

**HOW AMERICA'S RACIST HISTORY AFFECTED BARACK OBAMA'S
MOVEMENT AS PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES**

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Presented to the Liberal Studies Faculty

at the University of Michigan-Flint

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

in

American Culture

May 4, 2021



First Reader _____



Second Reader _____

This thesis is dedicated to:
My dad who rests in heaven,
For teaching me to never take any wooden nickels.
My mother,
For the many lessons taught to me as my first teacher.
And my daughter,
Who I know will grow to be an empowered, intelligent, strong, and responsible woman.

Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude goes first to my thesis advisor Doctor Erica Britt, English faculty member at the University of Michigan- Flint. Dr. Britt consistently allowed this paper to be my own work, all the while expertly guiding me through my thought process, where needed. Her unwavering excitement for linguistic history, knowledge of Black culture, and the desire to see her students do well, kept me consistently engaged with my research and assisted in the success of this project. I am also appreciative of the Dr. Lois Alexander, program director of the MALS program at the University of Michigan- Flint, for granting me her time and effort as a second reader and advisor to this project. Her passionate participation and input provided a much needed perspective.

I am truly indebted to my family and friends, whose value to me is priceless. Their love and support has undoubtedly been a constant source of inspiration during the process of researching and writing this thesis.

And finally, I acknowledge my best friend and husband, Ryan, who has motivated me to set goals and who has supported me while I accomplished them. This accomplishment would not be possible without his unfailing love and encouragement throughout my years of study, and through life.

Abstract

This essay aims to answer the question “How did America’s racist history affect Barack Obama’s work as president of the United States?” To answer this question, I will examine the following factors: the history of racism against Black Americans, definitions and rules of Blackness, and criticisms of Barack Obama’s work during his presidency. This essay considers if Obama’s presidency created advantages or disadvantages for Black people wanting to move into political spaces by comparing Black representation in political areas before and after his presidency. This assessment will discuss limitations to Black people entering these spaces, shown by the disproportionate numbers through historical context. I present a review of literature across a number of fields, including media and popular culture, education, identity research and public commentary of multiple political categories to develop conclusions about the type of leadership style utilized by Barack Obama. Examples from Obama’s presidency, critiques from others, and historical context are used to contextualize views and acceptance of race in political office.

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I understood the risks.

~Barack Obama

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION

To address the complexities of Barack Obama's presidency as the first Black president of the United States, this thesis examines definitions and frameworks that help to define and understand Blackness as a basis in understanding the role racist ideologies played in affecting his presidential image. This discussion is not aimed at weighing or determining Obama's Blackness, as the concept of Blackness in America is a challenging notion. Instead, the goal is to explore America's perception of what the first Black president should or should not be and do. Obama's mixed race heritage becomes critical for this discussion in which I examine the asymmetry in America between the experiences and power of Black and white Americans. The intended purpose of this dialogue is to analyze how America's racist history affected Barack Obama's actions as President of the United States. This essay analyzes leadership styles of leaders in Black communities presented by Cornel West (2018) and provides a critical discussion of Obama's struggles against stereotypes of Blackness.

This discussion starts by laying a foundation describing aspects of racism in America and institutional inequalities viewed through media and fixed images. Following that, white fragility and other factors affecting white people's view of racism create the grounds for discussing sociological connections to Obama's whiteness. Subsequently, aspects of Blackness are defined and discussed within socially constructed rules dictating and policing Blackness amongst Black communities. Also examined will be the socially constructed rules that determine how a Black leader should or should not operate in their specific political arenas, followed by an exploration of the progress in representation of Black political leaders, which will help gauge Obama's influence on representation. Criticisms of Obama's presidency in the news and literature are

discussed in order to explore public critiques of his movement as a Black man in America, followed by an exploration of Obama's experiences in his own words. Conclusions are presented determined by the textual analysis, and in the context of suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER II.
RACE IN AMERICA

Racism and Institutional Inequality in America

America's history of racism and institutional inequality continues to affect the cultural representation of African Americans in political spaces. Black people in America have been minoritized and historically excluded from elected office because of explicitly racist policies, including voter suppression, Jim Crow laws, and racial disparities in capital punishment that persist to this day. Barack Obama's election to the office of the president – twice – shows the capability of Black Americans to overcome these challenges. However, broader trends in the numbers of African Americans holding political office suggest that challenges remain. For example, of the 113 Supreme court justices in US history, all but six have been white men and only three have been people of color. The upward, however unbalanced, trajectory of Black leadership in America reveals there are three Black senators, and no Black governors. As of 2021, of the 435 members of the 117th Congress of the US House of Representatives, there are 57 Black representatives (13%). Although there has been progress toward knocking down barriers for Black political figures, Black political leadership has been scarce historically in America (Brown and Atske). As such, understanding these inequalities in a historical context is crucial to explaining some of the disparities within cultural representation.

The Civil War Amendments (the 13th in 1865, 14th in 1868, and 15th in 1870) were intended to guarantee equality for recently emancipated slaves and became benchmarks in American history of change for previously enslaved African Americans. The 13th Amendment made slavery unconstitutional and illegal ("Constitution of the United States," Amend. XIII). The 14th Amendment reversed *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, which held that the US constitution was not meant to include Black people as citizens, and so the rights in the Constitution were not

granted to Blacks, whether they were free or enslaved. The 14th Amendment states that the rights of citizens could not be taken away without due process of the law (“Constitution of the United States,” Amend. XIV). Lastly, the 15th Amendment declared that men would not be denied the right to vote regardless of race or having been a slave (“Constitution of the United States,” Amend. XV). Regardless, Jim Crow laws, or Black Codes began to exist around 1865, shortly after the ratification of the 13th Amendment. During the next century there would be an increase in Black executions by lynching as well as race riots, including the race riots of 1919, known as the Red Summer. As racial tensions continued, in 1954 the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that educational segregation was unconstitutional, ending “separate-but-equal” education (*Plessy vs Ferguson*, 1896). The following year, NAACP activist Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a public bus, which was the spark needed to ignite the Civil rights movement. In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, which legally ended the segregation that had been established by the long-standing Jim Crow laws. In 1965, the Voting Rights Act stopped attempts to keep minorities from voting. In 1968, The Fair Housing Act of 1968, ended discrimination in renting and selling homes. Continuing in 1994, then President Bill Clinton passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. The bill has been seen as controversial for its racial implications with the inclusion of the “three strikes rule.” The legacy of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 continues to harm communities of color, while its supporters continue to receive criticism (Shannon).

According to sociologist Joe Feagin, the socioeconomic condition of Black Americans in the 20th and 21st centuries can be linked to slavery. Feagin describes factors that constitute what he calls “badges and disabilities of slavery” (Feagin, 67) which include: segregated education,

discrimination in housing and disenfranchisement in voting. Author and African-American politics scholar, Ronald W. Walters, explains that equal justice towards Black communities continues in the form of poverty and low-wage employment, mass incarceration and criminalization, all factors that impact the socioeconomic condition of Black Americans today (Walters).

White Fragility

The limitations described in the previous section do not impact white Americans in the same way as Black Americans and it is important to discuss ways that white Americans have created tactics to avoid taking responsibility for their historical role in Black people's economic and political disadvantages. Overall, Obama's complex mixed heritage grants him access to these tactics in some spaces and also makes him susceptible to racism in others.

