

# **BETWEEN BARACK AND A HARD PLACE**

Racism and White Denial  
in the Age of Obama

Tim Wise



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## Preface

On November 4, 2008, at a little after 10:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, television networks began announcing the big news: Senator Barack Obama had been elected 44th president of the United States, thereby becoming the first person of color to win the office in the nation's history. Immediately, discussion turned to the historicity of the moment, and with good reason. For a nation built on a foundation of slavery, disenfranchisement, and white domination, the election of a man of color (and a man who, according to the racial taxonomy that has long existed in the United States, is indeed black) to the highest office in the land, is of no small import.

Millions of new voters, especially voters of color, had turned out in record numbers to cast their ballots for Barack Obama. In the days that followed, African American men and women who thought this moment might never happen, spoke of the pride they felt, having come so far in the past four decades, from a time when merely registering black people to vote could and did result in death. That Obama's victory says something about the United States, and about race and racism in this nation, is hard to deny.

But what it says, and what it doesn't say, is ultimately

not determined by the feelings of voters, however joyful they may be about Obama's victory. What Obama's political rise says about racism in America is to be determined by an honest appraisal of the real conditions on the ground in this place, not for Barack Obama, but for approximately 90 million persons of color in all: black, Latino, Asian American and Pacific Islander, indigenous persons, and Middle Easterners. When that appraisal is conducted, the racial and ethnic reality of the United States is sure to be seen as far more complex than some might like to think. For while the individual success of persons of color, as with Obama, is meaningful (and at this level was unthinkable merely a generation ago), the larger systemic and institutional realities of life in America suggest the ongoing salience of a deep-seated cultural malady—racism—which has been neither eradicated nor even substantially diminished by Obama's victory.

Herein I will explore what the political ascent of Barack Obama might mean, and more importantly what it doesn't mean, about race, about the power of whiteness in early twenty-first-century America, and about America itself. This I will do in the form of two essays, the first of which argues that contrary to the beliefs of many, the evidence is clear: systemic racial discrimination and profound inequity of opportunity continue to mark the lives of persons of color, Obama's own successes notwithstanding. Furthermore, not only does the success of Barack

Obama not signify the death of white racism as a personal or institutional phenomenon, if anything, it may well signal the emergence of an altogether new kind of racism. Consider this, for lack of a better term, Racism 2.0, or enlightened exceptionalism, a form that allows for and even celebrates the achievements of individual persons of color, but only because those individuals generally are seen as different from a less appealing, even pathological black or brown rule. If whites come to like, respect, and even vote for persons of color like Barack Obama, but only because they view them as having “transcended” their blackness in some way, to claim that the success of such candidates proves the demise of racism makes no sense at all. If anything, success on these terms confirms the salience of race and the machinations of white hegemony. That 43 percent of whites voted for Obama—more than voted for any white Democratic candidate since Lyndon Johnson in 1964—is impressive, to be sure, but perhaps less so than many would like to think.

In short, the 2008 presidential election may not have been a contest in which racism was vying against anti-racism, so much as one in which two different types of racism were competing for predominance. On the one hand was old-fashioned bigotry, or Racism 1.0, which could have caused enough whites to vote against Obama for racial reasons as to have ensured his defeat. This is the kind of bigotry that has long marked the nation’s history:

the kind that, in its most extreme moments has precipitated racist murder, lynching, and terror on a grand scale; the kind that led to dozens of white-on-black riots in city after city for much of the early 1900s; the kind that precipitated restrictive covenants and “neighborhood improvement associations” to block persons of color from moving into white neighborhoods; the kind that even now animates hate groups and hate crimes when taken to its illogical conclusion. It is racism with which we are, as a nation, familiar, even if we remain sadly naïve as to the depths of its depravity. And that familiarity allows us to know it when we see it, as we occasionally did in the run-up to the election, in hostile and unhinged e-mails attacking Obama for racial or religious reasons, or in Internet videos showing blatantly racist supporters of Obama’s opponent, Senator John McCain, engaged in only the most thinly veiled racist invective. On the other hand, however, was Racism 2.0—a far less easily recognized type—which could allow him to win the presidency, but only because of his ability to ease white fears and transcend his still-problematic blackness, biracial though it may be. While Racism 1.0 appears to have suffered a defeat this time out—and for that, we can all be grateful—let us not overlook the possibility that Racism 2.0 may have been in full effect, and ultimately the reason for Obama’s victory. And if that is true—a subject we will explore shortly—then there remains a great amount of work to be done.

Likewise, if Obama's win has the effect of creating a new archetype or model of acceptable blackness—in other words, if whites come to “need” black folks to be Obama-like in style, affect, erudition, and educational background in order to be considered competent or trustworthy—his singular victory could actually create higher barriers for the bulk of African Americans. Whereas whites have long been able to run the gamut of observable intelligence, articulateness, accent, and erudition and still become president, or obtain other high-ranking positions in the private sector, for instance, people of color have long worried about being tokenized, and accepted only when they make whites sufficiently comfortable or don't seem “too black” in the way many whites still perceive the larger black community. If Obama's success reinforces that tendency to isolate acceptable blacks from those who are “unacceptable,” the consequences for overall racial equity could be negative, rather than positive.

