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ELIZABETH J. WEST

We've Seen This Before: The Pre-Obama Transnational Figure in Early Black Atlantic Writing

Internationally, readers of his autobiography, viewers of documentaries on his life, and even those who only casually follow world news, are familiar with the uniquely multicultural dimension of President Obama —from his family to his lived experiences. In politics and academia, this diverse personal background of the U.S. 44th president has led to proclamations that his triumph signals the nation's true turn to a multicultural identity. Obama, as we are all probably aware, was born a U.S. citizen, from the union of a Kenyan father and a white mother from America's heartland: a union of transnational religious as well as cultural influences. Notably, his father was not an immigrant or naturalized United States citizen, but rather a visitor of sorts—here seeking a western education that he might export for the benefit of his native country as well as for himself. Though born in the U.S., Obama's birth in Hawaii, one of the last two states to join the current fifty state union, and as well a unit of the country that is not part of the continuous continental expanse, also marks his reach beyond national border lines. His further Indonesian connection—that is—a stepfather and his siblings from that union, as well as time spent there in his youth, extends his global lens even further..

On the most individual level, one can readily argue that Obama's life story encompasses a multicultural/multiracial/multinational identity and experience. How that individual experience and identity then reflects (or perhaps, problematizes) the broader concept of transnationalism is a matter certainly deserving academic and social query. As he campaigned for his first presidential term, Barak Obama regularly reminded

audiences of the specialness of his bid for office: that is, that a person with a name and family origins so unfamiliar to most Americans could wage a viable campaign for the nation's highest post. In the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attack on U.S. soil, those living in the country with any seeming ties to Islam or parts of the world inhabited by Muslims were subject to open scrutiny and isolation. Under these circumstances, Barak Hussein Obama's presidential run was even more remarkable. Candidate Obama would argue, however, that his candidacy was possible precisely because of America's legacy as a country whose oneness emerged out of the mergence of many. His Nov.4, 2008 campaign speech in Chicago is probably the most well-known of his speeches advancing this message. To the thousands in Chicago's Grant Park that evening, candidate Barak Obama enthusiastically proclaimed that America was entering a new era, one in which the so-called "American Dream" could be reclaimed for a nation of people whose oneness was shaped from the mergence of many. While this sounds like yet another declaration of the "melting pot" myth, it also seemed a refrain of the "multinational" or "transnational" discourse around which Obama's life story has prepared for public consumption.

As a term, transnationalism has been around for some time—at least since the dawn of the twentieth century. In its broadest sense transnationalism considers a world in which national borderlines are blurred or diminished through heightened border crossings by populations that transplant—instead of transform/remake their identities of origin. Beyond an introductory level to any number of discipline specific studies of the global world, the definitions and histories of transnationalism may vary and in some instances conflict. Andreea Lazar explains that "Transnational migration research has been established on the anthropological deconstruction of the prevalent assimilationist perspective which was the mainstream conceptual approach in classical migration scholarship" (70). Some scholars anchor their definition of transnationalism in a concept of normalization or universalization—that is, the presumption that border crossing at contemporary heightened levels paves the way to a one-worldness. Thomas Faist posits the general supposition that definitions and categories of transnationalism may vary among scholars and disciplines but at the foundation "transnational studies have come to focus on issues of mobility and networks" (*Diaspora and Transnationalism* 17). Faist notes that while migrants are

central agents to this vision of transnationalism's power, "in diaspora and transnational approaches, the intensified cross-border transactions are not necessarily connected to a global consciousness, a global horizon of world society, global justice and cosmopolitanism . . . or the growing importance of universal norms in the world polity approach" (15). He cautions further that "migration is a case where there is no neat coincidence of ' globalization from below', no growing awareness of 'oneworldness,' on the one hand, and universal ideas, on the other" (15). Exploring the promise of transnationalism's potential to correct global inequities between developed and developing nations, Itamar Mann illustrates through his analysis of the transnational character of law that Faist's skepticism is not misplaced. Mann argues that "there is little evidence that transnationalism has helped to enforce human rights" (316).

