

# Trotter Review

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Volume 20  
Issue 1 *Gaining Political Ground in the Twenty-  
First Century*

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Article 2

January 2012

## Introduction

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### Recommended Citation

Lewis, Barbara (2012) "Introduction," *Trotter Review*: Vol. 20: Iss. 1, Article 2.  
Available at: [https://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter\\_review/vol20/iss1/2](https://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol20/iss1/2)

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# Introduction

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What is the political valence of blackness at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century; has it waxed or waned? Is it headed to greater potency or back into the dark days of the past when complexion determined the worth of character? Major political advances have been achieved nationally in the last ten years, most significantly in the election of the nation's first African American president. Yet a resistant status quo remains. The push to unseat President Obama is virulent, and it is hard to imagine that all of the motivation to do so is tied only to his performance.

A vanguard state in some respects, Massachusetts made history this century by granting a black governor a second term for the first time ever. In the twentieth century, the state also distinguished itself as an out-front player in black politics when Edward Brooke, a Republican, became the first black U.S. senator to enjoy reelection in a place with the best and worst of racial history. Boston, where Martin Luther King earned his doctorate and developed his theory of non-violence, is identified with liberalism but also reactionary racial attitudes, exemplified most prominently in the busing crisis of the 1970s, when an angry young man of Irish background from South Boston whacked an ambitious young black lawyer of African descent. Boston, the symbolic navel of the nation, is one of the last large cities in the country to tarry in electing a black mayor. Will the city look out from its vaunted hill and rise above the quagmire of its racial past or will it slip and fall like Jack and Jill, tumbling down and losing its capacity to hold water?

In this issue, Kenneth J. Cooper, the *Trotter Review's* editor, who has covered education and politics for major national newspapers like the *Washington Post* and the *Boston Globe*, compares Denver, where he grew up and spent his young manhood, and Boston, where Barack Obama first came to wide national notice at the 2004 Democratic convention. Cooper

investigates why the venerable city on a hill is a laggard from the perspective of local black political power.

When Obama moved from celebrity political contestant to president, achieving the unexpected and making real what could only be dreamed beforehand, he had his Boston area education and exposure to the ranks of power largely to thank. It was in Boston where he was named editor of the *Harvard Law Review*, an unprecedented honor for a black law student, the son of a Kenyan immigrant, and began his climb into the heights of national renown. That climb to the heights, beyond expectation, makes me think of the recently released film *Red Tails*. These men made their mark through education, discipline, and determination. Flesh-and-blood heroes, the Tuskegee Airmen were young and bright and the best of their generation, like Obama. The times, though, were different. In the middle of the twentieth century, when discrimination was more entrenched, these young men would not be stopped. They were committed to using their skills to impact history. And in the end, they blazed a name for themselves as exemplars of bravery and daring, turning the expected inside out and exploding it.

So long in coming, and, yet, not fully arrived. Those are the words that race into my mind as I think of Obama's first term in the White House juxtaposed against the success of the Tuskegee Airmen, gray eminences now, a few of them surviving and stunning in their vibrant energy and resolve; their commitment to discipline etched in every muscle, their postures still unbowed, despite the years. It is as though their success was too ground-breaking and sky-breaching to be forgotten and, thank God, some of them are alive to draw pleasure from the praise and recognition they are receiving. They proved their worth to a doubting world, and, at the time, their efforts and achievements were discounted because of complexions branding them, in the eyes of others, as unworthy. Old, deep-dyed habits and thinking take a long time to fade, if they ever do. And so the real, live heroes who took a hangar full of discarded craft and made them zing through the skies had to wait many decades for their story to be told to the world in a medium that makes lives monumental, that turns men into immortals, bigger than life; and yet they showed that they were the very stuff of life and a representative number remain so to this day.

Howard Manly, a seasoned journalist and editor for the *Bay State Banner*, a successor to the newspaper that William Monroe Trotter published from the beginning of the twentieth century, writes about the acceptance challenge that Obama, as commander in chief, has faced in his first term. There is a repeated litany of reservations. To what extent is he truly presidential? Can he stand up to and defeat the nation's enemies? Those are the questions that Manly asks and answers.

Obama took on al Qaeda and won just like the Tuskegee Airmen who shot the Germans out of the sky and did heavy damage to them on the ground too. The Tuskegee pilots were ordered to put the safety of the men they escorted above their own. In other words, they were told to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of others. What was new about that? Their whole lives, they were told they rated second, not first. Still, like Obama, they exemplified democracy overseas. Obama's the guy who got Bin Laden. And they were the guys who helped stop Hitler.

Will Obama go the distance and shoot down the nation's troubles? And if he should succeed, how much credit will he get and when will it arrive? Over and over again when the country is in the clinch, the black option is the resource taken. And then, if the day is saved and the war won, the recognition takes its pretty time to arrive, lagging on the way, seemingly with the hope that the debt can be squared with token and tardy gratitude, and then pushed into a forgotten corner. Flying in and around those fast-coming bullets requires deft handling. But success is never easy and flying against the odds is heroic in every book out there. Pursuing a world better than the one inherited was a given for the brown and black men flying their hard-won new planes with red tails, and it is a goal for the man in the White House now, who may or may not get another chance to scale the heights of action.

