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Just Joking? Chimps, Obama and Racial Stereotype

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. When the perpetrators and promulgators of such imagery are caught in the light of national media and accused of racial bias, whether blatant or implied, they always resort to the same ideological escape hatch: it was only 'a joke'. There has been no shortage of such visual racist jokes attending the candidacy and election of Barack Obama, most of them recycled from the archive of stereotyped racist images that filled American print culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and spawned a still lively market in blackface memorabilia. In the internet age, however, the public response to forays in racist humor has been swift, turning cartoons in private emails from a Republican politician to constituents or locally printed images by a Republican group into instant national controversies.

Most contentious in the Obama-related spate of images is a *New York Post* political cartoon published on 18 February 2009, which lampooned Obama's stimulus bill on its op-ed page, immediately causing a major public outcry. The now infamous chimp cartoon by Sean Delonas depicts 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'¹

Those who defend the image as legitimate political critique with no racist overtones or intent argue that the image merely suggests that the bill is so bad it could have been written by a chimp, or that the chimp represents the white Democrats in Congress who authored the bill. Those who find the image racist counter these arguments by pointing out that the bill is identified with President Obama and that the caricature of a black man through the image of a chimp is a resurgence of one of the oldest racist images in the United States.

The cartoon was produced on the heels of an actual shooting of a chimp to which Col Allan, editor-in-chief of the conservative *Post*, referred in a statement to the press (Hines, 2009) wherein he defended the work as broadly satirical:

The cartoon is a clear parody of a current news event, to wit the shooting of a violent chimpanzee in Connecticut. It broadly mocks Washington's efforts to revive the economy. Again, Al Sharpton reveals himself as nothing more than a publicity opportunist.

Allan referred to the 200-pound chimp known as Travis, kept as a pet by a woman in Connecticut, who severely mauled another woman who was a friend of the chimp's owner. Travis was in turn shot and killed by police when his owner called them to the scene. News accounts suggested that Travis might have been reacting to drugs given to him by his owner, while others observed the general fact that full-grown chimps cannot be regarded as safe pets and treated like humans.

Allan also referred to comments in the press made by Al Sharpton in which Sharpton described the *Post* cartoon as 'troubling at best, given the historic racist attacks of African Americans as being synonymous with monkeys' (Hines, 2009). Sharpton also noted:

Being that the stimulus bill has been the first legislative victory of President Barack Obama and has become synonymous with him, it is not a reach to wonder: Are they inferring that a monkey wrote the last bill?

Though he has sometimes been perceived as a demagogue in the past, the attempt to dismiss Sharpton as a publicity hound met with little sympathy in this case; nor was Sharpton alone in condemning this cartoon. Filmmaker Spike Lee echoed Sharpton's outrage, as did civil rights leaders, New York state politicians, angry *Post* readers, and members of the public. Barbara Clara, president of the National Association of Black Journalists asserted: 'To compare the nation's first African American commander-in-chief to a dead chimpanzee is nothing short of racist drivel' (Hines, 2009). State Senator Eric Adams called it a throwback to the days when black men were lynched. Protesters picketed the tabloid's offices, demanding an apology and calling for a boycott.

Some observers worried about the implicit reference to assassination (Fantz, 2009). On the cartoon 'danger scale' of 1 to 10, Dilbert creator Scott Adams gave it a 9. 'He's got everything he shouldn't have,' said Adams. 'Gunfire, that's the one thing you cannot get away with. And then he's got violence against animals, also a pretty big no.' Spelman College history professor Jelani Cobb told CNN that the image made him nervous about the safety of a black president in a historically racist country: 'When I looked at it, there was no getting around the implications of it. Clearly anyone with an iota of sense knows the close association of black and the primate imagery' (Fantz, 2009). To most observers, this cartoon had nothing to do with the flap caused by the *New Yorker* cover by Barry Britt (21 July 2008), which satirized the archconservative view of the Obamas as Muslim terrorists.

Cartoonists were reluctant to condemn one of their own, however. Despite the high score Adams gave the cartoon on the 'danger scale', Adams said he still liked the cartoon, and Ted Rall, President of the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists, said the cartoonist owed no one an apology:

He was trying to jam two stories together, and unfortunately, this is what a lot of lame editors like. The comparison he had in mind: The guy

who wrote the package wasn't Obama; it was a bunch of white economic advisors, and he [Delonas] wasn't thinking about Obama. (Fantz, 2009)

Rall suggests that the problem lay with the incompetence of the editor, who should have understood, where Delonas himself did not, that this chimp would not be understood as representing 'a bunch of white economic advisors', but Obama himself.

