

Joy James

The Dead Zone: Stumbling at the Crossroads of
Party Politics, Genocide, and Postracial Racism

In traditional African thought, there is no concept of history moving forward towards a future climax. . . . the future does not exist beyond a few months, the future cannot be expected to usher in a golden age, or a radically different state of affairs.

—John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophies*

The further the Negro gets from his historical antecedents in time, the more tenuous become his conceptual ties, the emptier his social connections, the more superficial his visions. His one great and present hope is to know and understand his African-American realities in the United States more profoundly. Failing that, and failing to create a new synthesis in history and the humanities, and a new social theory, he will suffer the historical fate of intellectual subterfuge.

—Harold Cruise, quoted in James Turner, “Africana Studies and Epistemology”

All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave.

—Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*

Introduction: At the Crossroads, Charging Genocide

The genocide of Darfur shames the conscience of us all.

—Barack Obama, Berlin, July 24, 2008

A critique of political thinking in Africana thought brings us to a crossroads. At this intersection, passing trajectories meet. Moving in opposite directions, they send contradictory messages concerning democracy, racism, and political violence.

One trajectory pursues the accomplishments of Africana intellectual, artistic, economic, and political elites. That trajectory culminates in the campaign of Barack Obama—the first black presidential candidate in a major U.S. party and the first black president-elect since the founding of this slave nation turned faltering empire. The other trajectory tracks the misery of the local and global black masses. It also traces minority group repression by global capitalism, as well as the potential and real possibilities of racial genocide in democracies through state violence and neglect. The intersection of these two diverging lines produces a conceptual dead zone,¹ one that is marked by the absence of analysis engaging antiblack racism and genocide in Western democracies and the resilience of elite thinkers to disavow such analyses. Even though it holds the challenges of transformative thought and action, this arena is dead to conventional thought because the nexus at which black achievement meets black genocide appears as a conceptual void. Thus it is avoided. In Western democracies, rarely are “black achievement” (e.g., the Obama campaign and election) and “black genocide” (e.g., the racially fashioned prison industry and foster care system) discussed in the same breath. This essay explores issues at the edge of conventional thought in order to expand critical thinking.

William Patterson and the Civil Rights Congress’s 1951 petition to the United Nations, *We Charge Genocide*, is notable for drawing international attention to crimes against African Americans such as mob lynchings and police brutality, economic exploitation and electoral theft, and substandard schooling, housing, and medical care.² Yet *We Charge Genocide* offers neither a discussion of the political and economic achievements of black Americans, nor a discussion of how black elites, like their white counterparts and mainstream America, may either oppose or ignore (and thereby be complicit in) antiblack genocide.³ Nor does the document mention “autogenocide” or violence internal to black communities (in fact, its sex-

ism and misogyny prevent it from doing so).⁴ From its progressive, radical standpoint, it is incapable of theorizing the nexus, the convergence, and then the separation of black elites and the disposable dispossessed.

National and international Africana elites occupy influential posts in prestigious universities and colleges (whose billion-dollar endowments rival the gross national product of some nations). Yet even within these halls of security, or perhaps because of them, our critiques of state violence are rare. Often we criticize the policies of political parties or leaders. Also criticized are sectors ostracized in civil society such as the poor, unwed mothers, absentee fathers, prisoners, and criminals. Clearly, black achievement and pathology or victimization routinely commingle in political thought. For instance, black liberals or radicals note the role of legislation and punitive policies in the disruption or amelioration of collective black life and well-being. Black conservatives and neoconservatives highlight moral failings on the part of individual blacks and generalize a collective social pathology; they view these as the consequences of a black proclivity toward entitlement, immorality, and (sexual) predation. (Supposedly, these are traits that only black conservatives or neoliberals have managed to escape;⁵ black conservatives offer few opportunities to dissect and depart from white conservatives, as their unoriginal parallel racial views dictate that blacks mirror neoconservative whites.)

Since the postbellum origins of the “talented tenth,” elites have disproportionately shaped Africana thought and have offered themselves as role models dispensing cautionary, constructive, or caustic advice and guidance to impoverished, “dysfunctional,” or criminal(ized) blacks. Historically in Africana thought, black achievers disseminate commentary critical or supportive of black underachievers, citing reasons for their and our failings. Rarely do the criticisms by nonelites of the affluent influence a nation. Equally rare are radical or structural critiques that enter conventional thought and speech. More often, state performance of racial neutrality is scrutinized, and claims for racial diversity that overshadow calls for racial equality are rejected as coherent radical critique that leads to sustained resistance. The dead zone has a gravitational pull that slows down radical critiques just as it slows down time. Thus “change that we can believe in” is presumed to come disproportionately from elites who have no structural critiques of capitalism, white supremacy, or heteronormative patriarchy, nor any time line on which to chart struggles against the predatory structures.

Consider that few traditional media outlets have labeled the invasion and occupation of Iraq as “racist.” That discussion of racial predation in foreign policy was virtually dead in the fall 2008 U.S. presidential debates between Republican contender John McCain and his Democratic rival. Theoretically, McCain could still garner white votes if he were to introduce the American citizenry to general racism and the specific anti-Arab and anti-Muslim animus embedded in U.S. foreign policy—a surreal scenario, given this particular candidate and the attack campaign he chose to run with Sarah Palin. Candidate Obama could give a stirring speech on the topic and, likely, subsequently slide down and out of the polls into political retirement. How he deploys his moral authority as president remains to be seen—although Obama’s silence during the December 2008 Israeli invasion of Gaza that left thirteen hundred dead registers as a moral absence.

Consider the public’s response to Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s severe denunciations of the United States. First from his pulpit and later from a media podium, Obama’s former pastor derided no particular policy or official but an entire nation and its state apparatuses. Before his coerced retirement, Wright served as a marine and then in the medical corps for President Lyndon Johnson and later as reverend of one of Chicago’s most influential (celebrity) churches that addressed black poverty. Wright may be one example where black achievement intersects with black misery and genocide to produce an analysis from the dead zone. Obama’s denunciations of Wright—without addressing the valid content in his diatribes—exemplify how to avoid being dragged down into a zone in confrontation with white supremacy.

