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An Obama Nation? One Filmmaker's Journey Since the Historic Election

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From 'E Minha Cara/That's My Face'

I watched the historic inauguration of President Barack Obama on a television set in a Park City condo. I was at the 25th Sundance Film Festival, where I was pitching a project, as a Sundance Documentary Institute Fellow, about Black photographers. And though I was far from DC, I was excited to share the experience and euphoria of the inauguration of the nation's first president of color, elected against all odds after an incredible campaign that used media to empower and give voice to constituencies usually discounted and ignored.

I felt the desire to document this incredible event, to be a part of it, to claim it. In the 1960s, when my late grandfather saw--for the first time--empowering images of African-Americans on the television, he would grab his Super-8mm camera and film the television set. This footage made its way into my film *E Minha Cara/That's My Face*, which was at Sundance in 2002. But walking up and down Main Street this year, I was struck by the absence of the Black House, an institution, like the Queer Lounge, that had been an important source of support and community for filmmakers of color for the prior two years of the festival.

So during the first days of the festival conversations about films were peppered by commiserations with fellow filmmakers about the absence of this institution. And this got me thinking about what this election means for filmmakers of color at this particular moment. What does it mean for us to have this representation--an African-American--in places of power? Now that a Black man was about to occupy the highest office in the country, does that mean we finally get a moment to have our stories move from the margins to the center? Is there finally an opening for diverse stories told by diverse storytellers in a way where we are not the exceptions, we are not the only ones in the room?

Interestingly, in the weeks and months following the election, I noticed a bit more interest around my projects. Several doors opened. I had face time with broadcasters who, during our meetings, shared with me their surprise and incredulity around the election and upcoming inauguration. It seemed as if all of a sudden lots of white Americans were wondering where did this educated, self-made, middle-class Black family--soon to be First Family--come from? I totally understand.

If there is one hidden image in American popular culture, it is the Black middle class. Sure, we see them in advertising, and for a while in sitcoms, but in documentary films? For the most part, they are not present. Most representations of Africans and African-Americans that get broadcast and/or mainstream distribution in this country are made by white filmmakers and, in most cases, the white filmmakers and the black subjects are of radically different classes and education levels. Rarely do we see the diversity that is the African-American--or even the African experience, as writer and National Black Programming Consortium executive director Jacquie Jones has pointed out in her 2007 essay, "Out of African." In mainstream media, Black middle class Americans, which make up the majority of African-Americans in the country, are representationally invisible.

This is what makes films like *The Black List: Volume One* so appealing. Made by portrait photographer/filmmaker Timothy Greenfield-Sanders and acclaimed public radio show host, journalist and former *New York Times* film critic Elvis Mitchell, *The Black List* is a simple concept: a collection of interviews with prominent African-Americans from the worlds of the arts, sports, politics, business and government about their work and identity.

When I first saw Greenfield-Sanders and Mitchell in conversation around the film at Black House at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival (where the film made its premiere), Mitchell commented on the title of the film, which plays on its normative meaning of black list--a register of persons who, for one reason or another, are being denied a particular privilege, service, mobility, access or recognition. Conversely, a white list is a compilation or list identifying persons or organizations that are accepted, recognized or privileged. *The Black List* responds to the same impetus that drove my grandfather to pick up his Super-8mm camera to record those televised images

of Black accomplishments in the 1960s: The desire to see our diverse selves reflected, for the first time, in mainstream media. Following the screening of the film at Sundance, a middle-aged white audience member stood up during the Q&A and announced that after seeing this film, for the first time in his life he was proud to call African-Americans his countrymen.

But in some ways *The Black List* goes to the other end of the spectrum; most of those profiled in the film, like Barack Obama, fall into the category of celebrity and as such are subject to a form of Black exceptionalism. *The Huffington Post's* ZZ Packer writes, "This famous double-bind, one whose motto is that all Black folks' failures are the norm and all Black folks' successes are the exception, is one educated African-Americans live with daily, and it is exceptionalism at its worst." The irony is that Black exceptionalism is often used to close down conversations around diversity. When I tell people I am making a film about black photographers, the immediate response is a proud, self-congratulatory, "Oh yes, Gordon Parks!" I refer them to one of Deborah Willis' many books about the hundreds of Black men and women photographers who were documenting their communities from 1840 to the present.

These works and the images of our communities are just now being collected and preserved, after being ignored by mainstream institutions. And the overwhelming evidence they present is that all Blacks are exceptional in that they have succeeded against the odds to carve out a life for themselves and their families in an often hostile culture.

