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INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE: SEEING OBAMA'S ELECTION THROUGH THE BLACK AMERICAS: ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVES AS A MIRROR

Abstract

Based on fieldwork in Argentina, Ecuador, Jamaica, and Martinique during the 2008 campaign and the 2009 inauguration, extended to the 2012 election cycle, these articles build on anthropological scholarship on Diaspora. Local communities' responses to the election and inauguration provide a look "behind the mirror" (Gregory 2007). Specifically, building on insights from Kamari Maxine Clarke (2010), this transnational connection imagined and called into being networks of black linkages, what she has called "humanitarian diasporas." The discussions, analyses, and political claims-making are examples of Gilroy's (1987; 1993) articulation of the Black Atlantic, particularly networks that transnationally or "outer-nationally" link black communities to one another. Taking ethnographic subjects' own transnational reflection of the meanings of Obama as a starting point, these articles analyze and extend our understandings of diaspora while offering a solid understanding of the many ways blackness is being defined and redefined in particular national and regional contexts. [Diaspora, Blackness, Humanitarian Diasporas, Obama, Latin America, Caribbean]

INTRODUCTION

November 4, 2008. A wave of cheers passed through the city of Port-au-Prince, as if the Brazilian national team had just won the World Cup. Individuals shot fireworks in the sky like January 1, Haiti's Independence Day. Those still in the street honked their horns. The U.S. presidential election has just been called. Barack Hussein Obama was elected as the first African American president. It was a day of celebration in the world's first free Black republic.

Quickly Obama's face adorned walls and *tap-tap* (colorful public transportation), often next to international icons of Martin Luther King and Bob Marley—but never next to Haiti's national

pantheon of freedom fighters. Large white buses that began to appear shortly after the election—imported from Taiwan or Korea—were anointed the name "Obama." The previous U.S. president whose name became generalized was for used clothing, "rad Kenedi." The kreyòl version of Obama's slogan, "wi nou kapab" (yes we can) was quickly absorbed (some say re-absorbed) into the political discourse, as Haitian president René Préval's political platform shared another namesake, *Lespwa*, or "Hope."

Four years later, following a deepening recession and an enduring military presence in the Middle East, Obama was re-elected. Following eight years of an exhausting War on Terror and a botched—racialized—response to Hurricane Katrina, not to mention the financial crisis just hitting, Obama's first election inspired astronomically high hopes. Writing in *Time*, Touré said that the re-election was the real marker of racial progress. For a Black person to win a re-election demoted from superhero to ordinary human being was the real history-making event (Touré 2012). For Obama's re-election, people reported a pride and solidarity but not the air of celebration. In the interim was an earthquake that shook the country to its foundations. Obama was overshadowed by his Democratic predecessor, United Nations Special Envoy Bill Clinton, whose presence was ubiquitous and whom many Haitian people call "governor general," a racialized term referring to a nineteen-year U.S. occupation begun in 1915.

Obama's 2008 election was indeed historic, for many reasons. Based on a highly successful on-the-ground community organizing effort aimed at generating a record voter turnout of younger and African American voters, Obama's elevation to president represented the "audacity of hope" to many. The fact that Obama became the first non-white president of the U.S. and indeed racial minority head of state for any nation in the Global North contributes to this singularity. But what does his

election and presidency say about race, blackness, Pan Africanism, and the African Diaspora? How do various constituencies across the Black Atlantic understand these phenomena? This special issue offers a unique set of ethnographic groundings to interpret and disentangle the multiple meanings of this still ongoing chapter in world black history.

Based on fieldwork in Argentina, Ecuador, Jamaica, and Martinique during the 2008 campaign and the 2009 inauguration, extended to the 2012 election cycle, these articles build on anthropological scholarship on Diaspora. Local communities' responses to the election and inauguration provide a look "behind the mirror" (Gregory 2007). Specifically, building on insights from Kamari Maxine Clarke (2010), this transnational connection imagined and called into being networks of black linkages, what she has called "humanitarian diasporas." The discussions, analyses, and political claims making are examples of Paul Gilroy's (1987, 1993) articulation of the Black Atlantic, particularly networks that transnationally or "outer-nationally" link black communities to one another. Taking ethnographic subjects' own transnational reflection of the meanings of Obama as a starting point, these articles analyze and extend our understandings of diaspora while offering a solid understanding of the many ways blackness is being defined and redefined in particular national and regional contexts (Clarke 2013; Rahier 2010, 2011). This collection asks what shifts, if any, in racial praxis are heralded by Obama's election.

