The recent 96th Annual Meeting of ASALH (the Association for the Study of African American Life and History) held October 6-10, 2011 in Richmond, VA provided a rich opportunity to reflect on the status and history of Black people in America, and in the world. It also spoke to my idea of "legacymaking"—something in which I have a strong interest, as its ongoing presence reflects the vision and intellectual legacy of Carter G. Woodson, the man who is known as the "Father of Black History" and who established this important organization over ninety years ago.

According to the ASALH website, the organization came into existence on September 9, 1915 under the visionary leadership of Dr. Carter G. Woodson. At that time, the name was the "Association for the Study of Negro Life and History." Despite the name change from "Negro" to "African American," the organization's vision and mission have remained consistent through the times: "We are the Founders of Black History Month and carry forth the work of our founder, the Father of Black History. We continue his legacy of speaking a fundamental truth to the world—that Africans and peoples of African descent are makers of history and co-workers in what W.E.B. DuBois called, "The Kingdom of Culture."

And ASALH has not wavered from the path that Dr. Woodson set the organization on almost one hundred years ago. At this latest conference, I was there to help launch a new journal in Black Studies—Fire!!!: a multi-media journal of Black Studies that reflects a collaboration between ASALH and JSTOR. The brains and creative and technological leadership behind the journal is Dr. Marilyn Thomas-Houston, a visual anthropologist at the University of Florida (and former colleague), with roots in the theater and music industry and a scholarly authority on the Black Diaspora in Nova Scotia—yes, there are lots of Black folk in Nova Scotia.

The numerous panels on the intersection of technology and Black Studies, referred to by some as "e-Black Studies" is a testament to the endurance of Carter G. Woodson's vision to preserve the rich contributions of African Americans to the U.S. and the world, and to the tenacity of Black Studies/aka African-American Studies/aka Afro-American Studies as an enduring field of innovative scholarship and research. It also provided ample space in the formal panels and workshops and in between, in the corridors and restaurants, to reflect on where we are as a people (our current state of affairs), and where we need to go (the future of Black America).

As fate would have it, the conference offered me the chance to see old friends, buy books that placed Black children at the center of the narrative, try on some Afro-centric clothing and simply

reconnect with folk whose common bond is celebrating and elevating the achievements of African Americans in the United States and globally. Anyone have a problem with that?

REFLECTING ON THE PROGRESS OF BLACK AMERICA UNDER PRESIDENT OBAMA
I also listened to the debates and animated conversations about the state of Black America under the first Black President of the United States. What emerged for me as a central theme is our lack of clarity over what we, as African Americans, expected of President Obama. Clearly we assumed he would be "pro-Black" and place Black people at the center of every policy—an unrealistic assumption at best. We also assumed that perhaps the racial paradigm of North America had shifted significantly with President Obama's election.

What a disappointment it has been to all of us to realize that as we approach the 22nd century, the great U.S.A., which elected the first self-proclaimed African American president in the 21st Century is still engaged in the same historic game in which racism is a key player. The political jockeying taking place to oppose President Obama's every action are intended to deny him a presidency of accomplishment, and is reminiscent of the events that occurred post-Reconstruction with the erasure of Black representation at the political level. According to noted historian Eric Foner "…between 1865 and 1877, about two thousand Blacks held elective and appointive offices in the South. A few [of these Black political figures] are relatively well-known, but most have been obscure and omitted from official state histories."

Ironically, most African Americans who held seats in the senate and congress were members of the Republican Party—a party that had a wing known as the "Radical Republicans" who supported freedmen and Civil Rights, demanded more stringent sanctions against ex-Confederates and even opposed the Klu Klux Klan, and President Lincoln, whom they viewed as too soft on anti-slavery . They would surely turn in their graves over the current antics of the Republic Party in the last two centuries.

By 1867, just two years after the end of the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, states began to "reclaim whiteness" with the emergence of "Black Codes" and "Jim Crow" laws designed to ensure ongoing political and social disenfranchisement of African Americans. Today, it is not too far-fetched to state that there is a concerted effort to reclaim whiteness, and that a Jim Crow attitude hovers over Washington, DC and the country.

Unfortunately, it has become politically incorrect and impolite to call racism where it exists. Yet, there is little else that could account for the tremendous opposition President Obama has faced since coming into office. Let's first begin with the way in which he is addressed. The media and critics have had a difficult time shaping their mouths and pens to say "President Obama." They call him "Obama," "Mr. Obama," but it has taken a long time before many have been able to ante up the courage to refer to this self-proclaimed Black man (despite his mixed parentage, which he acknowledges and embraces) as "president."

