The Problem of African American Public(s):
Dewey and African American Politics
in the 21st Century

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Dewey’s account of the eclipse of publics in *The Public and Its Problems* has special relevance to the contemporary challenges of post-soul politics. The civil rights movement has transformed social conditions, so that continued uncritical reference to it as a framework for black political activity blocks the way to innovative thinking about African American politics. Conceptions of community that have informed African-American politics in the past have given way to a fractured and fragmented public unable to identify itself. I argue for a view of community and democracy that takes seriously the complexity of racialized experiences in the U.S., and instantiates new forms of communication to form democratic dispositions capable of addressing the challenges of our current moment.

Have the past struggles succeeded?
What has succeeded? yourself? your nation? Nature?
Now understand me well – it is provided in the essence of things that from any fruition of success, no matter what, shall come forth something to make a greater struggle necessary.
Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

The old saying that the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy is not apt if it means that the evils may be remedied by introducing more machinery of the same kind…. But the phrase may also indicate the need of returning to the idea itself, and of employing our sense of its meaning to criticize and remake its political manifestations.
John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*

Do we have to begin consciousness with a battle heroines and heroes like you have already fought and lost leaving us with nothing in our hands except what you have imagined is there?
Toni Morrison, *Nobel Acceptance Speech*

Ours is a complicated historical moment. One marked by enormous progress and profound setbacks. We have witnessed over the last few decades a rapid
expansion of the black middle class, the emergence of African American CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, and the election of the first African American – Barack Obama – president. By some measures, African Americans have finally found their place within mainstream American society. We no longer, some argue, need to retreat to racial enclaves for comfort and security. No longer, they might add, do we have a need to appeal to race in matters of politics. We have, for the most part, arrived.

But the tremendous progress evident in black America stands alongside the bleak reality that many African Americans have fallen beyond the pale. We have witnessed over the last few decades an expansion of the black “underclass.” Large numbers of African American men and women find themselves caught within the intricate networks of the prison industrial complex: from 1954 to the present day the black prison population has grown by 900 percent. Many African American children suffer from the chronic ills that attend growing up in poverty. Black babies, for example, are two-and-one-half times more likely than white infants to die before their first birthday. To be sure, a substantial number of African Americans are caught within a vicious cycle of poverty and violence that betrays any claim that all is well throughout black America. These realities, some argue, demand continued struggle. We can ill afford, they might add, to ignore the relevance of race in matters of politics. Even with Obama’s success America remains fundamentally shaped by white supremacy.

To be sure, the phenomenon of Barack Obama has, in some significant way, precipitated a crisis in African American politics. For some, Obama’s candidacy, not to mention his election, represented the end of an era where the traditional languages of racial protest gave way to a more effective, or at least supposedly more effective, language of governance and coalition; his success marked our entrance into what some called a post-racial America. Obama and many who supported him vehemently rejected such characterizations. For them, the grim realities of racism continued to cut short the life chances of many African Americans. Nevertheless, his candidacy did in fact represent an end to a certain style of political engagement. The figures of Reverends Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton seemingly receded into the shadows while new and younger faces began to emerge and assume the mantle of black leadership.

What was striking about this moment involved, among other things, the fact that many groped for a language to describe the transition. And, what was revealed with remarkable clarity as they searched was a startling inability on the part of so many people to talk about race and racism without falling into the rather easy trap of thinking solely in terms of intentional prejudice and the cruder forms of identity politics. Obama’s candidacy and its extraordinary success made clear that the many challenges confronting black America required an imaginative and immediate shift in our political lexicon – that our traditional “vocabularies of struggle” are in need of recalibration in light of the particular conditions of our current circumstances. This effort goes far beyond the rather