



# A Finished Revolution?

Barack Obama as the fulfillment of Reconstruction.

Many credit Barack Obama with ushering in “the new black politics,” or claim that his presidency has ended black politics as we know it; he supposedly signals either a “postracial society” or a type of “post-modern blackness,” a term bell hooks formulated and one Anders Stephanson explicates by comparing it to bebop: “a black cultural avant-garde that corresponds historically to abstract expressionism in painting—the last gasp of modernism.”

But in emphasizing the birth of the new or the death of the old, we don’t allow for the continuum; that nothing has died or been reborn, but rather fulfilled, namely, the promise of Reconstruction.

Reconstruction was an era of unparalleled hope and optimism for blacks, who were, for the first time as a group, part of the American political process. The decade and a half following the Civil War saw the election of over fifteen hundred black legislators. In that historic time, black leaders and white Radical Reconstructionists recognized the political expediency of using each other: White Reconstructionists needed black votes if they were going to come to power; black leaders needed to ally themselves with the political machinery if they were going to make good on the promise of Emancipation. It was a symbiotic relationship substantially different from the paternalism that sometimes overshadowed the courage and idealism of the Abolitionist movement.

Reconstruction did not end so much as it was overtaken by a period of so-called Redemption. White Southern Democrats—the vast majority of whom were former Confederates—chafed under what they felt was a Radical Republican insistence on enfranchisement

of the recently freed black population. The most extreme of these former Confederates formed paramilitary terrorist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan to oust white and black Republicans from power, usually by initiating riots, night-riding, fire-bombings, and outright murder. These extremists were self-appointed “redeemers” of the South, hoping to reclaim each of the former Confederate States of America from federal occupation and re-establish white supremacy.

The redeemers’ hangings, lynchings, and raids of terror worked. By the presidential election of 1876, only three states from the original eleven CSA—Louisiana, South Carolina, and Florida—were “unredeemed.” Those states were finally won back by a political quid pro quo, when Rutherford B. Hayes became president over rival Samuel Tilden in exchange for the withdrawal of federal troops.

It’s no accident that the religious concept of “redemption”—with its obsession with white robes, “baptisms by fire,” and Restorationist rhetoric—became the central organizing metaphor for the political movement Redemption, which gave rise to white robes of the non-choirboy variety: the White League, the Knights of the White Camilla, the White Line, and other supremacist organizations who vied for prominence with the Klan. The frenzied Protestantism that began to take hold all over the South fed the fervor of the redeemers, imbuing them with a near-religious fundamentalist zealotry; in turn, “redemption” became a code word in Southern revivalist white churches; salvation of the soul and salvation of white supremacy were concomitant goals.

Once Redemption had removed all Republicans from power, redeemers even sought not

just to end black suffrage, but to smite it and attack it from all sides.

Wholesale murder, lynching, and mob violence toward blacks culminated in the 1890s, when, as Philip Dray reports in *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, “in a typical four-week period” one would learn that:

Mrs. Jake Cebrose of Plano, Texas, was lynched for “nothing”; four men....Solomon Jackson, Lewis Speir, Jesse Thompson, and Camp Reese...were lynched together in Wetumpka, Alabama; an eight-year-old black child identified only as “Parks” was lynched in South Carolina for “nothing”; Charlie Washington was lynched for “rape and robbery” in Alabama...Dan Ogg was put to death in Palestine, Texas, because he was “found in a white family’s room”; and Alex Walker of Pleasant Hill, Alabama had his life extinguished for “being troublesome.”

But the nation, because it was intent on nullifying North-South enmities, ignored the new tide of violence, pushed the race question aside, and, in so doing, opted for reunification over unity of vision, mistook balancing the checkbook on race for settling the account. The North would turn a blind eye to the restoration of white-supremacist governments in the postbellum South, and the white South, for its part, would become American once more, would even sign loyalist oaths, but it would not cough up apologies for crimes it did not believe were criminal, nor express a guilt it didn’t feel. Instead, it would tolerate—but hardly yield to—a federal government it had always viewed with suspicion: a resistance that would come to the surface again with constant battles against the feds in the 1960s.





