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## HANDOUT THREE, LESSON ONE

# INTERVIEW THREADS TRANSCRIPTS

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### FAMILY & RACE

**ANTHONY PETERSON**

**01:15:11:03 - 01:19:23:08**

What I like to say is “race is not real, but race does matter.” And it’s not real because, biologically, it doesn’t add up to anything significant. There is more variation in what we call races than there is between what we call races.... When I think about Barry/Barack Obama, I think about how he had to, and part of this began before or at least in high school, he had to determine what it means to be a Black man in the United States. Because although he is only half Black, and in fact, that half of him that is Black didn’t come through that slave experience that many of us did. But what he had to deal with is that anyone who looks at him, anyone who interacts with him, anyone who connects with him, sees a Black man, or a Black boy and then a Black man. So, he has had to determine what does it mean to be a Black man, and I think there was some trial and error with him. I think playing a Black style of basketball was something he chose to do because he decided “I’m a Black guy, so I need to do this. But in Hawaii, because there were so few Black folks there and most of them were connected to the military and he wasn’t, I think that’s just the way he chose to go about it. He knows that people see him and see a Black boy, a Black man, but in Hawaii those ethnic issues are always out there. We don’t hide our ethnicity in the ways that some other folks do, so he just had to claim some things for himself.... I think when I talk about the confidence that I saw in 2004 at that Democratic Convention speech, I think that was a man who had claimed who he was for himself.

**VALERIE JARRETT**

**1:04:46-1:07:09:18**

I do remember the first time I read *Dreams from My Father*. I’ve now read it several times since and each time I see a different message and part of him that I didn’t necessarily focus on the first time. But I was struck by how candid he was about the painful parts of his childhood and coming of age and reckoning with being an African American from mixed parents. Grappling with the anger that comes when one is abandoned by one’s own father, particularly for

boys. I think that was a hard thing for him and he’s struggled. On the other hand, as he’s often said to me since, the people who loved him most in the world were White and so that allowed him this sense of belonging or expectation of being able to connect in the way that maybe some African Americans did not. But I do remember thinking what a candid, honest, portrayal of your evolution. Interestingly similar to his wife “becoming” in her story but from very different childhoods. Both raised though with very common values. And those values of hard work and excellence and resilience I think are part of what led him to be the extraordinary president and human being that he is today.

I think the fact that Michelle had come from two parents who loved each other dearly, a brother who was a buddy and partner and literally shared a bedroom for most of their childhood, extremely close, just not in proximity but in spirit, reminded Barack Obama of what he didn’t have. And I think he hungered for that and he used Michelle’s father as a role model. Someone who believed in hard work and family and sacrifice, who was present in the lives of his children, even though he obviously was in great pain quite often from MS and how he overcame that pain in order to be an integral part of his family life. He died not long after Barack came on the scene, I think the stories that both Michelle and her mom and Craig told him of their upbringing helped him understand the kind of father he wanted to be. He wanted to be the father he never had.

**TA-NEHISI COATES**

**01:06:22:17-1:09:18:21**

If you think about Black experiences and plural, I think there are two that predominate, and that is the experience of coming out of the South and dealing with the kind of direct and often brutally violent and in-your-face sort of racism. And then there’s the Black experience that is related to that. You know, most often for those of us who came or whose relatives came from the South, in the North, the grinding sort of poverty of the cities, the kind of racism that’s writ in the policies segregates us for instance, to public housing. Like my mom lived in public housing. That’s sort of like the story of my lineage. My dad from Philadelphia living in that sort of grinding poverty. And so those are I think

the two stories that we see in terms of most Black politicians, I would say for the most part. And then you have certain people who maybe who grew up because of class reasons maybe did not have to directly deal with that even though in those cases, they aren't really that far from it. I mean, Barack Obama was from Hawaii. And that's not to say that Hawaii is a racial utopia, you know, a non-racist utopia. That's not what I'm saying. But the very geography is different. Black people are not just a minority; they are a significant minority there.

The entire notions and assumptions that you see on the mainland, while they may be diffused and it may be some of that there, it's just not — it's not as prevalent, it's not the same sort of thing. So the first thing was to be there. And here's another level of it, 'cause that's not enough. You know what I mean. Like, you could be there and you could have White parents or White grandparents or whatever who don't actually love you and communicate their racism to you and so while he does describe certain instances where it was there for his grandparents, it's really no doubt that they loved him and accepted him.

And then the third level was his mom who was White was very clear that you are Black, you know what I mean, like, there's — so he never had the — I think in addition to that, he never had in a major way like any sort of schizophrenia about what he was because his mom was really, really clear with him about that and bought him books and took him to see things. So even if it was not communicated to him in a way that it was to say, me and most Black people, it's just in the air, it's what you are, you know what I mean, there's no intellectual — it was there for him. And I think that is highly, highly unusual. There are very, very few — there are a lot of Black people throughout history who are biracial, who had White parents. That's not particularly uncommon. I think that gets overrated when people talk about his experience. You know, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, we have a long history of Black people who have White parents. That's not really what it is. It's that plus those other things that make it just fundamentally different.

