

# **African-Centered Consciousness and Black Power in the Age of Obama**

On January 20, 2009 Barack Obama was inaugurated as the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America after becoming the first African American to be elected to that position. Many observed the election of Barack Obama as a victory for African Americans and a clear cut indication that the invidious racism embedded in much of America's turbulent history was on the decline and that a new era of post-racialism was on the rise. They viewed the election of Barack Obama as a collective achievement that could be shared by all people of African descent throughout the diaspora. It was a historical, cultural and political milestone that symbolized the struggles of the ancestors and signaled that a long awaited change had come. For example, Peniel Joseph in his book "Dark Days, Bright Nights: From Black Power to Barack Obama" argues that there is a relationship between black power's successes and its contributions to the civil rights movement. According to Joseph, Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael were community organizers like Obama, whose path represents the culmination and redemption of his predecessors. Joseph asserts that the two paths to Black social justice, Black power and the civil rights movement created the tension and progress that paved the way for the first African-American president, whose political roots are planted in activism. Joseph presents Obama's election as an example of the vindication for Black power (Joseph, 2011).

However, there were others who were somewhat skeptical of Barack Obama's election. They considered the significance and meaning of Obama's election and contemplated when and where Obama's social and political ideology entered into discourse with the radical Africana intellectual tradition. In Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton's "Black Power: The Politics of Liberation" (1992) one of their main arguments is that Black visibility does not mean Black power, which is to say that they question whether or not the presence of Black faces in high places necessarily translates into Black power unless Black people lead and run their own organizations, bargain from a position of strength and are involved in the decision making processes affecting the lives of Black people. Amos Wilson, who often addressed the falsification of African consciousness, warned African Americans about being deceived by superficial transitions that appear to bring about change while the foundational relationships and the economic domination of African descended people remain unchanged. Wilson states "at some point letting Blacks be computer engineers...or even the President of the United States" maintains the constants that define and characterize the relationships between Black and whites under conditions of white supremacy domination and control.

This conference highlights the manner in which scholars from various disciplines within academia grapple with and position Amos Wilson's ideas about African-centered critical consciousness and Black power, as evidenced in his scholarship, within the contemporary socio-political context of what is often referred to as the age of Obama. Regardless of one's theoretical orientation and/or attitude concerning the effectiveness of the Obama administration, the fact remains that the intellectual terrain on which debates centered on race, class, culture and consciousness are contested has changed dramatically during the Obama era. It is within this context that we gather in an attempt to study, critique and apply the social/political philosophy of Amos Wilson. Throughout his life's work, Dr. Amos Wilson consistently articulated and argued the importance of African-descended people having the ability to examine and think critically about the reality of the conditions under which they live. Critical consciousness can be defined as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1998, p. 17). Similar to Bobby Wright, who took the position that the only contradiction among Black people is that there are no contradictions, Amos Wilson encouraged Black people to recognize the cultural, social and political contradictions that impact their quality of life.

Hence, an underlying thrust of this conference is to explore and engage in dialogue that interrogates the relevance of African-centered critical consciousness and Black Power and evaluates how these concepts resonate during the age of Obama. What are the contemporary contradictions that the Wilsonian intellectual tradition needs to address at this particular juncture in history? Has the notion of trans/post-racialism that has been emphasized during the Obama era changed the perception of race and erased the importance of principles relative to African-centered critical consciousness and Black Power? Have scholars' understanding of Amos Wilson's ideas about African-centeredness and Black power changed during the Obama era? If so, how have they changed and how do these principles manifest themselves during the age of Obama?

The mission of contemporary Africana scholars who choose to follow in the Wilsonian tradition is to learn from the strengths and weaknesses of our elders and create a new space. This new space must expand, not disregard, the work of the elders. African-centered critical thought is at a crossroads and the future of African-centered critical thought will be determined by the decisions that are made now. Will we become an elite 21<sup>st</sup> century talented tenth? The answer is emphatically no, for in the final analysis, the value of African centered principles depends on our ability to erect plans that result in an improved quality of life in the communities to which we are accountable. This is our challenge, our duty and our mission.