Following the Civil War, redeemers were aided by a lack of commitment from the executive branch, lack of long-term funding for education and troop intervention, and complete failure of the Supreme Court to uphold the Fourteenth Amendment, which promised “equal protection under the law.” A retrogressive President Andrew Johnson, an insurgent Klan, and a diffident Supreme Court effectively smothered the Reconstructionist attempts at black autonomy, whether by destroying institutions like the Freedmen’s Bureau, as Johnson did, or by failing to defend anything but the mere *de jure* function of the Fourteenth Amendment. The historian George M. Fredrickson argues that, “Reconstruction failed because the government proved unwilling or unable to...overcome the violent white resistance to black equality.”

Redemption seemed to have won, Reconstruction to have lost. But some historians like Eric Foner, author of *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*, see a different possibility, one that Foner hints at with his subtitle. America’s Reconstruction was not defeated so much as defaulted. Since its inception and its somewhat inconclusive and inglorious denouement, we have been living, when it comes to race, in a state of suspension, a kind of historic free fall.

Not much had changed in the hundred years from the end of the Civil War to the federal troops converging upon Ole Miss to quell white riots over James Meredith becoming its first black student in 1962. The first Civil Rights Act, penned in 1866, essentially had to be written again nearly a hundred years later, when Lyndon Baines Johnson would sign the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Historians talk of a Second Reconstruction with the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and even a Second Redemption, the anti-busing riots and the dismantling of school desegregation initiating a “blacklash” of sorts. Seen in that light, the Birmingham bombings of 1963 and the forty-one rounds of bullets white police pumped into Amadou Diallo in 1999 are all flares of the same Redemption that lynched the aforementioned eight-year-old South Carolina boy “for nothing.” The Civil War may have ended in 1865, but Reconstruction did not draw to a close until January 20, 2009,

when Barack Obama became President of the United States.

There are many parallels between Barack Obama and Lincoln (two statuesque Illinois lawyers-cum-statesmen whose Old Testament eloquence is bedrocked in plain-spoken Midwestern simplicity), Obama and Martin Luther King, Jr. (two brilliant leader-orators whose integrationist message of hope, change, and civic freedom are rooted in black liberation theology), and Obama and JFK (two young, good-looking, charismatic leaders who seem to capture a whole zeitgeist in their very visage, who, as William Rees-Mogg puts it, “combin[e] personal magnetism with a strong appeal to American idealism”).

There are even biblical parallels: David Remnick, editor of *The New Yorker*, highlights how one of Obama’s speeches differentiates the “Moses Generation” of Civil Rights martyrs and the “Joshua Generation” of Obama-era activists and organizers. But it’s fitting that Barack Obama, who was an author before he was a legislator, would find his neatest parallel in literature—or rather, a sort of Bermuda Triangle of drama, literature, and history: Suzanne-Lori Parks’s *Topdog/Underdog*.

*Topdog/Underdog* is a play about a black man (who happens to be named Lincoln, Link for short) playing Abraham Lincoln in a penny theater, and his decision to re-enact Lincoln’s dying moments—again and again—says a great deal about America, namely, its insistence on renewal, making one’s life over, second acts, how we invent reality by the very words we choose. But implicit in all of this is the notion that we present ourselves to others as a package—an act. Link forsakes the game of three-card monte for a more authentic life, and though a life lived largely on a stage replicating President Lincoln’s oratory may seem steeped in artifice, to Link, it is infinitely more genuine than the stock materialism, hucksterism, and victim-victimizer dance he excelled at as a dissembling youth on the streets.

Obama reminds us of Link just as he reminds us of Abraham Lincoln, a figure who believed that divisions can be either conquered or bridged, not by providing people what they want, but what they need. But what do they need? A story, a narrative of personal, inner struggle as allegory for the larger picture, to

replace the larger historical narrative made incomprehensible by dint of its magnitude?