Traditional media and pundits are more outraged by the assertion of U.S. racism culminating in genocide than by the terrifying loss of and damage to (civilian) life. What infuriates the mainstream is the attribution of genocide to their democracy. Millions such as McCain and Palin’s “pro-Americans” reject criticisms that their democratic support—through representatives, deregulation of human rights, xenophobia, and ignorance—fosters racial genocide. Despite the official lies about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, no one will be impeached or forced to resign from office. Add to this outrage the destruction of Iraq’s infrastructure, the death and maiming of nearly one million people, and the displacement of millions more as internal and external refugees. Mainstream Americans can forgive a wealthy, conservative white man for condemning this practice but will curse a black man and deride his party for its audacity to condemn U.S. human rights violations.

The party spokesperson must have no historical antecedents rooted in racial repression to remind a state of its foundation in white supremacy. There must be no context that points to a larger systemic crisis in humanity, no dead zone to drag the nation into a place where its certainty in itself as “exceptional” might collapse alongside its idealized identity. Not being McCain but instead a carrier of racially fashioned historical antecedents such as enslavement and antiblack genocide, Obama by necessity engages in “intellectual subterfuge”: speak in generalities, announce the ideological conflicts that led to a cultural crisis as over, and posit new challenges to be collectively met by a nation that has not relinquished racial supremacy or imperial yearning. With the historical antecedents of the conqueror, McCain will never charge the United States with racial genocide. With the historical antecedents of the conquered and as the ultimate symbol of black achievement, Obama will never charge the United States with genocide. Such rhetoric would end his political life. And, many would argue, what would be the point? If the dead zone appears to share the traits of the twilight zone, then this indeed would be a futile, politically suicidal gesture. If, however, this speech act stimulated us to think critically and politically in a world marked by violence and deception, then this could work as a precondition for an imaginable future. But if the pragmatic present constitutes the realistic future, why bother to dream outside the framework of American fantasy?

Of course, political leaders, their parties, voters, the opposition, and nonvoters discuss genocide. That painful topic is also studied and debated in Africana thought, academia, media, and policy forums. Yet the topic of genocide is usually restricted to foreign policies and foreign countries or past histories from which we have evolved. When it comes to contemporary expressions of repression, histories are forgotten or curtailed, while the current context is vaguely rendered. For example, in the United States, calls for reparations to offset enslavement and apartheid are thought of as revisiting the past and as “divisive” and “counterproductive” to “going forward.” Those who forget that past centuries of enslavement and colonialism shape contemporary Africana crises reject Harold Cruise while embracing John Mbiti: when it comes to black disenfranchisement and exploitation, only the present day (villain) matters.

Among nonvictims, genocide is an inflammatory subject because there is no ideological or moral justification for the continuance of a state that countenances genocide. The citizenry complicit in it is considered to be aberrant to the civilized world. The charge of genocide is the touchstone for

allegiance or rebellion. A genocidal state is not only immoral and unlawful, but it has regressed to savagery. According to international law and the U.S. Constitution, it must be disciplined and restored to the “rule of law.”

Few speak of U.S. policies as genocidal because the dominant tendency is to analyze national policies as the byproduct of specific administrations or political parties *not* as the consequence of a state apparatus built on and seeped in racial animus. In the land of the First Amendment, one is free to argue that, irrespective of the political party, the state manifests an antiblack (or anti-indigenous) animus that promotes premature social and physical death for its most marginalized peoples. However, in a land in which (neo)liberalism and (neo)conservatism dominate intellectual thought, that argument opens one up to being caricatured as paranoid or a buffoon—a Jeremiah Wright with footnotes. The trajectories in Africana thought are clearly delineated as they intersect and clash, and are repudiated as they take leave of each other. Prominent Africana writers such as Orlando Patterson and William Julius Wilson embody black achievement and shoulder a discourse that normalizes and validates the state by ignoring the context and its murderous excesses. One can critique legislation, party politics, and elected leaders and the legislative promises or debacles they sponsor without ever uttering the incendiary word *genocide*.⁶ Harvard scholars have published tracts on the word *nigger*, tracing the etymology and reflecting on emotional connotations. Yet *genocide*, which has a much more fearful impact on national consciousness and material well-being, is less rigorously analyzed as part of the black condition.

If you don't name it and shun the language, then you veil the phenomenon. What is also obscured is state violence, as conventional language maintains that only dictatorships, not democracies, practice racial genocide. Convention assumes that electoral democracies have a failsafe mechanism—an enlightened and empowered citizenry—that prevents their participation (except as liberators) in genocidal practices. It is thus not surprising that those most targeted by historical and contemporary state excesses are those most likely to crash into its apparatuses: racially fashioned policing and the prison industrial complex, homelessness, substandard schools and housing, foster care for children marred by indifference, inadequate oversight and resources, the poverty draft into an immoral war, and “shoot-to-kill” edicts for (black) survivors of New Orleans's substandard levees designed by the Army Corps of Engineers.⁷ It's no wonder that some stumble at the intersection where elites undertheorize contradictory

conditions marked by class and opportunity (or opportunism, more properly phrased) as they are carried off by the trajectory of black achievement and greater America's expanding embrace.

In the United States, we are routinely asked to fall and genuflect at the crossroads: to acknowledge the positive in U.S. and global "race relations" without dwelling on the negative—the continuance of racial repression and disenfranchisement. But 2008 is the first time that we may likely (in)voluntarily stumble from our own frustrated desires and longings. For the ascendancy of a liberal black to the U.S. presidency must mean something profound, if democracy's future is to culminate in a "golden age" and blackness is to have a place at the table. If antiblack genocide remains a feature of that utopian democracy, the profound becomes profoundly disappointing—although, of course, not for everyone in a democratic state. Racial genocide has been a historical fixture in Western democracies as citizens amassed existential wealth (white privileges) and material wealth (capital and militarism) through antiblack policies. But those realities tend to be muted in public discourse, where blacks and other people of color are invited to sit at the table of accumulation as national and global narratives note progress.

