WHEN I VISITED my mother last May, much of her living room had been converted into what I half jokingly called a Barack Obama shrine. Since Obama had declared his candidacy for president, my mother had diligently collected everything about the man that she could get her hands on. Magazines, newspaper articles, and T-shirts formed the bulk of her collection, all of it in pristine condition and not to be handled except with utmost care. Almost overnight, all things Obama had become a staple of my mother’s conversation. His message of unity and transcendence, his unwillingness to be cowed by “a chorus of cynics,” all of this inspired
in my mother a late-life surge of confidence. It had even led to her changing the way she answered her phone. Instead of her usual “Hello,” she took to lifting the receiver and announcing, “This is our moment.”

By the night of Obama’s remarkable triumph, she had digested far more than his trademark phrases. Still, she was more than thrilled when, during his victory speech at Chicago’s Grant Park, he once again proclaimed, “This is our moment.” Obama’s victory seemed “just too good to be true, overwhelmingly good,” she told me. “There are no words to describe how I feel. ‘Elated’ is not good enough.”

Hers is a voice tempered and made scratchy by seventy-seven years of living, almost as many years of smoking, and decades of making herself heard in a house crowded with loud, boisterous youngsters. My mother is special to me, of course, but in many respects she’s a typical black woman of her generation. A child of the Depression, she married young, stayed married, and stayed home to raise six children. She remembers Jim Crow quite well and, like many of her peers, has more than a few chilling firsthand tales of travel in Mississippi (where her father was born), Missouri, and other places known for white residents’ historically open and often violent hostility toward African Americans. She is faithful, fearless, and frank, adept at blessing you with gentle encouragement while demonstrating her unerring skill at telling it exactly like it is. While her experience, her lifetime of dearly purchased knowledge, deeply informs my
own life, there are parts of it to which I have no access. Her memories contain mysteries that I can only guess at. To hear her answer her phone with such an uncautiously optimistic phrase was a startling, wonderful surprise.

Her optimism, while inspired by Obama’s meteoric rise, seems to me quite different from the youthful exuberance that often surrounded him. My mother remembers Emmett Till, Medgar, Malcolm, Martin—she’s witnessed and endured enough to know that getting all giddy is foolish for colored people, let alone dangerous. But because she is a dedicated and informed voter, her hopefulness cannot be attributed to ignorance or naïveté. Nor does she choose to forget any of those traumas and tragedies. She can remember them while hoping at the same time.

To my knowledge, my mother has never mounted a soapbox and given a speech, never rocked the microphone at a street rally. She’s one of those proud black Americans who could be relied on to fill seats when leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. came to town seeking support, applauding attentively and standing ready with the checkbook when a call for offerings was raised. I was with my mother when I saw Angela Davis speak at a rally during the distant seventies. I was sitting next to my mother when an aging Roy Wilkins presided over his last NAACP convention near the end of that decade. She supported them all, primarily because they were “race people,” or dedicated champions of black advancement. And she clearly considers Barack
Obama a race man, the latest and most inspiring member of that exalted tradition.

Others are less clear about Obama’s place in the pantheon of exemplary black leadership or even whether he belongs at all. He complicates, in fascinating ways, conventional considerations of black political struggle.

At a forum I attended at Georgetown University last April, writers and thinkers gathered to discuss the legacy of the Black Arts Movement that deeply influenced African American creative culture in the 1960s. Although Obama was a child during that time, growing up far away from the poems, paintings, and music exploding in places like Newark, Harlem, and Watts, even that period had become difficult to discuss without working his campaign into the conversation.

Among the panelists were Amiri Baraka and Haki Madhubuti, celebrated poet-activists, race men, and former young lions turned gray eminences. “The mainstream is not ready for a fire-breathing black man,” a friend of Obama’s reportedly told the *New Yorker*. In contrast, fire-breathers have long been welcome in African American communities (see Wright, Rev. Jeremiah). In fact, anyone who aspired to leadership in the traditional sense was expected to at least suggest the potential for bringing the heat. Baraka
and Madhubuti, to borrow the poet Jayne Cortez’s term, are fire spitters. Baraka, a two-fisted bantamweight known for wailing his poems with the volume and magnetic intensity of a hard-bop saxophonist, had visibly mellowed, although he could still skillfully move a crowd and leaven his intensity with savage, witty ad-libs. While delivering his trademark denunciation of monopoly capitalism, he openly grappled with the “postrace” riddle, trying to determine Obama’s relationship to a phrase the candidate had never officially embraced.