Racism is a system that begins with an ideology and is deeply rooted in America's democracy (DiAngelo, 21). It is a thing of the past to many white people, although they benefit from the privileges of being white. As DiAngelo has articulated, *white privilege* is a sociological concept referring to advantages taken for granted by white people which Black people cannot enjoy in the same capacity (DiAngelo, 24). In other words, a white person does not fear unequal treatment because of race. This notion is invisible and nonexistent to most whites, particularly those who refuse to acknowledge the theory's legitimacy. DiAngelo argues that ideals that view whites as superior and people of color to be inferior, are heavily embedded into the nation and create what can be called the *white racial frame* (DiAngelo, 34). Positive stereotypes of whites and negative stereotypes of people of color are included in the frame and include location in accordance with race as well, considering one signifies class and race stereotypes by geographics

(DiAngelo, 34). Whiteness itself places the identifier in a position of power. The narrative of minority inclusion is muddled by the white racial frame given that, where there is celebration of Blackness, this is only possible with the permission of whiteness (DiAngelo, 24-26).

Barack Obama, being both a person of color and a white American, straddles two macro-level categories in the socially recognized racial hierarchy and presents an interesting case for the exploration of how these hierarchies intersect. Although one could potentially “pass” for white (i.e., blend in with a white person), a multicultural person cannot “pass” as Black, because “there is no corresponding term for the ability to pass as a person of color” (DiAngelo, xvi). Society assigns multicultural people the identity they most resemble, regardless of the individual’s feelings toward personal identity (DiAngelo, xvi).

DiAngelo discusses the underlying foundation of white fragility, uncovering how race shapes the lives of white people: belonging, freedom from burden of race, freedom of movement, ability to be “just people,” white solidarity, relation to “the good old days,” white racial innocence, and segregated lives (DiAngelo, 51-69). These concepts potentially influenced the manner in which Barack Obama viewed race, having been immersed in a multicultural upbringing. The idea of being “just people,” and having no connection to the historical battles of Blacks in America, further the idea that Obama could possibly compartmentalize the parts of his multicultural identity.

It can be assumed that people who are half-white benefit from having easier access to information than Black Americans on how to navigate systems built to benefit whiteness after considering the previous concepts. Having a partial white identity, class, and a white upbringing likely play a role in Barack Obama’s movement through Black communities and public spaces. Although it was originally believed Obama was not the descendant of slaves, recent discoveries

have uncovered that his lineage is of slave ancestry though his Caucasian mother's bloodline (*Ancestry.com*; Robinson; Stolberg). However, African American descendants of slavery and Jim Crow are the only population group in the United States with a multicentury legacy of group-specific enslavement and institutional debasement because of social regulations like the "one-drop rule." Further, mixed race marriages were illegal until 1967 (Hollinger, 2008). Racial experiences that descendants of African American slaves faced, that continue to expose them to racial segregation, were not lived by Obama's mother, Stanley Ann Dunham. Therefore, the finding of her African ancestry does not indicate that Obama was racially challenged as a cause of it. Obama's own set of experiences, regardless of DNA, account for his identity as a Black man. As the next section will discuss, Blackness is an experience that is deeper than DNA.

CHAPTER III.

DEFINITION OF BLACKNESS

Blackness

Defining what it is to be Black in America goes beyond being a descendant of the African Diaspora or having African DNA. There are determining factors that contribute to the ideals and stereotypes that maintain racial disparities in America. Dissecting the trends that tend to dictate the aspects, boundaries, and limitations of Blackness in Black American culture, is essential to understanding what is considered authentic Blackness. Jenny Nguyen and Amanda Koontz Anthony's research on Black authenticity, *Black Authenticity: Defining the Ideals and Expectations in the Construction of "Real" Blackness*, presents working definitions for trends of Black authenticity, and emphasizes the relationship between images in media and an individual's own perceptions and expectations of authentic Blackness. These trends and definitions will contribute context regarding the construction of Barack Obama's identity.

Black authenticity is loosely defined by Nguyen and Anthony as "a cultural resource legitimized through ideologies, actions, and interactions" (Nguyen and Anthony, 770) which includes values and expectations that characterize what it means to "be Black" to the individual as well as to others in and out of Black communities and spaces. What it means to "be Black" to one group in a Black community may vary from Black principles in another group. Blackness is a constantly changing and evolving dynamic in which Black authenticity reflects dominant ideologies and perpetuates intersectional inequalities of race, class, and gender. According to Nguyen and Anthony, trends of two related processes of Black authenticity presented in media and literature are called *commodifying realness* and *legitimizing membership*.

First, *commodifying realness* relates to what it means to "really be Black" based on controlled, constructed factors within the limits of what is authentic Blackness (Nguyen and

Anthony, 771). Through images in popular media, characters are seen as Black but support the colorblind ideal that without race there can be no racism (Diangelo, 40-42; Nguyen and Anthony, 772). Commodifying realness upholds white norms through applications of white ideals to Black bodies and does not always come from Black culture. For example, Blackness in television of the 1980s and 1990s shows middle-class Blacks as being closer to middle-class Whites, while stereotypes of working-class and poor Blacks were highlighted in shows like *Good Times*. These latter representations of what is meant to “be Black,” typecast Black characters as inferior and poor. Black women are portrayed as either hyper-sexualized, mammy figures, or welfare receiving “baby-mommas.” Black men are often portrayed as comical and “safe” for white audiences (Nguyen and Anthony, 772-773).

Commodifying authentic Blackness also refers to “white standards of beauty” in images in media (Nguyen and Anthony, 772-773). White ideals play a role in commodified realness, since they continue to stand as standard beauty ideals for Blacks. Ultimately, commodified realness indicates a duality to Black authenticity. Where it creates an image of the perfect Black person in respect to white standards, it also continues to display cultural inequalities and Black stereotypes. Collins argues that oppressive othering defines the dominant ideologies that make “social injustices appear natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life.” (69)

According to Nguyen and Anthony, *Legitimizing membership* refers to “Black authenticity in terms of personal and group identity construction” (774). Khanna (qtd. in Nguyen and Anthony) argues that this involves “individuals’ constructions of authentic Blackness in conjunction with expectations held by others (774)”. Creating what Blackness means to a person can come from complexities between their own lived experiences and expectations for what it means to be Black. According to Nguyen and Anthony, the use of African American Vernacular

English (AAVE) is one method for authenticating Blackness, as AAVE relates to the “ghetto” identifier and lower class (774). Middle-class Blackness portrayals are scripted to be cultured as having white characteristics in the media. As a result, middle-class Black children and adolescents create strategies to identify according to designated environments. This is called a “not me” identity, aimed at gaining access to white middle class circles and separate from Black traditions, including the use of AAVE. Black children may adjust how they present their identity based on these images, and responses from their peers. It is also noted that Black men can also distance themselves from portraying the negative stereotypes of the Black image through strategies of “moderate Blackness” (Nguyen and Anthony, 774-775).

Nguyen and Anthony argue that the concept of legitimizing membership is also shown to define emotional restraining methods that are used to make white people comfortable through the construction of an “easy going” type of character. Examples include Bill Cosby’s character, Dr. Huxtable, in *The Cosby Show*, in which he was depicted as an easy going comical, buddy character. Both Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan are given identical titles and depictions in sports media, where their images and tendencies to stray from racial and political conversations make them “safe” entertainment for white people. Essentially, Black people feel the need to negotiate with cultural standards, determining their own definition(s) of what it means to “be Black” to them versus controlled images of Blackness.

The Black experience can be defined as something that can happen to a Black person, or to someone who identifies as Black, although it is not limited to these things (Nguyen and Anthony; Hollinger). Barack Obama’s presidential victories assert that a significant percentage of the white electorate is willing and eager to show that Blackness is not a barrier to the presidency. Conditionally, because of Obama’s Blackness being linked to immigrant ancestry,

his “Blackness” has been challenged. Ben Carson who ran for president in 2016 says “[Obama] didn’t grow up like I grew up . . . for him to claim that he identifies with the experience of Black Americans, I think is a bit of a stretch.” Carson was also reported as saying that Obama was “raised white” (Hollinger). Other cultural challenges will be further discussed in this document.