The intent of the cartoonist (and his editor) was the primary defense proffered by the *Post*. In a statement on its website, the *Post* said the cartoon was meant to mock an 'ineptly written' stimulus bill:

But it has been taken as something else – as a depiction of President Obama, as a thinly veiled expression of racism. This was most certainly not its intent; to those who were offended by the image, we apologize. (Hines, 2009)

The statement then suggests, however, that some have attacked the *Post* opportunistically and 'to them, no apology is due. Sometimes a cartoon is just a cartoon – even as the opportunists seek to make it something else.' Despite the apology, this statement wheels around to assert that those who regard the cartoon as racist are misreading it and 'sometimes a cartoon is just a cartoon'. Even a blogger on the liberal *Huffington Post* insisted:

The democratic leadership (Pelosi, Frank, etc.) inserted many items that BHO did not pitch in his campaign. All the satirist is trying to depict is that a rabid monkey could have just as well written the stimulus document. ('New York Post Chimp Cartoon . . .', 2009)

The *Post* and observers such as this one argue for a careful sifting of the facts and discernment of intent, as if that were the basis for political cartoons in general, or this political cartoon in particular, which refers to the first major piece of legislation promoted by, identified with, and signed by a newly elected black president.

Rupert Murdoch, owner of the *Post*, issued a statement the week after the cartoon appeared in which he more or less reiterated the apology the editorial board first published, along with its veiled retraction:

Last week, we made a mistake. We ran a cartoon that offended many people. Today I want to personally apologize to any reader who felt offended, and even insulted. Over the past couple of days, I have spoken to a number of people and I now better understand the hurt this cartoon has caused. At the same time, I have had conversations with *Post* editors about the situation and I can assure you – without a doubt – that the only intent of that cartoon was to mock a badly written piece of legislation. It was not meant to be racist, but unfortunately, it was interpreted by many as such. (Otterman, 2009)

Neither Murdoch nor the newspaper's editors, this statement suggests, understood the historic racist significance of the chimp as a caricature. And since the apologies rest on the question of intent, they implicitly raise the question: Can the cartoon be racist if the cartoonist and editors didn't 'intend' it to be?

Sean Delonas is well known for his vile cartoons, particularly anti-gay cartoons. Among other things, he has compared homosexuality to bestiality. He also likes to represent foreigners as surrounded by flies, to ridicule Rosie O'Donnell and Michael Moore as hugely obese, Heather Mills for having only one leg, Madonna for growing older, and New York Governor David Patterson for being blind. Delonas mocks women, gays, lesbians, trans-genders, Latinos, blacks, foreigners, fat people, the aging and the disabled. How could this be anything other than a racist cartoon?

But it must be understood that intention is a false argument in such cases, even when made in good faith, since racism can be so internalized and normalized as to efface itself quite effectively. The argument of 'intent' could exonerate nearly every racist tract and image that has ever been produced as a 'joke' or 'misreading'. As many theorists have argued, meaning is not anchored to intent; instead it is produced by the discourses that surround the image in the arenas in which it circulates. This makes intent secondary at best, especially for a political cartoon whose explicit purpose is to resonate with familiar cultural meanings. Indeed, political cartoons are based on caricature and caricature depends on the immediate recognition of the object being caricatured. As Roger A. Fischer, author of *Them Damned Pictures: Explorations in American Cartoon Art*, observes, the success of a political cartoon rests in its ability 'to influence public opinion through its use of *widely and instantly understood* symbols, slogans, referents, and allusions' (Backer, 1996, emphasis in original).

So why the continued belligerence, the non-apologetic apology? The *Post* clearly opposes the stimulus plan, which a majority of the country regards as necessary, if problematic, and addresses its critique toward a conservative audience it assumes will be sympathetic. The argument over the racist implications of the cartoon, in the eyes of the *Post*, are a displacement of the larger argument over the priorities of the country that many regard as teetering dangerously on the brink of a major depression. Murdoch, Delonas and the *Post* editors obdurately align themselves with Herbert Hoover, who as President in 1929 was unable or unwilling to take any steps toward alleviating the economic crisis and became infamous for turning a deaf ear and blind eye to those most in need, even tear gassing and burning down the tents of war veterans who camped out on the lawn of the White House to demand their benefits. This helped lead to Hoover's defeat and the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932, who immediately put in place his own version of a stimulus package, thereby heading off a revolutionary threat from the left. Nonetheless, conservatives roundly denounced Roosevelt. The *Post* and its Republican supporters today are still making this head-in-the-sand argument, which depends on the market 'correcting itself'.

The chimp cartoon is only the latest provocation in a series of provocative events that have made national news in the last few years. In 2002, Trent Lott's veiled endorsement of segregation in remarks related to the presidential campaign of Strom Thurmond in 1948 caused an immediate uproar that forced him to step down as incoming Senate Majority Leader, despite the week-long attempt by then-President George Bush to gloss over it and Lott's own apology. In 2005, former Reagan Secretary of Education William Bennett suggested on his syndicated national radio show that, hypothetically, aborting black babies could reduce crime. Although the remark caused a furor, Bennett remained unapologetic and retained his show. In 2007, radio host Don Imus called the African American Rutgers University women's basketball team 'nappy-headed hos' on his nationally syndicated program. Although Imus apologized, he was fired from the radio program. Each of these nationally prominent figures defended their remarks on the basis of intent, whether they ultimately apologized or not.