Before the Democratic National Convention in August 2008 that would officially name him the Democratic standard-bearer for president, Obama engaged in a whirlwind campaign tour. His speech on July 24, delivered in Berlin, was historic and moving, and it drew a multiracial mass of two hundred thousand. Obama charged those gathered and viewers around the world to build a global "more perfect union" (reprising his March speech in Philadelphia on race, in which he "cleaned up" his political gaffe about white bigotry and antiblack voters). The presidential candidate repeatedly challenged witnesses to act on behalf of humanity's needs and political agency: "Will we stand for the human rights of the dissident in Burma, the blogger in Iran, or the voter in Zimbabwe? Will we give meaning to the words 'never again' in Darfur?"⁸ Obama also referenced the site at which he delivered his address as a historical context that pointed toward the challenges of the future, the wall dividing east and west, the significance of reconciliation and reconstruction (among the Germans, within the former Soviet bloc, and within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and between the North and the South).

Given the targeted audience "globally" and in the United States—the Obama campaign toured Europe and the Middle East, not Africa, Latin

America, and the Caribbean⁹—implicit in his address was the defining metaphor of World War II, the “last good war.” The Obama speech referenced the camps and contemporary genocide. Germany, of course, is synonymous with genocide. Yet there was a broader context that remained unexplored. With the exceptions of its world wars, Nazism, and Stalinism, European imperial powers have played out their genocidal intent on the geographies they colonized and racially fashioned. The genocides that resulted were distilled into World War II and Nazi Germany. Those crimes against humanity led to the UN convention banning genocide:

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.¹⁰

Proving “intent” is the challenge. Antidiscrimination cases are difficult for plaintiffs to win because they must prove intent, that is, that the violator intentionally discriminated against you because of gender, race, sexuality, or religion. This takes place in a legal framework. One must prove motive, even though the end result should be determinative. Noting that not only blacks are harmed by antiblack genocide, João H. Costa Vargas argues in *Never Meant to Survive: Genocide and Utopias in Black Diaspora Communities* for a radical critique:

The ongoing marginalization and premature, preventable death of disproportionate numbers of Black persons in the African Diaspora create the very conditions for the revolutionary transformation of our societies. Anti-Black genocide generates the imperatives of liberation and revolution. We either begin to address, redress, and do away with what make possible the multiple facets of anti-Black genocide, or We succumb to the dehumanizing values that produce and become reproduced by the systematic and persistent disregard for the lives of Afro-descended individuals and their communities.¹¹

Because it is not the consequences that are punished but the intent to harm, the burden of proof is placed on the victims.¹²

President Ronald Reagan signed and enacted the genocide treaty in 1988 (after it was amended by the U.S. Senate allegedly in order to restrict its usage by Native American and African American human rights advocates). Genocide is still considered to be a phenomenon practiced by uncivilized, rogue states (i.e., non-Western democracies); it is rarely thought of as applicable to the United States. Seeking its “golden age,” the “postracial” America¹³ obscures repressive realities; thus, it mutes and deflects a general awareness of the full impact of racism on the lives of people. Sever U.S. racism from its logical conclusion—genocide—and matters become even more confusing and sadly satirical.¹⁴

Electing a Black President in Postracial America

The anticipatory moment of relishing the “defeat” of racism through a U.S. presidential election (followed globally, given U.S. imperial ambitions) renders Barack Obama *the* iconic harbinger of a hopeful future. White candidates making the same antiwar speeches have not amassed multiethnic followings throughout the world. Yet, Obama delivers a mixed message, shaped by either racial codes or racial indifference. In a 2008 speech seeking to shore up a primary victory over his Democratic rival Hillary Clinton, he said, “We are the party of [Thomas] Jefferson.”¹⁵ With his mixed-race child-mistress and enslaved progeny bastards at home and rabid antiblack policies in the nation’s capital and abroad, President Jefferson teeters. Despite his insistence in *Notes on the State of Virginia* that blacks are biologically inferior and unfit for democracy (while Native Americans are only culturally inferior and, hence, with proper training could be potential citizens), his political DNA has established a black legacy.¹⁶ With a mixed-race “bastardized” heritage and Ivy League education, Obama stands firm: knowing Jefferson’s racial pathologies, he avoids denouncing them by exiting the dead zone to embrace (presumably without satire) the founding father and his followers.

It is unclear how the twenty-first century’s new multicultural legacy will distance itself from Jefferson’s eighteenth-century genocidal politics since multiculturalism refuses to name them. Is the Jeffersonian legacy of racial domination amid racial commingling failing, or is it our legacy of radical antiracist resistance that falters? If the state has relinquished its geni-

dal policies, then blacks should logically support it, since it promises the “future” golden age of freedom from material want, fear, and repression. If the state continues to practice antiblack racism, then what is logical, as opposed to self-serving, in support of it, and what is the moral relevancy of Africana thought that avoids this crisis? Multicultural white supremacy can transform electionworthy blacks into Jefferson’s romanticized “Native Americans”—the ideal non-European politically conditioned to further the interests of white elites. If this is the case, we’ve come full circle, despite the specifics of policy proposals to bring about change. The Jeffersonian ideological fervor and mandate for superior and inferior races are unchallenged while progressive legislation is put forward by multiracial liberal candidates. “Civil rights” becomes the conceptual framework and *lingua franca* for redressing wrongs. It is a linguistic taboo to name racial genocide; of course, if you cannot speak it, you cannot abolish it—this, the most extreme, logical expression of racial repression. Progressive legislation is important, of course. But how can it be sustained if it refuses to articulate context, to point to the crossroads and its dead zone that we repeatedly revisit? Civil rights, as opposed to human rights or antiracist legislation, can be whittled away by successive administrations because the default mechanism of white supremacy remains in place. How is such legislation, or its promissory note, a “postracial” America, sustainable if the general consciousness of the citizenry refuses and fails to comprehend antiracist struggles?