TRANSNATIONAL DISCOURSES OF RACE

These articles address the shifts in the transnational elements of blackness, how people in the African Diaspora outside the United States understand race, racism, and blackness, both in the United States and at home, and how the two reflect one another. Importantly, several articles build on Kamari Clarke's and Deborah Thomas's (2006) ethnographic grounding of the concept of the Black Atlantic. As Maddox (this volume) paraphrased Gilroy, "black subjects of the diaspora share a history of colonialism, slavery, and contemporary practices of state-repression and institutional racism—black communities are always going to be linked transnationally because of these mutual perceptions." While the world events that brought African peoples to the "New World" cannot be understated, this conflation of experiences of African Americans and Caribbean people with those on the continent homogenizes and takes for granted the very meanings and

links that are of interest to anthropologists (Rahier 2010).

These articles offer very rich ethnographic analyses to deconstruct blackness from a critical vantage point. This exemplifies Faye Harrison's important call to "decolonize" (1991) and "globalize" (2008) anthropology, as people from the South have perspectives, points of view, and analyses of their own, and can return our gaze. The gaze may not be so much directed at the United States as much as it is back at home, challenging Brazil's ideology of a "racial democracy" (Freyre 1957 [1933]), helping darker-skinned Martiniquans challenge the hegemony of the white *béké* elites, or simply demanding recognition (Fraser 1997) for African descendants in Argentina or Ecuador. As agents/actors/activists, people from the African Diaspora are writing a hopeful transnational black narrative onto Obama to make claims and advance racial justice at home. These claims and advances, if won, will be done at the cost of "strategic essentialism" (Spivak 1987) running the risk of fixing blackness in a U.S. mold and letting racial progress be measured by a U.S. yardstick, as Page alludes to perceived responsibilities for a U.S. Black leadership. As one of Main's interlocutors argued, it also runs the risk of depoliticization.

MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF OBAMA

Obama's election is literally rewriting black history. A colleague in sociology recounted that her intro-level textbook—published in 2008—began with the phrase "no racial minority has ever held the highest office, the highest level of power in the U.S." While it is definitely true that this particular glass ceiling on our dreams has been shattered, and a generation of U.S. Americans will grow up seeing a Black person on television not only as a sport or entertainment star but also as the President, African American Studies scholars, students and indeed people outside the academy are forced to continue theorizing race and racism. In 2009, U.S. Blacks were twice as likely to be unemployed and three times as likely to be without health care as U.S. whites, and in 2009, the world-renowned chair of a Harvard University department can be arrested trying to enter his own house. This is to say nothing of the events that transpired in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 that galvanized a generation of activists asserting that Black lives matter.

Obama's *race* and not just his color challenge an essentialist blackness. Some commentators believe that Obama, with a white mother (an anthropologist, no less) fit into the myth of the

United States being “post racial” (Baker 2010). As Trouillot (1994) and others (e.g., Harrison 1995; Mullings 2005) argue, there are important social factors to race besides color, such as class and education. As Anderson points out Obama is “embraceable” because of his Harvard law degree. His ancestors were not “house slaves”—his ancestors were not slaves at all. As the increasingly powerful and shrill “birther” groups pointed out, Obama’s father was not an African American but an African, inviting people like Donald Trump to bully the president into presenting his birth certificate.

What meanings of Obama are being made within the Diaspora outside the United States? Citing an Ecuadorian activist, Meredith Main outlines the “Obama effect,” which she borrows from one of her interlocutors to mean the contradictory set of ideologies associated with Obama’s election. At once, it is a symbol of hope and progress for black peoples the world over on the one hand, as well as a “bootstraps” individual achievement and a mystification of existing structural racism on the other. Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa’s “people’s revolution” and “21st century socialism” included a strategy of incorporating Afro-Ecuadorians into positions of visible leadership, an element of what Lani Guinier (1994) called the “triumph of tokenism.” Many local activists grasped this double-edged sword that Obama personified, as an attempt to further their activism while at the same time reaping political capital for the Correa regime. Across the continent in another center-left regime in Argentina, Judy Anderson discusses a similar situation in “Obama drama,” wherein his election at once energized black communities and sidestepped the conversation about race; African descendent peoples were officially invisible. Obama’s election offered an opportunity for recognition and inspired mobilization, and coincidentally a shift in leadership that could potentially portend greater unity among the various factions—the more established *colonials* and the recent migrants from Africa, especially Cape Verde. To what extent race and blackness are being reformulated because of leftward political winds blowing strongly in the continent (most evident in Hugo Chávez’s Venezuela and his close ally in Bolivia’s first indigenous president Evo Morales) or because of Obama’s presidency remain open questions, as is the future of regional collaboration after Chávez’ passing.