Blackness is defined by more than one individual experience, and includes a person’s traumas and displacements, as well as depictions of life and freedom. Using Nguyen and Anthony’s frameworks of *commodifying realness* and *legitimizing member* as bases by which to determine Obama’s Blackness to the American people is not the intent of this discussion, rather it is to understand how these ideologies possibly affected his presidential image. There are stereotypes attached to being Black in America stemming from the racially implicit ideologies discussed here. It is important to discuss how these stereotypes affect the image of Black Americans, and to understand the socially constructed expectations Barack Obama faced as a Black man in America.

Performance of Blackness

Given the knowledge of Blackness as an ideology, it is relevant to discuss the way Blackness is presented to the American people, in order to better grasp the dynamic of racial stereotyping Barack Obama encountered as President of the United States. As mentioned earlier, stereotypes are presented in controlled images. The images presented in indoctrinated stereotypes of Black individuals in the United States stem from racist ideologies that consider Blacks to be uncivilized and inferior. Blacks were portrayed by professionals in theater and media long before slavery was abolished – in minstrelsy, as mammy, sambo, and Uncle Tom character types. In minstrelsy, white actors painted their faces with dark brown and black paint, imitating slaves

with song and dance (“Minstrel Show”). Although minstrel shows faded and disappeared, relics of their racial typecasting and performance stereotypes have continued in numerous performance methods, including television comedies such as *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *The Jefferson’s* (“Minstrel Show”). Characters in these American comedies represent stereotypical minstrel shows depicting coon figures, like the dancing Jim Crow and the happy darkies. In almost all the episodes of *Good Times*, J.J., performed by actor Jimmie Walker, is laughing, throwing his hands in the air and shouting, “DY-NO-MITE!”

Pressure from Black communities, and organizers have largely impacted these types of stereotypes in controlled images. One instance of this is the transformation of the Aunt Jemima syrup brand, now called Pearl Milling Company, which has recently retired the racist branding, name, and logo (Valinsky). Aunt Jemima’s origins show the character to be based on the mammy stereotype, an enslaved Black woman who would care for and sometimes nurse their slave owners’ children (“Minstrel Show”). Fewer of these images are being portrayed in modern media, but other representations of Black culture are depicted through stereotyping. The representation of Blacks through images of gang violence, welfare dependence, and hypersexuality tends to create prejudices and biases in viewers (Kulaszewicz, 7).

Blackness is also presented in news broadcasting. In *Black Lives and Spatial Matters*, author Jodi Rios discusses presentations of Blackness through the images depicted in media during the Ferguson protests that erupted after the death of unarmed eighteen-year-old Michael Brown Jr. Killed at the hands of former Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson, the death of Brown, and treatment of his body after, precipitated subsequent protests and riots – but the media also capitalized on portrayals of Black delinquency and social deviance (Rios). Another image

portrayed was the lack of care for Black bodies. After Brown's body was left in the street for four hours, peaceful protestors were met with tear gas and rubber bullets (Rios, 231).

If a person's actions defy certain standards within a community, the individual can be met with criticism and even ostracization in some groups. For example, the video of Michael Brown, released within minutes of his death, showed him pushing a store clerk and stealing cigars. Brown's actions were viewed by some as worthy of punishment, even invoking advocacy for it in response to his crimes. Marc Lamont Hill argues that the release of the video assisted in fortifying negative images of Blacks, ease of victim blaming, and attempts at shaming poor Blacks by middle class Blacks. The deployment of respectability politics during the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, is an example of the respectability politics that Barack Obama had been criticized for. The following chapter will discuss how ideals and stereotypes of Blackness are policed in and outside of Black communities using the frameworks of the politics of respectability, colorism, intersectionality, and styles of Black leadership.

CHAPTER IV.

RULES OF BLACKNESS

Politics of Respectability

Discussing Barack Obama's usages of respectability politics will help further the discussion surrounding expectations of Blackness in and out of Black communities. According to Higginbotham, racialized respectability politics "are a form of symbolic violence that offers implicit rules for marginalized individuals to follow in order to earn respect in mainstream culture (1880-1920)." Politics of respectability describes any behavior that is deemed unworthy of respect within a specific group. This includes behaviors that go against standards shown in controlled images and are most often condemned in and out of Black communities. These behaviors are considered unsatisfactory or in poor taste compared to what is considered "respectable" behavior for a member of the group. For Black individuals, this can mean encouragement to refine individual behaviors in an effort to "improve" them to gain others' approval. Essentially, respectability politics results in Black people having to, or feeling the need to police their identity, including speech, sexuality, and appearance which includes skin tone and hair (Banks, 41-98; Hunter, 142-164). Due to the need to police Black identity, aspects of Blackness are sometimes hidden by Black leaders, essentially to make white people feel comfortable. Black respectability politics is a conscientious strategy, traditionally adopted by African-American women, to reject white stereotypes and promote morality and "decency" while de-emphasizing sexuality (Paisley, 213).

Fredrick C. Harris describes the policing of Black students' hair and body and the effect of the politics of respectability in *The Rise of Respectability Politics*. A seven-year-old Black student in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Tiana Parker, was sent home from Deborah Brown Community

School because of a dress code violation. Her parents were told that her hair, dreadlocks wrapped in a pink bow, violated the schools dress code policy. The policy stated that students were prohibited from wearing “unusual hairstyles” that are a distraction from the schools “respectful” learning atmosphere. The school policy also regulated “dreadlocks, afros and mohawks,” lengths of girls’ weaved hair, and length and neatness of male hair as well. Although the policy did not include race as a factor, the styles deemed inappropriate are most often seen in Black communities, while styles that were allowed seemed to perpetuate white standards of beauty and respectability.

According to Tiana’s father, Terrance Parker, (“Second-Grader’s Dreadlocks Cause for Concern?”), the rules in the school policy were designed by elite Blacks and were supported by state government and Black citizens who believe in the effectiveness of the rules. The school Tiana attended was majority Black, including the administration. Administrators from the school did eventually make changes to their policy, but not before national public outrage after Tiana’s parents withdrew her from the school. These types of rules, according to Harris “have their origins in the turn-of-the-twentieth-century Black middle-class ideology: the politics of respectability”.

Barack Obama has been accused of and criticized for his use of African American politics of respectability. Harris is one of those who criticizes Obama’s use of the politics of respectability and believes that although conversations of respectability politics have been had regarding other Black entertainers, journalists, community leaders, and politicians, it is gaining greater frequency in Black America. An example of Barack Obama’s use of respectability politics can be seen in his speech “Remembering Kings legacy,” celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington. President Obama’s plea was to a majority Black audience, calling

the actions of their forefathers “self-defeating” and that they had “lost their way.” To unify a divided country, he stated that we can choose to “continue down this current path . . . or to change” (see Appendix, pp. 45-50). This language chastises the actions of Black leaders, asking citizens to resist the urge to fight for resolution using the same tactics as their predecessors.

While there was much criticism in his lecture, Barack Obama offered little solutions as president. Some argue that Obama did not employ usage of respectability politics while in office because he did not tell Black people to restructure their behavior for the approval of others, but rather encouraged racial enrichment and elevation (Starkey). The argument can be made that those who criticized Obama for use of respectability politics are guilty of practicing a “new form” of respectability politics, teaching Black people to be concerned about whites’ perceived images of them and seeking to undermine attempts to hold Black people minimally accountable (Starkey).

