Politics As Usual: Black Stereotypes and President Obama's Racialization

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President Barack Obama attempted to transcend race by running a colorblind campaign and administration. Nevertheless, the President and First Lady Michelle Obama have been racialized by media as the result of stereotyping and white supremacy. This paper will demonstrate that racism is not a relic of the past by drawing parallels between previous racist imagery and current media depictions of Barack and Michelle Obama.

I: Black Stereotypes and their Historical Ties

The idea of race is a social and legal construction with real and meaningful consequences. According to critical race scholars Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, “race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient.”

Through the process of racialization, legal and political systems marginalize individuals and groups by ascribing them race.

Based on rationales including common knowledge and scientific evidence, the United States legal system has utilized the social construction of race to determine American access to privilege:

From the start, European settlers in North America established structures encouraging a possessive investment in whiteness. The colonial and early national legal systems authorized attacks on Native Americans and encouraged the appropriation of their lands. They legitimated racialized chattel slavery, limited naturalized citizenship to “white” immigrants, identified Asian immigrants as expressly unwelcome, and provided pretexts for restricting voting, exploiting the labor and seizing the property of Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and African Americans.

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Our laws have thus effectively shaped our physical appearances by determining whose presence is legal and subsequently reinforcing the treatment that accompanies different races.

Negative connotations have accompanied blackness since our country’s inception. After the slave trade was initiated in the 1400’s Africans ceased to be seen as people but as commodities with no social value except their exchangeability. When African slaves reached American shores they faced more subjugation and coercion sanctioned by law. Political systems infiltrated society and slavery through the implementation of slave codes between 1660 and 1705 which reiterated that slavery would be perpetual and hereditary.

The one drop rule further ensured a growing labor force and maintained property within white society by enslaving all children born to slave women by white men. Because blackness meant perpetual and hereditary slavery, the public mind equated the black race with poverty, servility, intemperance and criminality. In his novel The Leopard’s Spots, Thomas Dixon wrote “A single drop of Negro Blood kinks the hair, flattens the nose, thickens the lips, puts out the light of intelligence and lights the fire of brutal passions.” Both historically and in modern society, mainstream media and popular culture propagate such depictions as legal, sociological and ideological truths and reinforce these ‘truths’ through suppressive stereotyping.

Tracing the history of dominant African American stereotypes in United States culture requires an understanding about white supremacy. White supremacy has been defined as:

A political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance

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and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.\(^6\)

By being brought into the U.S. as slaves, blacks have been victim to white ideals about how race determines worth and the distribution of power among classes.

With changes in the political, social and economic structure of the U.S. have come shifts in popular perception of blacks’ role in society. While media serve to perpetuate these images, the images are a reflection and a product of white supremacists with a political agenda. When certain images persist, the suspicion arises that such images must be appealing, serve a purpose, and have meaning. Throughout United States history, the media have portrayed caricatures of black Americans through songs, children’s books, cartoons, magazines, trademarks, and minstrel shows as Sambos, Jim Crow, Uncle Toms, Mammies, Apes, Picaninnies, Zip Coons, and Menaces to promote political and capitalistic agendas.

During slavery, the Sambo reaffirmed the belief that Blacks needed to remain under white control and that their natural propensity was towards laziness and irresponsibility. “By representing the…Sambo as childlike, by instituting process of infantilization, the slave master constituted himself as Paternal Father. The ideology of paternalism could then seem to be grounded in empirical fact.”\(^7\) This myth of slave subordination coexisted comfortably with the slaves’ reality: that slaves were required to work endless days, and that it was illegal for a slave to learn to read and write, to travel freely without their master’s permission, to own property, or to sue in court. The Supreme Court’s decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857)\(^8\) that African

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\(^6\) FRANCIS LEE ANSLEY, *White Supremacy (and what we should do about it)*, in CRITICAL WHITE STUDIES: LOOKING BEHIND THE MIRROR 592 (Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic eds.,1997).

\(^7\) Sylvia Wynter, *Sambos and Minstrels*, 1 SOCIAL TEXT 149, 151 (1979).