Central to the play is the rivalry between Link and his brother, Booth, whose jealousy of Link’s rhetorical gifts and smooth-talking leads him to beg Link to teach him three-card monte so that he may one day surpass his brother at the game. Booth, having squandered his own inheritance from his parents, is obsessed with Link’s inheritance, Link’s memories of their erstwhile parents, and, most of all, with Link/Lincoln’s nickelodeon-esque portrayal of Lincoln. Watching Link die a thousand deaths as Lincoln onstage is icky and odd and even comic when on a literal stage, but it is also a metaphorically apt appraisal of how unfinished business reawakens animus, necessitates re-waging old battles, and amounts to a kind of involuntary reincarnation. In short, those who know history—especially those who know history—are doomed to repeat it.

The real ghost of *Topdog/Underdog* is not Lincoln but history, and particularly that American history of freedom and victory after the Civil War, an undelivered and unclaimed promise.

Watching the dexterous actor Jeffrey Wright play Lincoln the brother *playing* Lincoln the Emancipator is to see Wright reanimate himself as might a mechanized vaudeville puppet, walking chillingly in whiteface as if a ghost in flesh, bringing home the eternal serpent-eating-its-tail quality of race relations, the undead nature of the Great Emancipator, the Civil War, and Reconstruction.

The unseen specters of the play are Link and Booth’s parents, members of neither the Moses Generation (MLK, Rosa Parks, Medgar Evers) nor the Joshua Generation (Obama, et al). The absent parents are a half step between, post-Civil Rights Movement poster children—they have the careers, the promise; they even have the means to leave their children a modest inheritance. And yet they have abandoned their children; they are lost in the wilderness, and the implication is, if Lincoln and Booth follow their lead, they will be worse than orphaned, they will be de-centered and left with no moral compass.

The absent parents of *Topdog/Underdog* are of that same interim generation as the current elder statesmen of black political leadership:

Jesse Jackson, John Lewis, Andrew Young, Julian Bond—all notable for having participated in the Movement, survived it, perhaps outlasted it. As Cornel West noted in an interview in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, this lost-in-the-wilderness generation is marked by:

increasing class division and differentiation, creating on the one hand a significant black middle class, highly anxiety-ridden, insecure, willing to be co-opted and incorporated into the powers that be, concerned with racism to the degree that it poses constraints on upward social mobility; and, on the other, a vast and growing black underclass, an underclass that embodies a kind of *walking nihilism* of pervasive drug addiction, pervasive alcoholism, pervasive homicide, and an exponential rise in suicide.

As West implies, that generation (his own, by the way) seems a bit retrograde as it nears its dotage. Graduates of the Civil Rights Movement, they saw how it made heroes of ordinary black citizens who stood up to daily indignities, how it made exemplars of ordinary white citizens who fought for the rights of all children, not just their own. Movement legend suggests that each successive decade brought its own wave of college and high-school students, black and white, who defied their parents' fears and admonitions, refused the inheritance of bigotry, and, if they could not wipe the slate clean, brought in a new one.

At first, the post-Civil Rights black leadership took advantage of this youth, this energy, this willingness to reject the accepted rhetoric and insist instead on a new vision, even if the vision seemed at times blurred and hopelessly utopian to their parents. But something happened: The Movement, which began covertly in the kitchens where domestics worked, in black churches, in black homes, sewing circles, and basements, found itself all grown up. It became more statesmanlike, but also more stagnant; more organized, but also more ossified; in short, it became more like the very power structures the Movement sought to tear down.

Instead of continuing to draw upon both black and white activists, the late '60s saw the Movement sporting a streak of black nationalism, which brought both a sense of self-reliance and pride, but also a longing to shrug off rich white Northern liberals, hippies, disaffected white anarchists, and a whole panoply of white groups. One could say this eschewed the idealism of young black-white student

coalitions in order to concentrate on the very real, grown-up matters of housing discrimination, school redistricting, busing, and affirmative action, but it would also be true to say that a dictum ran through the Movement: You can't dismantle the master's house using the master's tools. And what applied to the master's tools applied doubly to the master.