Colorism

Another rule that dictates Blackness in Black communities is colorism. Amongst Black communities in America, colorism is an issue stemming back to the Slavery era, where lighter skinned slaves were most often given tasks in and around the house, and darker skinned slaves were to work outside and, in the fields (“Colorism – NCCJ”). Because Obama is a biracial light-skinned Black man, it is relevant to address potential benefits of colorism due to his complexion. Colorism or shadeism was defined by Alice Walker as the “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color” and refers to the prejudicial treatment of people based on their skin color within groups of people who share similar ethnicity traits or perceived race (Walker, 290). Again, white standards of beauty are adhered to in the discrimination processes of colorism. Other observable characteristics, such as eye color and hair texture, may

also serve as the basis of similar kinds of prejudicial treatment within cultural groups. It should be noted, however, that skin color is the most important and frequently used measure for prejudice within cultural groups. Although there are limitations and exceptions, colorism in Black culture primarily privileges lighter skin tone over darker.

President Obama has been the victim of colorism in the past. Senator majority leader Harry Reid, while pushing then Senator Obama to run for the presidency, privately described him as a “light-skinned [African American] with no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one” (*Racist Slur or Innocent Slip-Up?*) Reid’s characterization suggests Obama was someone who would appeal to white voters because of his complexion. Political journalists and authors of the book *Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime*, Mark Halperin and John Heilemann, suggest that Reid’s comment seems to confirm the suspicion of many Black Americans: that some whites prefer light-skinned Blacks over their dark-skinned counterparts (Halperin and Heilemann, 24). The racial hierarchy presented by the notion of colorism addresses how a lighter skinned Black person may have more/better opportunities than darker skinned Blacks. Black women are similarly discriminated against in and out of Black cultural groups, which will be discussed in the next section, titled “Intersectionality.”

Intersectionality

Another aspect of identity that can assist in the discussion of the movement of Black politicians, namely Barack Obama, in political spaces is intersectionality. Intersectionality is a “lens, [or] a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other” (Steinmetz). In *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*,

law professor Kimberle Crenshaw exposes intersectionality in three Title VII court cases: *DeGraffenreid v General Motors*, *Moore v Hughes Helicopter* and *Payne v Travenol*. In each case, Crenshaw examines the findings of the lawsuits and unearths limitations of the feminist and antiracist movements. Crenshaw suggests, based on the outcome of these cases, that “Black women’s experiences are much broader than the general categories of discrimination discourse provides” (Crenshaw, 149).

The framework of intersectionality exposes how one’s identity can affect movement through specific spaces and arenas - considering the multifaceted dilemma Black women face - of race and gender. This viewpoint encourages political activists and community leaders to include Black women in their groups and organizations, examining them as not only Black or women, but as Black women. Although initially derived to understand Black women’s complex identity, the theory can also assist in viewing and understand Barack Obama’s movement in the political sphere through an intersectional lens. Crenshaw’s analogy of a traffic intersection is a metaphor for the intersectional approach to discrimination:

Consider an analogy for traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happened in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination (Crenshaw, 149).

This framework describes how we all occupy multiple spaces that may intersect and overlap through race, class, gender, and other characteristics (DiAngelo, xvi).

The previously described “rules” that dictate Blackness to Black people (intersectionality, colorism, and politics of respectability) are not definite rules per se, but concepts that help to analyze the identification of Black people by Black people and organize challenges that may be presented. The next section defines how Black leaders should/do represent Black people in the past according to American philosopher Cornell West.

Defining Black Political Leadership Styles

Addressing leadership styles of former Black leadership in America creates a starting point in determining the leadership style presented by Barack Obama during his time in office. Cornel West has publicly criticized Barack Obama (Thompson), however, his assessment of Black leadership in *Race Matters* was delivered over a decade before Obama’s presidency. West gives an analysis of Black political leadership in America arguing that the failure in development of quality leadership in America is highlighted amongst Black middle class Americans who have low self-esteem, little morals, and live in poverty (West, 63). West argues that Black communities continue to decline because of class divisions and broken structures in Black families. These ongoing issues in Black communities represent the lack of quality Black leadership due to the absence of valuable traditions in Black communities aimed at creating leaders (West, 37). West’s opinion is that Black politicians no longer lead with the intent to build communities, but instead to uplift themselves. Tactics used by powerful leaders, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcom X, have been lost on present day leaders who are “too hungry for status to be angry, too eager for acceptance to be bold, too self-invested in advancement to be defiant” (West, 38).

West groups Black political leaders under three types: *race-effacing managerial leaders*, *race-identifying protest leaders*, and *race transcending prophetic leaders*. Race-effacing managerial leaders move through political spaces surviving on their political ability and are considered the lesser of two evils when the other option may be a white conservative male. Race-identifying protest leaders view themselves in the likeness of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. traditions, but operate more according to Booker T. Washington traditions. These types of leaders aim to enhance the Black community by “serving as powerbrokers” with powerful, usually white, economic, or political elites. White Americans must placate race-identifying protest leaders, so the dilemma of the Black community is overlooked and ignored. Once effectively into elected offices, these types of leaders generally become race-effacing managerial types who have large Black constituencies and who use “flashy styles and flowery rhetoric” (West, 39). Lastly, race- transcending prophetic leaders require “personal integrity, political understanding, moral vision and prudential judgement, courageous defiance, and organizational patience (West, 40). West’s opinion is that the latter style of leadership is lacking in Black political leaders, which continues to be a detriment to quality Black leadership in this country.

According to West, public figure and American minister Jesse Jackson’s 1984 and 1988 presidential runs cast him as an opportunist, running after Shirley Chisolm - the first Black major-party candidate – ran for President in 1972. West’s idea of an opportunist is someone not choosing to lead in effort to be at the forefront of Black issues, but someone who chooses their own motives. This, he believes, is a crisis in Black leadership in America. According to West, the future threat to Black America cannot be separated from the crisis in Black leadership and has three parts. First, Black leadership at the national level tends to lack a moral vision and practices that uplift Black people. Second, relative failures create availability for bold and

rebellious Black nationalist figures with short and narrow visions, and sensational practices. Lastly, the crisis in Black leadership leads to political skepticism among Black people, which lowers the value of work done by engaged local activists who have made a difference, without whom there can be no progressive politics (West, 44). West offers solutions to what he has dubbed “the crisis in Black leadership”: 1) national forums to reflect, discuss, and plan responses, and 2) serious strategic and tactical thinking about how to create new models of leadership and forge the kind of persons to represent these models. West insists the time has come where Black political leaders are no longer looking to be the “president of Black America,” and that to be taken seriously as a Black leader, one must be a race transcending prophet who questions and critiques the powers that be for the betterment of minority groups in America (West, 46). This foundation for critiquing leadership styles for modern Black leaders is useful in categorizing Barack Obama, although the analysis is dated. There are points of interest to be considered before determining which, if any, category to place Obama in, or whether to create a new category altogether. West’s analysis of Black leadership is a catalyst for examining Black leadership further within the limitations of time and opinion, thus evolutions of the descriptions will be addressed within the conclusion.

CHAPTER V.