\(^8\) Dred Scott v. Sandford, 60 U.S. 393 (1857).
Americans were not citizens under the Constitution, but were essentially property and therefore granted no rights, further illustrates the political climate and disjunction between what blacks were legally allowed to do versus what blacks in the public mind were capable of achieving. Ignoring this reality allowed the perception that a typical slave lacked intellectual ability and desire to change their circumstances. Slaves thus became Sambos, somehow less than human. The transition of Sambos into popular entertainment was seamless.

When abolitionists began their fight for emancipation and the end of slavery became a serious political question, Jim Crow was created – and from him, the Minstrel show. Imaging black bodies as a source for entertainment, whites in black face modeled the Jim Crow character who shuffle-danced and sang. "Minstrel shows effectively both "created and disseminated stereotypes of African Americans as inept urban dandies or happy child-like slaves."  

Heightened racial tensions left blacks as a form of comic relief. As Lemons suggests, “from the beginning, minstrels helped audiences cope with their concerns, frustrations, and anxieties…minstrels provided a nonthreatening way for vast numbers of white Americans to work out their ambivalence about race at a time when that issue was paramount.”

During the abolitionist movement Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* changed the preexisting Uncle Tom stereotype of African American male slaves from “docile, content or comic” to “gentle, long-suffering, and imbued with Christian piety.”

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10 Id. at 1263
12 *Images of the Outsider*, supra note 9, at 1263.
When the Civil War ended in 1865, the Emancipation Proclamation theoretically freed all slaves, and the 13th and 14th Amendments to the Constitution codified their new status. With these developments, Uncle Tom bifurcated to include a female figure called the Mammy. Because many blacks continued to serve white families after being thrust into mainstream society without opportunities elsewhere, the Mammy emerged as a happily obedient, loyal protector of the white house. Stripped of her sexual allure, the Mammy was thus never capable of arousing desire in the head of the house. In relation to her own family, the mammy controlled her home. By contrasting this image with the social norm where men controlled the household, whites attempted to prove that blacks were not capable of participating in civilized society. The portrayal of blacks as happy servants through the Mammy image implied an indifference to poverty, subservience, and segregation.

The post-Civil War Reconstruction era also resulted in depictions of Blacks as subhuman through grotesque caricatures with monkey-like features. Advertising trade cards showed blacks with oversized hands and feet, sloping foreheads, big mouths, and large ears. Similar trade cards treated blacks as chicken-stealing, watermelon-eating brutes. Attempts to analogize newly freed slaves with apes reveal the threat whites perceived would result from blacks living, working and prospering alongside them in mainstream society. To maintain the preexisting power structure, whites caricaturized blacks into a form literally incapable of being equal. The artistic rendering of black children as Picaninnies evoked subhuman images –

13 ETHNIC NOTIONS (Signifyin' Works 1986)
14 Black Stereotypes, supra note 11, at 104.
15 Id.
showing them as dirty, partially clad, and animalistic made it easier to justify ridding society of blacks’ presence in the new world.

Whites used the Zip Coon caricature during Reconstruction to demonstrate blacks’ failure to adapt to freedom, thereby justifying systematic lynching, disenfranchisement, segregation, and exclusion from the economy. The Zip Coon “…was a preposterous, citified dandy. In the minstrel shows he was easily recognized in his bright, loud, exaggerated clothes…he was a high-stepping strutter with a mismatched vocabulary. He put in airs, acted elegant, but was betrayed by his pompous speech filled with malapropisms.”16 When the Supreme Court’s 1896 decision in Plessy v. Ferguson17 upheld an equal protection challenge to a Louisiana statute segregating black and white passengers on public train cars, proclaiming that the two races remain “separate, but equal,” it became clear that promises made by the Civil War and Reconstruction had been broken.

Implications of the one drop rule were sharpened during the post-Reconstruction Jim Crow era, “when opposition to social equality for blacks was well served by a monolithic notion of blackness accompanied by legislation that outlawed as miscegenation black-white marriages…”18 The Menace stereotype, depicting black men as savages with uncontrollable urges to pursue white virgins became prevalent during this era beginning with the 1915 silent film “Birth of a Nation”.19 These images both incited and promoted violence during a time when lynching kept blacks “in their place.”