Electioneering rather than sustainability is the driving force in party politics. During the 2008 Democratic primaries, both Clinton and Obama supported liberal agendas protecting “minority” interests. Their campaign Web sites are studies in the use of language to channel political literacy while garnering votes. Clinton offered no rubric for “civil rights” under her “Issues” icon, although there was a category for women. Under the subject of strengthening democracy, her Web site requested that people submit online forms to her “voter protection team” if they had “seen or heard of any issues with voting or people trying to keep others from voting.” The site was also in Spanish.¹⁷ In turn, on his Web site under “Issues,” Obama has a civil rights category. His progressive agenda included acts to strengthen civil rights enforcement, criminalize job discrimination, expand the scope of hate crimes statutes, end deceptive voting practices, end racial profiling, reduce crime recidivism by providing “ex-offender” support, eliminate sentencing disparities, and expand the use of drug courts.¹⁸ Obama’s hope for

reconciliation of various social sectors into a functional democracy, a more perfect union, resides in some part in the ability to revive the civil rights project, or at least its symbolism, in which “content of character” rather than “color of skin” measures civic virtue. In a September 28, 2007, speech in Washington, D.C., at the historically black Howard University, Obama introduced his “Plan to Strengthen Civil Rights”:

The teenagers and college students who left their homes to march in the streets of Birmingham and Montgomery; the mothers who walked instead of taking the bus after a long day of doing somebody else’s laundry and cleaning somebody else’s kitchen—they didn’t brave fire hoses and billy clubs so that their grandchildren and their great-grandchildren would still wonder at the beginning of the twenty-first century whether their vote would be counted; whether their civil rights would be protected by their government; whether justice would be equal and opportunity would be theirs. . . . We have more work to do.¹⁹

The candidate evokes the movement, the trauma, the sacrifice, and the commitments to justice. Then he calls for more: vote.²⁰ Because Obama is the solution. Do not simply “vote” in the civil rights abstract—vote for him. The work to be done follows only those avenues delineated within legal strategies: no protests, civil disobedience, or lawbreaking in their various social and political forms. The campaign defines the “problem” to be overcome as a litany of injustices,²¹ which in the absence of specific language can hardly be considered by the general public to be traceable to white supremacy or predatory capitalism. Social problems and injustices were delineated by the campaign, and promises were made to solve those problems.²² Again, no context was given about how racism and disenfranchisement became structural components of our collective past, present, and future lives, and no mention was made of Cruise’s “historical antecedents.” If mainstream, traditional (white) voters desired antecedents and context, then these would have been provided in order to garner their votes. But to provide antiracist discourse in the absence of an expressed desire for it or in the face of strong antipathy toward it would have effectively killed the presidential campaign of the first major party black candidate. Winners stay out of the dead zone so that they do not falter or fail with the majority. Losers are another story. Of course, the victims of genocide, such as communities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, suffer the greatest losses.

Continuing to confront the role of racial repression in genocide becomes more complicated with the political desire and emerging language for a “postracial” America. Of course, this penultimate golden age can also be racist. *Postracial* is not antiracist; rather, it is a desire to be perceived as nonracist, to not be flawed by moral and political failings. *Postracial* is supposedly a reference for being beyond antiblack racism and beyond “black racism” (given the lack of institutional power that blacks hold over whites and nonblacks, “black racism” is more accurately defined as chauvinism). *Postracial* is not synonymous with postwhite supremacy. Whiteness retains its hegemonic normativity. The ability to decide to “go beyond race,” which in conventional language is not leaving whiteness behind but leaving behind a blackness repressed by whiteness, is a power that most nonwhites do not wield. Those elite blacks who decide that discussions of white supremacy are anachronistic derive their authoritative voice from the institutional power of white patronage; they have no independence outside of that context to issue such a call, for it is not borne out in public or social policy or practice.²³

The postracial politics of the 2008 campaign was shaped in part by the successes of the civil rights movement. During Clinton’s and Obama’s jockeying in the 2008 Democratic primaries, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. remained the premier symbol for a successful national transition toward a postapartheid state now understood to be “postracialist.” As Clinton and Obama sparred, each claimed to be the heir to King’s legacy and their opponent to be a poser. Invoking (inter)national transformation of race relations, which they interpreted as based in elected officials or “grass-roots” organizations, neither referenced civil disobedience and uncivil and criminal acts against apartheid and discrimination. Their observances suggested the evolutionary movement toward a final destination, marked by the progress from the apartheid and Jim Crow eras that preceded the activism for black and Africana studies in the 1960s and the electoral clout that has helped to create Barack Obama.

The racial-sexual constructs put forward in the postmovement era acknowledge an entrenched black and Africana presence, but one bound by its entertainment value to whites. In a February 21, 2008, *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, Daniel Henninger writes, “The Democratic Party is undergoing the greatest seismic shift since Bill Clinton came out of Arkansas in 1992.”²⁴ Henninger lists the names and ages of *male* black Democratic politicians that he views as “cut more or less from the same mold”: Illinois

Senator Barack Obama; Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick; Newark Mayor Cory Booker; Washington, D.C., Mayor Adrian Fenty; and Harold Ford Jr., a Tennessee politician. In a bipartisan spirit, Henninger also lists prominent black Republicans: former Maryland Lieutenant Governor Michael Steele and former Oklahoma Congressman J. C. Watts complete his list.