In her essay, "Black Transnationalism and the Politics of National Identity: West Indian Intellectuals in Harlem in the Age of War and revolution," Michelle A. Stephens reminds us that transnationalism has spawned new critical inquiries in the social sciences and the humanities. According to Stephens, American Studies is among the fields exploring ways to understand and interpret transnationalism's significance: "While migration itself had always been an important theme in the study of American culture, the use of the term *transnational* signaled a new orientation in American studies scholarship" (591). Stephens reminds us of the role of the humanities in promoting a now popularized view of transnationalism's transformative influence: "It is precisely the work done by scholars in humanities fields such as cultural and literary studies that has led to a questioning of the bounded meanings of traditional social science categories such as 'race,' 'ethnicity,' and 'nationality'" (592). This emerging theory of transnationalism and its power to subvert longstanding boundaries and categories of populations and people suggests that we are moving toward a world in which nations exist in and beyond their geographic borders. A slight twist to this view is the concept of the translocal which envisions populations of people crossing borders and bringing their national positionalities into their reformations of identity and politics in their new locations. Translocal suggests that the immigrant and her adopted country are transformed through the imprint of the immigrant's worldview rather than the immigrant's adaptation to the conventions of the adopted country.

Whether through the perspective of the transnational or the translocal, there is a propensity to overlook the challenge that race introduces to readings of "mobility and networks" trending toward universalization. The case of Caribbean immigrants in the United States makes this especially clear: in their sustained history of immigration "the Caribbean American ethnic community has produced some of the most influential figures in American race and cultural politics throughout the twentieth century" (592). Until recent times, however, in academia as well as the larger U.S. society, West Indian identity has been conflated with that of African Americans. Whether self-willed or imposed, West Indian transformation to African American is the result of "the 'black-and-white' history of race relations in the United States" (592). Today we are less apt to collapse West Indian identity so simply into the generalized image of African American, but the identity line for these immigrants and their offspring continues to oscillate. This flexing demarcation of identity is a trop that echoes the experiences of varied non-white immigrants in the United States, and it no less captures the transnational experience of the country's 44th president.

Looking more closely at Barak Obama's life, particularly examining how his experience of mobility and networks reflects the currently proclaimed changing face of Americanness, we might find, if we look back in history (that is, to better understand the origins of what many deem the sign of a new national direction) that we have seen similar narratives. Clearly, in the history of U.S. government and politics, a black president is a new narrative, but is the matter of how he is perceived through a national lens/gaze a revolutionary or game changing phenomenon for U.S. society? Juxtaposing Obama's narrative with centuries earlier likenesses reveals transnationalism's failure on the level of the translocal (that is, if we consider translocal that dynamic of migrant or border-crossing populations transporting/transplanting the ethos/interests, etc. of their national origins into their "networking" in new geographical and cultural spaces—forging a new set of "national" faces and agendas).

For those invested in the mythical White Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP) prototype as the face of American nationalism, Obama has seemed a threat to centuries old power structures grounded in a Eurocentric new world vision. From the earliest, those later inscribed U.S. "founding fathers" were clear on their vision of American identity:

the author of America's mythological settlement narrative, William Bradford made clear that Native Americans were a people standing in the way of God's Providential "new light on the hill"—the fulfillment of which was destined, even with the requirement that native inhabitants be extinguished[1]. In the following century in Query 14 of his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson made clear that Blacks had been brought in as laboring others—and that they were a population standing outside the periphery of citizenship. In Jefferson's vision, if black emancipation was to be considered, by necessity their removal from the nation would have to be arranged: and with their removal, Europeans /whites would fill the numbers void resulting from the expulsion of this freed population.

Though considered and even attempted on small scale ventures by various organizations and leaders, Jefferson's vision of black expulsion was already improbable at the moment he articulated it—and this was certainly evident by the dawn of the Civil War when both the costs and logistics of exporting four million blacks made the idea unrealistic[2]. From the earliest, however, it was clear that while whiteness could not be the singular face in fact, it could be enshrined as the national face of record. Blacks might be present in body, but they could be otherwise removed. In her Pulitzer Prize winning collection, *Native Guard*, poet Natasha Trethewey reminds us how this erasure takes place in the history of the U.S., as black contributions to the nation's history and

1 William Bradford's seventeenth century *History of Plymouth Plantation, 1620 -47* narrates the account of the Puritans' persecution suffered in England and their voyage to, and settlement in what they would name Plymouth. Their now famous contract, The Mayflower Compact, and their feast of thanks-giving (the origin of the now national Thanksgiving holiday) during their first year have survived as part of the nation's origins narrative.