16 Id. at 101
17 Plessy v. Ferguson 163 U.S. 537 (1896).
18 David A. Hollinger, The One Drop Rule & the One Hate Rule, 134 DAEDALUS 18, 20 (2005)
19 ETHNIC NOTIONS (Signifyin' Works 1986)
Racial violence, discrimination and segregation continued throughout the 20th and well into the 21st century in housing, the labor market, access to education, and the criminal justice system. In the 1930’s and 1940’s The Wagner Act and the Social Security Act effectively denied benefits to minorities.\textsuperscript{20} The Federal Housing Act of 1934 directed money towards whites and away from communities of color.\textsuperscript{21} Restrictive covenants prevented neighborhood integration.\textsuperscript{22} During the 1950’s and 1960’s federally funded urban renewal projects destroyed black-occupied housing projects. African Americans face criminal convictions and sentencing in greater numbers than any other racial group, based partly on the structural weakness of minority neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{23}

Since the Civil Right Movement, blacks have enjoyed greater access to realms historically reserved for the white majority – including a presidential election. However, while Barack Obama’s presidential nomination and subsequent victory in 2008 led many Americans to believe the United States has evolved past race, the notion that our country is now colorblind or post-racial is both flawed and detrimental to \textit{actually ending} racism. Not only do racist practices still function despite reported shifts in attitude, but colorblindness means that new patterns of discrimination will not be challenged. Colorblindness also threatens the progress made by minorities as it leads the majority to believe programs such as affirmative action are no longer necessary.

Section II will focus on how the media have disparagingly presented First Lady Michelle Obama. Section III will focus on President Obama and how race haunted his campaign,

\textsuperscript{20} THE POSSESSIVE INVESTMENT IN WHITENESS, supra note 3, at 5.
\textsuperscript{21} Id.
\textsuperscript{22} Id. at 25
\textsuperscript{23} Id. at 11
including media criticisms of not being “black enough,” categorization as an “other,” and attempts to “blacken” him. As the reader will see, racial transcendence is a myth. American society is uncomfortable with the ambiguous “other” and will use media to ostracize and label “others” accordingly. Analyzing media depictions of the Obamas will prove that African American stereotypes still exist, but in more covert forms.

II: First Lady Michelle Obama

As the first African American First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama has faced unprecedented criticism based on her race and gender. Idealists imagined Michelle’s visibility would be a tool for eliminating stereotypes associated with black women, educating the world about black culture, and changing the way black Americans see themselves and their opportunities.24 In reality, media depictions of Michelle Obama embrace historically negative imagery associated with black women, ranging from Mammy to “angry black woman.”

Born into a close-knit working-class family and raised in the South Side of Chicago, Michelle did not experience privilege in the traditional economic sense while growing up. However, Michelle achieved what some deem the “American Dream” by attending Princeton University as an undergraduate and Harvard Law School. Upon graduation, Michelle worked at the prestigious corporate law firm Sidley Austin as an intellectual property attorney, became an assistant to Chicago mayor Richard Daley, started the Chicago chapter of a training program

called “Public Allies” and eventually became vice president of community affairs at the University of Chicago Medical Center.25

In a familiar collision between racism and sexism, media insistently question and critique Michelle’s femininity. Media want to limit Michelle to a devoted mother and wife, when in reality she fills both roles while maintaining her own career, and initially achieved greater professional success than her husband Barack. Uncomfortable with the reality that Michelle and Barack’s relationship began as mentor and mentee at Sidley Austin, media attempt to highlight the distinction between a traditional American family with set gender roles and the Obamas to prove that Michelle and the Mammy are one in the same.

Despite defying stereotypes of black motherhood, Michelle is chastised when failing to conform to societal expectations in a political setting. When media represented Obama as a god-like figure through the “Magic Negro,” Michelle was harangued for painting her husband as a mere mortal. During a fundraising speech in February 2007, Michelle told the crowd:

I am always a little amazed at the response that people get when they hear from Barack. A great man, a wonderful man. But still a man...I have some difficulty reconciling the two images I have of Barack Obama. There’s Barack Obama the phenomenon. He’s an amazing orator, Harvard Law Review, or whatever it was, law professor, best-selling author, Grammy winner. Pretty amazing, right? And then there’s the Barack Obama that lives with me in my house, and that guy’s a little less impressive. For some reason this guy still can’t manage to put the butter up when he makes toast, secure the bread so that it doesn’t get stale, and his 5-year-old is still better at making the bed than he is.26