Madhubuti gave a variation of the speech I’d often heard him deliver when I was an awestruck college student, haunting his bookstore on Chicago’s South Side and sitting attentively through lecture after lecture at Olive-Harvey community college’s annual black studies conference. I still remember a chalk talk in which he demonstrated persuasively that the ministerial model of black leadership was insufficiently equipped to deal with an increasingly educated and sophisticated ruling class. Obama, educated and sophisticated, with a background in grassroots organizing, would seem to fit into the model of alternative leadership that Madhubuti was then proposing.

In the wake of the furor surrounding Obama’s comments about “bitter” Americans, Madhubuti defended bitterness in American society and in black American communities in particular. Given the harsh conditions confronting so many of our people, he seemed to suggest, bitterness
was understandable. His words reminded me of Malcolm X’s witty response to those who called him an extremist. “I’m an extremist,” he said, because the black race is in “extremely bad condition.” Like Malcolm, Madhubuti takes care to address the concerns of the disenfranchised, the black people (usually in the inner cities) for whom all this talk of progress must often seem like a cruel joke.

Two weeks before the Georgetown event, economist Glenn C. Loury had made similar observations in an online column. Historically, the shape-shifting Loury has been as far away from Madhubuti on the ideological spectrum as Angela Davis is from Condoleezza Rice. But Madhubuti’s comments at Georgetown echoed Loury’s. Pointing out the wishful thinking behind the idea of a postrace society, Loury had noted, “As I write this, one million young black men are under the physical control of the state; a third of black children live in poverty, and, the Southside of Chicago, with more than one-half million black residents, is one of the most massive, racially segregated urban enclaves ever to have been created in the modern world.”

Madhubuti, putting the lie to critics of race men who say they avoid talk of personal responsibility, went on to challenge black America’s penchant for mindless consumption and apparent aversion to production and manufacturing. He was visibly angry as he spoke; part of his frustration seemed to come from his awareness that the substance of his speech had changed little over the years—not because he
had no new ideas but because the conditions he addressed had remained largely the same. Some problems had shown little to no improvement in the past forty years (17 percent unemployment, 50 percent dropout rate), while others had gotten distressingly worse (79 percent of black babies born outside of marriage, skyrocketing incarceration rates for black males).

Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison once complained that his initial efforts to “excite the minds of the people” about the antislavery cause had been “palsied by public indifference.” A similar plague of apathy seems to complicate the efforts of veteran activists like Madhubuti; indeed the reluctance of the disadvantaged to get “excited” over the prospect of reaching escape velocity seems to be just as formidable as the systemic racism that hinders their rise. Madhubuti knows this and it doesn’t make him happy.

In his essay, Loury expressed aloud the conundrum at the heart of the race man’s dilemma—an irritating question that Americans in general are frequently hesitant to address: What is our proper relationship with history?

Madhubuti and Baraka struck me that day as living history. Once allies who angrily split over fierce ideological differences, the two men had grown comfortable enough with each other in recent years to share podiums and work on books together. Their durable bond and stalwart presence in black intellectual circles suggested that having in common a ferocious passion for black advancement was suffi-
cient reason to join forces—in much the same way, perhaps, as Obama’s invocation of hope insists that that emotion alone can help us overcome our stubborn differences.

Sitting in the audience at Georgetown, I identified with the speakers as they parsed recent events for clues to reading our changing cultural geography in the age of Obama. Though my dalliance with black nationalism was brief and I was never even tempted by Marxism—two poles that Madhubuti and Baraka once represented—I clung to the perhaps romantic notion of myself as a race man in the old-fashioned sense of the term. Indeed, in black thought the idea of the race man transcended “isms” and included a vast range of wildly varying and occasionally disparate political philosophies, including W. E. B. DuBois’s Pan-Africanism, Paul Robeson’s unabashed internationalism, and the earnest integrationism of Walter White and Roy Wilkins. Malcolm X, Langston Hughes—race men both. Even Ralph Ellison, stern and unapproachable in his Riverside Drive apartment, with ever-loyal Fannie guarding the door, was a race man in his way. If we cast its gender-specificity aside, the concept—if not the phrase—has been expansive enough to embrace brilliant leaders of the feminine persuasion, such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Ida B. Wells.

Booker T. Washington, too. “It is sad to think of a man without a country,” he once observed. “It is sadder to think of a man without a race.”