2 Numerous sources are available for population statistics on the pre-Civil War South. These include Internet reference sources such as infoplease.com, which reports that the black population in 1850 was more than 15%. (infoplease.com/ipa/A0922246.html). Data bank resources such as Statistical Abstract of the United States, and Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research ("Historical, Demographic, Economic, and Social Data: The United States, 1790-1970") also provide population data for America's antebellum period.

accomplishments go unacknowledged, uncelebrated, and their sacrifices unmourned. Trethewey's work underscores America's historical rejection of a national narrative that would include people of color as major or relevant contributors.

If the history of race and identity in the United States portends the transnational face of a post-Obama presidency, then perhaps the more powerful lesson of a post-Obama presidency will be the future that nineteenth-century black novelist, Frank Webb, portends in his novel, *The Garies and Their Friends*—that is that border crossing and interracial mixing may stir the pot, but all ultimately settles out to the white ruled status quo. More clearly than the point illustrated by the fates of Webb's mixed race characters—particularly the tragic Clarence Garie who dies dejected after being rejected by his white lover, and Clarence's distant cousin, Winston, who goes abroad to assume a white identity and the privileges that come with it—are the documented experiences of early Africans in the Americas whose transnational identities and travels defied European contrived definitions of a monolithic black identity.

In the pages that follow, I consider three such figures: Nicholas Said, Omar ibn Said, and Job ben Solomon, whose globe-trotting adventures and not-so-standard black identities predate Barak Obama by more than a century, and portend the problem of envisioning Obama's presidency as a transformative moment in American politics and culture. These literate, Muslim, world travelled men, representative of the elite in their African homelands, and elite as well by European standards of birth, social rank, and education were held up by whites as extraordinary Africans. They were, however, extraordinary in the minds of their Eurocentric contemporaries because their experiences and identities defied a Eurocentric discourse of race that validated new world slaving. Their border crossing, that is, their transnational experience, was possible because those whites who granted them a pass from the standard fate of the black and enslaved did so in large part because, though African, their social station and worldliness bore striking similarities to elite and upper class white society.

A look at eighteenth century Job ben Solomon and the 1734 *Memoirs of the Life of Job* (written by Thomas Bluett) illustrates how dynamics of race and class complicate overly generalized conclusions on transnational experience. In the 1734 account Job recalls that while

out on a business excursion in 1730 for his father, who has sent him to "sell two Negroes and to buy Paper, and some other Necessaries," he is captured by the enemy Mandigoes and remanded to the Middle Passage and slavery in the U.S. (15). From the onset of the narrative, Thomas Bluett, Job's white transcriber, establishes Job's exceptionalness. The text's title calls immediate attention to Job's place of distinction in his homeland—that is, that he is the son of a high priest, making it clear that Job is no commoner. Bluett refers to Job as an "African Gentleman," of "whose veracity" he had "no reason to doubt" (10). Bluett recounts that Job's grandfather was the founder of the nation that Job knew as home before his capture. Like his father, Job had studied the Koran and Arabic, and he then served as sub-priest to his father. Bluett explains that almost immediately, Job's specialness is evident when he is put to work on a Maryland plantation in 1730:

> Mr. Vachell Denton sold JOB to one Mr. Tolsey in Kent Island in Maryland, who put him to work in making Tobacco; but he was soon convinced that JOB had never been used to such Labour. He every Day shewed more and more Uneasiness under this Exercise, and at last grew sick, being no way able to bear it; so that his Master was obliged to find easier Work for him, and therefore put him to tend the Cattle. (19)

Bluett first meets Job in jail: Job is captured and held after he has escaped from his master's plantation. Despite Job's degrading circumstances, Bluett describes this first encounter in a tone of awe and admiration. Job must make signs to communicate, but after he writes and utters the words "Allah" and "Mahommed," and then refuses their offer of wine, Bluett and the other white interrogators are able to discern that Job is a "Mahometan." Though they cannot immediately determine his origins, they conclude that given Job's "affable Carriage, and the easy Composure of his Countenance . . . he was no common Slave" (21-22). During his imprisonment Job's circumstances and origins are later revealed through the translations of "an old Negroe Man, who lived in that Neighbourhood, and could speak the Jalloff Language, which JOB also understood" (22). With his misfortunes now made known, Job does not meet with a declaration of emancipation from his master; however, the revelation that Job's station exceeds that of the common slave lot moves his master to special consideration for Job. He becomes kinder to Job, even "allowing him a Place to pray in, and some other

Conveniencies, in order to make his Slavery as easy as possible" (22). Bluett and other whites, including James Oglethorpe, are so disturbed by Job's suffering that they arrange for his passage to England, hoping that he will then find a way to return to his homeland. This goal comes to fruition, as Job finds white benefactors in England as well, who contribute funds, influence and other needed support to secure his freedom and his passage on a ship home to his father, family and community.