Critics drew the implication that Michelle’s willingness to speak about her husband in a less-than-favorable light further evidenced Michelle’s failure to conform to her gender

role. Threatened by the idea of Michelle as a superior, an opinion piece written for the New York Times called Michelle’s quips emasculating and chiding, tantamount to casting her husband as an undisciplined child.27

The difference between Barack and Michelle became even more apparent during Obama’s campaign. As a political tactic, Obama focused more on solutions while Michelle never hesitated to vocalize her views about America’s failings. During a speech in February 2008 Michelle Obama publicly declared her discontent with the United States’ political process, which she later attributed to lack of minority participation. Articulating her desire for progress, Michelle stated:

What we have learned over this year is that hope is making a comeback. It is making a comeback. And let me tell you something — for the first time in my adult lifetime, I am really proud of my country. And not just because Barack has done well, but because I think people are hungry for change. And I have been desperate to see our country moving in that direction and just not feeling so alone in my frustration and disappointment. I’ve seen people who are hungry to be unified around some basic common issues, and it’s made me proud.28

Mainstream media immediately retaliated against Mrs. Obama by discrediting and politicizing her comments. Critics questioned her allegiance and patriotism to a country that provided her an education and successful career. For months following Michelle’s speech, the public attempted to reconcile historical expectations of (white) women in politics with the current potential first lady, a woman who exceeded the paradigmatic framework established by past generations.

27 Id.

In April 2008 the conservative magazine National Review published a cover featuring Michelle Obama under the title “Mrs. Grievance.” The accompanying article bemoaned, “She was among the first generation to benefit from ‘affirmative action’, which was supposed to ameliorate the lingering grievances of racism but seems, in Mrs Obama’s case, merely to have transformed them into post-modern pseudo-grievance.” One commentator described Michelle as ”bitter, anti-American, ungrateful, rude, crude, ghetto.” In the May 2008 article “Obama’s biggest general election liability: His bitter half,” conservative columnist Michelle Malkin lamented “…get over yourself already, haughty spirit. Pride doesn’t photograph well. And bitterness leaves frown lines. Which means Botox bills. Which “struggling folks” like you and your husband simply cannot afford. Try smiling for once. It’s cheaper.”

In June 2008, Fox News flashed the graphic “Outraged liberals: Stop picking on Obama’s baby mama” during an interview with Michelle Malkin about whether Michelle Obama had

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30 Mark Steyn, Mrs Grievance, FREE REPUBLIC (April 21, 2008) http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/2006753/posts
32 Michelle Malkin, Obama’s biggest general election liability: His bitter half, MICHELLE MALKIN (May 7, 2008, 6:02 AM) http://michellemalkin.com/2008/05/07/obamas-biggest-general-election-liability-his-bitter-half/
been unfairly targeted and criticized.\(^{33}\) By calling Michelle Obama a “baby mama,” Fox News served its viewers a not-so-subtle reminder about the presidential candidate and his wife’s blackness, and reinforced the notion that despite the Obamas having been married almost seven years before conceiving their first child, as a family the Obama’s are still more “other” than “conventional.”

Less than a week later, Michelle Obama appeared on The View to distance herself from the antifeminist hazing experienced after her Milwaukee speech. In doing so, Michelle drew attention to her role as a mother, not mentioning her career or political views and praising former First Lady Laura Bush for never “add[ing] fuel to the fire.”\(^{34}\) Commentators deemed Michelle’s new softened persona a ploy for feminizing her, and thus rendering her less problematic with the voting public and press.\(^{35}\) Since Michelle could not change her race, she changed her persona. Any future political missteps could then be attributed to her personal failings, not her status as a black woman.

Subsequent speeches by Michelle focused solely on dreams and hopes for her daughters, her experiences as a mother, and her strategies for helping her daughters adjust to life in the White House. Political scientist Melissa Lacewell-Harris theorized that Michelle Obama’s mom-in-chief persona undercut public discourse surrounding black women as bad mothers.\(^{36}\) While enslaved, black women had no control over their own children – sons and daughters could be

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\(^{35}\) Megan Garber, *Can The Media Deal With Michelle Obama?*, ALTERNET (June 21, 2008) http://www.alternet.org/reproductivejustice/88942/can_the_media_deal_with_michelle_obama/?page=2

sold without their consent or beaten without their protection. Claiming public ownership over her children helps rewrite history. Michelle Obama’s supposed revision of black mothering politics draws heavily upon the politics of respectability:

Introduced in the nineteenth century as a strategy for combating negative perceptions of black women’s bodies as lewd, devious, sexually aberrant, and unfit for citizenship, the politics of respectability encourages black women to adopt middle-class values of thrift, piety, modest self-presentation, and Christian religious ideals to present themselves as worthy of American citizenship. The politics of respectability has today come to function primarily to rescue derogatory images of black women as perpetually angry, maternally unfit, and sexually insatiable.37

While it matters what effect Michelle’s makeover has on race and gender politics, what matters even more is what motivated her reimagining. A letter written to the Clarion-Ledger newspaper in Jackson, Mississippi, evidences the popular perception that Michelle Obama likely sought to overcome through her renovation:

We have been spoiled by having the first lady representing us in the White House and representing our nation to the world, to be a soft-spoken, compassionate, humble, tolerant, graceful, forgiving, good-natured and patriotic person. Jackie Kennedy, Hillary Clinton, Barbara Bush and Laura Bush were all of the above. Mrs. Obama is none of the above. She is an angry, caustic, abusive, racist, sharp-tongued, anti-white and anti-American person. Mrs. Obama would be the perfect poster person for the Hate America Program.38

37 Id. at 51.
38 Id.
In July 2008 New Yorker magazine cover satirized Michelle Obama’s body “as a canvas to dramatize stereotypes of black female identity…reinscri[ing] the fear of the unregulated black female body as a supreme danger to the American body politic.  

Media focus on Michelle’s body has spanned from obsession about her personal style, to her hair, her arms, and even her posterior.

Michelle represents the ultimate threat to white womanhood and American patriarchy. She appears to perpetuate the matriarchal household attributed to black women and still maintains her status as an educated professional. Michelle has achieved “the American Dream” and yet is treated like the American nightmare. Faced with reconciling traditional notions of black women with modern day Michelle, media denounce her as foreign and unassimilable.

**III: President Barack Obama**

“There is not a black America and a white America and a Latino America and an Asian America – there’s a United States of America.”

— Barack Obama

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39 *The Politics of Satire*, THE NEW YORKER (July 21, 2008) http://www.newyorker.com/online/covers/slideshow_blittcovers#slide=1
40 Cooper, *A’n’t I A Lady?*, supra note 36, at 49.
During Obama’s campaign for presidency, political analyst Donna Brazile voiced America’s hopes for racial transcendence when she stated, "Barack will tell us that we don’t have to go back to being just a white America or a black America, that we can now become something else, together. That is the promise of his campaign, and his challenge." Obama’s 2008 presidential election has been described as a defining moment in United States racial politics based both on our nation’s perceived ability to see beyond race and vote based on a candidate’s merits, and on Obama’s perceived success in aligning himself with the human race rather an individual racial group. In a positive characterization of this phenomenon, Paul Street remarked:

[Obama]'s relatively conservative and accommodating approach to the race question is perfectly pitched to the perverse racial politics of the post-Civil Rights and neoliberal era. It has been masterfully designed to exploit both the willingness of many white voters to proclaim their rejection of old-fashioned race prejudice and the simultaneous unwillingness of most whites to acknowledge the continuing powerful and pervasive role of racism in American life.

43 PAUL STREET, BARACK OBAMA AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN POLITICS 80 (2009)
44 Thanking the President: A Racist Conservative Finally Confesses That Obama is Pure Awesomeness, ROGUE GOVERNMENT (April 3, 2012) http://rogueoperator.wordpress.com/2012/04/03/thanking-the-president-a-racist-conservative-finally-confesses-that-obama-is-pure-awesomeness/.
To many Americans, President Obama embodies post-racial politics. Based on his racial ambiguity, Obama has become a “…screen onto which people all over the world can project their own aspirations,” and has at times been reduced to an idealized, nonthreatening “Magic Negro.” Similar to an Uncle Tom, this African American character appears out of nowhere to help white protagonists, while concomitantly assuaging the white guilt resulting from the country’s history of slavery and racial segregation.\textsuperscript{45} “…As with all Magic Negroes, the less real he seems, the more desirable he becomes. If he were real, white America couldn’t project all its fantasies of curative black benevolence on him.”\textsuperscript{46} According to Shelby Steele, Obama is an Iconic Negro, a bargainer who heals racial divisions and “who dispels the sense of ‘otherness’ between the races and replaces it with a feeling of warmth, human familiarity and racial goodwill.”\textsuperscript{47}

