

A New Year's Resolution of Hope

BY IRMA MCCLAURIN

Photo: Suluki Fardan

This year I have decided against any resolutions to exercise more, eat less and refrain from working late. I have tried all of these in the past, and there are just too many intervening factors that make them impossible to keep. Mind you, I intend to walk everywhere, including to the printer, down the stairs and across the street for lunch. I also plan to monitor what I eat and portions, and I am determined not to burn the midnight oil at work - everything will be there tomorrow.

My 2008 New Year's Resolution is to cast a vote for hope by voting for Barack Obama. I have heard the media's hype about why Obama may not be the right choice. He is inexperienced; he is not Black enough, etc. But I have asked myself, since when did Black America let the American media decide our future? In the past, they have been dishonest, biased and at times

downright racist. So let's examine their questions about Obama.

Black enough (for whom)?

Barack Obama has never presented

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himself as other than what he is. He is the product of a bi-racial marriage (mother white and father Black). This type of union was impossible under slavery, though it probably occurred. The most

frequent relationship under slavery was that of sexual abuse, in which Black girls and women were targets of sexual predators who were often their white masters, the white slave overseer, and any young (white) man out to have his first sexual conquest. Slave girls and women were easy targets. As property they had no rights and so could never cry rape. Under slavery Black women were stereotyped as sexually lascivious and characterized as "asking for it" or "making them do it." These beliefs still prevail today. The progeny of these abusive relationships (though there were a few legitimate cases of white men who married their slaves and made their children legal, or as in the case of Strom Thurmond, saw to their offspring's education and occasionally met with them without every admitting paternity publicly) walk among us today. ►

We see the legacy in the faces (and skin color) of our grandparents, parents and other relatives, and occasionally they surface as a surprise in the next generation of children or grandchildren (honey, who did you

Colonel's Dream (1905).

He also took the Black community to task for privileging lighter skin in his collection of short stories entitled *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899). In these

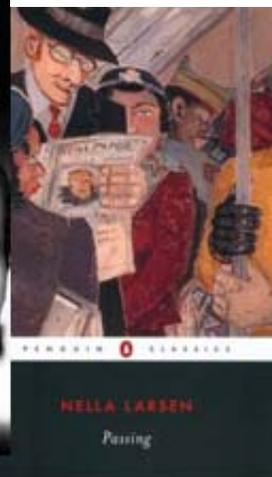
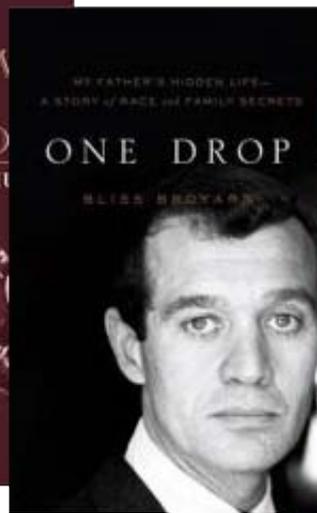
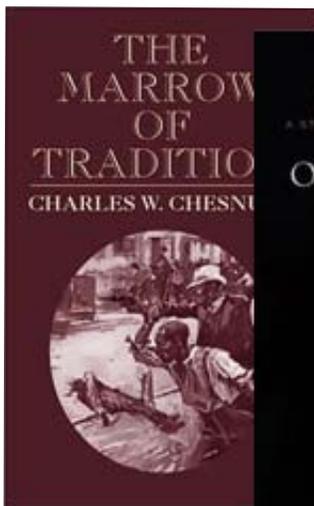
“Under hypodescent, any child with one Black parent was automatically presumed to be Black and would take on the lower (subordinate) status of that parent. This rule perpetuated slavery and ensured a never-ending stock of Blacks in servitude.”

say the baby’s father was?). In truth, a large percentage of African Americans carry some white/European genetic material, alongside that of Native American and African.