Where Washington implied a belief in race loyalty and
obligation, his fierce rival DuBois declared his mission outright. He spelled it out in a 1902 essay, “Of the Training of Black Men”: “I insist that the question of the future is how best to keep these millions [9 million Negroes] from brooding over the wrongs of the past and the difficulties of the present, so that all their energies may be bent toward a cheerful striving and cooperation with their white neighbors toward a larger, juster, and fuller future.”

How does a race man regard his mission amid the shifting winds of the millennial age? Is he confused? Sullen? Precisely how large, just, and full is the future looking these days, and how has Obama changed its scope—if at all? Obama’s bold election night declaration seemed aimed squarely at such questions. “It’s been a long time coming,” he asserted, “but tonight, because of what we did on this day, in this election, at this defining moment, change has come to America.”

According to Edward Said, intellectual performances can “keep in play both the sense of opposition and the sense of engaged participation.” That’s what modern race men and women do at their best. At once fiercely critical and resolutely patriotic, they’ve got too much blood in this soil, ancestral ties too tenacious to ever consider packing their bags. “I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually,” James Baldwin wrote. With the heyday of Parisian exile long gone and journeys back to
Africa exposed as mostly implausible, race men and women have nowhere else to go. There are too many bodies in the earth, and you can’t, as Toni Morrison once wrote, just up and leave a body. Those bones belong to the land, the land belongs to us, and we don’t need to wear lapel pins to prove it.

In a *Newsweek* article about Obama, Evan Thomas uncharitably and inaccurately dismissed “race men” (the quotes are his) as old-style politicians “who use skin color as a political tool.” That’s a superficial and woefully ahistorical view that fails to take into account African America’s rich tradition of strategic resistance and constructive dissent. The skepticism with which race men can be counted on to challenge our historically sluggish government is ultimately a quintessential *American* impulse. After all, they merely put into practice the necessary vigilance that Tom Paine described long ago. “Common sense will tell us,” he argued, “that the power which hath endeavoured to subdue us, is of all others, the most improper to defend us.”

Malcolm X, among the most eloquent of the dissenters, insisted that black Americans had to get their own houses in order before engaging their white countrymen at the bargaining table. He returned again and again to the need “to instill within black men the racial dignity, the incentive, and the confidence that the black race needs today to get up off its knees, and to get on its feet, and get rid of its scars, and to take a stand for itself.”
Race leaders not only advocate on behalf of blacks but “at the same time needle, cajole, and denounce Negroes themselves for inertia, diffidence, and lack of race pride,” St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton noted in their 1945 landmark book, *Black Metropolis*. So deeply ingrained is this self-correcting strand (the politics of black respectability) that both black and white comedians have subjected it to blistering parody. For example, on NBC’s *30 Rock* Tracy Morgan costars as Tracy Jordan, a talented actor given to fits of paranoia. He tries to stay one step ahead of a “secret group of powerful black Americans” he calls the Black Crusaders. According to his delusion, members of the cabal (including Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Colin Powell, and Gordon from *Sesame Street*) meet “four times a year in the skull of the Statue of Liberty,” where they make plans to “ruin anybody who they think are making black people look bad.”

Critics of African American liberalism sometimes miss the whole responsibility thing, or pretend that it simply doesn’t exist as an element of the black progressive agenda. Shelby Steele, to provide one ironic example, appears not to recognize how closely his own words sometimes resemble Malcolm’s. “You must never ever concede that only black responsibility can truly lift blacks into parity with whites. . . . If blacks should be responsible for their own uplift, then it is not racist for whites to expect them to do so,” Steele offered in *A Bound Man*. He writes as if DuBois, Marcus
Garvey (“Up you mighty race!”), and Malcolm had never spoken—frequently and eloquently—on such matters. Left unanswered in Steele’s critique is why the measured rise of black professionals, as admirable a demonstration of responsibility as any, has thus far failed to result in any semblance of parity extending beyond the middle class.

To his credit, however, Steele correctly anticipated the grumbling that arose in some quarters of black thought when Obama occasionally gave speeches criticizing absentee black fathers, negligent mothers, and other forms of malignant conduct among African Americans. Some critics wondered why Obama singled out blacks when those misbehaviors occur among other ethnic groups as well. For a race man to ask such a question is especially odd, since Obama was merely paying attention to an unavoidable fact that race men are obligated to point out: where black Americans are concerned, there is always more at stake. Some folks seemed to understand this more readily than Jesse Jackson did, for Obama’s comments last Father’s Day at Chicago’s Apostolic Church lowered his standing among black voters not one bit.

Malcolm X seldom drew such criticism when he made similar comments.