Henry Louis Gates, prolific black Harvard intellectual, who was arrested for entering his home in Cambridge, suspected, because of his complexion, of being a thief in 2009, stood at a podium at the Harvard Bookstore in Cambridge on a Tuesday evening in early December 2011. Conservatively dressed in a long black wool coat and carrying a polished wood cane, he was there to address an audience of approximately fifty ready to hear about his new book, *Life Upon These Shores: Looking at African American History, 1513-2008*. The book is dedicated to and inspired by the memory of his father and

the times they spent bonding in front of the television screen watching the news during the Civil Rights Movement. So much that was groundbreaking happened in the century just completed; and Gates' dedication to his father signified the generational link of continuity, an asset difficult to maintain in the black community, so often buffeted from outside and kept in procrustean dimension, cut off and severed.

The Civil Rights Era, an explosive time of change and transformation, was highly visual. Now, it is the eyes, rather than the ears, that serve as the primary source of knowledge. So Gates chose the image as crucial in his review of black history seen through an expansive anterior lens, inclusive of South and Central as well as North America. Geared for the popular reader, *Life Upon These Shores* begins earlier than most books on the subject and ends with the election of Obama as president.

A few weeks after Gates spoke at the Harvard Bookstore in Cambridge, David Margolick, who has written about entertainment and civil rights history, characterized Gates' effort in the *New York Times* as skewing the trajectory of black history toward achievement and away from struggle, which is its accustomed pole in general conception.

The space between success and failure is a short gap between seats on the set-aside car of blackness in America. The popular ideation is that blacks invariably occupy the failure side of the aisle. Last summer, I attended a black theater festival in Greensboro, North Carolina. The festival brought millions of middle-class cultural blacks to Greensboro, uniting the Tyler Perry crowd with the August Wilson crowd and drawing folks from the middle of that spectrum as well. It was a veritable sight to behold, the blackening of the economic district of Greensboro, which bowed to the almighty power of green in black hands. In Greensboro in the early 1960s, four black male college students from North Carolina AT&T inaugurated sit-in protests at a downtown Woolworth's counter, now part of the Greensboro Civil Rights Museum that commemorates that era-changing act of performance that countered the status quo. In that museum, I saw photos of a train station, still standing and functional a few blocks from the museum. Today, the segregated signs have been removed but the architecture of an earlier era remains intact. Symbolically speaking, the nation is still in the grip of a divisive history, slow to die. We may have removed the sign of difference, but we have not yet dismantled

the internal thinking that assures that complexion consigns some folks unalterably to the disadvantage zone.

During the question-and-answer period in Cambridge, Gates responded to a question about the contemporary significance of the fight Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois waged publicly over how to earn political and social respect for blacks in America. DuBois vs. Washington, or educated achievement vs. nose-to-the-grind struggle inside a submissive demeanor, is a debate still open more than a century after 1895, when Washington took the mantle of black leadership by reassuring whites gathered in Atlanta for the Cotton States Exposition that the Negro community would be patient in the face of segregation and would not tip over the apple cart of convention. Booker T. promised to keep blacks in line, and for that he became czar of the colored folks. An addendum to the historical record is needed to correct a major oversight. As the era's leading black intellectual, DuBois was given the anti-Washingtonian mantle; but William Monroe Trotter, of a long and illustrious family committed to civil rights since the nineteenth century, was the real radical. Trotter, also a Harvard grad like DuBois, was the first to oppose Washington, mounting his attack in a Boston church in 1903. Trotter was the one whose bravery in the face of a stony status quo radicalized DuBois.

In answering the question of how the menial vs. the educated black impacts on today, Gates replied that the black middle class has gained educational, political, and economic ground; yet less educated, disadvantaged blacks are captive within a poverty rate roughly the same as existed in the 1960s, when Martin Luther King was assassinated. The result is a two-humped curve, one signifying progress and the other lack. A negative and a positive cancel each other out, so can these humps get resolved and merged into a greater, consistent force? Is that already beginning to happen as current population shifts unsettle a country in the grip of a growing black and immigrant presence? The political might of whiteness is losing numbers nationally; for example, Boston lost 48,000 whites between 1990 and 2010, while blacks, Latinos, and Asians increased their numbers. The United States map is being kaleidoscopically redrawn as residents move for opportunity and redraw settlement patterns. The old tower of American might is in danger of cracking, and a different future may be writing itself on the wall.