These leaders follow in the wake of the “postracial” politics that Henninger dates to *The Cosby Show* and its fictive heteronormative upper-class family.²⁵ The all-American black Huxtables supposedly ushered in the “postracial” politics that mark our present-day encounters. President Reagan also cited the popularity of the show with whites as indicating that the civil rights movement was no longer needed. Henninger, a Clinton supporter, seems to applaud Obama, and his cohort group, as having moved blackness out of the “other” category of pathology and racial resentment. He writes: “Right now, Barack Obama is the most famous symbolic man in America, and in one area of the nation’s life where symbolism still matters. Is this enough to make someone president? No.”²⁶ The piece concludes by suggesting the true heirs of the King legacy: “Barack Obama may be taking his country to a new place on racial politics. His party’s politics looks like a higher mountain.”²⁷ For Henninger, the Democratic Party was synonymous with its (then-)dominant leadership, the Clintons. Barack and Michelle Obama, as a high-powered, highly successful American family who “worked” for their wealth while placing their children’s needs as central, are likely to be considered the “new” Huxtables by some Americans. That appeal could help to derail old party politics.²⁸

One hundred eighty degrees removed from the *Wall Street Journal* is the *Black Agenda Report* (BAR). The journal’s managing editor, Bruce Dixon, writes in the February 20–26, 2008, issue: “In this year of symbolic optimism, when a Black man is a leading contender in the presidential race, as well as being a leading recipient of contributions from Wall Street, from big insurance and from military contractors, the need to measure and describe life as it is actually lived by millions of African Americans has never been greater.”²⁹ Dixon references the economy and racially driven policing and incarceration as they reflect the most impoverished sectors (again a 180-degree turn from blackness or racial politics embodied in the fictive Huxtables, the ultimate black achievement narrative): “As recently as 1964, a majority of all U.S. prisoners were white men. But since 1988, the year Vice President George H. W. Bush rode to the White House stoking white

fears with an ad campaign featuring convicted Black killer and rapist Willie Horton, the black one-eighth of America's population has furnished the majority of new admissions to its prisons and jails."³⁰ Here, incarceration is not an afterthought or footnote but rather the "criminal justice complex" is woven into the national political economy and its racial politics. (The Washington, D.C.-based Sentencing Project notes that the majority of drug consumers are white but the majority of those incarcerated are black or Latino because of disparities in racial profiling, policing, and sentencing.)³¹

The indicator of black well-being and, thus, the meaning of politics are measured, in *BAR*'s estimation, by the most disenfranchised. As a result, readers encounter *BAR*'s continuing criticisms of Obama due to the politician's presentation of racial politics (including his rhetorical embrace of Ronald Reagan, a bipartisan move also criticized by Hillary Clinton) and his literal embrace of white men, identified by *BAR* as the most racially reactionary and conservative sector of American society. However, *BAR* does not mention that black women are the fastest-growing population among the incarcerated and the sector of society most at risk for HIV/AIDS. (When *NewsHour*'s Gwen Ifill moderated the 2004 vice presidential debates, she posed questions about black women and HIV/AIDS to both Vice President Dick Cheney and Senator John Edwards; both candidates were ill-informed on the issue.)³²

The postracial politics of the presidential election, like the postracial politics of the academy, will not be easily tethered to a black liberation agenda. "Intellectual subterfuge" might permit us to attempt to peacefully coexist with the invisible woman, that is, to continue to profit from her presence in labor or service to more dominant sectors. The Huxtables have provided a reassuring fictional future that has more attraction than futuristic novelist and MacArthur Grant recipient Octavia Butler's damaged and dangerous heroines. The Huxtables posit the lack of imagination on the political landscape and so facilitate (white) "normalcy" as oppositional to (colored) "pathology" projected onto an alien blackness embedded in criminals, radicals, and anarchist-activists. The political trajectories toward being mainstreamed suggest the promise of the climax, one that in time will reward centuries of struggle, even if the promise might be imaginary. It doesn't matter how brave we are. In the absence of conventional time that works for us, it matters only that a community of scholars and activists provides a container that holds us as we seek to confront bondage without the promise of liberation. What seems most important is our immediate experience to

expand moments of possible freedom through interrogation and critique of the conceptual, political frameworks that constitute our constructive “past” and promised “future” and foster the invisibilities that constitute our blind spots.

Conclusion: The Future of Africana Studies

Inspired by the multidimensional concept of genocide suggested by Patterson and his collaborators in 1951, I [argue] . . . the necessity of coming to terms with the deadly, often state- and society-sanctioned, yet seldom overt contemporary campaigns against peoples of African descent. Approached from various angles, genocide allows us to understand seemingly disparate phenomena as they relate to each other, contributing to the continued oppression and death of Black people in Africa and its diaspora. . . . [We require] a heuristic framework around which we can not only recognize but also combat the multiple forms that anti-Black genocide has acquired in late capitalist polities.

—João H. Costa Vargas, “Genocide in the African Diaspora”

Remove the knife from the five-year-old’s throat. The universe will take care of itself.

—Kofi Busia, Omega Institute, July 28, 2008

In *The Black Jacobins*, C. L. R. James remarks of historians, “They write so well because they see so little.”³³ What is often unspoken and so unseen is the pervasiveness of violence. If genocide is taken off the table for discussion, then there is no immediacy in the struggle. Here’s the point: time does not exist, but genocidal violence does. The golden age is American mythology. There is no evolutionary future, only the immediate struggle. Resisting violence is a mandate. If our writing suffers because we see more than we can articulate, that’s fine. At least we tried. Residing in the dead zone, at the nexus where the flight from violence meets the deeper immersion within it, our only achievement will be to stop fetishizing achievement and romanticizing or condemning dysfunction and despair. The crossroads’ dead zone becomes a threshold, a potential site for working for emancipation.

Crossing back and forth over the threshold, thought is freed from a prevalent cultural drug, U.S. exceptionalism. Globally exported as the deification of democracy abstracted from context, U.S. exceptionalism is justified by some by money and militarism; the more thoughtful point to the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Yet either rationalization posits the religious belief that democracy is an evolutionary trek toward freedom.³⁴ Given the Thirteenth Amendment, the convict lease system, and the modern prison industrial complex, the United States has never known democracy severed from captivity.³⁵ Yet democracy is rarely contextualized within systems (e.g., socialism, capitalism, consumerism, or [multiracial] white supremacy). As a freestanding idealization, it issues its own mandate: history must usher in its own golden age. Thus, the training of a truncated political imagination begins. U.S. exceptionalism positions party politics and the transcendent political leader to overshadow the agency of genocidal survivors and political resistance. Is there anything more exceptional than a nation of white supremacy deigning to elect a black man as its chief executive?