Despite these perceptions, Obama has been racialized by media, political opponents, commentators and arguably by himself, proving that racial transcendence is neither plausible nor a practical tool for attempting to move beyond the United States’ history of racial discrimination and oppression. Allowing a black man into the White House to serve in our country’s highest political position upsets America’s status quo. In an article discussing the complexity underlying Obama’s choice to mark “Black, African American or Negro” on his Census form, political science professor Melissa Harris-Perry summarized America’s fascination with the decision by stating, “the real threat he poses to the American racial order is

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{id} \textit{Id.}
\bibitem{shelby} SHELBY STEELE, \textit{A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited About Obama and Why He Can’t Win} 89 (2008)
\end{thebibliography}
that he disrupts whiteness, because whiteness has been the identity that defines citizenship, access to privilege and the power to define national history.”48 To restore the status quo, those in power have utilized media in attempts to quash his campaign and prevent a successful presidential term.

When Hillary Clinton held a significant lead among black voters, media outlets questioned whether Obama was “black enough” to earn African American electoral support. When a controversy arose surrounding Obama’s black minister, the question became whether Obama was “too black” to garner white votes. By the final months of the campaign, Obama opponents labeled him un-American, a Muslim and a terrorist, proving:

We are decidedly not in a ‘post-racial’ America, whatever that may look like; indeed, many have been made more uneasy by the election of a black president and the accompanying euphoria, evoking a concomitant racial backlash in the form of allegedly satirical visual imagery. Such imagery attempts to dispel anxieties about race and ‘blackness’ by reifying the old racial stereotypes that suggest African Americans are really culturally and intellectually inferior and therefore not to be feared, that the threat of blackness can be neutralized or subverted through caricature and mockery.49

By recycling and reinterpreting traditional African American stereotypes, media depictions of Obama span from the Sambo, to Picaninny, to the black Brute. These representations capitalize on Obama’s perceived complexity or ambiguity to raise doubts about his citizenship and his commitment to national interests.

President Barack Hussein Obama began his life in Hawaii, the son of an African father from Kenya and a Caucasian mother from Kansas who entered into their relationship when miscegenation was still considered a crime in the United States. Raised solely by his white

mother and white grandparents, Obama confessed in his memoir *Dreams From My Father* to neither proclaiming or disclaiming his mixed heritage as the result of feeling judged when his background was uncovered, “…privately, they guess at my troubled heart, I suppose – the mixed blood, the divided soul, the ghostly image of the tragic mulatto trapped between two worlds.”50 Rather than identify with one race or the other, Obama “learned to slip back and forth between [his] black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and structures of meaning, convinced that with a bit of translation on [his] part the two worlds would eventually cohere.”51 The discomfort experienced by those unable to place Obama in a pre-determined racial box has evolved from simple curiosity into complex political questions:

Obama’s mixed ancestry generates some new uncertainty about blackness. The white part of his genetic inheritance is not socially hidden, as it often is for “light-skinned blacks” who descend from black women sexually exploited by white slaveholders…rather, Obama’s white ancestry is right there in the open, visible in the form of the white woman who as a single mother, raised Obama after his black father left the family to return to his native Kenya.52

Throughout his life, biracial Obama has consciously chosen to search for his African roots by visiting his absent father’s country, affiliating himself with the black church, working with black youth in Chicago’s inner city, and marrying an African American woman. Regarding his alignment with the black community, Obama stated, “I can embrace my black brothers and sisters, whether in this country or in Africa, and affirm a common destiny without pretending

51 Id. at 76
to speak to, or for, all our various struggles.”\textsuperscript{53} But media have led us to question whether Obama is “really black.” And if so, is he too black, or even black enough?

