

And We Are Not Saved

Kal Alston
Syracuse University

Don't Re-Nig In 2012 (Stop Repeat Offenders. Don't re-elect Obama!). That bumper sticker is for sale on the Internet (from Stumpy's Stickers, where one can also purchase a sticker with men in KKK regalia with the text, "The Original Boys in the Hood"). Can someone please point me toward the post-racial, post-feminist world in which we supposedly live? For sure, pundits — particularly but not only, black pundits and public voices — have been assiduously reminding us since 2008 that the election of a black man as president, while not an empty sign in itself, was neither the sign of the Apocalypse nor of a post-racial America. But the non-empty signification of the Hope/Change message of what happened on election night 2008 has not endured in a world in which new majority minorities are emerging. This is the world in which whites are resentful of the admission of Asians to the state universities of California at a higher rate — a fact contrary to the post-*Bakke*, post-Ward Connerly world that was supposed to keep blacks, browns, and pors out of the seats that G-d (and Clark Kerr) meant for deserving white students. Curses, foiled again.

As George Yancy suggests, there was a discursive element of hope running through that night in November 2008 that was actually about the hope of whiteness and the momentary feeling of relief that racelessness was at hand. The end of the new White Man's Burden — having to be raced in a world that had for so long only required being (normal) — could be glimpsed from the far shores (of Lake Michigan). That night was magical and revelatory. This was the hope of the New Century: that those ideals and aspirations might be realized, that any (boy) could grow up to be President. (Even a Kenyan Muslim racist fist-bumping radical). And the magic of the election night told of something that did not simply happen; rather, it told of something that we, collectively (we of good will and good history), made happen.

Jordan Shumate is the only black student in his ninth-grade English class, in Falls Church, Virginia. His teacher asked him to read aloud Langston Hughes's 1940 "Ballad of the Landlord." The poem begins:

Landlord, landlord,
My roof has sprung a leak.
Don't you 'member I told you about it
Way last week?

Landlord, landlord,
These steps is broken down.
When you come up yourself
It's a wonder you don't fall down.

Ten Bucks you say I owe you?
Ten Bucks you say is due?

Well, that's Ten Bucks more'n I'll pay you
Till you fix this house up new.

Jordan began reading and the teacher stopped him. “She told me, ‘Blacker, Jordan — c’mon, blacker. I thought you were black,’” Shumate told *The Washington Post*.¹ The teacher then read the rest of the poem in black dialect. The fourteen year old was offended by the recitation, but found himself reprimanded when he challenged the recitation. We have twenty years of research and scholarly writing about the challenges of the black male in school — whether it is related to achievement gaps, stereotype threat, the provision of black male role models, the oppression of coolness, or the tenacity of the school-to-prison pipeline (the final concern in places not generally Falls Church) — that would cause us to worry about the consequences of this incident on Jordan’s self-esteem or other facets of life. He refused to perform his blackness in a way that was gratifying for the teacher; at fourteen he was able to resist becoming the black boy that the teacher conjured from the poem, the blackness that she inscribed on a 1940 poem recited in a 2012 classroom. The poem ends with the landlord calling the police:

Um-huh! You talking high and mighty.
Talk on-till you get through.
You ain’t gonna be able to say a word
If I land my fist on you.

Police! Police!
Come and get this man!
He’s trying to ruin the government
And overturn the land!

The landlord expects to be paid for substandard property, and the temerity of the black tenant who revolts results in a reading of criminality onto his body. The teacher may not have considered that reading as consequential, but she did sanction the refusal to connect Jordan’s black body to an ethnic history, to a class position, to a culture that clearly did not resonate directly for this one student. Was Jordan “trying to ruin [the teacher’s lesson] and overturn [education]?”

Certainly President Barack Obama, by his very bodily presence, elicits the charge, fear, and terror that he is ruining the government and overturning the land. These emotions seep out of the pores of his Republican opponents, as well as critics on the left. From the right, Obama’s policies that have been read reasonably as being pro-business, industry, and banking, have been reinscribed as socialist — as ungovernable. That ungovernability, that unruliness, that wild inhumanity of the black man erupts as a trope (not that it went away, so much as it went slightly subterranean for a period while the foreign-ness, the otherness took on very elaborate contours) that cannot be contained, even by the normally hilarious federal judiciary. As when Judge Richard Cebull of the U.S. District Court for Montana forwarded this jest:

Normally I don’t send or forward a lot of these, but even by my standards, it was a bit touching. I want all of my friends to feel what I felt when I read this. Hope it touches your heart like it did mine. —

A little boy said to his mother; ‘Mommy, how come I’m black and you’re white?’” the email joke reads. “His mother replied, ‘Don’t even go there Barack! From what I can remember about that party, you’re lucky you don’t bark!’”²

At least in this joke, Obama ends up alive. In the real world not only has Obama’s life been continually on the line, the boys that his presidency may have inspired are still ending up dead from being black in America.

Trayvon Martin was close to home; he was walking home from the store; he was being followed by a man in a vehicle with a 9mm gun: “This guy looks like he’s up to no good, or he’s on drugs or something,” George Zimmerman tells the 911 operator. “He’s just staring, looking at all the houses. Now he’s coming toward me. He’s got his hand in his waistband. Something’s wrong with him.”³

When Trayvon began to run away, Zimmerman followed him, against the direction of the 911 dispatcher. Trayvon, 17, is dead and Zimmerman has not been charged.⁴ He claims it was self-defense. Trayvon was “trying to ruin the [evening] and overturn [the neighborhood/watch].” Trayvon and Jordan remind us that the work is not done for those boys and those like them, and for us, whether whiteness or brownness or blackness constitutes our burden and potential distortion of thought, action, and living.

Postscript: I had the pleasure of sitting next to Zadie Smith, author of *White Teeth*, at dinner while I was writing this response. We were talking about these issues and the bizarro world I feel I am in at my age hearing people talk about contraception like insane, irrational beings, like it is 1960 (pre-*Griswold*, not to mention pre-*Roe*). I said to her that I felt as though I was having to write the same papers I wrote twenty years ago. And she reminded me that history is not linear — that my father, a preacher, used to tell me that despite my many relatives’ queries, he did not consider himself “saved.” He contended that it was not an end state — he considered that on his good days he was “being saved.” So each turn of the wheel reminds us that there is work — both old and new — to be done — in schools, in voting booths, in statehouses, in Zucotti Park, in the streets and in the White House — today and tomorrow — by pundits, politicians, philosophers, and poets — here and there.

I want to thank George Yancy saying some things that needed to be said at this time and in this place.

1. Emma Brown, “Fairfax Investigates Allegations of Racially Insensitive Behavior by High School Teacher,” *Washington Post*, March 16, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/fairfax-investigates-allegation-of-racially-insensitive-behavior-by-high-school-teacher/2012/03/15/gIQA6lyGHS_story.html?tid=pm_local_pop.

2. John S. Adams, “Federal Judge Admits He Sent Anti-Obama, Racist Email,” *USA TODAY*, March 1, 2012, <http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/story/2012-02-29/Montana-judge-racist-email/53307060/1>.

3. Trymaine Lee, “Trayvon Martin Case: 911 Audio Released of Teen Shot by Neighborhood Watch Captain,” *The Huffington Post*, March 16, 2012.

4. On April 11, 2012, forty-six days after the shooting, Angela Corey, the State Attorney in Seminole County Florida, brought second degree murder charges against George Zimmerman. Zimmerman was originally granted bond, had that bond revoked, and returned to court for a new bond hearing. In July 2012, Zimmerman was granted a second bond. Trial is set for the fall of 2012.