As a result of these illicit relationships, and given the Jim Crow laws against miscegenation, any child born of such unions was automatically presumed to be Black. It is what the late anthropologist Marvin Harris coined the “rule of hypodescent.” Hypo meaning lower. Under hypodescent, any child with one Black parent was automatically presumed to be Black and would take on the lower (subordinate) status of that parent. This rule perpetuated slavery and ensured a never-ending stock of Blacks in servitude. It didn’t matter that some of these slaves looked like their fathers (phenotypically white) and could pass; if knowledge of their ancestry were revealed they could be thrust back into slavery at a moment’s notice. We have come to know it as the “one drop rule.” That is, one drop of Black blood, regardless of phenotype (appearance) makes you Black.

After emancipation, some of those who could pass over and lived with the perpetual fear of discovery (see Nella Larsen’s novels, *Passing* and *Quicksand*). Twentieth century African American novelist Charles Waddell Chesnutt (who was phenotypically white, but “legally” Black) wrote about the challenges of being a “mulatto” in three novels, *The House behind the Cedar* (1900), *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) and *The*

stories, Chesnutt critiques those Blacks who established a “color line” to exclude darker-skinned Blacks. Each story hinges on some type of misunderstanding in which the darker-skinned Black is presumed to be less than his lighter-skinned counterparts. At the end of the story, there is a turnabout in which Blackness is proven to be worthy or in which the light-skinned Black chooses to stand with his/her race and shuns passing.



Modern day stories such as Bliss Broyard’s narrative of her father’s passing for white in *One Drop: My Father’s Hidden Life - A Story of Race and Family Secrets* (2007), remind us of the deep reach of slavery’s legacy into the American present, and how some of us have come to lament and deny our ancestry, rather than seeing it as a *cause célèbre*.

Why celebrate? Because we as a people survived the horrors of slavery and thrived; through our

labor and our blood, sweat and tears, we created the economic foundation for which America is noted. Slave labor built such monuments of American progress and democratic government as the White House and the United States Capitol, and used our talents and creativity to establish a rich cultural tradition of music, dance, art and literature rooted in a fusion of African, European and Native American elements. If Indians are the first authentic Americans, we are truly the second American people. We are innovators and inventors, facts that should be celebrated and revered.

This is the backdrop for understanding the significance of the media’s questioning of Barack Obama’s Black authenticity. According to this country’s history and its well-established rule of hypodescent, he is Black. End of story. As for the answer to the question of whether he’s “Black

enough?” His actions have proven that he is more

attuned to and understands the challenges of what it means to be a Black person, and specifically a Black man, in America than any of the other candidates. He rose against the structural barriers of racism and economic and social privilege to become the first Black president of the *Harvard Law Review*. He then took that well-earned privilege and worked as a grassroots organizer; no one can doubt that his educational pedigree could have provided more lucrative ▶



PHOTO: STUDIOTOBECHI

opportunities as the *Harvard Review's* first black president. He chose to follow an action agenda of helping those most in need. Years before he was a presidential candidate on the campaign trail, Barack Obama already had cast his destiny with "the folk."

In this political culture, Barack is a rarity because his words and his actions are in alignment. He walks the walk of a man who understands the plight of the dispossessed, and at the same time he can commune with and compete effectively among the elite (a la Harvard). He managed a successful political career as an Illinois State Senator and has made history again as only the third African American since 1881 *ever* to be elected to the United States Senate since Reconstruction - that

is almost 114 years!

What's experience got to do with it?

One critique that is percolating in our community is Obama's lack of experience. Well, Hillary Clinton has experience as a Senator and so does Barack Obama. Where they differ is that Hillary spent time in the White House married to the President. While she was involved in health care, her only claim to experience is that she was at the table, behind the scenes and privy to the President's most intimate thoughts - sometimes. But she was not the president.

She has had a chance to be a "presidential" intern. But where was she when her husband instituted welfare reform that has made women and children more vulnerable? Where

was she when Clinton backed down on appointing Lani Guinier? Why didn't he back his candidates the way Bush has dug in and backed his appointees? Obama did not have the opportunity to become a presidential intern - very few Blacks would ever be able to do so. But he has as much experience as Senator John F. Kennedy had when he ran for president, and he offers us the same possibility of hope and a new political order, even within the Democratic Party - now that's political transformation.