In short, the racial pluralism which marked the earlier days of the Civil Rights Movement had disappeared; whether caused by black insularity or white disengagement or a combination of the two, the result was that the maturing Movement came to be viewed (by whites, but also by blacks as well) as less about civil rights and more about *black* rights. Racism came to be viewed as a black problem, rather than everyone's problem. Arguments to keep, or recruit, whites in the Movement became tantamount to heresy. By the end of 1966, according to Jessica McElrath, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (known as SNCC) "took a step toward the elimination of whites from the movement." This radicalization occurred under the leadership of Stokely Carmichael, to the chagrin of King. Carmichael's Atlanta-based Vine City Project issued a 1967 position paper, condemning:

...the inability of whites to relate to the cultural aspects of Black Society; attitudes that whites, consciously or unconsciously, bring to Black communities about themselves (western superiority) and about Black people (paternalism); inability to shatter white-sponsored community myths of Black inferiority and self-negation; inability to combat the views of the Black community that white organizers, being "white," control Black organizers as puppets;...whites, though individual "liberals," are symbols of oppression to the Black community due to the collective power that whites have over Black lives.

Likewise, the paper notes, white participation sometimes reinforced "stereotypes...that Blacks can't organize themselves and whites have come to believe that they have to watch Blacks."

The Black Power movement at its idealistic core very rightly emphasized black ownership, black self-sufficiency, black pride, and black self-determination. Martin Luther King, Jr., agreed with all of this, and never condemned the Black Power movement, though he was often accused of doing so. But King had the political acumen to recognize that a minority movement operating within a majority system

would have to convince at least some of those in the majority of their investment in the struggle and of its universality. He was, for a while, often painted with the same accommodationist brush as Booker T. Washington. Yet while King, Jesse Jackson, and Jeremiah Wright have similar roots in liberation theology, Booker T. Washington represented an old guard who believed in white patronage, skillful accommodation, and bettering the race via segregation, quite the opposite of King's emphasis on the primacy of political activism, the liberation of the poor, and the necessity of integration as a guarantor of blacks' rightful home in American society.

The '70s saw whites retreating into their own ethnic identities as Irish Americans or Anglo Americans or Jewish Americans; white women, white Catholics, white Methodists. White suburbanites fled the nation's inner cities as they began to fill with black people and began to be run increasingly by black mayors. Blacks could boast an increase in the black middle class and the highest college attendance levels ever. It was a *détente* many were willing to live with, ad infinitum, if necessary.

But this *détente* came at a price. A "Second Redemption," marked by white resistance to busing and affirmative action, was also marked by insularity on the part of blacks. Detroit and Cleveland may have become mostly black because of white flight, but cities with a sizable black middle class like Atlanta, Chicago, and Houston maintained both black and white middle- and upper-middle-class enclaves, though not *mixed* black-white neighborhoods. The idea is that blacks will lead their lives, and whites and other ethnic minorities will lead theirs. The consequences of this mutual alienation and withdrawal become apparent whenever blacks or whites find themselves on "alien territory," as witnessed by the case of Amadou Diallo, and other cases such as Sean Bell, who was killed on his wedding day by plainclothes officers "for nothing," and Oscar Grant, who submitted to arrest in Oakland under the suspicion of "loud revelry," and was killed "by mistake" by the subway police. The victims are overwhelmingly black, and their crime, largely, is that of simply being within range of police officers' guns.

