

# Lincoln's reincarnation

BY SETH FELDMAN

Seth Feldman is the director of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies and a professor in the Department of Film at York University.

Cinema has provided us with a good many images of the African-American male transformed, in the words of one classic study, *From Sambo to Superspade*.

The rise of Barack Obama has raised the difficult question of how a majority of the American electorate was acclimated to the idea of an African-American president. It has also raised the more pressing question of how the various cultural filters used in this process continue to shape Obama's brand and hence the prerogatives that are politically possible for him.

So let's go to the movies. Cinema has provided us with a good many images of the African-American male transformed, in the words of one classic study, *From Sambo to Superspade*. That title, retrograde as it may be, still has a resonance in that there remains little in between the two extremes of negative stereotyping and reframing the black male as extraordinary. One might even say that it is the balancing of these doppelgängers within a single individual that itself has been Hollywood's lesson on the African-American experience.

## ANSWERING RACIST SLANDER

Those of us of a certain age will remember the stirring climax of Stanley Kramer's 1967 film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Poor Matt Drayton (played by Spencer Tracy), the perennial father of the bride, must decide whether he approves of his daughter's engagement to Dr. John Prentice (played by Sidney Poitier). Dr. Prentice, already known for his pioneering work in Africa, is wealthy, statesmanlike, and seemingly a shoo-in for a Nobel Prize. The daughter, on the other hand, seems to shop for a living. In no less solemn a tone than he displayed while delivering his verdict as a judge in the Nuremberg trials, Tracy rambles on interminably before finally giving his blessing to the marriage, stupid move that it might be. Whew.

Made only a few years after Obama's parents celebrated their marriage, Kramer's film not only drove another nail into the coffin of miscegenation laws but

also answered the ancient racist slander about black men's insatiable desire for white women. And it answered with a resounding "So what?" But there was also a third, perhaps inadvertent lesson taught by *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. The film's climax made, in no uncertain terms, the point that the black man in America, no matter how accomplished, must still depend on the white man's acceptance. Great man that he was, Poitier's character couldn't just walk away from all the condescending blather.

## DOUGLASS AND LINCOLN

Poitier's character in that regard is no more evolved than the picture Frederick Douglass painted of himself in an autobiography written nearly 100 years earlier. Douglass was the one African-American whom Abraham Lincoln held in high esteem. Lincoln, who famously declared he would have been willing to end the Civil War without freeing a single slave and who was far from immune to the racial prejudices of his day, declared Douglass to be not only the equal of his

white confidants but their superior. "Douglass," he said when meeting him at his second inaugural ball, "I saw you in the crowd today listening to my inaugural address. There is no man's opinion that I value more than yours; what do you think of it?"

Dr. Prentice and Douglass, activists though they may be, are reduced to passive characters, who can only be made acceptable through the agency of white observers. In an odd way, this is perhaps one of the reasons why there seemed to be so little concern about Obama's lack of experience. The experienced black man, who is merely as competent as, say, Mitt Romney, is of no interest to the American collective imagination. Only the extraordinary black man is worthy of the necessary consideration and approval.

## OBAMA: A PUBLIC MAN

We learn this lesson again in the character of President Tom Beck as played by Morgan Freeman in Mimi Leder's 1998 film, *Deep Impact*. Although Beck is not Hollywood's only black president, he is fairly typical of the role. The film itself is about a huge space rock threatening the continued existence of life on earth. President Beck's job in the film is to make nationwide television addresses proclaiming the bad news. He is, in other words, a secondary character who has nothing to do with either the personal conflicts that parallel the apocalypse or the last-minute dramatic rescue of life on earth.

The character of President Beck speaks to another one of the mysteries of the Obama campaign: the frequent complaints about not being able to know anything about the man. Huh? Few candidates have done more to display themselves to the electorate. By the time anyone outside Illinois got to vote for him, Obama had published two autobio-

Lincoln's reincarnation, page 23


are emotionally invested in the idea of him. Unfortunately, there are issues here that may not be resolved because they have greater staying power.