DATA ANALYSIS

Black progress in legislation post-Obama

As mentioned, styles of leadership in Black communities tend to vary. While Barack Obama was not the first, or only Black leader in America, his platform as the first Black President of the United States was symbolic. In the time since Obama's first inauguration in 2009, Black legislators are working to fill remaining gaps in racial inequalities in America's branches of government. Senator Raphael Warnock, a preacher from Atlanta endorsed by Obama, made history as Georgia's first Black senator in January 2021 (Stracqualursi). There are no Black governors in office at the time of this writing and has not been since the retirement of former Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick in 2015. Two Black females, Jennifer Foy and Jenn McClellan, are among three Black candidates seeking to become governor of Virginia – Justin Fairfax being the third Black candidate and current Lieutenant Governor. Foy and McClellan hope to make history as the first Black Female governor in the state (Brown and Atske, 2021). It should not be assumed that the election of a Black president has filled every racial disparity in America, but the potential for growth in representation is logical. As the "first" of anything, expectations are often created alongside criticisms and those who follow in their footsteps mirror or disengage from the originator's movement. This is not limited to race. Being the first Black president of the United States placed Barack Obama in a position to be both praised and condemned by other politicians, media, and American citizens.

(Criticisms of) The First Black President of the United States of America

Author and academic Michael Eric Dyson evaluates and critiques Barack Obama's leadership techniques as the first Black President of the United States in *The Black Presidency-*

Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America. Criticisms from Black Americans during the Obama administration were fueled by Obama's lack of racial transparency while in office. At the same time, Black Americans adored him and wanted to see him successful. Black people became Obama's harshest critiques and biggest defenders, shielding him from racist rhetoric and, at times, refusing to have conversations that may have made him more susceptible to criticism (Dyson, 16). Rev. Jesse Jackson's son, Jesse Jackson Jr, came to the president's defense after he was publicly criticized by the Reverend. Black leaders showed their support for him: however, Obama was not vocal in his support for Black leadership. It was only after Rev. Al Sharpton offered Obama support, that Sharpton became Obama's favorite Black leader (Dyson).

Also criticized was the oratorical style Obama presented most often to the American people, which included everyday language with phrases like "screwed up" and noticed by media (Gerstein and Martin). Obama's oratory utilized the rhetorical devices: alliteration, simile, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, antithesis, and parallelism (Li et. al, 143-146). Obama's understanding of the power of language throughout his presidency enabled him to connect with the American people. Using carefully presented speeches, replete with informal language and pop culture references, his style resonated across sectors of the American people. This preaching style of oration is believed by researchers to strongly connect the speaker with the audience. Traditionally, it is best received by members of the Black community, particularly those familiar with church settings, as opposed to mixed groups of people (Britt). Dyson references multiple direct connections to Black popular culture Obama has made during speeches, for example, during one speech Obama said "They're trying to bamboozle you, it's the same old okey-doke. . . They try to bamboozle you, hoodwink ya. Try to hoodwink ya. All right, I'm having too much fun here" – phrases which may be understood by those who have seen Spike Lee's *Malcom X*

biopic (Dyson 72-73) and *Bamboozled* (2000). Another example Dyson gives of Black culture references made by Obama took place in 2012 at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner. During his speech he mentioned how he sang Al Green during his first term, and would sing Young Jeezy, if elected to a second term. Young Jeezy, a rapper, is well known for a song called "My president is Black," which is more than an inside joke: it was a nod to Obama himself (Alim et al.; Dyson 70-73). While singing of *Amazing Grace*, during the eulogy in Charleston for his friend, the Reverend Clement Pinckney, he led the congregation in singing the hymn, classic portrayals of signifying in Black churches (Kaufman).

It seems Barack Obama portrays Black expression using Black speech similar to other Black leaders and activists like Jesse Jackson, Martin Luther King, and other "past masters of Black sacred speech" (Dyson 259). The devices, talents, tactics, and techniques seen in Black churches are also seen in Obama's speech. Dyson believes there are two specific reasons for this: he was a member of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, pastored by Rev. Jeremiah Wright, and he believed in the vision of Martin Luther King Jr. in the early 1960s. According to Dyson, in 1993 *Ebony* magazine named Wright the second greatest Black preacher in the nation. Dyson says, "this is the Wright Obama loved and learned from" (Dyson), and likely mirrored many of his oratorical characteristics.

Criticism of Barack Obama's leadership during his presidency can be found throughout *We Were Eight Years in Power- An American Tragedy* written by Ta-Nahisi Coates. Coates gives the impression that Obama's presidency issued a new form of "hope" for the American people, amidst Black conservative dialogue and criticism of the former president. The author is also critical of President Obama for his failure to address Black issues from the start, and his handling of administrative affairs.

Aspects of President Obama's identity were analyzed by writers in media as "the new Tiger Woods of American politics" (Coates 37), another man of mixed race identity, who isn't "exactly Black" (Coates 37). He did not check the boxes that mainstream Black politicians matched, that of coming from a poor upbringing with parents who worked cleaning other people's homes. This portion of his identity was a major factor that the media used to explain how Barack Obama escaped the "assigned corner of the world" where the media places Black people in an effort to make white people secure in "all of the rest of it" (Coates 37). Coates refers to Frederick Douglass' experiences of being "an ordinary nigger while working on the fields, but when he was a famed abolitionist, it was often said that his genius must have been derived from his white half" (Coates 37). Coates applied this to the topic of America choosing to accept, rather than being forced to accept, President Obama's Blackness.

According to Coates, choosing to deny President Obama his said Blackness helped served the purpose of being a coping mechanism for anyone who had been wrong about the possibility of there being a Black President of the United States of America. While Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 electoral victories were dismissed by some as symbolic for African Americans, Coates believes there was nothing simple about the symbolism (Coates).

Obama was critiqued by Coates as a president who played both sides, turning to his platform and identity as a president who embraced all people when refusing to advocate for Black issues, and calling to his Black identity when using politics of respectability to condemn the Black community for continuing to "make bad choices" (Coates 299). It should also be noted since Obama was born relating to white people, he learned to and did gain their trust early on (Coates 313). On the other end of the racial spectrum, Michelle Obama's authentication of her husband's "Black credentials" is important to call to mind. Because Michelle's Blackness was

never questioned, her connection to President Obama assisted in the portrayal of an authentically Black male.

Barack Obama's Experiences

Developing a theory on the varying movement in Barack Obama's presidential career would not be complete without an analysis of his experiences in his own words. In his memoir, *A Promised Land*, Obama tells how his experience in Chicago helped him to answer questions about his racial identity that had at one time been unanswered. It was in Chicago that he determined there was no definitive description outlining what it means to be Black (Obama 16-7). After meeting Michelle Robinson, Obama's future wife, Obama saw firsthand and understood the theory that roadblocks were always present, as they were always in Michelle's mind. In her mind "the roadblocks were there and were clear; you did not have to go looking for them" (Obama 20-22).

Contrarily, Obama wrestled with the meaning of his mixed race status and the fact of racial discrimination. He nor anyone else had yet to question his "American-ness," until his run for the presidency. Not only was there a question of Obama's nationality, but there were also questions of Michelle hurting Barack's chances at office if she stayed with him while campaigning. "Obama's baby mama," is what the media said about Michelle. She was deemed "angry," "emasculating," and "not First Lady material" (Obama 133).

Obama says he knew what risks would affect him when attempting to appeal to a multiracial audience as a multiracial male: criticism, less benefits going to those who really needed them, having to appeal to the common interests, which "discounted the continuing effects of discrimination and allowed whites to avoid taking the full measure of the legacy of slavery,

Jim Crow, and their own racial attitudes” (Obama 118). Feeling the weight of the risks, Obama says he felt bound to “Black folks” (Obama 119).

A story from Barack Obama’s upbringing gives a portrayal of race in America through the lens of his white grandmother, Toot. Toot became afraid and showed her fear when a Black panhandler approached them when Obama was a teen. He says the moment struck pain and confusion for him, but ultimately did not change his view of his grandmother (Obama 140-3). Racist attitudes woven into our country through ideals of Jim Crow laws, segregation, and other limits on minorities due to racist views, created the misconceptions Toot displayed. As president, he says he saw no way to sort out people’s motives, particularly because of these racist attitudes woven into the country, including their preconceptions of him being “a Black guy from Chicago with a foreign name” (Obama 405-6).