What endears Job to his white benefactors, whose sympathetic treatment of Job undermines the standing racialized paradigms of blacks as not only slaves but deservedly so? How are they able to look to Job with such sympathy while they disregard the humanity of the countless other slaves under their very noses? Bluett's narrative formula reveals how this paradox or contradiction goes unacknowledged in the minds of whites. By establishing Job's exceptional character and the substandard humanity of the general African race, Bluett situates Job outside the translocal space of normative Africanity. Job embodies all that is deemed noble and honorable by western judgment, and Africans at large, represent the contrary.

Of the larger masses of Africans, Bluett concludes that they are "inured from their infancy to a hard and low life" (34). On the other hand, however, Bluett interjects his own assessment of Job, painting him as distinct from Africans in general, and perhaps a more fitting example of Enlightenment thinking than whites themselves. In the chapter titled "Of Job's Person and Character," Bluett stages this assertion by first dislocating Job from conventional blackness in its physical form. He plants speculation about Job's "real" blackness through his physical description of Job: "His Countenance was exceeding pleasant, yet grave and composed; his Hair long, black, and curled, being very different from that of the Negroes commonly brought from Africa" (46). He then follows with characterizations that again clearly ring of Neoclassical sensibilities. He describes Job as showing "On all Occasions . . . a solid judgment, a ready Memory, and a clear Head" (46). Making the case for Job's worthiness among his white counterparts, Bluett explains that notwithstanding Job's Muslim religious leaning, he is the picture of those qualities that reflect cultural refinement and high intelligence: "it was very observable with how much Temper and Impartiality he would reason in Conversation upon any Question of that kind, while at the same Time he would frame such Replies, as were calculated at once to

support his own Opinion, and to oblige or please his Opponent" (46). Job is remembered as highly intelligent and polished: he is said to have demonstrated extraordinary powers of reason, memory, and wit. He is said to have written three copies of the Koran from memory, and meanwhile he learned English through his experience as a slave. By the time he arrives in England he is a notably pleasant and witty conversationalist (46-49).

Although a significantly shorter narrative than that of Job ben Solomon's, the 1831 *Autobiography of Omar ibn Said,* penned originally in Arabic by Said himself, conveys a similar narrative of exceptionalism. Around age thirty-seven, Said, a native of Futa Toro (modern Senegal), became a captive of war and was sold into slavery. As with Job, Said was an Islamic scholar and devout Muslim. In fact, Said's account of his capture does not convey an initial fear at the whiteness of his captors, but rather the fear that he has been delivered up to Christians: "Then there came to our place a large army, who killed many men, and took me, and brought me to the great sea, and sold me into the hands of the Christians, who bound me and sent me on board great ship and we sailed upon the great sea a month and a half" (2). And although he proclaims himself a Christian convert, Said's prayerful incantations originate from the Koran, not the Bible. Most strikingly, he ends his narrative repeating that he has "been in the country of the Christians twenty-four years" (3), suggesting that he still sees his circumstances as a matter of religious, rather than racial difference.

Unlike Job, Omar ibn Said is never emancipated; however, he is spared the harsh life typically experienced by slaves on North Carolina plantations. The regard in which the Owens held Omar is probably most strikingly evident with his burial in the Owens family graveyard in Bladen County, NC. In the copy of Said's autobiography signed in 1905 by North Carolina native and politician, Alfred Moore Waddell[3], Said is reported to have been a Free Mason. Along with Waddell's signature on the book's title page, he also inscribes his own account of this Muslim

[3] Waddell signs his first and middle initials, AM, and his full last name. Biographical information on Waddell is available on the online "North Carolina History Project." Web. <http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/commentary/97/entry>. This link also includes a bibliography of sources on Waddell.

