



MIAMI BOOK FAIR  
KEITH WOODS & BRADLEY BENNETT

F: So I think with all that, I think I would now like to just welcome our introducer, Bradley Bennett. He's the executive editor of the *South Florida Times* that you've been enjoying, and he'll introduce our special guest.

BENNETT: (inaudible) Well, good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. We at the *South Florida Times* – and you see our paper there in front of you – are pleased to welcome you to the Miami Book Fair International. For those of you who are not familiar with our paper, we're a community weekly publication that focuses on the African-American and Caribbean Communities of Miami Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties, and you can find our paper in most public supermarkets in Miami Dade and Broward – or Johnson & Wales University and various other locations throughout the region. You can also check us out at our website, [SFLTimes.com](http://SFLTimes.com), which is updated daily.

And now it's my pleasure to introduce two gentlemen whom I consider kindred spirits because they, like I, have extensive backgrounds in newspaper journalism. They've also made the issue of race relations a major focus of their work, as I have.

First, I would like to introduce Christopher Kenneally, who is going to be our moderator today. He's an award-winning journalist and author who's reported on education, business, travel, culture, and technology for the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Independent* of London.

KENNEALLY: You can stop there. (laughter) I was a freelance writer. I had to eat what I killed, so – (laughter)

BENNETT: Many other leading publications, so I'll go on.

KENNEALLY: That's right.

BENNETT: He's currently Director of Author and Creator Relations for Copyright Clearance Center and co-host – and host and moderator of *Beyond the Book*, a

series on issues and writing and publishing, which is frequently broadcast nationally on CSPAN's BookTV. And Mr. Kenneally lives in Boston.

Today's program, titled "Uncovering Race Coverage: What We Mean When We Write on Race, Politics, and the American Scene," is a *Beyond the Book* panel discussion featuring Mr. Woods – Mr. Keith Woods, who is the Dean of the Faculty of the Poynter Institute in Saint Petersburg, which is just an extraordinary journalism school that many of us have either gone to or would like to go to because they have many series on teaching about journalism itself. Mr. Woods is a former sports writer and news reporter, city editor, editorial writer, and columnist that worked his way through those jobs in 16 years at the *New Orleans Times Picayune*. His professional writing won statewide and national awards including the 1994 National Headliner Award – he shared with colleagues for the 1993 series "Together Apart: The Myth of Race." He joined Poynter in 1995, and for seven years led the institute's teaching on diversity and coverage of race relations as part of the ethics faculty. In his time at Poynter, he has written columns and essays on topics ranging from fatherhood to race relations to the emerging journalism of the South African press. Mr. Woods leads seminars for journalists who must handle stories about a race and ethnicities. He's a former editor of *Best Newspaper Writing*, Poynter's annual collection of prize-winning stories and photojournalism selected by the American Society of Newspapers. He's also a regular speaker at the Poynter-sponsored National Writers Workshops, which is also just a prize thing to go to for many of the journalists (inaudible) get excited about this each year, and consults with newspapers and TV stations on matters of diversity, race relations, writing, and editing. So with that I will –

KENNEALLY: And if I can, I'll introduce the third member of the panel here. This is Bradley Bennett, executive editor. He didn't know when he walked in. He thought he was just going to have the easy job of introducing Keith and me, and passing out his papers. But I said, why don't you join us, and he was a good sport, so he's going to have a seat and join us as well.

(applause)

BENNETT: Thank you.

KENNEALLY: Well, thank you all for coming. And I've taken the occasion to ask Keith to read something that was published today in the *Times Picayune* – an essay, which I'll just allow him to set up, which I think does a lot to prepare us for the conversation we're going to have. Keith.

WOODS: Thank you, and I'm – I will read excerpts so that you don't have to live through the whole thing. It's – as I struggled on election night with a definition of what this meant that Barack Obama was being elected President of the United States, I also wrestled with a question that a former colleague in New Orleans had asked in requesting that I write something after the election, and his one strong

request was that I wait and not begin even imagining what I would write until the election itself, even though polls and everything else had sort of told you where this would wind up – and I’ll just read to you an excerpt from that, and by way of talking about how difficult and maybe how hopeful issues of race relations might be. So here we go –

“Election night had come with high expectations and good poll numbers, and my friends started early in asking, how do you feel – an unspoken but understood in that probe of emotions was the rest of their sentence – as a black man. I didn’t have words, which was as perplexing to me as to them. This should have been easy. ‘Wait,’ I told them, ‘let the numbers add up, and when Ohio and Pennsylvania and a southern state or two go blue, I’ll know. I’ll feel it. You’ll be the first.’

It was as if we didn’t all know the requisite answer. It’s an answer that has been – that was preordained by slavery, segregation, lynchings, and every time I ever felt a bigoted inferiority that America spent so much time trying to brand upon the souls of black folk. How would I feel? Before this historic election, I thought I knew. I would feel victorious, vindicated, proud, wistful in remembering the ones who suffered and died so that a clever freshman Senator with a provocative name could rise to the podium in Grant Park, while in the crowd and in our living rooms, we would cry. Only I didn’t.

My head and heart were in full rebellion against a black man inside me – the one who wanted to slap a high five on black America, and do a rooster walk around white supremacy’s sad little caucus. Instead of prancing a cocky strut though, I was cringing at every suggestion that this racial history we were about to make was the big story of the 2008 election. I was trying to understand why focusing on this monumental first felt so small, even insulting. Then Virginia was Obama’s, and Florida was flipping – and then the CNN graphics were flying all over the TV screen because the West Coast vote was done and so was senator John McCain.”

