Millenials for Obama and the Messy Antic Ends of Race

John Hartigan Jr.

You’ll have to measure time Before Obama and After Obama.
—Spike Lee, July 10, 2008

It’s the end of the era of the white man.

Barack Obama’s successful presidential campaign both drew upon and unleashed a torrent of millenarian thinking in American culture concerning the “end of white America.” Imagining the end of whiteness has deep roots in the United States, extending back at least to the eugenics movement of the 1910s and the subsequent enactment of racially based immigration restrictions in the 1920s. But in contrast with these efforts, which used fear tactics to politically mobilize against the demise of whiteness, Obama’s campaign imagined the end of whiteness in a far more hopeful tone, as a glittering, promising “postracial” future. This promise—increasingly called into question by the surge of race stories in the news—manifested tangibly in the messianic imagery that was projected onto Obama and slyly channeled by his campaign during the election. Certainly, there were the white supremacists who voted for Obama in the hopes that his victory would finally provoke the apocalyptic “race war” that such groups have long envisioned and tried to provoke. But the prevailing cultural imagining of Obama and the “end times” was of a racially transcendent messiah leading the country into the long-awaited “post-racial” promised land, where Americans, as Martin Luther King Jr. once intoned, “will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

So it is hardly surprising that many Americans now are deeply disappointed and perplexed that race did not simply end, but rather, it still continues to matter so intensely, as evidenced by the confusing, dispiriting drama over the firing of Shirley Sherrod from her position with the USDA. When Obama took the oath of office in January 2009, a powerful optimism gripped many Americans, as documented by a variety of national polls keyed on race. Along with the recognition that the seemingly invincible racial barrier (electing a black man to the most powerful office in the country) had finally been broken, Americans also widely succumbed to the tantalizing belief that full...

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lenarian thought deeply animates such assessments, which assert “the disappearance of this centrifugal core heralds a future rich with promise.” The focus in such pronouncements is on two distant horizons, the alpha and the omega, or the beginning and the end, as in “this is where the future of identity after whiteness lies—in a dramatic departure from the racial logic that has defined American culture from the very beginning.” This prophecy seemed further borne out with the retirement of “the last of the WASPs,” John Paul Stevens, from the U.S. Supreme Court in 2010.

Notably, whiteness was not the only end being imagined with Obama’s ascendancy. “The end of blackness” certainly was coming into view before Obama burst onto the political scene. But the election of a black man to the presidency marks the “end of the black American narrative,” according to Charles Johnson, who argues that this narrative long served as “our starting point, our agreed-upon premise, our most important presupposition for dialogues about black America.” The fact that over 10,000 black Americans have been elected to offices across the country leads Johnson to assert that the coherence of blackness as a racial formation defined by its subordination has been shattered. “No matter which angle we use to view black people in America today,” Johnson concludes, “we find them to be a complex and multifaceted people who defy easy categorization. We challenge, culturally and politically, an old group narrative that falls at the beginning of this new century to capture even a fraction of our rich diversity and heterogeneity.” The frames of reference, Johnson argues, that Americans of all colors have used for talking and thinking about black people are mutating rapidly.

The important question, though, is whether these “ends,” of whiteness and blackness, achieved or only imagined, are largely a product of the kind of millenarian thinking that has so often proved deceptive in the past. Have we been led astray by a state of anticipation, a messianic mindset that made the end of race seem finally almost here? There are certainly mistaken assumptions in this public discourse that can be quickly identified. Demography, for instance, is not destiny, and the fact that racial demographics are changing does not ensure that the structure of race will be fundamentally altered. Even if the dimensions of majority and minority shift, there remains the question of how people will racially identify in the future. Beginning in the mid-1990s, demographers and social commentators predicted that trends in immigration and birth rates indicated whites are becoming a minority and, subsequently, soon the United States would have no racial majority. This narrative was based on the declining number of “non-Hispanic whites” in this country. However, the actual results of the 2000 U.S. census suggested a different story. Instead of declining as widely anticipated, the number

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of whites held constant at about 75 percent of the population. For that matter, current census projections are that the number of whites will increase by about 80 million by mid-century, even while they also project, contradictorily, that "people of color" will become a majority in this country by 2042.

The source of this contradiction lies in how people continue to identify racially. Though demographers are diligent about delineating the category, "non-Hispanic whites," enough Hispanics are identifying as "white" to keep that racial identity growing. This growth is fueled also, by immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East, who may not pass as "white" on the street but who claim that identity on the census. This brings us to another point about demography. The acclaimed openness to interracial dating among the Millennials may not lead to the imagined end of race, either. This belief neatly dovetails with the figure of Obama himself, as Paul Adams explained in "Obama's Millennials—83 Million Strong," on the Huffington Post (June 30, 2008), "Barack Obama's life appeals to Millennials because it is the new American story. He, himself, [is] the product of a mixed-race couple, and not shy about it." But, as David Roediger pointed out in arguing against the "race is over" narrative, "the idea that 'crossbreeding' will disarm racism is at least 140 years old. Demographics simply are not always decisive." Where Adams imagines the Millennials "are just not subject to the same appeals to fear-of-othersness," Roediger points out that, as mixed marriages grew dramatically in the early 1900s too, "the prediction of racial change never quite became fact" (2003:8).

So where does this leave us? We are confronting a gap between the future—the oft-imagined but perpetually deferred "end of whiteness"—and the present. This is a gap Obama often finessed in his campaign rhetoric, which adroitly yoked a millennialist sensibility ("our time is now") to a postmillennialist emphasis on gradual perfectibility, as evident in his definition of hope as "that thing inside of us that insists, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that there is something greater inside of us." Adams's view, of course, is a tempting one: "In many respects the Millennials represent the first generation that may, indeed, actually live in the America we have always sought to build." As shimmering as that thought may be, we must also see that this vision is, at root, millenarian, and such visions have consistently been unable to close the stubborn gap between "then" and "now," "us" and "them." On one side, we have a powerful sense of the foretold, the preordained, and its transformative potential. On the other, we have the indurate present in all its messy complexity and unwieldiness. Messianic figures and rhetoric aim, and are projected, to close this gap, making the imagined possible future real, but the gap persists—a fact that, with race, is both frustrating and generative.