CRABS IN THE BARREL OR WHAT?
It is not clear to me also as to why there is such "hating" taking place among some African Americans, especially among such notables as Tavis Smiley and Cornell West, and some of the colleagues I encountered at the ASALH conference.

Are we disappointed that President Obama didn't "flip the script" and do for Blacks what whites have been doing all along—privilege his "own kind." If he had, I am convinced that he would have been impeached and possibly lynched, given the current political climate in which he has been characterized as a socialist, had the authenticity of his birth certificate questioned and been accused of being a closet Muslim.

President Obama has been critiqued for not paying enough attention to Black folk. And I have some friends who even suggest that we would have done better under Hilary Clinton—Pleeze! Some of the most draconian welfare policies were instituted under the Clinton administration, and the three strike rule for any criminal offense (no matter how inconsequential), disproportionately affects African American men because they are one hundred times more likely to have prior offenses. These policies and laws came into being under the Clinton administration—and who is to say that Hilary as President would not have continued this direction.

How easily we forget what the world was like before President Obama swept onto the campaign scene. Jesse Jackson had run for President twice, as did Shirley Chisholm, and neither of them came even close. Who of us did not say a prayer on election day that the miracle of a Black President, something of which we were convinced could not happen in our lifetime, might occur—and it did. Barack Hussein Obama II, self-identified African American, won the election as President of the United States of America, during what we now know to be its most challenging economic moment in history, save the Great Depression.

Has President Obama kept all of his campaign promises? No. But what politician has? Are we holding him to a higher standard? You bet! And those of us who have operated in arenas of power and privilege understand that this is the nature of the beast—we (meaning African Americans) sometimes beat up on ourselves and critique ourselves worse than those who historically have maligned us. We sometimes get in our own way, being hypercritical of anyone who has surpassed our own level, and trying to hold them back, rather than help them reach new heights.

Are we currently engaged in a "crabs in the barrel" approach to President Obama? We need to reflect on the roots of our anger and frustration; they did not just emerge with President Obama, but have been building for centuries. Yet, we expect President Obama to rectify all economic and social wrongs that have permeated the American political system in one term.

I am disappointed that there have been no suggestions that we re-establish programs such as Job Corp or create a modern-day WPA program that will put artists and others to work. The White House should look into the educational effectiveness of Upward Bound Programs, and A Better Chance, that offered educational supplements and alternatives that proved successful to achieve his educational goals.

I don't agree with all of President Obama's appointees, and I believe that he needs to clean house in his communications area because whoever is advising him has not yet tapped into the real pulse of Americans—Black or white.
I am satisfied in accepting the fact that President Obama is not the Messiah; he never promised

to be. He did promise to make this a better America for everyone within the constraints of traditional party politics, and if he is given the support he has pleaded for over the last two years, I have faith he can accomplish more along the lines of his campaign promises.

A real fact we must acknowledge is that none of Obama's presidential predecessors have ever found themselves faced with such political opposition. No matter what direction President Obama turns, Republicans have made it clear they will take no direction from a Black man. If he votes up, they vote down; if he says right, they turn left, and only former President Jimmy Carter has had the courage to call this behavior what it is—pure "d", home-grown American racism, recast as Teapartyism, recast as a return to American values of the past—by the way those were the same values that supported segregation, believed that a woman's place was in the home, and undergirded slavery. Yeah, let's go back to that past—no thank you.

The time spent at the ASALH Conference was an opportunity to reflect on where we are as a people. It was also a reminder that African American burial grounds (like the one recently discovered in Richmond, VA, the conference site) were once raided for medical experimentation, and have been paved over with parking lots. Every other people in the world are applauded for attempting to salvage their culture and reclaim their past. We are constantly reminded of the horrors of the Jewish holocaust, but any attempt by Blacks to suggest that slavery was an African holocaust is met with skepticism, and increasingly with accusations that we are reverse "racists." Those who speak that term have no idea of what they utter.

UNDERSTANDING RACISM

Let me set the record straight. Racism is the systematic exclusion of one group of people by another. It is systemic and structural, and requires societal power and institutional structures to exist. Can Blacks have prejudices? Absolutely! After all, we are socialized in a society that only recently has begun to value diversity, and is making every effort to eradicate the policies and laws that promoted diversity and inclusion. But can Blacks as a group practice racism? No. Not in our current social state of economic and political disenfranchisement. Racism is an institutional practice—bolstered by social structures, as well as political and economic power. Despite the election of a Black president, Blacks, as a group, have not acquired this level of power.