Hence, at the place where black achievement intersects with black genocide, there is a void that elicits little analytical interest among academic achievers. Most ignore the presence of the intersection, looking past the void with its supposedly obscure or muted signals—there are no yellow, orange, or red flares to indicate national black security threats—of state violence or state-incited genocide in Western democracies. Thinkers see only what is intellectually compatible with our paradigms, shaped and filtered by the dominant ideologies of the “dominant culture” (the latter phrase used by Jeremiah Wright elicited derision within mainstream media).³⁶

In Africana thought, some ask: how could a black or Africana man ascend to the presidency while antiblack racism and genocide flourish? Despite or because of George W. Bush’s 2000 presidency as a bequest from the U.S. Supreme Court following felon disenfranchisement, racially driven intimidation at the polls, and faulty voting machinery for impoverished neighborhoods, people more clearly see the process of electing a progressive black president in the United States. Most seem befuddled by the process through which antiblack racism leads to genocide. In an era in which a black man can be elected president in a non-African nation founded on slavery and white supremacy, what is the meaning of black genocide embedded in domestic and foreign policies, and how might multiracial white supremacy mask that meaning?³⁷

American exceptionalism has infiltrated Africana thought. This semantic infiltration shapes a discourse of entitlement. Americans and African Americans, including the newly arrived immigrants from Africa and the diaspora, are entitled to a future that appears to look like the future that whites sought to craft under capitalism and racism and sexism—the “American dream.” In a democratic state, the entitled are those (deserving) Americans and blacks, whose coronation occurs through the electoral process. John Mbiti could point out that such a concept of time (and space) is localized and not universal (quantum physics and Vedanta philosophy concur). Harold Cruise could warn that for African Americans to forget historical antecedents—steeped in genocidal policies implemented by a democratic state—would mean essentially the loss of our souls if not our minds. But neither of these arguments has much impact on politics in contemporary Africana thought.

The academy’s neoliberal mandate underscores black and Africana studies as well as other critical studies (ethnic, women and gender, queer, community engagement). Africana thought that circulates as intellectual property is largely produced and disseminated in university or college programs and departments, part of the government or corporate sectors, or all of the above. Given the endowments of elite colleges and universities, Congress has increasingly questioned whether such schools deserve tax-exempt status. Of course, state universities are extensions of the government and are regulated as such. Africana studies and thought may function as political parties in an academic environment with our own versions of the Republican National Committee, the Democratic National Committee, and the centrist Democratic Leadership Council, which attempts to emulate the past victories of archconservatives and reactionaries in the Grand Old Party.

Academics embedded in “political parties” (that is, political agents operating only within the confines of systems dominated by elites) often do not reject achievement or Mbiti’s “concept of history moving forward towards a future climax.” In the absence of an intellectual promise or progress culminating in tangible liberation, there is no apparent (political) purpose or mission statement for Africana thought, outside of gathering more data for those dedicated to alleviating suffering, intellectual investigations, or “opportunities” and career advancement. Grappling with the issue of black genocide outside of a liberal framework is seen as the kiss of death for career-minded academics.

The real and symbolic battles waged during the 2008 primaries have spun out symbolic gestures and performances that captivate a global audience and inspire loyal followers.³⁸ Yet how do the loyalists—the new political class—perceive and respond to antiblack genocide in all of its nuanced and blatant manifestations?

Sacrifices and struggles to create, institutionalize, and preserve African studies would promise, one hopes, a future, stable ground for further movement toward liberation. Yet we might be living in a sci-fi novel, one in which—as in the works of Butler, whose stumble on a Bay Area curb yielded yet another ancestor—we find the convergence of the scientific and the imaginative, of the empirical and the theoretical. All have the possibility of fashioning freedom. Resisting party politics and postracial racism, African thought may (re)invent itself acknowledging a past that cannot be fully celebrated, a present that cannot be adequately explained in conventional terms, and a future that cannot be fully trusted to promise anything like a utopia. Dystopia? As Butler's work suggests, dystopia is entirely possible. Yet in terms of liberation in the pursuit of (re)invention, we shall find that it is impossible to adequately contextualize any of this if, as *Some of Us Are Brave* asserts, the invisible woman sitting squarely in the crossroads remains unseen.³⁹

Admittedly, this essay stumbles. The intersection is unlit. The center, corners, curbs, and crossing lines are shadowed. In those shadows reside presidential party politics and genocidal policies. In full circle, “historical antecedents” offer both departure and arrival points as we repeatedly cross our own past while projecting a real and imagined future as critical thought radically invents meaningful engagement.

Notes

This essay is based on a paper presented at Cornell University on March 4, 2008, and updated following the November 4, 2008, election of Barack Obama as president-elect. My thanks to Grant Farred for his editorial insight.

- 1 These divergent lines intersect out of necessity. There is a shared condition of “blackness” as alienated and suspect in a white-dominated state and society. The intersection is often jarring, for there is no shared ideological narrative or political will to confront this alienation. I do not assume that the reader agrees that U.S. policies have historically promoted racial genocide. Perhaps, as a friend and colleague has observed, only the “extreme Left” would use this terminology. Even the Kerner Commission report on civil rights and civil disturbances and riots, a report that would be considered “radical” by today's political norms, did not issue that charge. This failure of recognition could be critiqued as part of

the ideology of nationalism or as an expression of genocide itself: if it does not exist, then we are innocents.

Elsewhere I have discussed the UN Convention on the Prevention and Elimination of Genocide and racial bias in U.S. domestic and foreign policy. See Joy James, *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in U.S. Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

- 2 William Patterson, ed., *We Charge Genocide: The Historic Petition to the United Nations for Relief from a Crime of the United States Government against the Negro People* (New York: Civil Rights Congress, 1951).
- 3 For analyses of conditions that are relevant to the United Nations' definition of genocide against blacks in the United States, see the following: Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black People in America from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2008); Dorothy E. Roberts, *The Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Dylan Rodriguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); João H. Costa Vargas, *Never Meant to Survive: Genocide and Utopias in Black Diaspora Communities* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008); and Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2008).