Malcolm’s context and constituency may have differed dramatically from those of a black man with his eye on the presidency, but Obama clearly understands that little else has changed in terms of the internal difficulties that blacks
face and the role of self-sabotage in making them worse. Nor has Obama missed the connection between the improbable journeys of men like Malcolm and his own unlikely emergence. He has written that Malcolm’s “repeated acts of self-creation” spoke to him as a young man. Malcolm had to become a citizen of the world before he could see that the battle for civil rights was a battle for human rights. Obama, by birthright and upbringing, grew up a citizen of the world and thus was able to conclude much earlier, “the hopes of the little girl who goes to a crumbling school in Dillon are the same as the dreams of the boy who learns on the streets of L.A.”

It's the very fragility of those dreams that prompts such caution among African Americans who've left younger days behind. The memory of dreams deferred leads to a wary perspective that tempts outsiders to dismiss it as unqualified cynicism, but watchfulness may be a better word. After Emancipation, when unshackled jubilation gave way to anguish following the crushing end of Reconstruction, black Americans were forced to reconsider the wages of optimism. “The slave went free,” DuBois wrote, “stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery.” Hence a collective guardedness that sometimes has no basis other than an awareness that freedom can be snatched away if it is not fiercely defended.

Do I believe the relative prosperity of the black middle class (relative to their poor black counterparts; the wealth
gap between black and white middle-class Americans remains alarmingly large), Obama’s historic victory, and other notable advances will amount to just another brief moment in the sun? No, I don’t, but our history here forcefully reminds us that we will always—always—need some individuals among us willing to watch our backs.

That’s where race men and women come in—not the charlatans and camera hogs with whom we are all too familiar, but those genuinely dedicated to service and uplift. As long as racial disparities exist, as long as there are problems particular to black people, loyal advocacy is not only desired but also required.

Obama has said as much himself. He writes in The Audacity of Hope that for black Americans, “separation from the poor is never an option, and not just because the color of our skin—and the conclusions the larger society draws from our color—makes all of us only as free, only as respected, as the least of us.”

Whether racism is the root cause of our problems is almost beside the point: such issues demand the concentrated attention of men and women who will go at them with ferocity, intelligence, and love.

But try mentioning the value of vigilance to young black people—whether poor or prosperous—and their eyes may glaze over before you finish your first sentence. Try telling the bright, accomplished, and privileged black undergrads at Georgetown that black people are “in trouble,” as Mad-
hubuti did, and you get mostly polite silence. One can’t help contrasting that response with the mobs of bright, accomplished, and privileged young black people who have taken to Obama and his message with such enthusiasm.

Obama, as might be expected, has paid tribute to youth spirit at every opportunity. When the forces of doubt threaten to slow him down, he says, what gives him hope is “the next generation—the young people whose attitudes and beliefs and openness to change have already made history in this election.”

He has made no mention of the racial makeup of this youth brigade, for many of whom “race” has taken on the most fluid connotations ever found in the United States. The very notion of a “post-sixties black identity,” to borrow Shelby Steele’s convenient phrase, may be an all but alien concept to an African American born in, say, 1987. Members of the Millennial Generation, usually defined as born between 1982 and 2003, are “the most ethnically diverse generation in American history,” “more positive than older generations both about the present and future state of their own lives and about the future of their country,” and “united across gender and race in their desire to find ‘win-win’ solutions to America’s problems,” according to Morley Winograd and Michael D. Hais, authors of Millennial Makeover: MySpace, YouTube, and the Future of American Politics.

And, having grown up during an era in which unparalleled technological breakthroughs have enabled a remark-
able outpouring of creativity, they are far more likely to take their cues from video-sharing or social networking sites than from America’s past. Years ago, I scoffed when rapper Chuck D called rap music black America’s CNN. I still don’t think his analogy was on the money, but watching today’s young people effortlessly manipulate their smartphones, iPods, and digital doodads, at last I’m beginning to get what he meant about alternative modes of communication. Of course, in the twenty-first century the alternative has become the standard. It’s not a hip-hop world anymore (if it ever was), and these passionate, politically engaged youth are not members of the hip-hop generation. Russell Simmons is in his fifties now (older than Obama), and the rapper on the mic is almost as likely to be an Indian American, Samoan, or Latino as an African American from Boogie Down Bronx or Compton, California. They make beats, spit rhymes, create images, and spout lingo amid an intoxicating, ever-expanding, mind-boggling datastream that knows no boundaries, geographic or cultural. Thirty years after Parliament-Funkadelic raised the possibility, Millennials need only push a button or tap a keyboard to go “all around the world for the funk.”