Are there good white people who recognize that they have benefitted from "white privilege" and seek to eradicate social injustices? Yes. Remember that the Civil Rights Movement was an "interracial" movement. Many whites died in the struggle to achieve civil rights for Blacks. And it is also possible for Blacks and other people of color to collude with and participate in the practice of racism and exclusion. Increasingly, the face of those who wield the policies, regulations, or operate businesses that exclude us are not white but "people of color," a term I have come to really dislike.

WHAT'S A BLACK PRESIDENT TO DO?

Even with election of Obama as President, Blacks have not gained much political and economic traction. Is Obama to blame for our lack of progress today or over the last several decades? Had he promoted a Black-centric perspective, would he have been allowed to continue his presidential term? I think not.

Remember the charges of “socialist” and “Muslim” that Palin and her followers leveled against the President? Had he moved on what could be construed as a “Black agenda,” I have not doubts that impeachment would have been the order of the day. I believe President Obama is struggling with the same things I have struggled with as a Black administrator at predominantly white institutions –albeit on a grander scale. How do you exercise power and authority in a way that doesn’t privilege your own people above others—something that has been the social standard for too long, and at the same time work to eradicate the centuries of inequities that have plagued your own people? It is a delicate balancing act.

Privileging Blacks over whites is not a solution to social injustice; it simply replaces one form of structural oppression with another—and, I’m not sure we want to go there. Historically, our redemption as a Black people has always been that we do not stoop to the level of our oppressors. However, we must work strenuously to ensure that the political and economic gains we acquired through the Civil Rights Movement, alliances between Blacks and whites, and having greater political representation do not continue to erode. The day Affirmative Action and race-based policies were eliminated, was the beginning of America’s reversion back to a work of social injustice.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN THE U.S. AND THE WORLD
Around the word, India and China promote policies that are based on the history of Affirmative Action in the United States to ensure that those historically excluded (the Dalits in India and ethnic Chinese in China) now have greater access, especially in education. Though these policies are not perfect, and may not address deep-rooted prejudices and stereotypes, neither country apologizes for their actions. Some years ago, Rena Singer of the Knight-Ridder Newspapers says “… Chinese-style affirmative action is comprehensive and so far-reaching that America's similar policies appear trifling by comparison.” America should be so enlightened.

We once were, but ironically the very thing that the Wall Street camp is crying for—a greater distribution of wealth (and privilege) is precisely what Affirmative Action laws were designed to do. If this true, then why has there been such a reaction to these policies and an erosion of access for groups “historically” underrepresented?

One theory I have is this: who was to benefit from AA got diluted and misguided with the introduction of the term “people of color.” It came to be used for anyone with a touch of melanin in their skin. And international students became the AA escape hatch. Institutions begin to substitute internationals for native-born minorities. They forgot that the goal of Affirmative Action was directed at people from groups that had been “historically” excluded: African Americans/Blacks, Native Americans/American Indians, Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans/Chicanos, Pacific Islanders and Alaskans, and Asian-Americans. These were the original “protected classes.” Affirmative Action was not intended as an immigration policy; rather, it “…was first introduced by President Kennedy in 1961 as a method of redressing discrimination that had persisted in spite of civil rights laws and constitutional guarantees.”

But institutions and organizations were more comfortable with foreign-born “people of color” because they did not share the history of oppression in the United States, and often accepted

the access that accompanied Affirmative Action but did not feel compelled at all to participate in the protests. After all, with their birth origins outside the United States, the struggle for increased access and opportunity was not their struggle.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?
Working with President Obama to create a more equitable political, economic and social system must be the direction we follow. And the operative words here are "work with." I don't believe President Obama ever expected us to remain uncritical of him. But I think if we raise our voices in community town halls where we speak to the erosion of Black rights and access to opportunities—we will be heard. If we hold "the state of Black America" discussions—that are not channeled through Soledad O'Brien, who knows as much about being "Black" as I know about being an Eskimo, but who has become the national spokesperson on "race"—though no one I know elected her as such, our voices will be heard by President Obama and his opposition. If we challenge the Republican politicians who claim to represent all the people, by staging sit-ins at their offices and writing letters and emails protesting their lack of cooperation with our sitting President, we will be heard. And we will have to decide if the "Occupy Wall Street" movement that has galvanized people across the country is really a movement intended to ensure that all Americans have equal rights, or merely a protest against the loss of white privilege.

BLACK HISTORY EVERYDAY
Thank you ASALH and the vision of Carter G. Woodson for making it possible for me to think about Black history and the status of Black people any damn day of the year—and not just in February! See ya next year at the conference.

Read More at:
http://www.asalh.org/

http://www.fire-jbs.org/

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