For those who disdain or refuse the term *genocide*, despite the compatibility of black conditions with the standards of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Elimination of Genocide, one must ask, "What language would you use?"

- 4 *Tragedy fatigue* is a term used in 2006 by a BBC correspondent to refer to black Aboriginal men who raped an infant who then had to be stitched together after the assault. The correspondent coined the term to reference genocidal violence inflicted on the indigenous population and the recycling of that violence among the same population generations later. No mention was given to the state's continual violence against Aboriginal Australians. Phil Mercer, "Abuse Rife at Aboriginal Camps," BBC, May 16, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4984986.stm>.
- 5 That Bill and Camille Cosby's son was murdered in the 1990s while changing a car tire in Los Angeles (the killer was an Eastern European immigrant) and that Bill Cosby himself has been accused of multiple sexual assaults on women appear to have not penetrated the consciousness of television, university, and community hall interviewers or audiences attending lectures promoting his book coauthored with Alvin Pouissant, *Come On, People*. See William H. Cosby Jr. and Alvin F. Pouissant, *Come On, People: On the Path from Victims to Victors* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007).
- 6 In the postwar era, U.S. presidents and lawmakers have directed the focus on genocide onto international enemies, using epithets such as "Hitler," "Stalin," or the "evil empire" during the Reagan administration's cold war with the USSR, and the "axis of evil" under the administration of George W. Bush and its battles with North Korea, Iran, and Iraq. Pavlovian moves for the electorate cheapen not only memories of historical atrocities but contemporary terrors.
- 7 For additional information on these areas of social decline, see South End Press Collective, *What Lies Beneath: Race, Katrina, and the State of the Nation* (Cambridge, MA: South

- End Press, 2007); Prison Policy Initiative, www.prisonpolicy.org (accessed October 28, 2008); and Dorothy E. Roberts, *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).
- 8 "Obama's Speech in Berlin," transcript, *New York Times*, July 24, 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/07/24/us/politics/24text-obama.html. See also "Transcript: Barack Obama's Speech on Race," National Public Radio, March 18, 2008, www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88478467.
 - 9 That mainstream news outlets such as the *New York Times* found the Republican presidential candidate's early tour of Latin America puzzling and anticlimactic reveals how the global citizen remains weighted with hierarchies of value.
 - 10 United Nations, "Convention on the Prevention and Elimination of Genocide," A/Res260 A (III), December 9, 1948; available from www.un.org/Depts/dhl/resguide/resins.htm (accessed November 7, 2008).
 - 11 Vargas, *Never Meant to Survive*, x.
 - 12 Amari Sekou, a doctoral student in anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin, maintains an e-mail advocacy group for organizing against antiblack genocide. He also heads the student committee of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement in New York. In a July 2008 message to the advocacy group, Sekou noted the following: given that UN documents are fairly inaccessible to people, the naming process of genocide, the evaluation of the investigation of it, and the adjudication or punishment of it belong largely in the hands of non-African elites. In addition, in the U.S. consciousness, genocide seems to be the historical property of Europeans as white perpetrators and victims. The question becomes how will Africana thought provide clear, simple definitions and examples of genocide in terms of a contemporary tragedy, one played out in bourgeois democracies. Sekou argues that people believe they need to be validated by the very institutions and authorities that are destroying them: "The use of the UN definition produces an air of officialness." If the language of Africana thought also produces an air of authority, the dependency web widens.
 - 13 Genocide is more clearly seen and more often addressed in the African context, even if, as in the case of Rwanda, after the fact. In racially fashioned global consciousness, Africa depicts a visceral portrait of the trek off the golden path into a hellish quagmire. Celebratory democratic moments, such as the presidential elections of Nelson Mandela (1992, 1996) and Thabo Mbeke (2000, 2004) in South Africa are heralded as great achievements. They are; well, at least Mandela's election was. Despite electoral gains, black mass poverty, misery, and violence remain entrenched. Propaganda informs that genocide preceded the African National Congress's entry into government but did not follow the ruling party into office.
 - 14 Following the ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the United Nations designated rape as a "war crime." In Sudan, rapes of girls, women, and boys and their mutilations or branding are part of ethnic cleansing, and this even extends to attacks against black Muslims. Africana thought must address "autogenocide," which would include domestic violence and the neglect or abuse of children and women. If we expand our definition of "political violence" (what some have referred to as "politicide"), we can take trauma seriously without personalizing it. Much as Veteran Administration hospi-

tals, the federal government, and the military had to understand that soldiers' posttraumatic stress syndrome was not about their personal (psychological) weakness, theorists and activists for political change will have to reconceptualize or frame language. For such violence should be understood not merely in terms of personal "weakness" but also in terms of political violence against a member of a subordinate group. In economic neglect and physical coercion or abuse, children are subordinate to adults, women to men. This is all a form of political violence. As such, it is a surrogate of state and corporate genocidal violence.

Africana thought sufficiently politically engaged but also somewhat psychologically detached will not be overwhelmed by genocidal violence; that is, paralysis will not result from either indifference or despair. Progressive action requires that black people routinely confront external and internal genocide without collapsing under the weight of indifference, despair, self-abuse, political apathy or defeatism, or anger directed against the victims (including self-anger). By expanding the scope for struggle rather than shrinking it in an attempt to manage crises, the chaotic, unstructured nature of violence reveals itself to a fuller extent. The UN "manages" genocide by having an "acceptable" number of dead and displaced before rhetorical intervention is made; military intervention with UN peacekeepers, if it happens at all, tends to occur well after the start of violence. Exactly how does one quantify genocide? If we situate antiblack genocide in the global economy of arms trade speculation (China in Africa) and the destruction of global food markets, the theft of natural resources and labor, and the expansion of repressive penal industries, then we have a presidential policy that encompasses the domestic and foreign arenas.