And I will leap forward in the piece to come to the conclusion that I was heading toward as I was trying to understand for myself what I was feeling. I talked about the bitterness of listening to the hoots during John McCain’s concession speech –

“But in one ‘change has come to America’ leap, he was passed a tribute Obama to his white grandmother and beyond the familiar sign posts of race. Even when he evoked the hauntingly prescient ‘I’ve been to the mountain top’ speech that King delivered the night before his death, Obama had bent the words in a such a way as to make the black man in me rest and make the American rise. King foretold ‘some difficult days ahead’. Obama said, ‘the road ahead will be long.’ ‘I’ve been to the mountain top,’ said King. ‘Our climb will be steep,’ said Obama. Said Martin, ‘I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land’, and Barack, ‘We may not get there in one year or even in

one term, but America, I have never been more hopeful than I am tonight that we will get there. I promise you, we as a people will get there.’ And I understood.

We were becoming the nation we claimed to be in 1776, proved we weren’t in 1968, doubted in cynical hearts scarred by memory that we would be on the morning after November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008. We were a new we, a new people. We were not just the dozens of euphoric black folk in Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. We were also the jubilant people of Honolulu exalting a native son. We were the richly diverse hundreds of thousands in Grant Park and the 63 million across the country. But not only that. We were triumphant Indonesian children waving a picture of the President-Elect, who once attended their elementary schools. The Kenyans dancing in the dusty streets of Kogelo celebrating a grandchild of Africa. The Australians in Sydney counting down the seconds before the California polls closed, then erupting in cheers for the people’s victory. The calm centered man with a biography that defies category had called upon a nation’s people to rise above what their lesser selves feared, and see ahead to what they aspire to be. And we proved better than we dared believe.

We have not so much transcended racism as we have hurdled the construction work on the bridge between where we were and where we wish to be. This was the ground the rebels in my head and heart had been fighting to take. Go tell the headline writers, the pundits, the black man in me that this was not nearly a racial milestone. We stand together as a nation, as a world, as a people irrevocably in this new place more powerful than we have ever been. I can write those words and believe them. Now, I can cry.”

(applause)

KENNEALLY: Well, thank you, Keith. And I think that that went a long way to setting us up here. And the first question I was going to ask you about was as a journalism professor, how you grade the coverage? And I should tell people that when we first talked about this panel, it was spring last year – sorry, this year last spring – and we anticipated history would be made one way or the other. At that point, I believe the nomination was on paper his, if not the primary election was not yet over. And I think in a way we’ve anticipated something because I think next year we can expect a lot of books on the election to be discussed here at the Miami Book Fair. But to return to that question, how do you grade the coverage? Maybe separate the primary coverage from the final election coverage, and tell us what you thought about some high points and some low points.

WOODS: Well, I think it depends on what the – on what coverage we’re talking about. If the question is about race relations –

KENNEALLY: That’s (inaudible) –

WOODS: – and how well we covered race relations, I would say, not very well at all. And that’s not to say that there were a lot of bad stories being written about race relations so much as it is to say that there weren’t many at all. For an issue that is – am I not close enough?

F: No, you’re fine, but you can take it and hold it if you’d like.

WOODS: But my hand will shake (inaudible).

KENNEALLY: Well, that’s – yeah, just – you’re fine. (laughter)

WOODS: So I’ll get closer. I’m much more comfortable this way. Here’s an interesting thing about this campaign, and Chris and I talked about this the other day that if – I’ve talked to many editors over time who have said – who have celebrated the fact that Barack Obama did not make a big deal out of race while running for President. And I wonder why they’re celebrating. And I’ve even as recently as last week asked some that question – what’s to celebrate about that? If you sat down and arrayed the issues that confront the United States on a daily basis, that confront children in schools, that confront people in a criminal justice system, that confront us in social services and neighborhoods and all of the areas that we are trying to live our lives, race relations and problems within it is one of our biggest problems. It is one of the nation’s biggest ongoing challenges. And the fact that we now have a black President tells the limitations, the boundaries around racism and the degree to which we’ve exploded those boundaries. But we cannot imagine for a second that we have resolved those issues that confront my black children in school today everyday when expectations for them may be low, when their schoolmates may still be taunting them with names – all of the things that are true about the country. So I think what we did as a journalism profession was said, OK, they’re not talking about it, and therefore, neither will we. And I think that was a huge mistake.

And I think to the extent that it was problematic, I believe, politically for Barack Obama to take this on, which may be one of the reasons – and I’m not going to read anyone’s mind – why he didn’t bring it up other than in Philadelphia when he was forced, it is not our responsibility as journalists to sit around and wait for the candidates to tell us what to talk about. And journalism has a responsibility to provoke and array those issues that are of concern to the people of the United States, and report on them as deeply as possible, and I don’t think that we did that up to the level that we should have.

KENNEALLY: So in a sense you’re saying the media let themselves off the hook?

WOODS: Yeah, I would say that they allowed the candidates to let themselves off the hook, I guess –

KENNEALLY: It was a complicity there –

WOODS: Sure there was.

KENNEALLY: – in a sense.

WOODS: Sure there was, and I remind people over and over and over again that John McCain did not talk about race either. Hillary Clinton did not talk about race either. The only person, in fact, who ran in this election cycle who did was John Edwards, and even that was a blip on the radar screen if you go back in the campaign.

