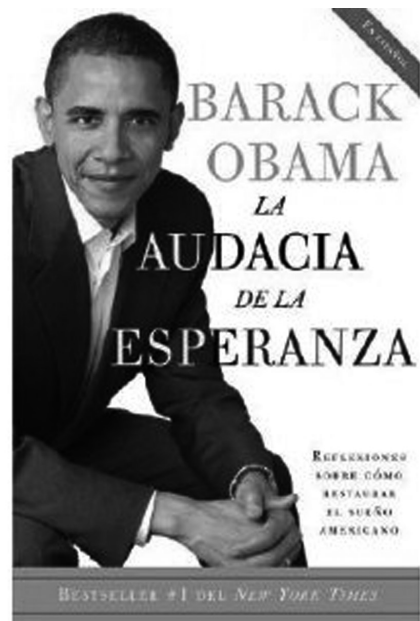


Obama and the Tradition of Racial Optimism: Lessons for Us

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After reading *The Audacity of Hope*, an excellent book written by Barack Obama, the current President of the United States, I am reminded of a racially optimistic literature so popular in the African-American tradition in the United States, and the strong, ever-present sense that blacks there should and can arrive by dint of their own ideas. It is not only a well-written book, but also wonderfully structured, and follows along the lines of what U.S. culture, and particularly African-American culture, considers among the most important things in society: values. An understanding of values allows us to speak of a literature of optimism, as opposed to a pessimistic variety. Even its title, *The Audacity of Hope*, reveals that the book's tropes will admit no terminology or narrative that promotes, a priori, any possibility of moral or spiritual defeat.

What is interesting about the text is that optimism and hope make their appearance in a political context in which there are always reasons for pessimism, for the defeat of the most prized desires, and for the triumph of reality's cynicism. It is about the audacity of



hope, not the audacity of a utopia. This is an important distinction for understanding how and why the probability of living with hope does not deny reality; there is an obligatory gesture of negation in utopian metaphors and narratives.

The opening of Obama's book does not contradict the title's enunciated spirit. In starting out by talking about his view of the real conflict confronted in the United States by Democrats and Republicans—an often exacerbated conflict, always in the wake of struggles for the hegemony of one or another's set of values—Obama opens up possible sources of inspiration for the hopes that have always characterized American idealism.

Obama's book masterfully goes from describing the temporary or periodic nature of these political conflicts, to examining values, and puts into words, contextualizes, and gives substance to a debate that could otherwise destroy not only hope, but the very same values underlying a specific political model. This illustrates the importance of politics as a form of cultural debate, even when they are uncomfortable and at their edgiest. He tells us, or reminds us, that politics without values is no good, which could be seen as a platitude, unless we see it in the context of another possible conclusion one might derive from his book, that there are no values without politics.

Values and politics lead to hope, but from a realistic point of view: a plural realism. This is how I can connect *The Audacity of Hope* with a book like *Roots*, by another U.S. author, Alex Haley. If we do not look beyond Haley's basic, crude descriptions of black life throughout the U.S.'s long history, the interpretive linking of these two texts could seem somewhat forced. Yet, the subliminal optimism and hope found in this difficult and sometimes hope shattering text can be found in the sublimation of the character, religiosity, and force of the Negro spirituals sung in the Deep South, songs that culturally conditioned the struggle for human rights, which themselves are struggles for optimism and hope.

This tradition comes up in so many other places, e.g., in race activist and author Dorothy Height's book *Open Wide the Free-*

dom Gates, and in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s wonderful example of oratory, "I Have a Dream." What I am referring to, of course, is illustrated optimism. This traditional view of hope making things possible goes hand in hand with the accompanying view that this requires education. It is comparatively enriching to see how a racial group's social climb produces an awareness that becoming educated is its first and foremost option. *The Audacity of Hope* is not only a book by a man who is educated in and of himself; it is also the result of a racial culture informed by the idea that one cannot 'arrive' without becoming educated. This idea-awareness also exists in Cuba, and explains why the old teacher's colleges are full of mostly black people training to be future teachers.