Our political and social reality has defined blackness to mean those descended from West African slaves. Viewing Obama as the child of a voluntary immigrant of African descent places him outside the scope of the traditional African American experience. In his article \textit{What Obama Isn’t: Black like Me on Race} journalist Stanley Crouch argues that while Obama “has experienced some light versions of typical racial stereotypes, he cannot claim those problems as his own—nor has he lived the life of a black American.”\textsuperscript{54}

In a country where African Americans have traditionally been excluded from higher education, at Ivy League universities in particular, Obama graduated magna cum laude from Harvard Law School. Supporters proclaim “Obama has deftly created a public persona as the embodiment of the American dream—a black man whose life measures both the substance and symbolism of individual achievement, hard work, and ingenuity.”\textsuperscript{55} Based on his education and leadership, some African American leaders perceive Obama’s election as transformative -- “As black men, we feel we have a voice now. We’ve been crying out in the wilderness. We have skills, qualities. Now people will give an ear to what we’re saying.”\textsuperscript{56}

Others have questioned whether Obama is living the American dream, or reaping the benefits associated with being an outsider. Studies have shown that black immigrants and their children do better educationally and economically than do the descendants of American slavery

\textsuperscript{53} DREAMS FROM MY FATHER, \textit{supra} note 50, at X.
\textsuperscript{55} Valeria Sinclair-Chapman & Melanye Price, Black Politics, the 2008 Election, and the (Im)Possibility of Race Transcendence, 41 PS: POL. SCI. & POL. 739 (2008).
and Jim Crow. Conservative writer Debra Dickerson criticized Obama for “…step[ping] into the benefits of black progress without having borne any of the burden.” Before becoming Vice President, Joe Biden described Obama as the "first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy.” When assessed through a historical lens, Biden’s statement clearly tied into the notion of blacks as Sambos or Zip Coons by implying that African Americans are traditionally inarticulate and aesthetically unappealing (and are likely incapable of being otherwise). Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid theorized that Obama being a “light skinned” African American “with no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one” would help his presidential bid.

At numerous points during his campaign, media framed Obama as a Muslim and a terrorist. Political opponents inquired whether Obama was “American enough.” Combining the Picaninny image with the Black Brute, these depictions appealed to white xenophobia and fears about globalization. Campaign strategist Mark Penn urged Hillary Clinton to exploit Obama’s "lack of American roots” and "limited” connection to "basic American values and culture.” Clinton, he advised, should add the tagline American to everything she did. During the 2008 Democratic primaries, Clinton supporters began circulating emails questioning Obama’s origin, religion, and birth certificate authenticity in an attempt to revitalize her campaign. One GOP

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commercial touted McCain as "the American President Americans have been waiting for," as if there were another kind.60

In an image circulated through email under the heading “B Hussein Osama,” a darkened Obama is pictured in front of the White House wearing a turban and facial hair commonly associated with radical Islamic terrorists. Obama’s eyes are set in a challenging glare, and his usual smile is replaced by a deadly serious scowl. Between the text and imagery, any viewer could imply that the change promised by Obama’s campaign is more closely related to terrorists taking precedence than changing toward a more egalitarian future. Electing Barack as president would be tantamount to allowing Osama Bin Laden to run the country. The text “just wait” could be read as a threat that when Obama becomes president, his true violent nature will surface. 62

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Media frequently attack who Obama is tied to, implicating a secret racial black agenda. In March 2008, videos began circulating through media outlets of Reverend Jeremiah Wright, repeating the phrase “God Damn America!” and blaming the United States for 9/11. Media began juxtaposing images of Wright and Obama together in a church setting while playing the controversial excerpts from Wright’s speech, effectively “work[ing] to reposition the black body by playing on white fears that behind the smiling faces of African Americans – even successful African Americans seemingly well integrated into the body politic- were enraged black men harboring seditious sentiments.”63 By redefining Obama as a black Menace, media successfully equated Obama’s message with Wright’s refrain. In addition, associating Obama with Wright “constitute[d] a direct attempt--one based in part on a bodily, or phenotypical, similarity between the two men--to redefine the presidential candidate’s citizenship: to transform Obama’s allegiances from nationalist to black nationalist.”64 Obama critics clearly agree, “I believe our nation is ruined and has been for several decades and the election of Obama is the culmination of the change. If you had real change it would involve all the members of Obama’s church being deported.”65

During his speech “A More Perfect Union” Obama condemned Wright’s words as “divisive” but refused to renounce his minister when he stated “I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community.”66