KENNEALLY: Well, one of the things that as we were anticipating doing the program, Keith, we sort of began to think about was the code that goes along with discussing race in this country and then gets transferred into media coverage. And you had mentioned some interesting points that for you felt like echoes of previous generations. And one in particular that I really found quite helpful to me to understand was this decoding, this unpacking you did of the phrase that “he’s not ready.” Talk about that, and take us back to a previous generation – and what that meant then.

WOODS: I mean there were so many things that happened over the course of these last two years that required some generational and historical knowledge to even understand fully. To understand why people were reacting as they were. There was a phrase, I think at some point – and I don’t remember the Senator who used it, but referring to Obama as “uppity.” Now, you have to have a generational knowledge. You have to in some cases even have a regional knowledge to know why people reacted as they just did in this room to the phrase. But what’s happened in our conversations in general about race and race relations is that we’ve now mixed over the course of time generation, region, history, knowledge, so much that you can’t really know from any one moment to the other even who means what when they say it. But what we do know is that people react consistently in some ways to phraseology. So “he’s not ready” has lots of levels of meaning, and again, the older you get – and maybe the other phrasing that we used toward the end of this campaign that we heard a lot was what he will do to our country and the country that we’ve created if Obama was elected.

And you don’t have to be a bigot to have what you do have the consequence of bigotry. You don’t have to be a bigot in order to stoke and make use of bigotry in a campaign, and I think to a certain extent ignorance is only an excuse so far. And then you have to be held responsible. But journalism has a responsibility to understand that when someone says something like that – he’s not ready – that the underlying signals to certain segments of our society that says that we’re not ready – that says that a young person or a black person can’t be ready – has to be unpacked in the media – splayed in front of people, and I guess to a certain extent confronting the people who said it with the question, is this what you meant? Did you mean in fact to invoke the rest of that phrase when I say uppity?

KENNEALLY: And in fact, you told me that the “he’s not ready” phrase was a response in – from white Southerners at the early days of the Civil Rights movement saying, oh, yes, yes, fine, but not right away. There was a tempering that said, well, no, we’ll have to wait that kind of related to that.

WOODS: Right, and what Martin Luther King called the intoxicating drug of gradualism – there is this overriding notion that I can both be liberal enough to say, it’s OK, and still maintain control by saying, just not yet. And none of those things may have been true. I think what’s important journalistically is to understand that when those words come from someone’s mouth and enters into the various filters of our society, journalism has a responsibility to help us figure out what the person meant, what they didn’t mean, what you heard, and what he heard, and how those things might be different. And there again, I don’t think that we did a good enough job of doing that.

KENNEALLY: And there was a phrase that when the election was final, and I haven’t done any research – a Nexus-Lexus search of the database to determine whether or not this is true, but my gut tells me that more often than not Obama was referred to as the first African-American President and less so the first black President. And when we were discussing that, we related that to Jesse Jackson’s campaigns and how Jackson seemed to play a role of bridging the Civil Rights movement to this new generation – this new generation of Obama politics. Do that unpacking again for us. Where and when did African-American emerge as a more common way to refer to the community, and if – I see Bradley wants to contribute. Feel free.

BENNETT: I was going (inaudible).

KENNEALLY: OK. Well, either one of you, but I think it matters. And tying it to Jackson’s campaign and a forgotten phrase that you and I resurrected yesterday when we were discussing it, the rainbow.

WOODS: The Rainbow Coalition. Well, let me just say a few things about this. First, Jesse Jackson, I think, single-handedly pushed the phrase African-American into the American lexicon in the late ’80s and early ’90s. I mean it was a very deliberate attempt to change language from both Afro-American, which is I always thought was an interesting term anyway – especially at the time when I was wearing an afro – and black, and at some level to force into the American lexicon a phrasing that gives this group of people a beginning point – that takes them out of being a color, and places them somewhere in the history of the world by the naming.

Now, I don’t imagine to know everything that was behind that, but I do know that when it came into – particularly into newsrooms, it was an especially compelling question to be asked because the question is who gets to tell you what you’re called. Who gets to name you? And that debate by the way is not over in newspapers. If you are Latino or Hispanic or Chicano, then somebody’s making a

decision everyday about which one to call you. If you're Native American or Native People or Indigenous People – all of those things are still – they're still going on in our newsrooms.

So you have the introduction of the phrase – we talked about the possibility maybe that Jesse Jackson's campaign fell sort of midway, at least sociologically, between our most, our deepest past in race relations and today.

And the other thing that I pointed out to Chris was that when people talking about Obama not running a race campaign, the suggestion in reflection is that Jesse Jackson did – when in fact his campaign was all about what he called the Rainbow Coalition. The reflection would be that Shirley Chisholm ran a racial campaign – of course she didn't. Or that Carol Mosley Braun or even Al Sharpton were running racial campaigns. And if you go back and look at the campaigns themselves, they were campaigns for presidency of the United States. And a lot of our memory is about how we felt, particularly as journalists, about who those people were. And it is one of the reasons that I believe today that we are still in awe of the fact that a black man ran for President and didn't make race an issue. The problem isn't what – the revelation here isn't what Obama did. It's what we expected. It's what we thought he was going to do or maybe even should've done. That's what we're learning here. We've learned less about Obama in this campaign than we have about ourselves and our expectations.