During the presidential election campaign in 2007, David Ehrenstein wrote a thoughtful article in the *Los Angeles Times* about Barack Obama and the figure of the 'magic Negro', which Ehrenstein described as a primarily noble cinematic figure, best personified by Sidney Poitier, who appears to save the white protagonist while representing no threat to white masculinity. The 'magic Negro' exudes what Ehrenstein calls 'curative black benevolence'. Ehrenstein writes:

He's there to assuage white 'guilt' (i.e., the minimal discomfort they feel) over the role of slavery and racial segregation in American history, while replacing stereotypes of a dangerous, highly sexualized black man with a benign figure for whom interracial sexual congress holds no interest.

We might regard the kindly, servile, and asexual 'Uncle Ben' and 'Aunt Jemima' as forbears of the magic Negro. A few months after Ehrenstein's article appeared, right-wing Republican talk show host Rush Limbaugh played 'Barack the Magic Negro' to the tune of 'Puff, the Magic Dragon' on his syndicated radio program. Following that, a candidate for the Republican National Committee chairmanship, Chip Saltsman from Tennessee, sent a CD to committee members for Christmas that included a song titled 'Barack the Magic Negro' (there are now many versions on YouTube). Saltsman told CNN (Sinderbrand, 2008) that the CD was a joke, meant to satirize the *Los Angeles Times* article. 'I think most people recognize political satire when they see it,' he said. 'I think RNC members understand that.' Not all RNC members did, however. RNC Chairman Mike Duncan, recognizing a public relations disaster when he saw one, rejected the satirical gambit in no uncertain terms. Perhaps alluding to the bruising losses by Republicans in the 2008 elections and the pervasive perception of the Republican Party as a shrunken southern regional party of old white men, Duncan said, 'I am shocked and appalled that anyone would think this is appropriate, as it clearly does not move us in the right direction' (Sinderbrand, 2008).

Saltsman lost his bid to become the next RNC chairman, as did Katon Dawson from South Carolina, who was a member of an all-white country club for 12 years and resigned just before announcing his run for RNC chairman when he learned that his membership was about to be reported in the press; instead the politically inexperienced Michael Steele from Maryland, the figure who gave us ‘Drill, baby, drill’, referring to Alaskan oil, at the Republican National Convention, became the first black chairman of the RNC. Steele ran unsuccessfully for the Senate in 2006, and was implicated in a possible swindle involving campaign funds being funneled to his sister’s defunct company, which never performed any services; he was also implicated in campaign literature meant to mislead people into believing he was a Democrat(!)² Following his election as RNC Chairman, Steele publicly criticized Rush Limbaugh’s rhetoric as ‘incendiary’ and ‘ugly’ and suggested that abortion should be a woman’s choice, but immediately backed down and apologized for both positions when criticized by the Republican Party. Steele, who talked about ‘hip hop’ appeal and ‘taking it off the hook’ appears buffoonish compared to the preternaturally calm and thoughtful Obama. In different ways, both represent the ‘magic Negro’, or just a more popular face for the Democratic and Republican parties, both of which defend the interests of a privileged class.

The RNC election came in the wake of a newsletter sent out by a Republican women’s group in California during the election campaign that featured an ‘Obama Bucks’ ten dollar ‘food stamp’ with barbecued ribs, watermelon, lemonade, and a bucket of fried chicken, labeled ‘United States Food Stamps.’ In the center was the face of Barack Obama on a donkey (Figure 1). The newsletter by the Chaffey Community Republican Women prompted outrage among members of its own group, which included African American women. Diane Fidele, the group’s president, explained that she wasn’t thinking in racist terms; she was merely offended that Obama would draw attention to his own race by suggesting during the campaign that he ‘didn’t look like other Presidents’ on dollar bills. ‘I didn’t see it the way that it’s being taken. I never connected,’ Fidele said (DeArmand, 2008). ‘It was just food to me. It didn’t mean anything else’. She was offended that he referred, in this oblique way, to his ‘blackness’? It was ‘just food’? What makes taboo the mention of race? Clearly, it is seen as a threat that must be ridiculed with ribs and chicken in order to be diminished? By trotting out these racist associations, culminating with the face of Obama on the political symbol of the donkey, Fidele maps demeaning racial stereotype onto the Democratic



Figure 1 ‘Obama Bucks’, pictured in Chaffey Community Republican Women newsletter, California, October 2008.