In the insular Caribbean, blackness is both taken for granted and complicated by factors of

creolization and pre-existing intermediate racial categories. So the racial undertones of Obama’s elections are also mixed. In both Jamaica and Martinique, darker-skinned majorities tend to be poorer and excluded from positions of authority. Language of *patwa* in Jamaica as well as Martiniquan *kreyòl*—spoken by the lower-income majority and blending European words with African syntax—are marginalized. The enthusiasm behind the fist bump in Martinique to Camee Maddox, a lighter-skinned U.S. black woman because of her citizenship and president is matched by the Jamaican taxi driver shouting “That’s your president!” to white Sarah Page. Articles in this volume also offer contemporary examples of the Caribbean discourse of reputation and respectability (Wilson 1973), critiqued and modified by anthropologists of the Caribbean (e.g., Freeman 2007; Thomas 2004; Ulysse 2008). In both Jamaica and in Martinique, higher status people identify with Obama’s respectability—his eloquence, his Harvard degree and Chicago law professorship. Maddox discusses reactions from a middle-status mixed-race group, *métis*, who refract Obama’s mixed-race identity with their own, claiming Obama as “president of the world” because of his mixed-raced heritage.

LOCAL/TRANSNATIONAL MEANINGS OF “RACE”

These essays build on this rich discussion of the complex interplay of race, class, and color in the region. What “color” is Obama? Citing a consultant in her title, Page answers that he is “not black,” at least in Jamaica’s color calculus, but “brown.” In the United States—because of the hypodescent “one-drop rule”—Obama can be none other than “Black” (Baker 2010). Despite this one-drop rule, there are important social distinctions based on color in the United States. Some commentators in these series of articles go so far as to say that it is no accident that the first Black president is mixed. Race or “color” has an independent relationship with class but in general, lighter-skinned people—the former planter class of *béké* in Martinique and lighter-skinned Jamaicans like the first independent leaders of Bustamante and Manley—tend to be disproportionately wealthier and more powerful, and darker-skinned people tend to be disproportionately poor. Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1994) discusses how class and race simultaneously operate, and how one’s “color” can be re-read, and lack of somatic capital countered, with rising educational and economic capital. Obama’s election may thus

symbolize not so much an “end to blackness” but a Caribbeanization or creolization of race.

According to the two articles on the South American context, the question of race and African heritage has been interwoven with that of culture and ethnicity, suggesting differential claims to “cultural citizenship” (Clarke 2013). Main discusses a recent recognition in the Ecuadorian constitution of African descended people as an ethnic group, within a logic of multiculturalism. Activists share suspicions articulated by Charles Hale (2005, 2006) about multiculturalism (see also Gordon 1997) and promote a concept of “interculturalism.” Anderson recounts a politically charged meeting when heretofore quiet individuals asserted their claims to leadership and began to question a light-skinned intellectual who “passed” as white and her “irrelevant” writings on African culture, some even challenging her authority to write on the subject. While constituting a numerical majority, black Martiniquans’ African-derived culture continues to be challenged and threatened by both local *béké* as well as metropolitan France since the island became an official Département d’Outre-Mer (DOM), akin to statehood in the United States, in 1946. This set of articles offer contemporary reflections on the multiple and often contradictory meanings of blackness, as they are refracted through the Obama presidency. All four articles assess these from a “glocal” perspective (Ritzer 2003) how the global is embedded with the local (Kearney 1995). Whether or not the “Obama effect” represents a rupture in local meanings of race in these ethnographic contexts remains to be seen, but these timely analyses offer us an important ethnohistorical record for future analysis.

DIASPORIC CURRENTS

Whether or not Obama’s ascension will have a transformative impact on local racialization patterns, it represents a transnational dialog and interconnection nonetheless, and thus constitutes a moment of “humanitarian diaspora” (Clarke 2010). These articles detail transnational conversations, most directly in Martinique with the women’s organization asking Maddox to share “this new concept of womanism,” but shared throughout as the expressions “Obama effect” and “Obama drama” suggest. Obama’s election as president is no doubt a unique opportunity but it is far from a singular phenomenon, as scholars of Diaspora have long pointed out (Rahier 2010). In addition to the slave revolts and the first person advocacy of Equiano, Jamaican-born Marcus Gar-