KENNEALLY: And there was some interesting twists and turns in all of that. There was a moment, I believe, late spring/early summer when he made essentially a joke – a humorous comment – which I believe he had many, many times about not looking like all the Presidents on the dollar bills. And the McCain campaign used that as an opportunity to say that the Obama campaign was somehow accusing them of being racist. And again, help us, as a good journalism professor, to unpack all of that and what you heard in that exchange and how it was covered.

WOODS: OK. I am not a journalism professor. Can we put that on the record.

KENNEALLY: Oh, I'm sorry.

WOODS: All the journalism professors in the room stand down. I'm not trying to –

KENNEALLY: But you run a journalism school. So maybe that's close enough – close enough for this discussion.

WOODS: And let me again put in the larger context of reporting and writing about race relations – that the McCain camp after Obama had said this – he'd said a number of times, but like many things that happened over the course of this campaign, it got it's moment. Everything kind of suddenly becomes an issue even though it might not have been an issue the day before because of whatever else was happening in the context of the campaign at that moment. But in this case, the McCain campaign

responded to that phrase by saying that Obama is “playing the race card from the bottom of the deck.” Now, maybe you remember, there was so many things that happened over the course of this campaign – it’s to remember all of the little ones.

Well, the first responsibility of journalism is to say, what does that mean – playing the race card. Does it mean talking about race? Does it mean complaining that you have been the victim of discrimination? Does it mean crying wolf? What exactly does the phrase mean? And we’ve lost track, like political correctness, of what the phrase means, and we’re just tossing it about as though we’re all sitting around saying, oh, yeah, I’ve got my little decoder device here. I can say playing the race card obviously means the same thing to all of us. And it doesn’t. So that was the first problem – in fact, I’ve written about how many news organizations didn’t even put the phrase in quotation marks, but accepted it as a phrase that we all share. And we do not. I don’t know what it means when you say it, and I don’t know what it means when one person says it to the next. So it’s a useless phrase in the beginning.

But beyond that, the notion that Obama in saying that I am – I don’t look like those other people is interpreted immediately – and I believe that he sort of made use of the ambiguity of this himself, but that it’s immediately interpreted to mean I am not white. It also could have meant I am not old. It could have meant I am not from this region or that region. It could mean that I was not born of privilege. It could mean a number of different things that a simple question back to the candidate would have cleared up – a pure journalistic question, sir, what do you mean when you say that? But of course, it’s not in McCain’s camp’s interest to ask that question, and so they tossed a race card comment in. And journalism instead of stopping and saying, wait a second, we’re journalists, we are not political pundits, we’re supposed to ask questions, not run with what we’ve heard, didn’t ask the question enough, and say, what do you mean? What does the phrase mean?

**KENNEALLY:** And I want to follow that with something about another, much more light-hearted moment, but again, you’re asking the question, what does he mean, and the point you made just then about the deliberate ambiguity. Obama is after all – besides a Senator and now a President-elect – a best selling author, a man who knows how to craft a sentence and write a book or two. And so when he says things, he’s very deliberate about what words he chooses. And I’m thinking of the exchange in the first news conference just after the election when they were asking about the dog that they were going to get for his daughters, and certain breeds were mentioned, and he said, well, maybe we’ll get a mutt like me. And you said that people interpreted that immediately in one way, and that they shouldn’t do that, they should be much more careful. Talk about that.

**WOODS:** Well, again, I was sitting around a table of colleagues watching the press conference and the woman next to me visibly winced – she responded, and she said, I wish he hadn’t said that. And I’ve – again, what did he mean when said, mutt? Did he mean that I am black and white? Did he mean that I am Kenyan and

American? Did he mean that I am from Kansas, Honolulu, Indonesia, Chicago, Harvard –

KENNEALLY: Columbia.

WOODS: – Columbia University. What did he mean? Well, if you assume always that the prism through which you see things is limited, then you ask the question. If you assume that the prism through which you see things is truth, you don't. And I think that journalistically our curiosity has been blunted to some extent – maybe by arrogance, maybe by a deeper sense that we already know, and so we don't ask questions. But I would again press the question back. Does anybody know what he meant when he said it? Because I didn't hear the follow-up question in the press conference, and I haven't seen anything written that suggested it could have meant more than the one thing that we assumed when we heard it.

KENNEALLY: It's fascinating, and I think that I'm going to go and watch all of those press conferences much more carefully now because that follow-up question becomes really important. I have some other thoughts for Keith, but I want to drag Bradley into this – Bradley Bennett from the *South Florida Times*. You had the fortune if you will of starting up the paper just before the election cycle began really, and benefiting, if you will, from the focus that the campaign gave to Florida. I've seen you nod your head a couple of times in this conversation here. Make this specific to this state. How do you feel the coverage of race fared in Florida, and just if you will let us know how you respond to some of the points Keith's made.

BENNETT: OK. Well, first of all, I'll say that certainly in Florida the description of somebody as black is not specific enough here. I mean because there are many people of African descent who live here who are from many different countries, and you can look at somebody and without hearing them speak and say, oh, that's a black person. If you asked the – like you said – and you have a little bit more of probing intellect with it – and you ask them well, how do you describe yourself – or journalistically, that person might say, well, I'm Cuban, I'm not black, even though they may be as dark a hue as I am, you know? There are aside from African-Americans to whom the term has traditionally referred, here in particular there are Jamaican-Americans, Haitian-Americans, people from the Bahamas, and all over the Caribbean who would probably not – that probably wouldn't be the first thing that they used to describe themselves as black. And I think that certainly had some significance in the way people looked at this race.