## POLITICAL AWAKENING

**DAVID MARANISS**

**01:39:05:19 - 1:41:03:02**

Chicago is the — in many ways the end of the arc of Obama's search for self-identity. He arrived in Chicago just coincidentally within the same period as Michael Jordan got to Chicago and became the most famous athlete in the world, Oprah Winfrey arrived in Chicago

and became the most famous celebrity in the world in some ways. And Barack Obama who was anonymous also got there in the early 80's — you know, mid 80's. But when he got there, he went to the South Side of Chicago and was for the first time feeling himself in the embrace of a real Black community. That was essential to his whole search. Finally, it was there. He worked as an organizer with poor people on the deep South Side of Chicago. He got to know the ministers, the reverends of that part of Chicago and really the Obama that you — you hear today, the cadences he learned. He didn't have those cadences. He learned them on the South Side of Chicago. You know, he has two speeches. One is sort of a professorial academic constitutional lawyer speech, and the other is an emotional speech. And that's what he learned in Chicago from Black Chicago, from the reverends there. There were all of these women, older women that he worked with who embraced him much like the secretaries did in New York and he felt that warmth and really for the first time really felt fully part of the African American community in the United States. And that's what Chicago gave him, is that sense at last of home.

**LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON**

**01:43:04:00-1:45:48:02**

I always thought he was going to be president. It's easy to say because people say, "Hindsight is 20/20." But even when we had our meetings, and our strategy plannings, and our training... I was telling Yvonne. He was training us one day, and I said, "You know, he is going to be our first Black president." And she said, "You think so?" I said, "Oh yeah." It was something about him that I really always believed that. We've come a long way. You look at the way a person responds, what they do, how they do it. And so you know that they're going to keep climbing up that ladder, but he still had the personality and the knowledge to be president. And people seem to always — people like Barack. I didn't know exactly what his plans were, but I knew that he was learning the system and he never said, "Well, I need to do this," or "I need to do that." But he kept meeting people and understanding how everything fit together. And the other thing that I looked at though, every time we had a project or a program we wanted, we had to sit down with a politician and play Captain May I? You know, we wanted to do the Employment and Training Center. We sat down with representatives of the city. We met with the mayor. We met with people who were over at the Employment and Training Department for the city, but it was always a matter of taking our ideas to someone in politics, and trying to get approved. What

I saw was though, because we always were playing this game of Captain May I?, because we weren't actually sitting at that table where the power was, and for him I think at some point he realized that he needed to be at the table. And I think that's when he had his political aspirations. I think that's where it came from, and I guess once he got there, and it's nothing like timing also and I think the time was right for him to take that step into politics.

#### **LAURA WASHINGTON**

**1:17:34-21-1:19:30:07**

Project Vote (in Chicago) was a voter registration drive that Barack Obama was hired to run. He — he came in, I think, after he had been at Harvard. And brilliantly got to know the city, got to understand the politics of the city, and got to figure out — and he's, and he's brilliant at understanding the politics of the city and the strategy that he needed to do to get folks registered. And raise the bar and the energy around Black political empowerment in a way that we hadn't seen since Harold Washington.

The man was brilliant at strategically thinking about all the things he had to do, all the steps he had to take to get to that grand prize in the White House. He knew he had to not only understand community organizing, but political organizing. He understood he had to start to develop relationships. He understood he had to start to build the chits that he would need. The things that he would go back to people and ask for in return. And so, the voter registration drive was just one example of that. It gave him a chance to get to know the power players. He got a chance for him to develop relationships. To develop the chits he would need to become an elected official.

I remember asking him how high did he want to go? And his answer, like any good politician was, "I just want to serve the people. I just want to do what's best for the people." He was extremely ambitious. Nobody writes a book about their life when they're 30 years old. Nobody comes from Harvard and Columbia and comes to the South Side of Chicago to do some organizing for some little community group you never heard from. Unless he's got a plan. Nobody runs for Congress when he's as young as he did, unless you have a plan. So, I think — I think he knew he wanted to get as high as he could. President, I don't think anybody thought that was coming. And certainly not at the time that I first met him.