Philosophers such as Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida have grappled with this molten, unwieldy potential in messianism, particularly as it might be turned toward achieving radical ideals such as a postracial future. In particular, Derrida's characterization of messianism—as "a spectral logic of inheritance and generations, but a logic turned toward the future no less than the past, in a heterogeneous and disjointed
time”—is keenly relevant to the questions here regarding Millennials and the rest of us as we struggle with the meaning of “postracial” in the here and now. But Derrida also offers a cautionary example based on his own effort to imagine the end of race in an essay he wrote (“Racism’s Last Word”) in conjunction with a traveling exhibition in 1983 of works by some of the world’s most celebrated artists, which anticipated and imagined the end of apartheid in South Africa. Derrida characterized the exhibit as “a memory in advance: that, perhaps, is the time given for this exhibition. ... Without counting on any present moment, it offers only a foresight in painting, very close to silence, and the rearview vision for a future for which apartheid will be the name of something finally abolished.” Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon responded by accusing him of forgetting history and the wily weight of racism’s past as he prophesized its future end. Instead, they argued, we must maintain vigilance, with an “historical eye,” for the ways the racial past is continuously reproduced by “a sequence of somersaults, deviations, and permutations” in current political discourse and social practices. McClintock and Nixon refused the portal opening toward the future, in favor of an incessant attention to the reinscriptions of the history of race that prevails in the present. This exchange neatly frames both an emerging issue for race theorists—the relative weight and relevance of history as the meanings of race change so quickly today—and the central retort many are now giving to the postracial future imagined in conjunction with the election of Obama: “nothing has changed.”

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We face a moment with race where millennialism’s imagined ends of history and race warp our ability to recognize the enduring, generative significance that race retains. The counter stance, promoted by some race theorists and activists, is that nothing changed with Obama’s election, and, if anything, the predicaments of race only intensified and became more intractable. This is one way of forestalling or limiting disappointment in a messiah that did not materialize, but it is not an adequate means of recognizing and greeting the changed circumstance of racial discourse provoked by Obama’s emergence as the emblematic “American.” Such a pessimism, while buttressed by a wholly warranted, coolly cynical realism, also risks squandering, first, the millenial hope engendered by Obama and, second, the fairly subtle stance on “postracial” suggested by his postmillenarian rhetoric of a more perfectible union. I suggest we need to come to grips with the millenial thinking that propelled “postracial” into our public discourse in a way that neither squelches or dismisses the very sense of hopefulness that delivered Obama to the White House.
In doing so, as promised, there is an additional “post” to draw upon here—“postmodernism.” What if we think of “postracial” not just as invoking a yet-to-be-perfected present future, in a postmillennial sense, but as that which, like modernism, is rejected while acknowledged as enduring by this particular “post”? This involves more than just playing with words. The key stance of postmodernism is a reflexive attention to the ways we remain culturally conditioned by something like race, even as we seek to overturn and undermine it. Instead of invoking “postracial” as signaling the end of race, we need to see it as doing similar work as “postmodernism,” which marked an insistent reconfiguration of modernism rather than its simple termination—much the way “postracial” was first used to characterize certain changing urban political dynamics. The more important resonance is that “postmodernism” reminds us that our assessments about the relevance and significance of race remain encompassed within dense cultural sensibilities and their attendant dispositions towards the past, present, and future. And isn’t it a modernist ideal, after all, that we could somehow fix a univocal, objective meaning to race or subordinate it to one grand narrative that stands apart from our very cultural interest in race? Instead, we must remember that our efforts, theoretically and politically, remain informed by narrative conventions, orientations, and expectations of which we are barely conscious—much as postmodernists like Hayden White pointed out regarding history itself. For all these reasons we should not shun “postracial.” It is a useful reminder both of what we hope for and that to which we remain bound, as we always and primarily engage race through powerful cultural forms such as narratives, particularly those that try to close the gap between the future and the past.

Suggested Readings

Kathleen Stewart and Susan Harding characterize millenarian/apocalyptic thought as a “mode of attention fascinated by endings, overturnings, and originary moments.... As a discursive field, contemporary American apocalypticism includes its (a) conditions of possibility, (b) histories of use, (c) symptoms, (d) precise social and institutional locales and modes of circulation, and (e) politics.” “Bad Endings: American Apocalypses,” Stewart and Harding, Annual Review of Anthropology, 28:285–310, 1999. Millennial thinking, generally, aims to reverse a prior era of suffering and evil, rewarding the virtuous and punishing the wicked. See The Shadows and Lights of Waco: Millennialism Today, James Faubion, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) and “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming,” Jean and John Comaroff, Public Culture, 12(2): 291–343. Postmillennialism sees this occurring without a traumatic, apocalyptic shock, but rather as having already begun, with the return of the messiah coming at the end of the era, rather than the beginning. As with eschatology, generally, a core notion is that history is divided into “ages,” periods of time featuring distinct forms of reality, with a “new age” initiating a new form of reality. See Keith Mathison, Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope,

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and then “No Names Apart: The Separation of Word and History in Derrida’s ‘Le Dernier Mot du Racisme,’” Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon, in Critical Inquiry, 13:1, page 154. On Hayden White’s account of the mediation of historical consciousness via particular cultural forms, such as narrative, see Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe, Johns Hopkins Press, 1975.


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