vey’s United Negro Improvement Association became primarily known for one of its planks simplified as “back to Africa.” *Negritude*, a cultural and social reflection and valorization of blackness in a post-colonial context, spread across the French Caribbean and French West Africa. Many of *Negritude’s* leading scholars were in direct dialog with U.S.-based African American writers and intellectuals who were engaging their own Harlem Renaissance. Zora Neale Hurston as a student of Franz Boas went to Jamaica and Haiti to conduct ethnographic research, and Langston Hughes translated Haitian novelist and founder of the Faculté d’Ethnologie Jacques Roumain’s master work (Baker 2000; Fluehr-Lobban 2000; Magloire and Yelvington 2005). Millery Polyné (2010) details the exchanges between U.S. Blacks and Haitian movements and leaders of many political stripes (including collaborators of U.S. imperialism and its opponents). This Pan African exchange, which shaped African intellectuals such as Almirar Cabral and Leopold Senghor, aggravated by colonialism’s overt racism within the world wars, encouraged a wave of independence struggles. Civil rights leaders of different orientations such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King identified decolonization and solidarity with Africa as intertwined with struggles in Selma and the de-industrializing urban north. The following wave helped to bring down South African apartheid through divestment, with groups such as TransAfrica Forum founded to institutionalize the movement. There are many other examples but these suffice to demonstrate that Obama’s election does not represent an “end to history” nor exceptionalism so much as a concrete manifestation of this continued diasporic exchange, undergirded by neoliberal globalization (Clarke and Thomas 2006). The essays that follow inspire us to ask questions about the continuities and changes within this transnational community, and they ask what significance a Black first world leader has on this exchange and the local meanings of race.

THIS VOLUME

This special issue arose from a panel at the 2009 American Anthropological Association, “The End of Blackness? Notes from the Field on U.S. Racial Politics,” for which I served as discussant. Beginning the series, Judy Anderson offers a compelling case study of the ways in which the pending election of Barack Obama offered a useful refractive lens for the various “black” communities in Argentina, long declared to be the “most Euro-

pean nation within Latin America.” This provides a unique entrée into a theoretically and ethnographically rich terrain of concepts of black self-identity and organization. Anderson discusses the ways in which the conversation of “Obama drama” at once frames and sidesteps the conversation about the various black populations in Argentina. Explaining the provocative title, the author cites folk categories of race that distinguish “real” from other *negro* populations. There are Afro-Argentines from the colonial line and African migrant communities, most visibly from Cape Verde. From here, Anderson takes us to everyday discussions of Obama and the glimpses of understandings of race and blackness that this discussion provides. Following this discussion is an ethnographically rich description of organizations geared toward black populations, be they community, cultural, or political, highlighting tensions between and even within groups and theorizing what these tensions represent in terms of generational, gender, and cultural differences.

Sarah Page’s analysis of Obama’s election and re-election from a Jamaican lens is provocative. Offering context for this discussion, the article provides a brief summary of Jamaican socioracial/color categories followed by an analysis of the historical marginalization of Blackness by Brownness. The author presents political exclusion, and ties this exclusion to the structural adjustment programs that obliterated the Jamaican economy and rendered the country poorer, more inegalitarian, and thus more susceptible to the parallel state of dons, such as “Dudus” whose extradition in 2010 led to violence, with scores of individuals killed. Page also discusses the issue of reputation versus respectability as different strategies employed by brown and black peoples, and how these different groups use these lenses to view Obama.

Camee Maddox’s article builds on conversations about diasporic identity, thinking, and consciousness. Situating the analysis in a nationwide mobilization in the French DOMs of Guadeloupe and Martinique in early 2009—incidentally weeks after Obama’s inauguration—Maddox’s article offers a critical discussion of how race is understood locally, and how this concept is intertwined with an incomplete postcolonial project. The article also incorporates a discussion of black feminism/womanism to interrogate the efficacy and appropriateness of transnationally transposing these concepts from their roots in Black America. Maddox argues that some see Obama’s election as a prophecy fulfilled; others draw inspiration from the “Yes we can!”

mantra to redouble their activism; others read his color within Martinique’s tripartite black/métis/béké racial categories to identify mixed-race Obama as president of the world; and yet others remain skeptical of the possibility of rupturing from U.S. imperialism and global capitalism. Maddox argues that the 2009 nationwide strike did not lead to greater autonomy or independence in Martinique but it buttressed the marginalized majority in their claims to what Renato Rosaldo (1994) called “cultural citizenship” (see also Clarke 2013).

Meredith Main offers timely analysis of “the Obama effect” in Ecuador, which she borrows from one of her interlocutors to mean the contradictory set of ideologies associated with Obama’s election. At once, it is a symbol of hope and progress for black peoples the world over on the one hand, as well as a “bootstraps” individual achievement and a mystification of existing structural racism on the other. The activists’ transnationally inspired, locally grounded analyses cited in the article tease apart these contradictory tendencies, in the end offering a cautionary tale of state co-optation of radical possibilities and movements while acknowledging the notable progress from Correa’s “citizen revolution” and “21st century socialism.” The article weaves together Hale’s (2006) analyses of the multiple ways in which neoliberalism deploys and depoliticizes discourses of multiculturalism, and Rahier’s (2011) analyses of African descended peoples in Ecuador. Main discusses a local concept of “interculturalism” as a way to avoid the pitfalls of a zero-sum multiculturalism predicated on neoliberal terms of citizenship.

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