But I look back to in terms of some of the phraseology of the campaign early on – and I think you have to go back to the primaries, where I think a lot of it came out between Clinton and Obama. And when nobody thought that Obama really had a shot. Clinton “won Florida” – in which Obama did not actually compete because of the really interesting rules – I guess that's one way you could –

KENNEALLY: You're speaking diplomatically.

BENNETT: Democratic – yeah, I am. Very diplomatically. Of the Democratic Party. But along the campaign trail, Clinton – at first, there were many African-Americans – in particular, women – when nobody believed that Obama had a real shot – black women who were Hillary Clinton supporters. And I think that that a lot of that tide began to change after Clinton made some remarks about Dr. King and President Lyndon Johnson in regarding the Civil Rights movement and community activism. And it was this idea that, OK, well, everything, all the marches that Dr. King led and all of the movement that he inspired throughout the nation – the speeches that he'd delivered that inspired people – all of that wasn't really significant without a President. And I think that people of different backgrounds and ethnicities and experiences look at things differently. I think in the black community that was looked at as, oh, well, you needed a white person to basically make that happen or else all that marching that you all did, all of that activism, it was all for naught without a white person signing off on it and making it happen.

So I think that was a significant turning point, and also of course after Obama won the Iowa caucuses, it was like, oh, this guy has a shot. And further when – and you mentioned Jesse Jackson – when Bill Clinton made some comment about – was it (inaudible) yeah, Jackson won South Carolina also, and there was something about a fairy tale or a dreamland or something along those lines made it seem as though, oh well – it was almost like they were saying, he has no shot – against (inaudible) –

KENNEALLY: Kind of, so what, really, I think it was.

BENNETT: Yeah like so what. That's fine, he won one state, but so did Jesse Jackson. And I think going also back to one of your points about Obama in terms of running as an African-American, but not running as the black candidate. It was sort of a double-edged sword, obviously. I mean on the one hand he doesn't want to sort of segregate himself as Jesse Jackson or the Reverend Al Sharpton, who also ran and ran unsuccessful campaigns because they were marginalized as only being for black people and not necessarily for everyone. But the other person who spoke about race among the people that you mentioned was Obama himself, and that was only after the Reverend Wright controversy in which he was sort of forced to speak about race. He had avoided that – directly addressing those issues, which are very significant issues in America, until after the Reverend Wright controversy erupted. And it's like, oh, well, this is what they're preaching in black churches, this is what a lot of black people feel, and maybe this is how Obama feels. And just in terms of being – he had to come out as more a unifier, and try to talk about what people have in common and how everyone sort of needs to get passed their own sort of racial prejudices.

But just in terms of the whole issue of race, I mean it was obviously a very difficult issue for everyone to sort of handle, but I think Obama essentially rose above it and got people to sort of look at themselves as, like you said, Americans, as opposed to

white Americans, black Americans, and Hispanic or whatever – we’re all part of the same country.

KENNEALLY: If I can ask you about your own paper’s coverage, and it’s interesting the *South Florida Times* as I understood from what you said is kind of a reinvention of a newspaper, a fairly recent one, and a reinvention in the age when interaction with the reporting doesn’t simply happen when you write a letter to the editor and hope it gets published a week later, but the interaction is immediate. People can post comments and do all that sort of thing. Can you give us an idea quickly of what kind of reaction the readership had to your coverage or to coverage generally of the election as far as race goes?

BENNETT: Well, sure, and I’m sorry I didn’t bring it, but we had an edition in which we distinguished ourselves from a lot of other black publications in that on the day after the election we had a story on our front cover with Obama sort of raising his hand, and the headline saying “Obama Wins,” and behind him was a sort of montage of photos of ancestors in black history. I’m sorry I didn’t bring that, but you can go online at [SFLTimes.com](http://SFLTimes.com), and you could order a copy if you like. And I actually wrote a column about that in terms of how the ancestors, such as Martin Luther King, talking about the promised land, and how he looked over the mountain top and saw a better place for our people – and I said, well, he must have been looking over at Obama in Grant Park in Chicago giving his acceptance speech as the President-Elect of the United States. And just other African-Americans such as Mary McLeod Bethune, looking at education as the great equalizer, and it’s sort of presaged what would happen by saying that here’s what you can do. If you study hard, you keep your nose clean, and as a lot of our parents in the black community would say, you strive for excellence and twice as good, twice as clean, twice as cautious, then you could be the President of the United States. And I think it’s something that it was taught to us early on. I’m not sure we really believed it until it actually happened.

But speaking of reader reactions, I just wanted to kind of share with you a little bit of a column that our associate editor, Renee Michelle Harris, wrote about Obama jokes not being funny. And this is a message not to the white supremacists or whatever, but this is a message to African-Americans. And it just – she said that as soon as the election was – results were announced, she began to get a number of text messages, speaking to the immediate reaction folks. One of them read, “All white people must report to the cotton fields tomorrow at 6:00 am sharp for orientation.” Another said something to the effect that because they give us 40 acres and a mule, we took the White House. And you all are amused, but she actually was not because she said that these folks who sent the text messages – I’m sure it was all in fun – but they don’t get it. It’s not about blacks dispensing payback to whites. She said, what happened is so much bigger than any of us, but it’s ours. All of ours. And as awesome as Obama’s election is for blacks. It doesn’t afford us the right to gloat or ridicule or even to blame. Does it mean that we forget slavery, Jim Crow, the bombings, and the lynchings? No way. Frankly,

it's because of those atrocities happen that this is so sweet. That's why Jesse, Oprah, and millions of others cried tears of gratitude. Yes, we still have a long way to go, but America is growing beyond its shameful past.