In the second essay, I explore the unique challenge to white America posed by Obama's candidacy and pending presidency. While overt racists will counsel backlash, and use Obama's rise to suggest that America is descending into a pit of cultural decay, and while mainstream commentators will counsel celebration, and use Obama as proof positive that racism is no longer a potent social force with which we must grapple, there is another option, at once more level-headed and yet aspirational, to

which we might turn. That option is to seize the moment, to channel the energy unleashed by the Obama campaign, to focus those who have believed so much in him and his mantra of “change” into productive antiracism and social justice work. The choice is to use this opening to develop and strengthen white antiracist identity, to insist on the audacity of truth and not just hope, to demand better of ourselves than perhaps even we thought possible. Just as Obama has issued a challenge to black folks to be more responsible for the problems in their communities—in part a message he sincerely believes, of course, but also one intended to make whites more comfortable with his candidacy—so too must whites take personal responsibility for ongoing racism, racial injustice, and the unearned privileges we continue to reap as a result. In other words, while it is certainly advisable for persons of color to take responsibility for their lives, no matter the presence of racism, it is just as important for whites to take responsibility for our mess, including the mess of racism and privilege, irrespective of how we believe (often incorrectly) black and brown folks are behaving. Personal responsibility is a two-way street, in other words.

It is this call for “200 percent responsibility” that I hope will resonate with those inspired thus far by Obama, and move them from a focus on his personal success to a more liberating and collective vision of progress. In other words, the challenge to the nation—and for my money,

especially for white folks—is to channel the energy and the inspiration of concepts like “hope” and “change” into constructive, meaningful endeavors for real social justice. The whole history of the struggle for freedom and true democracy suggests we will have to hold Obama accountable, as would be true with any president, and never become complacent, convinced that he has either the desire or ability to do the work for us. We must remember, it was never about Obama, and it isn’t now.

I should say here a few words about terminology used in this book, seeing as how misunderstanding is common when race is the subject being discussed. When I use the term “race” or refer to persons as “black,” “white,” or “persons of color,” I am not suggesting that these are concepts with even the slightest degree of scientific meaning. Indeed, most scientists now reject the notion of race as a biological or genetic construct. Rather, I use the terms in their social sense. Race has meaning not because there are “white genes,” or “Asian genes,” or “black blood” or “Latino blood,” but because it has been given meaning in the laws and customs of a society. Just as the women killed in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692 weren’t really witches, and yet the belief that they were ensured their oppression and death, so too can race have meaning due to social circumstance, even if those being oppressed by the concept are not truly biologically different, in any meaningful way, from those doing the oppressing. To be white is to be a

person, typically, of European descent and capable of being viewed as a member of the dominant racial group in the United States. To be black is to be, typically, a person of African descent, dark enough to be considered a member of that group that was historically at or near the bottom (along with indigenous persons) of the nation's racial hierarchy. To be a person of color is simply to be anything other than white, in the eyes of most Americans. These categories are fluid, to be sure, and often contested, but in social terms they remain quite real, such that they describe, with frightening precision, the likely social status of most persons caught in their categories.

In the case of Barack Obama, of course, as many have noted, he is a man of biracial ancestry: the son of a white mother from Kansas and a black father from Kenya. While it is valid and valuable to note Obama's biraciality—especially given the growing number of biracial persons in the United States whose racial identity is often ignored, or who feel as though they are forced to “choose sides” in claiming an identity for themselves—it is also worth pointing out that throughout U.S. history and still today, to be biracial hardly erases one salient fact: a person so designated will typically be seen as a member of whichever group is lowest in the racial hierarchy. So, to be black and white in terms of parentage is to be black. To be white and Asian is to be seen and likely treated as Asian, and so on. This is not to deny the unique forms of discrimination to which biracial

people may occasionally be subjected *as* biracial persons, but it is to note that the racism directed their way is most often aimed at the darkest and least white aspect of their heritage. And so, while ancestrally biracial, in the social sense, as a resident of the United States, Barack Obama is incontestably black.

The term racism, as I use it, can and does mean two things: first, an ideological belief in the racial or cultural superiority or inferiority of certain people defined racially as members of a group; and secondly, as a system of inequity based on race, or perceived racial difference. In other words, it is both an idea and a structure of institutions, in which policies, practices, and procedures produce inequitable outcomes. As with other “isms” (capitalism, communism, socialism, fascism, etc.), so too racism is more than merely an ideology. In the United States, racism has taken on particular historical forms, such as enslavement, genocidal land grabs, segregation, and racialized violence; and it has in practice amounted to one specific kind of racism: namely, white supremacy. And so when I use the term white supremacy, I do not mean neo-Nazism or Klan activity. Rather, I mean the entire structure of American institutions, historically and still too often today.

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Tim Wise  
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