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On the Occasion of Barack Obama's Inauguration

It was a thrilling moment.

When Barack Obama became the president elect of the United States of America, we saw images of old warriors of the civil rights movement shedding tears. We listened to the interviews with John Lewis who had made the journey from the Edmund Pettis Bridge on Bloody Sunday to this moment of triumph. We remembered the survivors of the Civil Rights Movement, people such as Wyatt T. Walker, Otis Moss JR, Andrew Young, Dorothy Cotton, Diane Nash, Robert Moses and others. They survived a movement that demanded a very high price from its nonviolent warriors. The drama of those days was compelling.

However, to jump from the 1960s to November 4, 2008 without a recognition of the between time would be a mistake. Much ordinary, day by day work ploughed the ground that allowed an African-American man to successfully run for president of the United States. Election night analysts told us that college educated people and young people had been instrumental in Mr. Obama's victory. Therefore, let us give credit to the students, faculty and administration of colleges and universities who worked to expand their curricula and their syllabi to include the work of African-Americans, women and other underrepresented voices in the academic cannon.

We ought to give some credit to scholars such as Cornel West, Thomas Sowell, Katie Cannon, Emilie Townes and others who wrote about race, economics, philosophy, ethics, and politics, helping America think more critically about race. We ought to remember scholars such as Michael Omi and Howard Winant whose work on race theory and the social construction of race helped students see the various contestations over the meaning of race.

We ought to recognize the development of postcolonial studies, an area of academic studies that reads the writings of peoples who have lived through colonial domination as part of their history and culture. It reads history and current events from the perspective of indigenous people, formerly colonized peoples, and it often makes the connections between them and oppressed people everywhere. Hybridity, marginality, liminality, and calling forth the emerging voices of the subaltern characterize this field of study. In a very real sense, Barack Obama's life story is a postcolonial story. He

is a mixed race man who grew up among the subaltern in Indonesia and came of age in a multicultural Hawaii.

Much of his campaign rhetoric echoes postcolonial figures and movements. Mahatma Gandhi taught us that we ought to “be the change we want to see in the world.” Cesar Chavez and the Chicano United Farm Workers in their struggle for justice proclaimed “Yes We Can!”

Further, we ought not to forget the less famous incidents. Let us remember the students—black and white—who, in the 1990s sat peacefully in the street at the intersection of Broad and Diamond to protest a racial incident at Temple University. One outcome of the protest was a requirement to study race and racism. Many professional schools, including theological schools, require such studies. We cannot know the impact of that protest upon the outcome of the election in Pennsylvania.

Let us remember pastors such as Rev. Sam Mann, pastor of St. Mark Union Church and Executive Director of Inner City Services in Kansas City, MO and John Mendez of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, NC who worked with pastors on reframing the dialogue on race. Rev. Mann also worked with the late Rev. Mac Charles Jones of the National Council of Churches to address the problem of black church burnings in the 1990s. And yes, let us give credit to Rev. Jeremiah Wright JR. The distortion of his ministry notwithstanding, it is no doubt that his preaching and teaching helped Mr. Obama develop the spiritual wherewithal to make the run for president. Rev. Wright has preached a message of audacious hope for years. He preaches and teaches that believers have an obligation to live to their fullest potential, and believers ought to trust God for the outcome of their efforts.

Let us thank business leaders of organizations both large and small who embraced affirmative action because it gave them a rationale to open their doors wider, to create a larger pool of talent from which to hire the best people. And once they created diverse work places, hired consultants to come in and conduct diversity training seminars.

Let us remember communities that engage, even now, in ongoing conversations on race. This past fall, during the election, I participated in such a conversation in Montclair, NJ. Communities across the nation have conducted such conversations for years. They have also engaged diversity through the arts and with community festivals.

Finally, and perhaps most important, we ought to give credit to those individuals of all ethnicities who stepped outside of their comfort zones and moved into neighborhoods where they were

the minority. We ought to give credit to those who stayed when the neighborhood changed. We ought to think about all of the people who went to work every day and was the only one of their race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation and helped their fellow citizens know that beneath the differences we all share the same fears, hopes, loves, dreams as we work to live our humanity.

On the occasion of the inauguration of Barack Obama as the first African-American president of the United States, we ought to pay tribute to the countless unnamed ordinary people who made this day possible.