Barack Obama accepted subjection to criticism, believing progress comes from knowing when to allow and/or accept criticism, and when to play it safe and avoid controversy. As the first Black president in America, Obama felt feelings of responsibility towards Black people regarding racist policies and institutional prejudices saying,

As the first black commander in chief I felt a special responsibility to [repeal Don’t ask, Don’t tell], mindful that Blacks in the military had traditionally faced institutional prejudice and been barred from leadership roles, and for decades had been forced to serve in segregated units- a policy Harry Truman had finally ended with an executive order in 1948 (Obama 611).

His decision to repeal *Don’t Ask Don’t Tell* seemed to be based on the notion of equality because of his place in America as a Black man. At the beginning of his political career, Obama told his

wife Michelle, “the election and leadership of a Black president stood to change the way children and young people everywhere saw themselves and their world” (Obama 663).

Barack Obama’s two terms in office were not without controversy due to his cultural background. There were very few controversies experienced by Barack Obama: notable were his tan Easter suit, the introduction of Birtherism, and the “Beer Summit.” First, Obama’s choice of color for an Easter suit was harshly criticized, being called a “monstrosity” and “terrible” (Farzan). Critics assumed the drab color choice was a nod to his inability to choose a side, as it was seen as a “wishy-washy” color (Farzan). Ironically, the “tan suit scandal” has been used to reference the disparaging difference in scandals between Obama and the succeeding president, Donald J. Trump (Farzan).

Next, Birtherism, a conservative conspiracy theory fueled by Donald Trump and multiple media outlets, asserts Barack Obama was born in Kenya and was a secret Muslim socialist as well as a Manchurian candidate planted in the United States to infiltrate the American government – despite Obama’s ample proof of nationality. Obama says many other claims were made, including one accusing him of having a ghost writer for his book *Dreams from My Father* (Obama 672-674). George Bush and Bill Clinton were never asked to confirm their birthplace, a point calling attention to the blatant discrimination Obama faced as president.

The last issue of controversy to be discussed is the arrest of Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. and the events that followed. Professor Gates was arrested, attempting to gain access to his residence after the door to his home had gotten jammed. Neighbors, believing him to be a threat, called the police. Sergeant James Crowley and two officers arrived at the scene, and after an alleged altercation, Gates was arrested and charged with disorderly conduct. Obama believed, although he did not state, that had Gates been white he would not have been arrested

for simply being rude to a police officer. He did, however, tell the press he believed the officers overreacted. Less than a week after the incident, Obama and then Vice President Joe Biden sat down with Gates and Crowley at the White House for what has since been named the “Beer Summit.” The summit was received fairly well, although many Black supporters and presidential staff did not understand why Obama “would bend over backward to make Crowley feel welcome” (Obama 398). Some staff empathized with the position he was put in. When told this by his advisor, Obama asked her “which position? Being Black, or being president?” (Obama 394-398). Attempting to preserve the dignity of both the Black community and the Police community proved to be an unwinnable task for Obama.

CHAPTER VI.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering the insights of writers and texts examined to this point, the following inferences and conclusions can be made:

Cornell West's descriptions of Black politicians are slightly outdated, but not inaccurate to describing current political figures. Considering the intense cultural climate in America since this book was published, one may presume that new categories could potentially better describe Black political leaders. Barack Obama tended to straddle the fence in relation to cultural issues, which can be shown in his usage of respectability politics. Heading into his second term he seems more confident in his identity by the references he made to hip hop culture during public events. Mentioning Young Jeezy was a call to audiences who could appreciate the reference, likely younger Black Americans. The symbolism of his place as the first Black president unified, beyond any of his active methods, his support among Black communities. Based on these characteristics, I would categorize Barack Obama as *a race-neutral managerial type of leader*. A mixed-raced, Black identifying leader without a spoken allegiance to the Black community, who has a large group of Black continuants, capable of connecting to audiences through bold imagery, and trusted by a large enough white constituency to win the presidential office twice. He straddled racial fences when it came to Black issues and support of Black leaders, while in office, blurring ethnic lines. According to the legitimating membership processes of Black authenticity, the former president's dual identity as a Black person allowed him to compartmentalize and straddle the fence when it came to racial issues. Not having deep commitment or ties to the Black community, this created a space for him to act as a person, and not just a Black person, although America will always identify him as Black.

Performances that represent Blackness, and perceptions of Blacks based on stereotypes and experiences, affect people's expectations of Blackness. Is it logical to anticipate someone who did not grow up/was not immersed in typical Black American experiences to have the same reactions and responses as those who did, and the ability to utilize them appropriately – to authentically move as someone who had all the experiences that make one “Black”?

Political victories won by former President Barack Obama may or may not have created opportunities for Black people and other minorities entering political spaces in America. However, Obama's presidential wins can enhance the desire for representation from members of other minority groups, believing that more representation equates to more representation.

Cultural representation in American politics has increased since 1965, but statistics still show the numbers to be disproportionate (Brown and Atske, 2021). Civil unrest, distrust of the government, and divisiveness over the last few decades could be attributes fueling peoples need and desire to feel represented. The increase in diversification of representation in politics is showing that although America is still working on accepting Blackness in American politics, progress is being made.

Although the image portrayed by the Obama family potentially helped to lessen any negative stereotypes and stigmas of Black people in America, the “perfect family” from a “not so Black” upbringing were a threat to white America. Other than his choice of Easter suit, the former president had very few scandalous moments. Larger issues were ignored, or perhaps the media had nothing else to talk about at the time. Even when he was composed and poised, Black people seemed to be most critical of Barack Obama's Blackness. Considering his complexion and heritage, was there ever an option for Obama to choose not to be Black?

Blackness is not defined only in terms of skin complexion, but by multiple characteristics including experiences and language variation. Black communities get to say what is Black and what is not and can diminish one's "Blackness" if certain criteria are not deemed met. Obama was not under the influence of respectability politics as much as he was a product of his own environment, recommending others to view life from a range of perspectives. Viewing his identity from an intersectional lens will encourage people to understand the meanings behind his statements and assist in understanding how Blackness collides with other areas of one's identity. Also, Black people's responses to other Black people – suggesting they be held accountable – deserves attention, considering Obama has been criticized for using this tactic. It is suggested that research be done considering the benefit of using Black conservatism as a strategy to successfully move through public and political spaces, with a particular focus on the effectiveness of the campaigns and strategies of Black conservatives like Ben Carson and United States Representative Clarence Burgess Owens. These actors seem to use emotional restraining methods to make white people comfortable or "get along well," including moderate Blackness, separating from negative Black stereotypes, and deploying respectability politics.

Taking on characteristics of preachers in Black communities, language, demeanor, and community connections, proves an asset for Black men when attempting to gain access to legislative spaces. In the political sense, Barack Obama, and Raphael Warnock, tend to take on this "Black preacher role," portrayed by a clean haircut, suit, and tie image, and use of bold language that includes metaphors and imagery. Modeling after Malcom X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Al Sharpton, both Obama and Warnock use their knowledge of the Black church to connect with broader ranges of constituency.