I think that with our readers – and our mission is to elevate the dialogue in the community to show what people in the black community are thinking about and doing within the community as a way of making improvements in the community – having a conversation in which we seek to improve ourselves, but also to show the larger community what we're doing, and if you have an interest in us – and maybe you're interested in doing business with us, or maybe you're interested in lending us a helping hand – or just maybe just understanding what is it that black folks are talking about, what is it that they're thinking? I mean that's our mission. That's our role in the journalistic world.

KENNEALLY: Well, I believe the President-Elect himself said in his speech, it's not the end, but a beginning, and it seems like that's the consensus that we have on this panel here.

That's the end of our discussion, but the beginning of any questions that you may have, which I'm expecting you do have some. I want to – I'm sure we could continue, the three of us, but I want to share this discussion with you in the audience here. I don't believe we have a microphone for people in the audience, but if you just speak loudly enough and if you'll allow me to paraphrase your question, I'll do that so we're sure everybody hears. So we'll start in the front there.

M: More commentary than a question. Because I remember what it was like in my – when I was growing up, (inaudible) my father had to deal with, and how by me watching my father deal with different issues, that gave me the idea of how to deal with similar issues (inaudible) racism and discrimination, and how helpful it is to see a situation (inaudible) old arguments (inaudible) black being inferior, hating yourself, (inaudible), all the issues can become more remote because he refuted a lot of those arguments, which is a pretty amazing thing to witness – a refutation of the historical arguments about the inferiority of non-white people. A major refutation of that.

KENNEALLY: And yet, Keith, if I could just bring you back to something you said at the beginning in kind faulting the media for not pushing hard enough on this. It's the beginning of a new way of covering race in this country. It's not the end of covering race at all. There have been some people trying to assert – some of the punditry asserting that we're in a post-racial society, and so – I see you already shaking your head. My question is going to be does that – is that an attempt to take race relations coverage off the table? And how do you respond?

WOODS: Well, OK, I don't want to assert, again, any mind reading on the part of journalism, but I've been teaching on the subject for 14 years, I've been writing on

the subject for 20, and I know from being a part of journalism and being a teacher in journalism, that is one of the things we are least happy to report on. We are least comfortable reporting on. That it is so often about us while we're writing about someone else that it becomes an incredibly difficult thing to write about – that the landmines around you, when you begin walking into this field, are so obvious and devastating that nobody really wants to take it on. So the opportunity to get off the hook altogether and call this thing post-racial must be incredibly attractive right now to journalism. And yet if we don't pay attention, as we didn't pay attention before Watts, as we didn't pay attention before 1968, as we didn't pay attention before Reginald Denny and Rodney King, after we didn't pay attention before the OJ verdict, we're going to have another one of those wonderful days in America where we're going to wake up, and we we're going to see these stories that say, we don't see things the same in this country, and it'll be breaking news once again as though we've learned it again.

So the challenge here is to recognize where we really are, where we've – what we've actually achieved by being able as a nation to elect a black man to be the President and what we haven't achieved. And make sure that we keep reporting on the thing we haven't achieved and digging and understanding. So the story to me is not is racism dead, it's a stupid question. The question really is what role does it have in America today, and where ought we be focusing our attention the most? And that journalism can continue to do, and we ignore at our peril.

BENNETT: I just love the – and I just wanted to say that I love the way you put it in your column about how it's – there's this bridge that's still under construction, and Obama was able to leap over – what was it – the mechanisms or the mechanics, the roadwork that was being done to achieve this great milestone. It doesn't mean that the hurdles are not there. But if you study enough and you prepare yourself enough – and you're extraordinary enough – because anyone who would be the President of the United States has to be an extraordinary person – I believe – should be.

(laughter)

Should be. Then you can actually overcome these hurdles, but that does not mean that the hurdles are not there.

KENNEALLY: Yes, a question here.

F: You referred to journalism as sort of a uniform type of group or profession – in other words, journalists should be doing this. But there are journalists of various stripes, and represent different points of view so that you might – if the questions are asked by, say, the *New York Times* or previously the *Chicago Tribune* or some other – the *Wall Street Journal* – they're going to have different ways of presenting the information. It's not going to come out the same. They're not going to answer the questions. You're saying there's a basic question to be asked, and we should be

getting some basic answers, but are we really going to get those basic answers, or are we going to get answers, say, the difference between Fox and MSNBC?

WOODS: Well, there's a – let me make a difference between the answer and the spin. OK? If you ask me a question, and I answer it, I have given you one answer, and that is in fact uniform. The questions by the way, I think, are very simple questions. They are why, what do you mean, how do you know that? Simple questions that journalism doesn't ask nearly enough. But if I'm watching Fox, and they don't play the answer on TV, or if I'm watching CNN, and they play it three or four times, the questions haven't changed. And I think across the board when we looked at some of things that blew up in the Jesse Jackson comments by Bill Clinton, the Martin Luther King comments by Hillary Clinton, Geraldine Ferraro saying that Obama wouldn't have gotten where he was but for the fact that he was a black man, Barack Obama himself saying the morning after his speech in Philadelphia that his grandmother was just like an – she was just a typical white woman or typical white person. All of these phrases, all of these ideas that are put forward into the public sphere require a parsing by journalists because when Hillary Clinton says, it took a President to make King's dream come true, there are many black people who heard, it took a white person. I don't think that she meant that. I think what she was trying to do was minimize Obama's speech ability.