## **FAITH**

#### **REVEREND ALVIN LOVE**

**1:08:11-07-1:10:31:23**

We often talked about his need for a personal relationship with the Lord and to find his space, the place where he could be most comfortable. One of the things that I — that I encouraged him to do was to try to find a church that was outside of the organizing project. You know, I'm — it could've been — I really think back now, it could've been real easy for me to draw him to my church and you know, that would've been it, but I always encouraged him to try to do it outside of this. Because if you join one of the churches inside, then it might set up kind of a competition with other groups and they're wondering why didn't you join us? And if you didn't join me, then I don't want a part of it and I encouraged him to go to a church of a pastor that I was familiar with, a Reverend L. K. Curry, who has been the pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church and he went there to meet with him and I don't think Reverend Curry trusted him too much and so it was Reverend Curry that sent him to Trinity and he began his relationship over there with Trinity. But we always talked about the need for him to be spiritually grounded if he was going to do this kind of work in the church and then even if he wasn't, he needed to be spiritually grounded and he needed to make that decision for himself and by himself. Once he made his decision to join the church, you could see a marked difference in his groundedness. Prior to that, Barack was searching for himself; both himself in the African American community but also in the faith community and I think when he became a part of the church, that search was over and he — you know, he delved into really building on that relationship and making that structure, that foundation strong in his life. I think it had real value and real meaning to him.

#### **JEREMIAH WRIGHT**

**1:14:24-01-1:18:22:08**

His experience of the Black church was zero. So we began talking about that. As we talked more about the church, in one of the conversations, I mentioned that at the end of my studies at Chicago, I had studied under Fazlur Rahman. He said, "The Muslim?" I said, "Yeah. I was doing Islam in West Africa under him." And we began talking about it 'cause that's when I found out he had family members who were Muslim and we began talking about the similarities and differences. I found him to be a very intelligent young man and our conversations increased in terms of his just stopping by to talk about issues. Not necessarily what's going

on in Chicago and how we can unify but picking up on our conversations about “the news media says there’s a fight between Christians and Muslims. I’ve got family members who are Christian and Muslim in the same family.” And yeah, I remember that because when he said he was interested in public office, I never met any politician prior to him who was interested in those kinds of things. So it stands out vividly.

He wanted to make an intelligent decision about his faith. I think the rest of his life in terms of his identity, he had a pretty good grasp on, it was just uncertainty. And I would say I was able to help him work through some of his questions, some of his doubts to the point of his being certain when he walked the aisle to join the church; it was not that all doubts are settled, but God accepts you with your doubts. I read that in the passage of scripture where the father says, “I believe but I got some unbeliefs,” just some stuff I don’t understand, that that’s normal and that an unexamined faith is not a faith worth having, so yeah, I would concur that I was able to help him accept Christianity with doubts. Not every doubt was settled, not every question was answered, but he didn’t feel like he was out of place. I said, “Welcome to the Club.”

I think that President Obama’s joining Trinity before he was a senator, before he was a candidate for the presidency gave him visibility among a large — very large number of persons in the Black community and when he — not just at Trinity but when he would go to different places and say he was a member of Trinity, that bought him — bah?— I had people who couldn’t even pronounce his name asking me who he was when he started running. I said, “He’s a regular guy, he’s a church member.” “For real?” I said, “Yeah.” “With a name like that?” I said, “Yeah, with a name like that.” I know several commentators that since the election have said he joined for that reason. I don’t know that that’s true, I know it gave him creds, yeah. He joined the legal counseling ministry with a legal background where we ask all new members to pick a ministry and become active in that, particularly with a church our size. So he’s just not coming in on Sunday anonymously, leaving on Sunday anonymously but have your life interwoven with the lives of other persons whether in your profession or not.

**MICHAEL ERIC DYSON**

**01:17:19:16 - 01:19:50:11**

There is no doubt that Jeremiah Wright helped to establish the religious authenticity of his parishioner Barack Obama because, remember, Obama doesn’t grow out of a Black religious tradition. There might be some great baptist churches in Hawaii, but not many African American religious acolytes congregate there en masse. So, when he came to Chicago, he got a real dose of that Black tradition of preaching and singing and the kind of ecstatic orality and the kind of combusive and vehemently visceral engagement with the truth. The body invested, the lungs invested, the soul invested, the emotions stimulated. He got a sense of that when he came to Chicago, and Obama was quite practical about the choice of a church, right, which is the one that gives me the greatest entrée into these communities as a community organizer and also as a Black man interested in kind of reconnecting with some of his Black roots and then stimulating them in many ways. And Trinity United Church of Christ was an ideal bed for such activities in a tremendous womb with an incredibly elastic heart and soul that gave him and afforded him the opportunity to engage, great choir, great preaching, upwardly mobile Black communities that are still committed to struggling and working-class Black people. It was an ideal place, and it gave him an authentic dose of that experience and inculcated him and included him in a very serious way that allowed him to feel it as an organic part of his growth and evolution and development. It gave him a sense of identity and a kind of at-homeness with the Black experiences that, in one way, had been foreign to him because he hadn’t been raised in and reared in the kind of rich tapestry of Black identity that you find in a Black church.