

in the democracy or, having been a degraded people, [we] aren't yet mature enough to participate in the democracy. And all of that is still underlying the voter suppression going on today. The release of the film *Selma* reminds us of how, not so long ago, we thought of voting as the answer, as the cure. And that turned out not entirely to be the case.

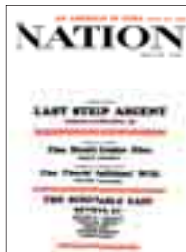
Muhammad: I wonder, Patricia, if you could talk about American exceptionalism?

Williams: Our sense of the good is always in the future. And there's a directionality to it that goes back, I guess, to the Puritan jeremiads, or *Pilgrim's Progress*, that we are proceeding toward this celestial city. That is a kind of optimism that is uniquely American, if not naïve. But it is deep in our cultural character.

At the same time, the degree to which words like "agitation" repeat and repeat.... The persistence, the reinvention, of race, of racism and its problems, really came to me in the word "agitation." I live in Boston these days, and the week after Ferguson, everybody in my neighborhood received a message from the Boston Police Department that if you were going to demonstrate, to do so responsibly—but also be aware of outside agitators. Now, certainly by one metric, everyone in Boston is an outside agitator. The language of agitation and the way in which it has devolved to be a permanent category of outside troublemaker—rather than, say, a politically progressive provocateur—is fascinating to me.

Muhammad: And the constant redrawing of boundaries—not just citizenship, but of who is part of the social contract...

Williams: But also who was human in all of this. Because this was not just a struggle for citizenship; it was a struggle from chattel, from the status of being cattle or animal to being human. [Fifty years after slavery,] the American Eugenics Society was investing more and more of its power in public discourse, even as the question of humanity was being sidelined by the growing push for Jim Crow. And I do worry that much of that "scientific language" is re-erupting [today] in the way in which we are reconstructing race as a biological category. For example, on PBS, [Henry Louis] Gates told Stephen Colbert that he was 100 percent white. This is very, very troubling—and, again, it speaks to the persistence of these scientific notions of race.



MARCH 14, 1966

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Muhammad: Langston Hughes was a frequent visitor to the library and a friend of Arturo Schomburg. His ashes are part of our Langston Hughes Atrium just beyond this auditorium, so he is always with us. But [in 1926,] he writes one of the most controversial essays of his career [for *The Nation*]: "One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, 'I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet,' meaning, I believe, 'I want to write like a white poet'; meaning subconsciously, 'I would like to be white.' This is the mountain standing in the way of any great Negro art in America, this urge within the race toward whiteness."

At the time, George Schuyler had written "The Negro-Art Hokum," a put-down of the celebrations of blackness that were all the rage in Harlem. Is it too much to suggest that this moment in the Harlem Renaissance shares much of the enthusiasm of the early Obama era? Any thoughts about "post-blackness"—then or now?

Smith: When the police are post-black, I'll be post-black.

Pinckney: That exchange between Schuyler and Hughes in *The Nation* in 1926 was really important. Schuyler's afraid of racial difference—because it has been used to define blacks as inferior. He wants to believe in color-blindness: everyone is American, there's no essential difference. And Langston Hughes embraces the difference and correctly identifies the class problem,

because the possibilities of assimilation for the middle class didn't exist for the black working class back then.

But the larger thing going on was that World War I was such a slaughter that the West lost faith in this kind of rationalistic, mechanistic thinking. And everything that had been an insult that black people were supposed to be—emotional, musical, lazy, feminine, oversexed—all of these things became virtues. In the Harlem Renaissance, they turned all of these negative images into positive ones. Whites wanted these things as well.

When we talk about "post-racial," we're actually going through another shift in control of the terms. In Ferguson, I was very struck by the young leaders on the streets. They weren't afraid to say they were gay. This is so far from the days of Bayard Rustin fifty years ago. But we're also very far from those macho postures that black people



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needed in order to take on or confront white authority. And once again, these changing definitions make it possible for whites to join, to become allies.