64 Id. at 19.
65 Hortense Smith, Sorry, Idealists: Racism Doesn't End With Our First Black President, JEZEBEL (Nov. 16, 2008, 12:00 PM) http://jezebel.com/5089473/sorry-idealists-racism-doesnt-end-with-our-first-black-president
In April 2008 Media linked Obama with Bill Ayers, co-founder of a communist revolutionary group that conducted a campaign of bombing public buildings during the 1960s and 1970s in response to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Palin referred daily to “Obama’s pallin’ around with terrorists,” and John McCain began personally attacking Obama, raising the question “who is the real Barack Obama,” with the audience screaming “terrorist!”67 Both statistics and voter commentary prove the success of the “Obama as a Muslim” crusade. During this period 12% of Americans believed Obama subscribed to the tenets of Islam68 and many Americans believed Obama was born outside the United States. Tunkhannock Borough Mayor Norm Ball announced his support for Clinton by commenting in a local newspaper “Barack Hussein Obama and all of his talk will do nothing for our country. There is so much that people don’t know about his upbringing in the Muslim world…I want a president that will salute our flag and put their hand on the Bible when they take the oath of office.”69

In a “satirical” cartoon drawn as cover art for The New Yorker in July 2008, Obama appears in Muslim clothing, exchanging a “terrorist fist jab”70 with wife Michelle in the White House oval office while an American flag burns in the fireplace behind them. A portrait of a Muslim extremist hangs over the mantle. While intended to challenge media allusions to foreignness and terrorism, the image arguably reiterated such representations.

68 Growing Number of Americans Say Obama is a Muslim, PEW RESEARcH CENTER PUBLICATIONS (Aug. 19, 2010) http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1701/poll-obama-muslim-christian-church-out-of-politics-political-leaders-religious
Media have used the image of the Ape to depict Obama’s “otherness” in multiple ways to prove that not only is he un-American, but also sub-human. A New York Post political cartoon published on 18 February 2009 lampooned Obama’s stimulus bill by depicting a dead and bleeding chimp lying face-up on a sidewalk with three bullet holes in its chest. Looming over the dead animal, one cop says to another, whose gun is still smoking: “They’ll have to find someone else to write the next stimulus plan.”

During his presidency, media have continued to perpetuate attacks on Obama’s nationality. Questions about Obama’s citizenship and legitimacy led to accusations of his ineligibility for the presidency under Article 2 of the Constitution. Media spread political opponents’ allegations that either Obama became an Indonesian citizen or that Obama held dual citizenship at birth. Lawsuits have even been filed to prevent Obama from running for re-election by claiming:

As Barack Hussein Obama II is of the "mulatto" race, his status of citizenship is founded upon the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. Before the [purported] ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, the race of

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These “birthers” went as far as questioning whether Obama had been circumcised, as circumcision is an American custom and would have been performed had Obama been born in the U.S.\footnote{Kay Steiger, \textit{Birthers Want to See Obama’s Penis}, JEZEBEL (Aug. 25, 2009, 10:00 AM) http://jezebel.com/5344988/birthers-want-to-see-obamas-penis} These questions and accusations prove America’s obsession with black male sexuality. Tied again to the black Brute stereotype, Obama’s citizenship has been linked with white males attempted control over black bodies. Obama represents the ultimate threat to traditional white power based on his position as the highest figure in government, and the birthers’ accusations represent attempts to strip him of that power.

**Conclusion**

When slavery ended, newly free blacks presented a threat to white privilege. Faced with the reality that former slaves could become equal to former white slave owners, white supremacists formulated ways to maintain the previous power structure – imagery in the media simply reinforced the “differences” between black and white, placing African Americans in a gray area, not quite slaves yet not quite free. Barack and Michelle have brought the story full circle. Together, the Obamas prove that blacks are not only capable of participating in ‘civilized society,’ but they can lead and control our society through their power and resources. In familiar fashion, media must create doubt to maintain the status quo for white supremacists. If Barack and Michelle are a Brute and a Mammy, they become easier to attack and dismantle. They must become foreign to protect American tradition, so media suppress these powerful...
figures to reinforce ideas about racial inequality. In doing so, media conjure and reinforce four centuries of racial imagery that has left indelible traces in the public mind. As we have seen, countering these images is a difficult task, but essential if we are to move beyond race.