slave. He recalls that in appearance, Omar was "a short, 'Mustee'-colored man, polite, and dignified in his manner" and that he remembered Omar "very distinctly." The "mustee" color signals a distinctness from the larger body of dark-skinned/black Africans that are enslaved with no consideration of their "distinct" character. His reported "dignified manner" distinguishes him from the mass slave population. He is African and black, but he represents a class not to be mistaken for the larger, presumably inferior slave mass. His transformed African identity does not bind him to the prototypical new world blacks with whom he is aligned. Not unlike Caribbean immigrants more than a century later, Omar ibn Said is obliged to take on the identity of new world blackness although his sense of identity remains decidedly rooted in his Muslim and African worldview.

Born five years after the publication of Omar ibn Said's narrative, Nicholas Said, like Omar, was born and educated into adulthood in Africa before his capture. Nicholas would arrive—yes, arrive, as he entered the U.S. from Canada, a free man. He was cast into slavery, not via the Atlantic, but rather the Saharan slave trade. His slave journey led him from his nation home, Bornou, across the Sahara, into places such as Tripoli, Turkey, Mecca, Egypt, Kartoun (Sudan). Along the way Nicholas Said found himself the slave of a Russian prince, whom he accompanied to European destinations such as St. Petersburg, Moscow, Saltzburg, Rome, Belgium, Paris, England, and Germany. Though he is enslaved, Said's adaptability and curiosity led him through many adventures and enjoyments in these places. He recalls Germany as one of his favorite European countries and remembers his particular reluctance to leave Munich and "the many attractive objects to be found here, not the least among which was the excellent Barvarian beer" (158).

Nicholas Said enters the U.S., having secured his freedom years earlier and having travelled widely—both as a slave and a free man. He regards himself black and African, but he also deems himself a cut above the common lot—in both his native Africa and the new world. As with Job ben Solomon and Omar ibn Said, Nicholas Said begins the history of his early life with a portrait that marks his superior social status: "I was born in Kouka, the capital of the Kingdom of Bornou, in Soudan. . . . My father was the elder son of Katzalla Malagemou, the ruling chief of Molgoy . . . My father greatly distinguished himself under our immortal King *Mohammed El Amin Ben Mohammed El Kanemy*, the Washington of Bornou" (9-10). In this recollection of his father's great achievements and his high rank and proximity to the kingdom's ruler, Said recounts his father's notoriety as warrior as well: "And for his most efficient services, in repelling the Fellahs from Bornou, created him *Katzallah* or general, and made him *generalissimo* of his army, which he afterwards commanded for upwards of twenty-five years with great distinction" (10)

Nicholas Said has had the misfortune of being reduced to a state of servitude, but he makes it clear that his origins connect to an elite heritage and that slavery could not destroy his good breeding and superior intelligence. One of the earliest moments in the text revealing Said's high estimation of himself is couched in overtures to the contrary. He begins his narrative by excusing his unmastered skill with English, but his explanation for this ineptness ironically highlights his superior skill with language rather than his pretense at humility: "Pure English can hardly be expected from one who has to choose his words and phrases from a *mass* of *Kanouri*, (my vernacular), *Mandra, Arabic, Turkish, Russian, German, Italian* and *French*, and all of them encumbered with the provincialisms necessarily concomitant upon each" (vii-viii). He follows this feigned apology with a summary of the linguistic logic that guided his spelling. In this explanation, however, Said sounds less the amateur dabbling in languages, and more the experienced and knowledgeable practitioner:

> In the spelling of proper names, too, I sometimes infringe the rule. This is owning to the fact that, for obvious reasons, particularly in regard to Africa, I had no opportunity of learning the current mode of spelling the names of persons and places; and I have been compelled, in some instances, to adopt the phonetic plan, and used such English letters as nearly corresponded to the sounds of the name as I remember them. I have, as far as possible, refrained from the use of foreign words and phrases, and whenever they do occur, or when the idiom or mode of expression is un-English, it must be attributed to my inability to convey the idea I desired in that language. (viii)

In physical appearance, Nicholas Said more closely reflects western monolithic paradigms of African identity—specifically with respect to his dark skin and wooly hair. But Said subverts the Anglocentric read of these traits as representing inferiority. In his description of the diverse population of his homeland, he recalls three distinct groups and speaks

of them hierarchically by skin color. Although he expresses high regard for all three groups, he constructs a hierarchy that seats the darker skinned Kanouri as the superior people:

> First, the Kanouri, who are the original, the purely negro type, the most numerous and the ruling class; second, the Shuahs, of olive complexion, and said to have sprung from the Bedouins; and third, the Kanemboo, negroes, from Kanem, a country north of, and tributary to Bornou. The Kanouris, as already remarked, are the ruling caste, the aristocracy, so to speak. The Shuahs, to which class belongs the Grand Vizier, Hadji Béchir, devote themselves to stock-raising, and supply the country with meat, butter and milk The Kanemboo are farmers, and supply the other classes with bread, while they act as most powerful auxiliaries to the Kanouris in time of war. They make the best soldiers, and it is even admitted by the Kanouris that the Kanembo are possessed of more courage and fortitude than themselves. (22-23)

Having identified himself as Kanouri previous to the above summary, Said's description of the Kanouri as Bornou's aristocracy seats him among the elite of this large and powerful African nation. This presumption of superiority is particularly underscored at those moments in the text when Said juxtaposes himself with blacks and servants to whose company he had been relegated as a result of his enslavement. His own servitude notwithstanding, however, Said would maintain a class distinction from those he considered beneath him. This is expressly illustrated in his recollection of a time in England when his association with elements beneath his station left him with a great sense of shame: "Indeed I disgraced myself at the country residence of Lady Waldegrave's by *associating with her footmen,* and I was forced much to my regret to give over my hitherto pleasant visits to her under-household because, being a *valet de chambre,* and having degraded myself by mixing with my inferiors" (184).

In the United States, Nicholas Said would continue to see himself as distinct from the lower caste among whom he had been cast through the misfortune of his enslavement. Despite entering the U.S. at the dawn of the Civil War, a conflict fueled by Southerners who wanted to maintain a racial system that relegated blacks to slaves, Said does not recognize himself as the object of such scorn. As if to convey to readers his autonomy and freedom of mobility (in contrast to the larger population of blacks), Said reports that in the aftermath of the Civil War, he decided

to go south where he could aid his "benighted people in the capacity of a teacher" (202). And while many warn him of white violence against blacks in Alabama, Said dismisses these warnings with an almost disturbing disregard for the terror that by the end of the nineteenth century had come to portend the century ahead in the Jim Crow South:

> While in Georgia and Florida, I had heard from the black people that Alabama was a very dangerous State and filled with Ku-Klux that the freedmen there did not know what freedom was owing to the oppression of the whites under which they were situated. I was advised not to go to that State my life, they said, would be in great danger. My own common sense dictated to me, of course, that it was not possible that such a state of affairs could exist in Alabama, besides that, there were good and bad in all countries. (205-6)

Nicholas Said's distance from the very population he purportedly seeks to serve is revealed in his own account of how blacks regarded him and his professed mission: "I shall here say, however, that it was thought by the blacks and a good number of whites I travelled for the purpose of spying through the country" (206). According to Said, some saw him as relatively harmless, while others deemed him "a Yankee emissary and a scoundrel" (206). It is not remarkable that whites would have regarded Said with suspicion and perhaps more probably with some agitation over his travel through the southern countryside with such an air of authority and freedom. However, that Said met with suspicion from Blacks, and given his frivolous account of answering their suspicions with the explanation that he was travelling for his own "amusement and gratification" (206), to ultimately make enough money to publish an account of his adventures, again illustrates his unwellingness to see the society of racial exploitation that was being refashioned in the postwar U.S. South. With a continuation of the naive tone that he uses to disregard the reality of racial violence in the South, Said describes his glorious entrance into the state of Alabama: "I crossed the Chattahooche into Alabama, and to my great surprise, was received with respect and kindness. I shall truly say, that I have never had such a reception heretofore" (206).

Like his transnational predecessors, Barak Obama, exists in white American imagination as an anomaly whose humanity does not speak to that of a changing trend, but rather a static moment in the nation's

history. The racial line in the sand continues to be drawn in U.S. discourse and policies, and as the face of multiculturalism, Obama reminds us again that throughout its history, America has flirted with the possibility of transforming its national identity and race discourse. President Obama certainly exceeded his nineteenth century predecessors in terms of notoriety and political accomplishment, but the key is longevity. At the end of his eight-year presidency, will the challenge to racism posed by a public Obama—in the form of his written and lived narratives—have staying power, and thus prove transformative?