While race men have been cultural watchdogs—Jesse Jackson has periodically weighed in against the misogyny and profane language expressed in hip-hop music—while simultaneously practicing some of those activities himself, namely, adultery and calling black people “niggas”—they
have largely missed many of the potentially transformative developments in popular culture. Amiri Baraka, for example, lectured his Georgetown audience on the need for a national black newspaper, as if Web 2.0 had never happened and black journalists had not responded with online news sites such as TheDailyVoice.com, TheRoot.com, and EbonyJet.com.

This new version of youth spirit doesn’t just confound African Americans who grew up in a society largely defined by race. Members of the majority culture have often failed to recognize and respond to the generation’s cues. For example, when Hillary Clinton adviser Mark Penn suggested that Obama’s supporters “looked like Facebook,” he indicated his own failure to grasp the rapid changes taking place. Like many of us, he just didn’t get it.

Obama apparently did. He stated, “One of my fundamental beliefs from my days as a community organizer is that real change comes from the bottom up. And there’s no more powerful tool for grass-roots organizing than the Internet.” His prescience led to My.BarackObama.com, a website shaped by Chris Hughes, a cofounder of Facebook. It helped him turn the world of political organizing on its head, raising more than 2 million donations of less than two hundred dollars each. Hughes was all of twenty-four at the time.

The self-generating, DIY philosophy behind such ventures is hardly new. But powered by Internet technology, it
can popularize and spread an idea (for instance, that Obama should be president) like brushfire. With no input from the candidate, in February 2008 Will.i.am, music producer and front man of the Black Eyed Peas, created a “Yes We Can” video, a moving blend of music and testimony (mostly from young, good-looking celebrities) that turned out to be far more effective than a paid advertising spot.

According to the Associated Press, Will.i.am’s video “quickly went viral” and “drew its one millionth hit within a few days of being posted.” By June, according to the New York Times, the video had been “viewed more than 18 million times, first at YouTube, and now at the Obama campaign’s portal, my.barackobama.com.” Although he and his band had performed at John Kerry fund-raisers during the 2004 race, Will.i.am considered himself mostly apolitical. Then he heard Obama’s address following the New Hampshire primary and everything changed. The speech, he wrote, “inspired me to want to change myself to better the world . . . and take a ‘leap’ towards change . . . and hope that others become inspired to do the same.”

Will.i.am’s response to Obama’s words—and its immediate impact upon popular culture—illustrates what sociologist Robert Putnam calls “areas of convergence.” Putnam suggests that there are more of these areas than Americans realize, and that Obama was perfectly suited to capitalize upon them for the nation’s benefit. “We feel divided in racial terms, religious terms, class terms, all kinds of terms, but we exaggerate how much we disagree with each other,”
Putnam told the *New Yorker*. “And that’s why I think he’s right for this time.”

*Convergence*—a ground-level version of the harmonic kind—is also the word that kept coming to my mind when I began to observe Obama’s phenomenal rise. I attributed it to the alignment of irreversible cultural trends, substantial political developments, and unstoppable market forces. None of that is meant to diminish the man himself: his charisma, his peerless eloquence, his seemingly effortless mastery of the issues, and the clarity with which he presents and pursues his agenda. But none of those qualities counters the fact that he appeared at exactly the right time and place in the course of American events. Although Obama’s very ascendance is a watershed moment, it has set in motion consequences that will reach far beyond his presidency. In addition to turning the old civil rights model of African American leadership on its head in ways that I don’t think even Obama foresaw, he has suggested a new framework of public service and leadership that will undoubtedly influence ambitious Americans of all backgrounds.

It’s likely that none of that was on Will.i.am’s mind in February 2008, when he followed his first Obama project with another music video, “We Are The Ones.” Its large, telegenic cast included nineteen-year-old Zoë Kravitz, a singer-actress and daughter of musician Lenny Kravitz, whose whole career seems rooted in the kind of global-harmony vibes aroused by Obama’s emergence.

Zoë Kravitz’s onscreen comments following the video
sum up the rising tide of sentiment—exuberantly free of old neuroses—that helped Obama’s campaign go from a long-shot venture to one of our nation’s most memorable and stirring quests for higher office. And they provide some hint of a new social compact flexible enough to inspire my seventy-seven-year-old mother in the Midwest and a nineteen-year-old in Hollywood.

“I want to be an optimistic person,” Zoë said, “and Barack is helping me do that.”