America's inherent racism, which is rooted in American values, makes it more difficult for Black people to move through political spaces. Black people are still working on being able to trust the government with racial issues still very present. Black Lives Matter and other social movement organizations have attempted to call for justice for the lives of unarmed people of color and other issues that Black communities face, such as normalizing Black people's natural growing hair. Barriers such as these make it harder for Black people to enter political spaces, simply because of who they are as Black people, based on what is engrained in American culture. Black people's movement in political spaces is held to a different standard than that for white politicians. Deeper scrutiny of Black political actors from all sides makes it harder not only to enter those spaces, but to want and desire to be in those spaces as part of the democratic process. However, as more Black "firsts" occur, more Black people and other people of color (POC) will and, indeed, are entering political areas on all levels. And while the numbers that show representation are changing, the imbalance is obvious. Clearly, Black people have a hard time moving in and through these public spaces, regardless of political affiliation.

Suggestions for Future Research

This analysis leaves questions for further research. Questions for future research include, but are not limited to: What and who does Barack Obama represent for Black people in America, and how have Black Americans tried to bring Blackness into politics? The process of moving into Black spaces is difficult if a person is not considered Black; simultaneously, it is difficult to be a Black political actor moving into political spaces. How does criticism affect representation when that criticism comes from Black people, as compared to white people? The criticisms received during and after Obama's presidency suggest that some people were simply relieved

that Obama was not an embarrassment to Black people by perpetuating negative Black stereotypes. Apprehension to enter these spaces could be due to the lack of representation and Black individuals “not seeing themselves” in their local, state, and federal branches of government. What will it take to relieve the burden Black people feel – that is, that they must work twice as hard to be as good as their white counterparts?

Based on this review, it is suggested that future research should continue to analyze the Black experience in American political spaces. Additional research is needed to address intersectionality of Black women in political realms. Further research on the connection between respectability politics and hidden aspects of Blackness in government is also suggested. Relatedly, research should continue exploring whether or not Black “firsts” promote further representation of minority leadership. Overall, more research addressing processes of entry into political spaces and acceptance into all arenas of governmental areas would add breadth and depth of understanding to this topic. Whether complete inclusion and acceptance of cultural diversity in politics will be realized is unknown; however, it is this author’s belief that by recognizing and addressing the difficulties Black people face when entering political spaces, the racial and cultural disproportionalities existing in state and federal entities can be better addressed.

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APPENDIX A.

Washington Post: Full transcript of Obamas speech celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington. “Remembering Kings legacy”

August 28, 2013

President Obama delivered the following remarks at the “Let Freedom Ring” ceremony to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington on Aug. 28, 2013, at the Lincoln Memorial.

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: To the King family, who have sacrificed and inspired so much, to President Clinton, President Carter, Vice President Biden, Jill, fellow Americans, five decades ago today, Americans came to this honored place to lay claim to a promise made at our founding.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

In 1963, almost 200 years after those words were set to paper, a full century after a great war was fought and emancipation proclaimed, that promise, those truths remained unmet. And so, they came by the thousands, from every corner of our country -- men and women, young and old, blacks who longed for freedom and whites who could no longer accept freedom for themselves while witnessing the subjugation of others. Across the land, congregations sent them off with food and with prayer. In the middle of the night, entire blocks of Harlem came out to wish them well.

Thousands attended the event on the Mall, where President Obama and others spoke.

With the few dollars they scrimped from their labor, some bought tickets and boarded buses, even if they couldn't always sit where they wanted to sit. Those with less money hitchhiked or walked. They were seamstresses, and steelworkers, and students, and teachers, maids and pullman porters. They shared simple meals and bunked together on floors.

And then, on a hot summer day, they assembled here, in our nation's capital, under the shadow of the great emancipator, to offer testimony of injustice, to petition their government for redress and to awaken America's long-slumbering conscience.

We rightly and best remember Dr. King's soaring oratory that day, how he gave mighty voice to the quiet hopes of millions, how he offered a salvation path for oppressed and oppressors alike. His words belong to the ages, possessing a power and prophecy unmatched in our time.

But we would do well to recall that day itself also belonged to those ordinary people whose names never appeared in the history books, never got on TV.

Many had gone to segregated schools and sat at segregated lunch counters, had lived in towns where they couldn't vote, in cities where their votes didn't matter. There were couples in love who couldn't marry, soldiers who fought for freedom abroad that they found denied to them at

home. They had seen loved ones beaten and children fire-hosed. And they had every reason to lash out in anger or resign themselves to a bitter fate.

And yet they chose a different path. In the face of hatred, they prayed for their tormentors. In the face of violence, they stood up and sat in with the moral force of nonviolence. Willingly, they went to jail to protest unjust laws, their cells swelling with the sound of freedom songs. A lifetime of indignities had taught them that no man can take away the dignity and grace that God grants us. They had learned through hard experience what Frederick Douglas once taught: that freedom is not given; it must be won through struggle and discipline, persistence, and faith.

That was the spirit they brought here that day.

That was the spirit young people like John Lewis brought that day. That was the spirit that they carried with them like a torch back to their cities and their neighborhoods, that steady flame of conscience and courage that would sustain them through the campaigns to come, through boycotts and voter registration drives and smaller marches, far from the spotlight, through the loss of four little girls in Birmingham, the carnage of Edmund Pettus Bridge and the agony of Dallas, California, Memphis. Through setbacks and heartbreaks and gnawing doubt, that flame of justice flickered and never died.

And because they kept marching, America changed. Because they marched, the civil rights law was passed. Because they marched, the voting rights law was signed. Because they marched, doors of opportunity and education swung open so their daughters and sons could finally imagine a life for themselves beyond washing somebody else's laundry or shining somebody else's shoes. (Applause.) Because they marched, city councils changed and state legislatures changed and Congress changed and, yes, eventually the White House changed. (Cheers, applause.)

Because they marched, America became more free and more fair, not just for African-Americans but for women and Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans, for Catholics, Jews, and Muslims, for gays, for Americans with disabilities.

America changed for you and for me.

And the entire world drew strength from that example, whether it be young people who watched from the other side of an Iron Curtain and would eventually tear down that wall, or the young people inside South Africa who would eventually end the scourge of apartheid. (Applause.) Those are the victories they won, with iron wills and hope in their hearts. That is the transformation that they wrought with each step of their well-worn shoes. That's the depth that I and millions of Americans owe those maids, those laborers, those porters, those secretaries -- folks who could have run a company, maybe, if they had ever had a chance; those white students who put themselves in harm's way even though they didn't have to -- (applause) -- those Japanese-Americans who recalled their own interment, those Jewish Americans who had survived the Holocaust, people who could have given up and given in but kept on keeping on, knowing that weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning -- (cheers, applause) -- on the battlefield of justice, men and women without rank or wealth or title or fame would liberate us all, in ways that our children now take for granted as people of all colors and creeds live together and learn together and walk together, and fight alongside one another and

love one another, and judge one another by the content of our character in this greatest nation on Earth.

To dismiss the magnitude of this progress, to suggest, as some sometimes do, that little has changed -- that dishonors the courage and the sacrifice of those who paid the price to march in those years. (Applause.) Medgar Evers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, Martin Luther King Jr., they did not die in vain. (Applause.) Their victory was great.

But we would dishonor those heroes as well to suggest that the work of this nation is somehow complete. The arc of the moral universe may bend towards justice, but it doesn't bend on its own. To secure the gains this country has made requires constant vigilance, not complacency. Whether it's by challenging those who erect new barriers to the vote or ensuring that the scales of justice work equally for all in the criminal justice system and not simply a pipeline from underfunded schools to overcrowded jails -- (applause) -- it requires vigilance.

(Cheers, applause.)

And we'll suffer the occasional setback. But we will win these fights. This country has changed too much. (Applause.) People of good will, regardless of party, are too plentiful for those with ill will to change history's currents. (Applause.)