About a month after Sundance, I went to see and participate in the William Greaves Career Award, presented in New York by Stranger Than Fiction and the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival. Greaves' achievements were expressed through film excerpts spanning 50 years of work, including *Emergency Ward* (1959), made while Greaves was working for the National Film Board of Canada; *Still A Brother* (1968), a feature-length film about the Black middle class; *The First World Festival of Negro Arts* (1966), featuring footage of Duke Ellington and the Alvin Ailey Dance Company in Dakar, Senegal; *The Fight* (1974), chronicling the boxing match between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier at Madison Square Garden; and *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968), an experimental work, shot in Central Park, where reality and fiction overlap. Greaves is often referred to as the dean of African-American filmmakers, and the breadth of his work is awe-inspiring. Not only has he produced a prolific body of work, he also has mentored generations of African-American filmmakers, including my mentor, the late St.Clair Bourne. It was absolutely amazing to see Greaves' artistry in the documentary form. I was particularly struck by the way he incorporates community in his films-specifically the interplay between class, race and geography in the African- American and the African diasporic experience. After the screening, a white colleague said to me, "These films are amazing; why haven't I seen them? Why didn't I see them in film school? They belong been right there besides Leacock, Pennebaker and Maysles." My response was that Black filmmakers are not the only victims of the exclusion that is borne of racism and ignorance, which marginalizes their works. We all lose out when the representation and expression of segments of the population are made invisible, untaught, ghettoized.

And it's not particular to African-Americans. Filmmaker Bernado Ruiz has written, "The fact is, there are too few programs by and or about Latinos on PBS at the national level and NALIP [National Association of Latino Independent Producers] could and should be doing more to pressure PBS for greater inclusion. I don't have to trot out examples of Ken Burns' *The War* to illustrate this problem. This has been happening for quite some time... Back in 1994, Ken Burns did the same thing with *Baseball*. *Daily News* columnist and author Juan Gonzalez explained, 'Perhaps the greatest Burns revision of history occurred with his 1994 film *Baseball*. In 18 hours of gripping drama, guess how much time Burns devoted to Latino ballplayers? Six minutes... That was a spectacular omission, given that modern-day rosters are more than a third Latino.'"

People of color are predicted to reach a majority of the population of the US in 2025, which, together with the beginning of the Obama era, might suggest that we are heading towards a "post-racial" world in which issues of identity and representation are possibly re-contextualized or re-thought. Many artists and producers of color are buoyed by the promise of Obama's election, but also feel that post-racial ideal is a myth. Filmmaker Shola Lynch says, "I take heart in someone like President Obama. If he was a film, you couldn't have sold him to Hollywood. Now he's proven he has an audience and it is a crossover audience. I think we will know when we are in a post-racial world when we will have a Black story and it won't be evaluated on its salability based on its Blackness." In fundraising for her film about the 1970s activist and cultural icon Angela Davis, Lynch says that it's never assumed that there is an audience for Black films made by Black producers. "I end up coming back to stories of Black women because few people are telling these stories," she says. "I look forward to proving that there is an audience for my film about--and for--the issues that Davis raises, whether you agree with them or not."

The assumption that films by producers of color are somehow less universal, less far reaching than their white counterparts, has done much to shape the playing field. I have been making films since 1987, and it seems there are far fewer Black filmmakers now than when I was coming up. Of the group of other filmmakers of color I started out making films with, I am one of a small handful still making films and making a living at it. I attribute my survival to the support of institutions like Third World Newsreel, National Black Programming Consortium and the Ford Foundation as well as international art institutions and African diasporic and queer film festivals, which have taken me, in just the past couple years, to Korea, South Africa, England, Haiti, Brazil, Canada, Holland, Greece, France and Ghana. And though my last three films have won multiple awards and have been broadcast on PBS, CBC, ARTE, New Zealand Doc Channel, Swedish Television, the Sundance Channel, etc., with each project I start, the comment I get from investors is, "That's a great idea. Have you taken it to Spike Lee?" and "What does Spike think about it?"

At my meetings at Sundance with a variety of international broadcasters, I could tell that the Obama election gave a new light or context for projects about Black representation, history and self-expression. There was a level of interest and excitement in their response to the pitches that seemed to parallel the world's following of the campaign and the belief in Obama's promise of change. I left those meetings buoyed by the promise of potential sales and the development of new relationships and deepening of older ones. Ironically, meeting with a US investor the next day left me feeling like I somehow found myself on another planet. This documentary film investor told me that though he thought the project was good, based on his experience, black films do not sell well overseas and therefore would not recoup a potential investment.

During the Sundance Awards ceremony, there was such strong representation of multi-cultural films and filmmakers, including documentaries (Chris Rock and Nelson George's *Good Hair*; Natalia Almada's *El General*) and narratives (Lee Daniels' *Push: Based on a Novel By Sapphire*; Cary Joji Fukunaga's *Sin Nombre*) that it seemed as if Sundance was sending the message back to Washington and the world: We see and hear the beating of the drum. It was during the ceremony that I felt, "Wow, perhaps we *are* entering a new era." Now if only we could let go of all the old baggage still getting in the way of real progress!

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