They are not only victims of police brutality but of a sort of slow-leak inner-city genocide, victims of a checkerboard America, an America drawn up in black and white, and now, increasingly, Latino and Asian. The white police officers typically do not live in black neighborhoods, and vice versa. This is not the



Omni-American dream of Albert Murray, but a new “separate but equal,” one mentioned by Obama’s Attorney General Eric Holder in his perhaps overly strident, but nevertheless brutally honest, statement commemorating Black History Month, noting that America has too much de facto segregation. Too true. Holder also surmised, with amazing tone-deafness, that this meant we were “a nation of cowards.”

If, by the end of 2008, America was in need of new leadership, it was also in need of new black leadership to break the entrenched tradition of genteel segregation. The post-Civil Rights era leaders were not so much a continuation of the Civil Rights Movement, but a stagnation of it.

No one doubts the dedication and work leaders like Jackson, Lewis, Young, and, later, Al Sharpton put in—they increased the voter-registration rolls, made the Democratic Party understand the importance of the black vote, kept up the fight for affirmative action and embattled programs like Head Start, brought attention to ecological racism, to newer, more subtle modes of discrimination, and provided channels of redress for poor blacks who had not often had any. But Jackson and Sharpton, in particular, became known for a certain reflexivity of both opinion and act that bordered on reactionary, and whether this is merely perception or truth hardly matters if it shunts their chances of getting anything accomplished politically.

Jackson and Sharpton may have been the go-to guys for a quick opinion of what “black America” thinks about an issue such as the Jena Six or the Duke lacrosse team controversies, but that sort of thinking—that “black America” could have a monolithic opinion—was a fallacy reinforced by the two men themselves, if not by word then by deed, accepting the terms as they were defined, then fulfilling the contract. The nadir of this sort of ventriloquism was when the comic Michael Richards shot off a barrage of unacceptable racist language, and Jesse Jackson accepted his apology as though such an apology could be accepted by a single African-American individual. The idea that black people have a representative might be convenient for whites, but it is politically deadly for blacks, making it easier for whites to dismiss blacks out of hand, the mentality of whites being “we gave at the office.”

Enter Barack Obama. It is true that Barack Obama is not, nor has he ever been, a “Black leader,” but rather a black leader. He came on the scene stressing the importance of universal civil rights, and his arm’s-length distance on race-based issues—to say nothing of the actual issue of race—distressed many. Jesse Jackson was caught on air, angry at Obama for chastising absent black fathers; John Lewis was an ardent Hillary Clinton supporter, stating how much the Clintons have done for black people, versus the relative invisibility of race on the Obama platform. These men are of the same generation as Jonathan Farley, a professor at Harvard who wrote:

At least the misleaders and pied pipers who came out of the bowels of the civil-rights movement paid lip service to the idea of uplifting the race. Obama and the new generation of black policy-makers, such as Newark, New Jersey, mayor Cory Booker, self-professed drug-dealer-cum-Harvard-professor Roland Fryer, and former Tennessee congressman Harold Ford, Jr., pay scant allegiance to the past or feel little obligation to their fellow blacks as blacks.

For all of his community organizing, Obama is not an ideologue, and despite his lofty rhetoric and the utopian landscapes of his prose, he is not an idealist. Barack Obama knows that he does not have to “pay lip service” to the race—that he does so by merely existing, by being elected. If this idea seems appalling, simply note that the mass defection of blacks from Hillary Clinton’s camp to Barack Obama’s had little to do with his brilliance and everything to do with his chances of winning. Once blacks saw that whites would vote for a black man, all bets for Clinton were off. Nailed in place by identity politics of one sort or another for four hundred years, African Americans were duly confused and surprised by what they viewed as a tectonic tremor in race relations. The black man who managed not only to win the caucuses of snow-white Iowa, but to do so without coming off like a Clarence Thomas, obviously had special shape-shifting qualities that had to be watched and heeded. Blacks who’d spent lifetimes tied into knots by the double binds of exceptionalism had just watched Obama free himself like an escape artist. And when the Jeremiah Wright controversy erupted, Barack Obama’s ability to deliver his “A More

Perfect Union” speech on race secured his place in history as not only a master orator and speechwriter but a gifted, scholarly cultural critic, a magician of metaphor. By declaring his candidacy in Springfield, Illinois, he cast himself as Lincoln; by making his “A More Perfect Union” speech in Philadelphia, he invited comparisons to A. Philip Randolph and to the Founding Fathers. His ability to telescope language, meaning, and intent into a single oratorical event is a gift beyond that of even the most talented orators of our era: Bill Clinton, John Lewis, Jesse Jackson, and, ahem, Ronald Reagan.