Williams: I heard recently a reporter describe the Senegalese man who was part of this horrible event [the *Charlie Hebdo* attack] in Paris, Amedy Coulibaly, and he referred to him as “African-American,” which was really significant to me. It made me think of how we are not only *not* post-racial, we are *pan*-racial.

We are pan-racial in a way that is also fed by the global security state, in which profiling has become an international enterprise that is very much informed by American categories. This has become a globally exported set of racial categories. And this is not a good recipe, when we all become “African-Americans” in this sense.

Muhammad: Isabel Wilkerson, you recently wrote an essay describing the Jim Crow South as the “largest slum in the world.”

Wilkerson: I think that this defection—of 6 million black Southerners from the Jim Crow regime—was misunderstood from the start. I’m so struck by the people who were interviewed around World War I by the Chicago Race Commission. They asked people why they had left and what had they hoped to find in the North. And over and over again, they said: “Freedom.” In one way or another, “freedom.”

We were decades past *Plessy v. Ferguson* [the 1896 Supreme Court decision upholding racial segregation], decades into a caste system known as Jim Crow. Jim Crow—we think of water fountains and restrooms. But Jim Crow meant that from the moment you woke up until the moment you went to sleep, a person had to be exquisitely aware of exactly what they could and could not do, based primarily on what they looked like. Every four days in the South, an African-American was lynched for some perceived breach of that caste system. And usually the presumed infractions were mundane, in the same way that we look at things that end up being a part of the killings that we’re hearing about now.

One of the most common reasons for lynching was the accusation of acting like a white person—not stepping off the sidewalk fast enough, or walking into the wrong door. It meant a nerve-jangling way to live, and that is what the people were fleeing. They were seeking political asylum within the borders of their own country. What happened to them when they arrived?



OCTOBER 20, 1956

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the North.
They said:
“Freedom.”



President Barack Obama is sworn in by Chief Justice John Roberts on January 21, 2013.



Muhammad: Du Bois publishes an article in *The Nation* in late October of 1956: “I believe that democracy has so far disappeared in the United States that ‘no two evils’ exist. There is but one evil party, with two names.” Voting would not have saved Michael Brown. But I am always uncomfortable with the kind of critique that Du Bois makes about the ballot box.

Smith: I think his cynicism is well-placed in that, as much progress is constantly being made, black people are continually left out of it. And it very much echoes the feelings of so many people on the ground right now. But it also points to the importance of grassroots organizing, so that we can push our politicians to be the politicians that we need and want in office. Whatever the limitations of the Obama presidency, part of the reason that he is elected the first time around is the antiwar movement pushing for an antiwar candidate. We have to think of these things in tandem. Voting can be a powerful tool if you’re using it in the context of a social movement that pushes the right type of people to run for office.

Pinckney: The problem with fatalism in the black community is that it always makes sure that no one can say you are a fool. The thing about pessimism is that nobody can put anything over on you. You always knew it was going to fuck up in the end.

Muhammad: In “The Last Steep Ascent,” [King] writes: “the Negro freedom movement has a policy and a program.... The lag is appearing in the white community, which now inclines toward détente, hoping to rest upon past laurels.” It is really remarkable to hear his evolving relationship to social transformation. And his unwillingness—*unwillingness*—to pronounce this work finished. Is this a King channeling our current moment?

Williams: We are talking about the hagiography of black leaders. And that is a general question of representation, whether it is in film or whether it is about Barack Obama right now. Obama was elected in part

because he became a cipher onto which people projected all of these images—that he was Malcolm X, that he was MLK. He was all things to all people—a big floating signifier. In much the same way, I think Martin Luther King has been resurrected as this color-blind conservative god to some. And I keep wondering how he would have been represented if he *had* survived. If he were 80 or 90 years old, if he had pressed his agenda, would he be heroic?