M: Effectiveness.

WOODS: What she was trying to do was political battle Barack Obama by minimizing the fact that he was kicking her butt as a speaker by making speakers less relevant. But that doesn't mean that she thought it took a white guy – it took white people to make things happen. If journalism doesn't understand that when information goes out, it passes through different lenses and different cultures and different generations, and simply chooses, as we have, to be parrots instead of analysts, to be people who operate with mallets instead of scalpels, then what you wind up with is a terribly confused and conflicted populous that doesn't really know what we mean, and that's all I'm suggesting.

KENNEALLY: I'd love to pursue that but it would take another hour. So we want to try to get to some questions. I want to try to be fair, and I don't believe we have anybody coming in after us, so we'll take the risk – do we have anybody coming in?

F: No, you're OK.

KENNEALLY: OK, so we'll take the risk of running a few minutes over time, and I'll reach back there – yes? Yeah, sure.

F: Well, in speaking of that, as newspapers fail and fail and fail – I'm a journalist and (inaudible), and we go to (inaudible) – newspapers go, and then we only have TV or we only have the Internet, I mean how much worse can it get? When at least in

a newspaper, you pick up a newspaper and there are several different editorials that give people an option, but when you listen to Fox, when you listen to CNN, when you listen any of them, you only get one perspective. And my concern is where are we going to go with this as (inaudible)?

KENNEALLY: Well, if I can just say, I think that that begins to touch on what I was going to ask you about, which is the inevitable thinness of things – the race to cover a story, the 24 hour news cycle, all of that just doesn't allow for the development and the kind of history lesson that needs to be inserted to give us the perspective you're asking for.

WOODS: Well, I would – my first reaction, and it's a very visceral reaction, is to say that's not my problem. And I don't want to suffer the consequences of journalism's troubles. So stop telling the story altogether if you can't do it right, would be my first answer.

\_\_\_\_: (clapping)

WOODS: Now, I think that the – thank you. (laughter) I think that the – first of all, I think we probably have not been nearly as diverse within our organizations as we want to believe – that Fox has taken it to the Nth degree, obviously, but Fox is not alone out there on the sort of political polarized end of the continuum. They're just less – they're less concerned about being obvious, notwithstanding their motto. But I think that the – first of all, the threat to democracy that is represented by what's happening to American newspapers should not be downplayed, and I don't think Americans understand enough even today, how imperiled we are as a democracy by the what's happening to American newspapers. Because the journalist is the only person who has the responsibility of helping us understand what we – know what we need to know in order to thrive in this democracy. Nobody else in any other profession has that job. We may not have done it well sometimes. We may not be doing it well today, but that's the responsibility. And what's happening as the economic motto of newspapers continues to fail – and we are now hit with the additional uppercut of an economy in crisis – I don't think we understand, we appreciate how significant that is to the story that we're trying to tell and to the democracy that we're trying to have.

When we talk about something as complex as race relations, where we have not done a very good job over the years getting good at it, and then you add on the crisis that we're confronting today, it is – it's a new level of a problem. But the Internet provides greater opportunity, and as we shake this out, as the ones that will fail, fail and go away, and whatever the new thing is rises, the opportunity actually will increase for us to tell the more complex story, to link to things on the Internet so that if you want to understand the ancestors that you had on the front page of that paper and their connection to this beyond simply a face and whatever it is that I knew about George Washington Carver, which is peanuts, then a link might take me deep enough through the website to understand that he invented linoleum, to

understand that he made a paint out of flowers, that his inventiveness was extraordinary and way beyond peanut butter. And that's now the new opportunity for communication. But like Obama, we have to make a big leap from where we've been to where we've got to go. We can't take a slow path because technology is not waiting for us.

KENNEALLY: We have some more questions.

BENNETT: Can I just –

KENNEALLY: Oh, sure, and then we'll go to you, sir.

BENNETT: And I'll be as brief as – but I think that what's sort of interesting, if you look at a story on our – that we have on our front page – you might have seen it elsewhere also, but it says that Obama is going to be the web outreach President. And that – and he's already done that during his campaign.

KENNEALLY: I believe the URL is Change.gov. I couldn't believe it when I saw it. They must have bought that two years ago.

BENNETT: So this traditional filter of the news media, which as you pointed out, has not been very diverse – has been controlled really and dominated by white males for most of the time that it's been in existence, and it's slowly beginning to change, but still is nowhere near as diverse as the population that it attempts to represent. Yeah, you see that – I believe a large part of Obama's success in this was that he was able to reach to people directly and circumvent the news media and that whole filter that goes along with it. He would send you a text message and say, make sure you register to vote, or make sure you get to the polls today – or, you know, Obama's in Florida today. He's coming to Miami Bicentennial Park or whatever. And that's – we're going to see more of that now – I think that mentioning that filter it's been sort of a one-sided filter for most of the time in the news media, or it's been slanted in certain ways more recently with Fox and MSNBC and so on and so forth. But now the reader or the viewer is going to have to be the filter, and you're going to have to decide for yourself what you think is right because you're going to be hit with so much information that it's you can't rely on anyone else now – it's got to be you.