Boston and Massachusetts offer a concentrated lens through which to glimpse intimations of the future. As the educational capital of the country, Boston brings together some of the keenest minds of the era and country; further, the city is a concentrated mirror in which the nation can see its reflected image within a continuum going back to the birth of democracy. The best of what this country is taken to signify, its striving for democracy, time-tested virtues, intellectual idealism, and even its denials and evasions, can all be found here in a state and a city that trace their pedigree back to the colonial era and a genesis moment. At the same time that Boston and Massachusetts are seen to embody the virtues of an idealism-driven life, there have been incidents over the years that have made it clear that the men and women of Massachusetts are also subject to racial blind spots. Despite its vaunted abolitionist history, Boston has also shown the world another face as well. For example, the busing crisis of the 1970s, a domestic war in which the American flag became an emblem of hatred, and the Stuart case of the 1980s in which the synonymous identification between black and the guilt of criminality was flagrant for all to see, show that Boston, like the rest of the country, can still harbor deep animosities and social divisions. That is why Deval Patrick's election is so important. He has become an icon, or rather, an exemplar that progress is possible. The same, to an even larger scale, is true of Obama's election to the presidency. The question remains, though, how deeply into the fiber and fabric of this society do these political changes go? Are they superficial, momentary? Are they visual indices of a changing time? Is their election a measure of new demographics or shifting attitudes?

Segregation, and its various expressions throughout the years, may contain the answer. The close cousin of slavery, segregation, although banished legally decades ago, is still structuring the places we live in this nation, where we go to school, and even where we worship. According to *The State of Equity in Metro Boston*, released in December 2011, Boston remains a city of homogenous, segregated neighborhoods, and Boston is by no means the only city nationally with this profile. Protestations to the contrary, we have not yet become one people, undivided with liberty and justice for all. In reviewing Gates' book and charging him with paying too much attention to black accomplishment, Margolick verbalizes the uglier but enduring side of America's lack of equity. In popular concep-

tion, blacks do not possess the means to perform above the level of inadequacy, except on an occasional basis, which is hardly worth mentioning, and is by no means the major picture.

The current issue of the *Trotter Review* raises the question of whether a new, twenty-first-century crop of black politicians, spearheaded by Patrick and Obama, can negotiate the divide that still obtains as a political and social chasm between black and white. Are we facing new times in the twenty-first-century? If so, what are the most important differences between then and now, and where are the real opportunities? If the past is just sitting unmarked and undisturbed around a corner, like the once-segregated train station in Greensboro, what accounts for the staunch persistence of yesterday? From some perspectives, the gulf of color that DuBois defined as the major problem for the future to solve is getting narrower. From other perspectives, it may remain as wide and unbridgeable as ever.

When John F. Kennedy, arguably Boston's favorite political son, was killed in the 1960s, Malcolm X was quoted as saying the "chickens are coming home to roost." Is the black body politic, dispersed and sold into the diasporic winds in years past, coming back together and rebonding in a new era? We know our political past, the ups and downs, and the photo ops creating the visual record that Gates and his father watched in decades gone by. As we look into tomorrow and assess what we see relative to what we want to achieve and how we want to bond with our posterity, what political future are we constructing as children of the African Diaspora across our particular cultural and national origins?

In our first article, written by Ravi K. Perry of Clark University in Worcester, Mass., he questions what commentators have termed Patrick's "deracialized rhetoric," which is characterized as a tendency to take the sting out of "polarizing effects of race by avoiding explicit reference to race-specific issues." Patrick, Perry argues, belongs to the breed of twenty-first-century black politicians who address black issues and interests in terms that a majority white constituency can accept and understand. Even if that approach is better than the alternative of avoidance, it does not get to the root of the dilemma as Cornel West frames it, which is that blacks are Americans, and not folks to be ignored, disciplined, or considered inhuman. Another scholar, Donald Cunnigen, believes that there is grow-



ing commonality between blacks and whites who are increasingly dealing with the same problems such as “relocation/outsourcing of jobs overseas, and the feminization of poverty.” Perry analyzed Patrick’s speeches, executive orders, newspaper articles, interviews, press releases, and appointments, and determined that the governor was more attentive to the needs of blacks during his first term although, in his second term, he filled several important positions with blacks, including appointing Roderick Ireland as chief justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court.

Joyce Ferriabough comments on women of color in the political landscape and shows that some ground has been lost politically at the beginning of the century but a few bright spots exist. Currently, in the halls of the Massachusetts Legislature, there are three women of color: Gloria Fox, who is African American; Linda Dorcena-Forry, who is Haitian; and Sonia Chang-Diaz, who is Asian-Latina. In the mayoral ranks, Lisa Wong of Fitchburg is the first woman of color to be elected across the state. In 2010, Ayanna Pressley broke through a one-hundred-year barrier to become the first woman of color elected to the Boston City Council. A young woman out of Chicago, Pressley gained her political footing in Senator John Kerry’s office, and has been returned to the City Council for a second term.

To gain more political valence, emphasizing gains versus stressing failures will go a long way to turning the tide in a new direction.

— ***Barbara Lewis, PhD***

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