Wilkerson: When you speak of the representation of a Martin Luther King or a Rosa Parks—this idea that they have to be perfect, and that they have to be presented as perfect, is also a form of dehumanization.

Foner: I wish they would just retire his speech at the Lincoln Memorial for a while. One speech, with one or two sentences out of it, is all you hear. The guy who was calling for economic justice, the guy who was calling for an end to the war and an end to the whole military-industrial concept in this country—you never hear about that on Martin Luther King Day. The civil-rights movement, which was very disruptive and very unpopular with very many people as it was happening, has been turned into this onward-and-upward journey. I think King would be appalled to see how he is actually represented nowadays on Martin Luther King Day.

Pinckney: This is the whole problem of the United States: history is a great inconvenience. So is the present, which is why everybody is so disappointed with Obama.

Muhammad: He certainly played to that. It wasn't an accident. He says in that second inaugural, he goes from Seneca Falls—just as a refrain—to Selma, to Stonewall. And that's history, right?

Pinckney: It matters that Obama mentioned women's rights, civil rights and gay rights as a centrist politician. It's reconfiguring the mainstream. I am not so worried about him not being as left as I am, because just as they can't make Obama lose his cool, they can't shove him from the middle ground. As long as he occupies the center, the Republicans have to be right-wing. I mean, I know there is a lot going on, and yet where are the black neocons who used to drive us crazy? Where are all those Jewish neocons who used to drive us crazy? We've been in a backlash for so long that we don't even recognize that, for once, the momentum is with us again. This is what all of this means with Ferguson.

Muhammad: I couldn't help but think about the resonance of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. Here is James Baldwin in *The Nation* talking about police occupation.

Smith: Yeah, and in reading this essay I became very angry, because it was published in 1966 and James Baldwin was talking about stop-and-frisk! Not the *idea* of stop-and-frisk; he is literally using the language “stop

and frisk.” So what I would like, then, is if we can look at history and say: “This is the job of the police. The job of the police is repression: it is the policing of the black body, it is destruction of the black body, and it is an insurance that black people stay in their place.” Let's not valorize policing. It is about certain people's public safety—and what they fear as a threat is black people.

Muhammad: So a final question: What does abolition/democracy look like in the Third Reconstruction?

Pinckney: There is not going to be a Third Reconstruction with a Congress like this one. If they are spending millions of dollars not just to convince you to vote for their guy, but to suppress your vote, it must mean the vote matters. And so now I consider the vote a radical act. I remember as a student not feeling that way, but now I do. No one gives you power—you have to take it, you have to find it, you have to make it yourself.

Williams: It is going to have to be a global movement. And it is going to have to be a movement that takes into account the enormous ecological and technological transformation that we are undergoing.

Foner: I actually like the term “Third Reconstruction,” because it gets us thinking about moments in the past where there was a combination of grassroots radicalism and political leadership. You know, in the 1830s, Theodore Weld, the great abolitionist orator, said: “I'm not putting forward a plan for abolition. The issue is a commitment to change. Once the commitment to change occurs, then it is the job of politicians to put it into effect. Our job is to make them understand that change is necessary.”

Wilkerson: There is such a chasm in our country between people of conscience who can see the injustice that surrounds us, and those who would prefer to be blind. And that is a substantial segment of our population. What does it matter, then, if we have something written but people refuse to acknowledge it? We have seen what can happen to laws that we thought were set in granite—say, the Voting Rights Act. The law is important. It is essential. But if hearts don't change, then even the laws are in danger.

Smith: What you're saying is that the impetus for change is the changing of consciousness. And how do you do that? Well, you have to make people uncomfortable, and they have to see the situation as untenable. What is so brilliant about this current movement is that, from shutting down the highways to going into the shopping malls to disrupting brunch, these young people are saying that normal is killing us, and that normal will not stand. You have to be uncomfortable with normal now.

This forum has been edited and condensed. You can find the full session at TheNation.com/third-reconstruction. 150th



JULY 11, 1966



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