A vote for hope is a vote for our future

We have become a country where President Bush's religious beliefs have infused virtually every action he has taken. They have affected his stance ►

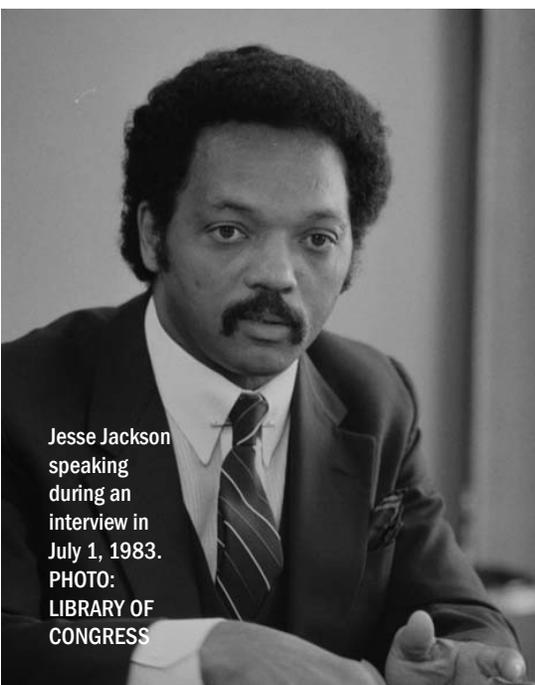
on national and global environmental policies, military engagements (which seem more like holy crusades fueled by his personal religious fundamentalism than legitimate political responses to external threats) and medical research. Has anyone noticed that under the current President, the poor are getting poorer, the rich are getting richer, and under his unfunded legislation of “No Child Left Behind” our children who are poor and/or minorities are not just being left behind, but they are being pushed out of schools so that the test scores can appear to increase?

Further, under this current presidency, the prison industrial complex is growing at a phenomenal rate and it is capturing those very same children who have been pushed out of schools and now are hopeless.

Internationally, we have become a global laughing stock due to President Bush’s arrogance, but more importantly, the contradictions in our actions and policies have revealed that democracy is nothing more than a trademark - from prisoner of war abuses and ignoring human rights violations within those countries that President Bush views as allies, to unprecedented surveillance of U.S. citizens under the Homeland Security Act, we are moving very close to a totalitarian state where the President believes he has the right to



PHOTO: STUDIOTOBECHI



Jesse Jackson speaking during an interview in July 1, 1983. PHOTO: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

For those too young to (or too jaded to want to) remember Jesse Jackson’s second presidential campaign in 1988, the phrase “give peace a chance” may not resonate. But as the end of the year approaches, it suddenly emerged from the deep crevices of my memory, like an old school Motown refrain. Think “Tracks of My Tears” by Smokey Robinson or “My Girl” by Mary Wells.

My New Year’s resolution will be very simple this year. It is a riff on Jackson’s statement above. I resolve to give *hope* a chance by casting my vote for Barack Obama. I believe that the possibility of his winning could radically transform the social fabric of our country. We could once again become a caring country rather than a global military and economic bully. We could once more become a country that believes it is simply not right that multinational companies and their CEOs amass amazing profits while our public educational systems deteriorate each year and public universities, in terms of costs, are moving further out of reach of those who most need them. We could once more believe that a strong country is one that invests in its own citizens before relying upon special visas and draining the brain power of poor countries elsewhere. We could once

more become a country that takes a stance to better equip our schools, feed our poor, house our homeless and build more health clinics rather than prisons. We could once more become a country filled with hope.

Can he win? It really doesn’t matter. What matters most to me is that we begin to *believe* in someone who symbolizes the diversity of this country, its history and its people; who has used his education to benefit the dispossessed; and who stands as a challenge to status quo politics.

A vote for Barack Obama is a vote for hope -nothing more, nothing less.

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exercise his powers without any checks or balances. Anyone who criticizes this new rule of law is labeled unpatriotic.

Give hope a chance