This guiding optimism, which is passed on through values and education, is shaped by a socially integrating concept, a philosophy that is no doubt the finest bit of civilizing thought produced by African descendants throughout the Americas, particularly the United States. In fact, it involves a double integration: that of citizens being integrated into a republic of equals, and of sociocultural integration in pluralistic societies, the only way to construct nations in our hemisphere.

This is what *The Audacity of Hope* is about. Not about any racist rhetoric of cultural, racial or political superiority, or exclusivist societies or separated cultures. Of course, there will be differences and cultural specificities. "There is wealth in diversity" would be a good slogan for modernity. Yet, the concept of success cannot be preached from a celebration of distinction and difference, but rather by black culture embracing the optimism that is so well represented in Obama's writing.

If Obama's book makes any essential contribution at all to our struggle, it is when it takes up the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther

King, Jr., with a view to how State policies confer power. This illustrates the tempo, tone, epistemology, and cultural accents of African descendants, and how their political and cultural context was shaped by racial and ethnic diversity. In my view, if there is any such thing as a 'before and after' with Obama, which could be read in his two best known books, *Dreams of my Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*, it is because in them he left open the possibility of completing the construction of our nations using a philosophy of cultural flexibility that integrates into citizens' republics our very own inchoate nations south of the Rio Grande.

Honestly, much to my historical and ideological surprise, with the publication of *The Audacity of Hope*. I once again see the United States as the world's cultural vanguard. From a Cuban perspective, I might say that the last fifty years have seen a decrease in the production of racially optimistic literature. We need to conduct an archaeological study of racial literature in Cuba, that is, of literature written by black men and women. With the exception of Carlos Moore and Juan Benemelis, the Cuban racial narrative with which I am familiar contains not optimism but complaints. From poetry to essay, one cannot find anything that evokes the trouble that comes from being a member of a racial 'minority' or calls for self-liberating claims. Curiously, the writers who come closest to creating a literature of racial optimism are black female essayists. It seems that the male writers are still caught up in a deliberate and emancipating narrative that does not allow them to go beyond the notion of the *criollo*, "socialist" revolution that was carried out for but not by blacks.

It is possible that the preeminence of women's essays is due to the doubly self-liberating character one sees in educated black women, because she is both black and female, a doubly difficult situation that allows her to simultaneously contemplate, cry out, and pro-

pose while also rebelling against an equally crude and subliminal form of domination. It is actually advantageous that only two men but many more women are at the forefront of Cuba's optimistic literature. In Cuba, the definitive fight against *criollo* domination can be won only by women.

With a project of literary archaeology, we need to establish a continuum, so we can reestablish the connection between yesterday, today, and tomorrow, to give historical vigor and cultural substance to the optimistic rhetoric with which Carlos Moore has imbued all his writing. Just 'saying no' to discrimination constitutes racial self-consciousness, not the kind that is produced in academe, with its conceptual mediations, but rather one that emerges from life stories, everyday experiences, disquieting essays, contestatory poetry, and music.

Hip-hop has done a good job of taking up this optimistic narrative, but does not give precedence to the cultural narrative. This necessary connection is what makes possible racial self-emancipation and the marginalization of emancipatory political rhetoric that legitimates as good and necessary a freedom that is bestowed by others. This was not possible in the United States because a book like *Roots* could not include anything about certain lesser known aspects of the political rhetoric employed by a segment of the U.S. left. If Charles Dickens provided fodder to Marx, *Roots* undermined Angela Davis. Yet, in Cuba, there is no text to undermine *History Will Absolve Me*. In racial terms, despite the cultural and historical differences, Cuba and the United States have the same structural dilemma: self-liberation as a premise for integration on the basis of difference. In Cuba, we still need to face the challenge of recovering our narrative of racial optimism.