KENNEALLY: Right, right. No, I promise one more question, and you right there.

M: Yes, I have two questions that I would appreciate it if both of you could address these. The first one is it seems to me that whenever, especially these X amount of times, whenever the verbiage “middle class” is mentioned, I can't help but get the feeling that it's only directed towards the white middle class, and what do you think about this as journalists or working in journalism? My second question is it seems to me as well – and I saw this this morning on CSPAN actually on *Washington Journal* – whenever Barack Obama's name is brought up, it's always

juxtaposed against, oh, but then there are X amount of African-American men in prison, or what's going to happen with the fact there's a 50% dropout rate. It's always – it always seems to me that race – that the realities that African-Americans are facing, the harsh realities in some cases are always brought up whenever his win is mentioned. So I just want to know what do you feel about those two issues? About the middle class always seems to me that it's attached to white America, and the whole juxtaposition of (inaudible).

BENNETT: Well, I think first of all, until I guess around the turn of the century in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – I mean early on there wasn't such a thing that was referred to as the black middle class. It came about I think largely because of the great migration from the South to the North, and people getting better opportunities in industrialized cities in the northern states. But it's interesting that – your question made me think that something that I've thought about since I was in college, which is that, look, there's always what's referred to as the black middle class, and it's looked at as I guess the elite or the top tier of in the black community. But you never hear much about a black upper class, you know? Or the black wealthy elite or something like that. And it does exist, you know? But it's been sort of overlooked, marginalized, forgotten. So yeah, I think when you talk about the middle class, yeah, I think in most cases, the reference in the media is to the white community and, oh, and some blacks made it, too. But that's very interesting.

And what was your second question?

M: Related to the fact that whenever Obama's win is mentioned (inaudible)–

BENNETT: Right, right, right. Yeah, I mean it just speaks to this whole idea of that race in America, and you can be as extraordinary as you want to, and that in and of itself – I mean, essentially, intellectually being elected as President of the United States should allow you to then transcend whatever stereotypes or I guess, like you said, you're refuting the stereotypes. But the fact is that those stereotypes exist and people still hold them, and the fact that one black man has reached that highest pinnacle does not mean that black men in general are looked at as being intelligent or articulate – though I hate to use that word because that, too, has some other negative connotations.

M: (inaudible) Joe Biden

BENNETT: Joe Biden, right, said. And otherwise, clean-cut or successful. And the reason that you're hearing that is because people still have those stereotypes, and they have not gotten passed them yet.

KENNEALLY: Keith?

WOODS: I want to add to that and say that first of all I agree completely with all of that, and we have to recognize how that is coming through our ears. Is it possible that

they don't mean white people, but you hear it that way? Or that we hear it that way? That's one notion. But the other one is this – and that this is my big pushback on Obama and the entire campaign. That I grew up poor, and poor people didn't exist in this campaign. Poor people were essentially the beneficiaries of whatever we were going to do for the middle class. It was Democratic trickle down. It was the Democratic party's version of trickle down theory. That we would talk about the middle class from beginning to end, and Obama made a huge push beginning to end. In fact his that wonderful Obama-mercial the week before the election was about the middle class. And in fact, if you saw, it was very deliberate in portraying a diverse middle class, but they were still the middle class. They were still – maybe they were teetering on the edge of falling down, but whatever was down there never got mentioned in this campaign. Again, John Edwards leaves the campaign and so does poor people, which is kind of ironic when you know how wealthy he is.

So I fret more over the fact that we are not talking enough about poverty. And once again, what will happen is that we will again delude ourselves into believing that that doesn't exist until a hurricane goes through a major American city and we are forced to watch on national television live while the product of poverty sits on rooftops in New Orleans. And we will imagine ourselves to have surmounted what we have not surmounted. So I would push again in journalism for the opportunity now to look at poverty anew.

On the second front, here is the paradox of race and racism and race relations in America. There is an opportunity because a black man is sitting in office for an attention to be brought to problems that we would just as soon ignore and wait for the studies to come out to produce the next set of statistics. We have a problem for young black men in America. We have a problem in our educational systems in public education systems in the country where our black and brown people are most affected. We have issues around the very things that we would not want a whole race to be associated with, but that does exist that could be brought – elevated to a different place exactly because not only do we have a black man in office, but we have an intelligent man in office. We have a man in office who can grasp, synthesize, and feed back eloquently to the country what our problems are and where our challenges are and can unite people around those issues. Heaven help us if he doesn't talk about those issues through the next eight years. Our challenge as a –

(applause)

– our challenge as a society is to be able to hear a black man talk about a black man's problems and recognize that it's an American speaking – and make that leap that is so difficult for us to make in which I can be the black man that I am and the father that I am and the son and the brother and the citizen that I am, and they can be different people at different times, and that black President can be the President sometimes and a black man sometimes, and we're comfortable with that.

(applause)

KENNEALLY: Well, thank you very much, Keith Woods. Keith Woods, Dean of Faculty at the Poynter Institute in Saint Petersburg. Thank you for joining us, Bradley Bennett, Executive Editor of *South Florida Times*. My name is Chris Kenneally. Appreciate your attendance here at the Miami Book Fair. Thank you very much.

(applause).

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