dreams from obama

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Supporters listen to news that Barack Obama has won the presidency from the non-ticket holder area of Grant Park November 4, 2008 in Chicago, Illinois. Photograph by Michal Czerwonka/Getty Images.

Like all political leaders, Barack Obama offers an idealized image through which supporters can see their own hopes, their "best selves," reflected through an identification with him.

In Obama's case, his racial identity is a crucial component of this image—and though he has not explicitly claimed this, he has implicitly offered us a return to the ideal that was at the core of whites' sympathetic identification with black claims at the high point of the civil rights movement in the early 1960s. This claim was to be included in a mutually supportive communal relationship from which blacks had been excluded—first through enslavement and then through the forced subordination of racial segregation. The injustice of this exclusion only became clear to a majority of whites when they themselves felt alienated from an inclusive communal identity; this was whites' understanding not simply of blacks but of themselves in the 1960s. This empathic identification faded after the racial and social turmoil of the late 1960s; but Obama's election signifies the possibility of renewed sense of shared membership in a mutually supportive relationship—not only with blacks but more generally.

Will this possibility actually be fulfilled? Will this promise have more staying power than the relatively brief reign of the civil rights ethos in the 1960s? The answer is, of course, not yet clear. But I have seen a hopeful harbinger in the response of African-American students at Yale Law School to Obama's election—of their readiness to see in his victory an offer of a supportive communal relationship that had not previously been available to them. Last spring, when Obama's nomination for the presidency had been assured, I had long conversations with some of my African-American students about Obama's impact on their lives and each described a sense of excitement, almost of disbelief, about the unexpected possibilities that Obama had opened for them. To an outside observer, their status as students at this elite law school might have seemed confirmation that they had joined the American "establishment." But nagging doubts still accompanied this status for them. In common with all Yale Law students—regardless of race, gender or ethnicity—each of them suspected that there had been an administrative mistake and they would, sooner or later, be unmasked and their admission would be revoked. But beyond this typical misgiving, some further suspicion persisted that their race remained a special demerit, a specific reason that they were not fully accepted, not full-fledged members of the Yale community.

Obama's success in obtaining the Democratic nomination in itself had already altered these students' visions of themselves. Possibilities that had seemed remote for them suddenly seemed to be within their grasp—not so much for professional or economic success but for their sense of belonging at Yale specifically and in America more generally.

One student in particular told me about an experience with his father, a humanities professor at a mid-Western university. The two of them had been browsing in a clothing store and the father called his son's attention to a white clerk who seemed to be following them while ignoring a white shopper in another part of the store. The father said, "She's following us because she thinks we're going to steal something." My student told me that he had dismissed this thought, and after the clerk approached directly and asked if she could assist them, he said to his father, "You see, she only wanted to help us." The father, however, repeated his insistence that the clerk was motivated by racial animosity. This disagreement between father and son was, my student told me, a recurrent theme in their relationship. But just after Obama won the Iowa primary (with overwhelming white support), his father called and told him that he didn't recognize this country, that in the America where he had grown up it was inconceivable that a black man could be a major party nominee for president. My student said, "My father told me that it was my country now, not his, and that he was glad for that, and happy for me." Y

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