In the end, it is not that the post-Civil Rights black leaders were too strident, but rather that they were not strident enough about the right things. Genteel segregation was allowed to flourish, not despite the efforts of Jackson, et al, but because the leaders had forgotten the Movement bore a message more potent than peaceful nonviolence or nobility of principle. It had as its trump card a promise of mutually assured destruction: United we stand, divided we fall; the same chains that bind the slave, bind the slaveholder. The bifurcation of political power in America into black camps and white camps was a dismantling of the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement. It gave blacks the impression that politics was a zero-sum game, and that to win, one must not divide and conquer, but one must conquer whatever has been divided, a sort of racial gerrymandering that meant we settled for what we got.

Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition was a return to plurality, and his decision to run for president in both 1984 and 1988 meant that his runs, while largely symbolic, had the effect of normalizing the stage for subsequent black candidates such as Sharpton and Cynthia McKinney and Obama; there is a sense that he sacrificed himself, many times knowingly, other times unwittingly, that he, like the main character in *Topdog/Underdog*, was rehearsing over and over again, only to have a young upstart supplant him. When Obama intones, “I stand on the shoulders of giants,” he undoubtedly refers to Martin and Malcolm, but also to Jackson and Lewis; and to Civil Rights workers like James Meredith, Viola Liuzzo, and Rosa Parks.

He also refers to the granddaddy intellectual of them all, a man not mentioned as Obama’s

doppelgänger as frequently as MLK, JFK, or Lincoln: W.E.B. DuBois. Obama would graduate *magna cum laude* from Harvard Law School one hundred and one years after W.E.B. DuBois graduated *cum laude* from Harvard in 1890. DuBois was not only the founder of the NAACP but the author of a revisionist tome entitled *Black Reconstruction*. In it, he posits that impoverished black and white laborers were undercut by the wealthy, elite planter class who kept them divided, used resentful white yeomen to take out their anger on lowly blacks who were gaining ground during Reconstruction, and thusly conquered and controlled both working-class blacks and whites. Barack Obama's message of difficult unity against the potential ease of division is the dream of Reconstruction, enunciated by such Reconstructionist leaders as the black Blanche K. Bruce and the white Thaddeus Stevens; carried on by the scholarship of DuBois, the integrationist dream of King, and finally the presidency of Barack Obama.

The end of Reconstruction was not the end of anything, least of all Reconstruction itself. Instead of providing a capstone to the Civil War, it highlighted that a cold war of sorts had begun, each state carving out its own definition of civil rights (or lack thereof). When flare-ups inevitably occurred, the federal government was called on to intervene, and thus, occupation never ended. The question of the South and Reconstruction remained. How could the South truly be part of the United States of America if white Southerners never atoned for years of murder and injustice, segregation and discrimination passed off as anodyne regionalism?

Predictably, black Southerners voted for Obama and, unpredictably, a number of white Southerners voted for him, leading to Obama wins in Southern states like Virginia and North Carolina. The South has not yet fully come around, but Obama is tapping the roots of the Southern Reconstructionists, proving, block by block, bill by bill, that America is one nation: not black and white or North and South; it does not have to be a house divided.

A friend of mine said she knew Obama not only had a chance to win, but *would win*, when she did some phone-banking in North Carolina; an elderly white woman listened to her pitch with impatience, then the woman hurriedly admitted she'd already made up her mind. "I've already decided," the lady said, not without some anger. "I'm going to vote for the colored guy." 🍷