Ultimately, a hierarchy of race remains, especially in terms of institutionalized structures and a persistent racial ethos encoded in the culture that aligns U.S. exceptionalism to whiteness, and perceived flaws or threats of national demise ascribed to the presence of blackness. Mitchelle Stephens explains, "black transnationalism" does not consist solely of fluid border-crossing identities. Rather, it also provides a sharp sense of the *political exclusions* created by western imperialism" (602). Will Obama's presidency mark a radical transnational transformation? The prospect of such an impact is as likely as Nicholas Said's survival had he attempted to cross into the emerging Jim Crow Alabama reminding white southerners of their historical racial reign of terror. Consider, for example, the backlash President Obama met when at the February 2015 National Prayer Breakfast he recalled that ISIS is not unique in its use of religion as justification for its violence, and that in fact, "In our home country [U.S.], slavery and Jim Crow all too often was justified in the name of Christ." The President's remarks did not resonate with those who prefer to gloss over the ugliness of this nation's history, and their resistance to introspection reminds us again of the unlikelihood for a transformed America. In an article that examined the response to President Obama's prayer breakfast speech, Ta-Nehisi Coates reflected on the magnitude of this unwillingness for national self-examination: "That this relatively mild, and correct, point cannot be made without the comments being dubbed, 'the most offensive I've ever heard a president make in my lifetime,' by a former Virginian gives you some sense of the limited tolerance for any honest conversation around racism in our politics."

Obama is arguably the pinnacle of the "exceptional" border-crossing/globe-trotting blacks transporting and transforming a native (or mixed origins) ethos to their U.S. network. We've seen this already, however: in the eighteenth and nineteenth century narratives of Job ben Solomon, Omar ibn Said, and Nicholas Said, and by numerous others. Consider for example, black soldiers in the Revolutionary War—on both the U.S. and British sides—who were unable to push a conscious national reconsideration of identity. Although President Obama has repeatedly explained that he is Christian, not Muslim, political extremist continue to refer to him as Muslim. The presumed horror of a Muslim presiding over the U.S. speaks to the tightrope act required by a president who is not white and, further disturbingly, perhaps not Christian as well. President Obama's "acceptable" blackness rests in his ability to transform that blackness into the nation's mythical exceptionalism that is framed in whiteness. As with Job ben Solomon, Omar ibn Said, and Nicholas Said, Barak Obama's transnational appeal is predicated on his maintenance of blackness and Islam as other. Just as President Obama in the twenty-first century, these early Muslims in America were subject to the will—whether good or otherwise—of whites who refused to acknowledge not only the significant presence of blacks and Muslims in the Americas in their own time, but any time prior. This of course is a masterful and not insignificant oversight, for as *New York Times* op-ed contributor Peter Manseau reminds us, "Muslims arrived here before the founding of the United States," and were a significant (an estimated 20%) population group among those Africans enslaved in America. That the U.S. continues to disregard the imprint of early Muslims in the Americas portends a future less like the transnational oneness that some argue will result from contemporary migrations, and more like the racialized caste systems that have been the global fallout for numerous populations since the European Age of Exploration.

Demographic scholars have projected that by 2042 whites will no longer constitute a population majority in the United States. But what should we make of this demographic number change? Will it spawn changes in policies and practices that leave black and brown people disadvantaged? If we consider Guarnizo, Portes, and Haller's reflection on transnationalism and migration through the prism of politics the answer is not likely yes. In their essay, "Assimilation and Transnationalism: Determinants of Transnational Political Action among Contemporary Migrants," they conclude that transnationalism offers little promise for political correctives. They find that "Transnational political action . . . is regularly undertaken by a small minority, is socially

bounded across national borders, occurs in quite specific territorial jurisdictions, and appears to reproduce preexisting power asymmetries" (1211). It is then, "yet to be determined" whether transnationalism's power will overturn the imbalance of power that slants towards the wealthy and powerful—and in America, white ruling class (1211). If then transnationalism and a dramatic shift in racial demographics are not enough to break down America's persevering system of racial caste, what lies ahead for this nation's future nonwhite majority? Could such a racial demographic just as likely pave the way for an apartheid rather than a multiethnic and multiracial society?"

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