Cornel West is confident that there will be a white backlash and, I would add, there could be a conservative one as well, especially around cultural and social problems that are invariably contentious in the United States—Xenophobia comes in many shapes and forms, such as abortion, gay rights, women's rights, and the contents of school curricula, perhaps even immigration laws, civil liberties, and environmental issues. All of these invariably give rise to emotionally charged disagreements that seem to be interminable because the moral beliefs and world views from which they are understood and justified are incommensurable. For example, despite optimistic claims that the United States is now "post-racial," one man's

appointment will not end racial tension, resentment, or discrimination, and the recent referendum banning gay marriage in California—where Obama won with an overwhelming majority—provides another example. These cleavages will continue to divide the nation. These kinds of local conflicts will not go away despite Obama's intention of creating a flexible, bipartisan coalition in Washington. The values and beliefs with which people conduct their lives do not necessarily correspond to either party politics or institutional agendas.

### THE ROUT OF NEO-CONSERVATIVE PUBLIC CULTURE

The looming question is whether the new president will be capable of narrowing "the gap between the promise and the reality," to use his own words. Perhaps for the present what matters is what

he represents. Given the widespread skepticism concerning politicians, lobbyists, and corporate America, the figure of the president has a moral authority that is baffling in other countries. If we read the election results as a referendum on the exhaustion of conservative ideas, Obama to a large extent won on the strength of his ideas. Let us hope that his arrival in Washington will usher in an era of careful reflection, auto-critique, and innovation both within the White House and elsewhere to fulfill the social and economic expectations of an increasingly complex and changing society. 

For more information on  
*Canada Watch* and the Robarts  
Centre for Canadian Studies, visit  
[www.yorku.ca/robarts](http://www.yorku.ca/robarts)

---

## Lincoln's reincarnation continued from page 19

graphical bestsellers, sat through a thousand interviews, and placed rationales for his policies on a sprawling website. What part of him was missing?

It was, I would suggest, the Tom Beck part—that is, the familiar, comforting, liberal Democrat leader of the free world who happens to be black. Where was the centrist, accommodating black president from central casting that had been previously imagined when Hollywood or anyone else wished to fantasize a black president? Certainly, it wasn't the kid with an Islamic name from a broken, interracial marriage who was also president of the *Harvard Law Review* and, after 2004, an unstoppable force. What we kept looking for and couldn't find in Obama was that comfortable, dull Hollywood cliché.

### THE AFRO-AMERICAN SUPERHERO

This brings us to our third film, the one in which Obama truly stars. The movie he is in, I would suggest, is Peter Berg's 2008 release, *Hancock*. In that story, Will

Smith plays not a president but rather a down and out African-American superhero of the faster-than-a-speeding-bullet variety. He drinks too much, eats with his hands, and passes out on park benches. When he does do his superhero thing, he causes as much mayhem as he prevents. The good citizens of Los Angeles, while naturally enough expecting the services of a superhero, are getting fed up with him.

Hancock (a name that seems to have been chosen for an American political year) is redeemed when a down-on-his-luck public relations agent takes on the task of resuscitating his image. As in most American films of this ilk, broad comedy ensues, and everyone learns a little lesson about what is really important.

Why is this the Obama story? It is because today, American film has finally engaged the extreme clichés about African-American males: their physical prowess working unpredictably for good and evil (think Mike Tyson); their image problems, often self-induced by the fear of their own achievements; the white

community's need for them to be adequate by becoming exemplary.

### BEYOND THE CLICHÉS

And just as American film has confronted these clichés, so has Obama. When the *New Yorker* published its infamous satirical cover in the middle of the campaign, it was depicting the image that Obama, thanks to the right-wing propagandists, might have had but didn't. He didn't because it was cancelled out by the other satirical image—that of the perfect if ethereal Obama that one saw, for instance, in the widely distributed JibJab cartoon ([http://sendables.jibjab.com/originals/time\\_for\\_some\\_campaignin](http://sendables.jibjab.com/originals/time_for_some_campaignin)).

All that remained for a president who thinks he is Lincoln—and may well be right—was to look out over his inaugural crowd and pick out his own Frederick Douglass. That wasn't protective glass around him; it was a mirror. For with the demands Obama is making and with his assertion of his right to judge others, this Lincoln's Frederick Douglass is the rest of us. 