In some ways, though, the securing of civil rights, voting rights, the eradication of legalized discrimination -- the very significance of these victories may have obscured a second goal of the march, for the men and women who gathered 50 years ago were not there in search of some abstract idea. They were there seeking jobs as well as justice -- (applause) -- not just the absence of oppression but the presence of economic opportunity. For what does it profit a man, Dr. King would ask, to sit at an integrated lunch counter if he can't afford the meal?

This idea that -- that one's liberty is linked to one's livelihood, that the pursuit of happiness requires the dignity of work, the skills to find work, decent pay, some measure of material security -- this idea was not new.

Lincoln himself understood the Declaration of Independence in such terms, as a promise that in due time, the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men and that all should have an equal chance.

Dr. King explained that the goals of African-Americans were identical to working people of all races: decent wages, fair working conditions, livable housing, old age security, health, and welfare measures -- conditions in which families can grow, have education for their children and respect in the community.

What King was describing has been the dream of every American. It's what's lured for centuries new arrivals to our shores. And it's along this second dimension of economic opportunity, the chance through honest toil to advance one's station in life, that the goals of 50 years ago have fallen most short.

Yes, there have been examples of success within black America that would have been unimaginable a half-century ago. But as has already been noted, black unemployment has

remained almost twice as high as white employment (sic), Latino unemployment close behind. The gap in wealth between races has not lessened, it's grown.

As President Clinton indicated, the position of all working Americans, regardless of color, has eroded, making the dream Dr. King described even more elusive.

For over a decade, working Americans of all races have seen their wages and incomes stagnate. Even as corporate profits soar, even as the pay of a fortunate few explodes, inequality has steadily risen over the decades. Upward mobility has become harder. In too many communities across this country in cities and suburbs and rural hamlets, the shadow of poverty casts a pall over our youth, their lives a fortress of substandard schools and diminished prospects, inadequate health care and perennial violence.

And so, as we mark this anniversary, we must remind ourselves that the measure of progress for those who marched 50 years ago was not merely how many blacks had joined the ranks of millionaires; it was whether this country would admit all people who were willing to work hard, regardless of race, into the ranks of a middle-class life. (Applause.) The test was not and never has been whether the doors of opportunity are cracked a bit wider for a few. It was whether our economic system provides a fair shot for the many, for the black custodian and the white steelworker, the immigrant dishwasher, and the Native American veteran. To win that battle, to answer that call -- this remains our great unfinished business.

We shouldn't fool ourselves. The task will not be easy. Since 1963 the economies changed.

The twin forces of technology and global competition have subtracted those jobs that once provided a foothold into the middle class, reduced the bargaining power of American workers.

And our politics has suffered. Entrenched interests -- those who benefit from an unjust status quo resisted any government efforts to give working families a fair deal, marshaling an army of lobbyists and opinion makers to argue that minimum wage increases or stronger labor laws or taxes on the wealthy who could afford it just to fund crumbling schools -- that all these things violated sound economic principles.

We'd be told that growing inequality was the price for a growing economy, a measure of the free market -- that greed was good and compassion ineffective, and those without jobs or health care had only themselves to blame.

And then there were those elected officials who found it useful to practice the old politics of division, doing their best to convince middle-class Americans of a great untruth, that government was somehow itself to blame for their growing economic insecurity -- that distant bureaucrats were taking their hard-earned dollars to benefit the welfare cheat or the illegal immigrant.

And then, if we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit that during the course of 50 years, there were times when some of us, claiming to push for change, lost our way. The anguish of assassinations set off self-defeating riots.

Legitimate grievances against police brutality tipped into excuse-making for criminal behavior. Racial politics could cut both ways as the transformative message of unity and brotherhood was

drowned out by the language of recrimination. And what had once been a call for equality of opportunity, the chance for all Americans to work hard and get ahead was too often framed as a mere desire for government support, as if we had no agency in our own liberation, as if poverty was an excuse for not raising your child and the bigotry of others was reason to give up on yourself. All of that history is how progress stalled. That's how hope was diverted. It's how our country remained divided.

But the good news is, just as was true in 1963, we now have a choice. We can continue down our current path in which the gears of this great democracy grind to a halt and our children accept a life of lower expectations, where politics is a zero-sum game, where a few do very well while struggling families of every race fight over a shrinking economic pie. That's one path. Or we can have the courage to change.

The March on Washington teaches us that we are not trapped by the mistakes of history, that we are masters of our fate.

But it also teaches us that the promise of this nation will only be kept when we work together. We'll have to reignite the embers of empathy and fellow feeling, the coalition of conscience that found expression in this place 50 years ago.

And I believe that spirit is there, that true force inside each of us. I see it when a white mother recognizes her own daughter in the face of a poor black child. I see it when the black youth thinks of his own grandfather in the dignified steps of an elderly white man. It's there when the native born recognizing that striving spirit of a new immigrant, when the interracial couple connects the pain of a gay couple who were discriminated against and understands it as their own. That's where courage comes from, when we turn not from each other or on each other but towards one another, and we find that we do not walk alone. That's where courage comes from. (Applause.)

And with that courage, we can stand together for good jobs and just wages. With that courage, we can stand together for the right to health care in the richest nation on earth for every person. (Applause.) With that courage, we can stand together for the right of every child, from the corners of Anacostia to the hills of Appalachia, to get an education that stirs the mind and captures the spirit and prepares them for the world that awaits them. (Applause.) With that courage, we can feed the hungry and house the homeless and transform bleak wastelands of poverty into fields of commerce and promise.

America, I know the road will be long, but I know we can get there. Yes, we will stumble, but I know we'll get back up. That's how a movement happens. That's how history bends. That's how, when somebody is faint of heart, somebody else brings them along and says, come on, we're marching. (Cheers, applause.)

There's a reason why so many who marched that day and, in the days, to come were young, for the young are unconstrained by habits of fear, unconstrained by the conventions of what is. They dared to dream different and to imagine something better. And I am convinced that same imagination, the same hunger of purpose serves in this generation.

We might not face the same dangers as 1963, but the fierce urgency of now remains. We may never duplicate the swelling crowds and dazzling processions of that day so long ago, no one can match King's brilliance, but the same flames that lit the heart of all who are willing to take a first step for justice, I know that flame remains. (Applause.)

That tireless teacher who gets to class early and stays late and dips into her own pocket to buy supplies because she believes that every child is her charge -- she's marching. (Applause.) That successful businessman who doesn't have to but pays his workers a fair wage and then offers a shot to a man, maybe an ex-con, who's down on his luck -- he's marching.

(Cheers, applause.) The mother who pours her love into her daughter so that she grows up with the confidence to walk through the same doors as anybody's son -- she's marching. (Cheers, applause.) The father who realizes the most important job he'll ever have is raising his boy right, even if he didn't have a father, especially if he didn't have a father at home -- he's marching. (Applause.) The battle-scarred veterans who devote themselves not only to helping their fellow warriors stand again and walk again and run again, but to keep serving their country when they come home -- they are marching. (Applause.) Everyone who realizes what those glorious patriots knew on that day, that change does not come from Washington but to Washington, that change has always been built on our willingness, we, the people, to take on the mantle of citizenship -- you are marching. (Applause.)

And that's the lesson of our past, that's the promise of tomorrow, that in the face of impossible odds, people who love their country can change it. And when millions of Americans of every race and every region, every faith and every station can join together in a spirit of brotherhood, then those mountains will be made low, and those rough places will be made plain, and those crooked places, they straighten out towards grace, and we will vindicate the faith of those who sacrificed so much and live up to the true meaning of our creed as one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. (Cheers, applause.)