and hateful ideologies of radical Islam.

Though ostensibly linked because they are both responsive to Wright's remarks (his comments on both whites and Palestinians caused controversy), Obama's remarks reveal a close connection between the promise of the post-racial and the persistence of the racial state. The first wrongheaded, "divisive" view disclaimed here is a belief in the racism of most whites. While Obama labels slavery America's "original sin" and describes continuing racial problems, he positions whites as predominantly willing to convert to the post-racial, if only they are given the opportunity. Such conversion does not take rejection of the old (racism), just openness to the new (the post-racial world illumined through Obama). Doing so will inevitably lead the old to wither away. In the same sentence, the opportunity for conversion is foreclosed for those opponents of Israel since their motivation is, indeed, irrational, effectively another form of racism: the hatred cultivated by "radical Islam." Similarly, while Obama's speech consistently questions the identification of America with the white race, he has no problem unequivocally affirming America's alliance with a state unabashedly committed to a particular racial identity: Israel. This antinomy points both to the specifically Christian nature of the post-racial (excluding Islam) and to the way that not only domestic but also foreign racism are concealed through post-racial narratives. Put another way, while Obama's role as post-racial saint is distinct from the

role of the Magic Negro, both roles simultaneously appear to further an anti-racist agenda while in fact subtly perpetuating racism.

Is the post-racial saint, then, just as much of a conceptual impossibility as the racial saint? Does the post-racial saint function solely as a catalyst for interpellation, pacifying the grumbles of racialized subjects? Perhaps we made the jump from the first century Mediterranean to the twenty-first century United States too easily. Perhaps we have played too fast and loose with the theological category of the saint in our secular age. Approached from the opposite direction: St. Paul himself, in that famous third book of Galatians, can be read as offering a forceful critique of secularism. He condemns those who would “rely on the works of the law.” Those who do so are, St. Paul proclaims, “held in custody under law” and “under a curse,” a curse removed by Christ. Now, under the authority of Christ, it is faith that makes humans right before God. St. Paul’s opponents are committed secularists. They recognize only the authority of law, but law is simply the substitute for the authority of God. The role of the saint is to allow the authority of God to shine through, revealing secularism’s dogmatic commitment to our worldly prison, its dogmatic refusal to be open to a higher authority.

St. Paul, then, trumpets his refusal of the plane of immanence, proclaiming a commitment to an authority orthogonal to the world. This is often lost when the concept of the saint is applied to secular contexts, to contexts where the religious is relegated to one among many domains of human interest. That to which the saint is committed, that which shines through in the life of the saint, is conceived in worldly, rather than other-worldly, terms. Even a smidgen of worldly content contaminates the transcendent. Badiou suggests that this was the case with the Nazi commitment to a universal contaminated by racial thinking, by the categories of Aryan and Jew,

and the same contamination seems evident in the case of Obama's post-racial transcendent.³¹

The post-racial seems to describe another world, totally different from our own, yet it is only different in one respect, with respect to race, with respect to a specific difference of our specific world. The post-racial saint, then, is not a saint but a celebrity. She advances her own fame under the guise of a universal that conceals its particularity rather than with a particularity that points to a universal. The post-racial saint is a narrative device, deployed to advance the interests of some – at the expense of others.

³¹ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. London: Verso, 2001.