- 15 "This primary season may not be over, but when it is we will have to remember who we are as Democrats, that we are the party of Jefferson and Jackson, of Roosevelt and Kennedy, and that we are at our best when we lead with principle, when we lead with conviction, when we summon an entire nation to a common purpose and a higher purpose." "Transcript: Senator Obama's Remarks in N.C.," *New York Times*, May 6, 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/05/06/us/politics/06text-obama.html?scp=1&sq=Barack%20Obama%20%22We%20are%20the%20party%20of%20Jefferson%22&st=cse.
- 16 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Washington, DC: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1905).
- 17 Hillary Clinton Web site, <http://clinton.senate.gov/issues/women/> and <http://clinton.senate.gov/issues/civil/> (accessed November 4, 2008).
- 18 Barack Obama Web site, "Civil Rights," http://origin.barackobama.com/issues/civil_rights (accessed November 6, 2008).
- 19 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Howard University Convocation" (speech delivered at Howard University, Washington, DC, September 28, 2007), www.barackobama.com/2007/09/28/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_26.php (accessed November 5, 2008).
- 20 If party politics simplify narratives and "reality" is spun for electoral advantage and economic gain, then despite their differences ideologues tow the same party line. Even the Republican and Democratic Party elites have more in common than disenfranchised groups seeking admittance. The Democratic National Committee's failure to contest voting irregularities in 2000 in Florida and in 2004 in Ohio and a report that one out

of seven black votes is routinely thrown out suggest that increasing the voting rolls has more to do with increasing (or, for Republicans, decreasing) the electoral advantage of a particular party, not the expansion of black rights under white supremacy.

- 21 The following is from Obama's campaign Web site:

Pay Inequity Continues: For every \$1.00 earned by a man, the average woman receives only 77 cents, while African American women only get 67 cents and Latinas receive only 57 cents.

Hate Crimes on the Rise: The number of hate crimes increased nearly 8 percent to 7,700 incidents in 2006.

Efforts Continue to Suppress the Vote: A recent study discovered numerous organized efforts to intimidate, mislead and suppress minority voters.

Disparities Continue to Plague [the] Criminal Justice System: African Americans and Hispanics are more than twice as likely as whites to be searched, arrested, or subdued with force when stopped by police. Disparities in drug sentencing laws, like the differential treatment of crack as opposed to powder cocaine, are unfair.

Barack Obama Web site, www.barackobama.com.

- 22 The following quotes from Obama's campaign Web site list both problems and solutions:

Strengthen Enforcement of Civil Rights

Obama will reverse the politicization that has occurred in the Bush Administration's Department of Justice. He will put an end to the ideological litmus tests used to fill positions within the Civil Rights Division.

Combat Employment Discrimination

Obama will work to overturn the Supreme Court's recent ruling that curtails racial minorities' and women's ability to challenge pay discrimination. Obama will also pass the Fair Pay Act to ensure that women receive equal pay for equal work.

Expand Hate Crimes Statutes

Obama will strengthen federal hate crimes legislation and reinvigorate enforcement at the Department of Justice's Criminal Section.

End Deceptive Voting Practices

Obama will sign into law his legislation that establishes harsh penalties for those who have engaged in voter fraud and provides voters who have been misinformed with accurate and full information so they can vote.

End Racial Profiling

Obama will ban racial profiling by federal law enforcement agencies and provide federal incentives to state and local police departments to prohibit the practice.

Barack Obama Web site, "Civil Rights."

- 23 The prison and policing systems are prime examples of a nation failing to go beyond race; racial and class bias are instrumental in arrests, sentencing, and executions in the United States, where the majority of those who commit illegal acts are white but the majority of those incarcerated are not.
- 24 Daniel Henninger, "Obama and Race," *Wall Street Journal*, February 21, 2008.

- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Michelle Obama's more moderate and mollified language and the accompanying visual images increasingly evoke the more comforting image of the fictive Claire Huxtable, who presents the more suitable demeanor of a First Lady, even one who is black. Zillah Eisenstein has written extensively on race, feminism, and controversy concerning Michelle Obama. See Zillah Eisenstein's writings online at www.ithaca.edu/zillah/projects.htm (accessed October 28, 2008).
- 29 Bruce Dixon, "African America—Mass Incarceration," *Black Agenda Report*, February 20–26, 2008.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 See the online Sentencing Project reports at www.sentencingproject.org (accessed October 28, 2008).
- 32 "Text of Cheney-Edwards Debate: Vice President and N.C. Senator Clash in Cleveland," CBS News, October 5, 2004, www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/10/05/politics/main647570.shtml.
- 33 James, *The Black Jacobins*, x.
- 34 Just as Christianity materialized as an imperial program, as did Judaism through Israel, so, too, have Western or bourgeois democracies emerged as imperialist in the postcolonial era.
- 35 Analyzing the Thirteenth Amendment, which codifies enslavement to the prison industry, I argue this position at length in "Introduction: Democracy and Captivity," in *The New Abolitionists: (Neo)Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings*, ed. Joy James (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), xxi–xlii.
- 36 Wright's angry "paranoia" and incivility is viewed by only a few as a radical analysis of structural repression in U.S. imperial and racial polices. Wright seemed to sanction the 9/11 terrorists by citing United States–sponsored terrorism. His widespread condemnation in the media failed to reference state violence—the Central Intelligence Agency's assassination-prone practices, the School of the Americas' training of Central American death squad leaders, Iran-Contra scandal revelations of illegal funding for Contras, CIA involvement in southern Africa and Latin America in violation of the Bolin Amendment, international drug cartels, and covert funding of counterrevolutionary paramilitaries' targeting of civilian populations using intimidation and torture.
- 37 For a discussion of "multicultural white supremacy," see Rodriguez, *Forced Passages*; and Joy James, "Democracy and Captivity."
- 38 During the 2008 primaries, Brown University's Web site proclaimed that Hillary Clinton led Rhode Island in votes. Brown gained national recognition in 2001 with the appointment of the first black president to head an Ivy League university. "R.I. Survey: Clinton Leads Obama in Democratic Presidential Field," Brown University, September 10, 2007, <http://news.brown.edu/pressreleases/2007/09/clinton-leads-obama>.
- 39 Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (New York: Feminist Press, 1982).