Party itself. The image visualizes Obama's difference from the long line of white presidents represented on the dollar bill by suggesting that he will only represent the interests of poor blacks and will turn the US into a 'welfare state'. Before stepping down as head of the Republican women's group as a result of the controversy, Fidele admitted that she was trying to criticize Obama's welfare policies with the illustration ('Obama Bucks Distributor Resigns', 2008).

In yet another incident, Dean Grose, mayor of Los Alamitos, California, sent out an email with an image featuring the White House lawn planted with watermelons under the title, 'No Easter Egg Hunt This Year' (Figure 2). One of its recipients was Keyanus Price, a black businesswoman who told the *Orange County Register*, 'What I'm concerned about is how can this person send an e-mail out like this and think it is OK?' (Lynn Fletcher, 2009). But the mayor said he was unaware of the connection between African Americans and watermelons. Really? What, then, would have made this cartoon 'funny'? When Price emailed the mayor about the inappropriateness of the image, he replied by saying: 'In these economic times, you just have to laugh now and then.' It was this failure to understand the implications of the 'joke' that infuriated Price and led her to make the image public. In February 2009, following a firestorm of criticism, the mayor resigned, undoubtedly without realizing that those rows of watermelons that led to his downfall occupied the same site as the veterans' 'Hooverilles' of three generations earlier.³



Figure 2 'No Easter Egg Hunt This Year': picture sent out in mass email from personal account of Dean Grose, mayor of Los Alamitos, California, February 2009.

In a chilling article, Phillip Goff and Jennifer Eberhardt (2009), two social psychologists at UCLA and Stanford, demonstrate that even among whites who are not racially prejudiced there is a strong tendency to associate black faces with apes. They write:

In multiple studies on ape and African American associations, using different experimental approaches with white and nonwhite subjects, we have found that the link persists and can be triggered in the most egalitarian of people. Our research also suggests a particularly disturbing consequence: When the association was called to mind, even in the absence of conscious awareness, participants in our laboratory experiments were more likely to endorse violence against African Americans.

They note that this was true in relation to the 1992 beating of Rodney King, when LAPD Officer Laurence Powell referred to a black couple as ‘something right out of *Gorillas in the Mist*’ just moments before becoming involved in the King beating. Goff and Eberhardt ascribe this tendency to ‘a lifetime of conditioning, rooted in historical representations of blacks as less than human’.

Given the national coverage and debate over such images, Sean Delonas and the *Post* editors would have had to be culturally blind and deaf indeed, as well as historically unaware – hardly the qualifications for successful political cartooning. If they were sensitive to the implications of dragging out this racist imagery – in this case opportunistically using the cultural referent of an actual out of control chimp as a pretext – the cartoon can only be meant to delegitimize the moral, intellectual and political authority of a black man in government in order to preserve a brittle, racist, and collapsing capitalist economic system that cannot support the majority of the population it is meant to serve, regardless of race or ethnicity. If they were actually unaware of the implications of the imagery they were using, that is even more frightening, for it indicates an association between African Americans, apes, and the condoning of violence that is so deeply embedded as to be unrecognizable.

J. Stanley Lemons (1977) suggests that blacks became the butt of national ‘jokes’ at moments of heightened social tensions in the 19th century, when slavery began to be seriously questioned and following the failure of Reconstruction. Similarly, the election of a popular African American President and the installation of a black family in the White House also has evoked a conservative backlash, including a rise in hate groups, and brought out the racist jokes – but the massive national refusal to find them harmless, much less ‘funny’, suggests that the ideological naturalization of blackness as subhuman and threatening is finding stronger resistance.

Notes

1. The New York Post will not authorize copyright permission to reproduce this cartoon because it created such a political stir. It can be viewed online at <http://www.nypost.com/delonas/delonas.htm>.
2. See <http://centerblue.org/2006/09/23/md-sen-republicans-anonymous-steele-campaigns-as-a-democrat/>
3. As we go to press, I’ve learned about boxes of waffle mix sold at the conservative Values Voters Summit held during the election campaign, which manage to construct Obama as subservient Negro, Muslim terrorist, and Mexican ‘illegal alien’ all at once. The boxes picture a racist caricature of Obama in place of ‘Aunt Jemima’ on the front, Obama with a simulated Muslim headdress on the top flap, and, on the back, a picture of Obama in stereotypical Mexican dress and sombrero above a recipe for ‘Open Border Fiesta Waffles’ that can serve ‘4 or more illegal aliens’. The recipe includes this tip: ‘While waiting for these zesty treats to invade your home, why not learn a foreign language?’ Republicans Newt Gingrich and Mitt Romney were among the speakers at this forum, which drew over 2,000 activists from 44 states (see Lowy, 2008). I thank John Peffer for bringing this to my attention.

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I Believe In Miracles

We Can Sing Now

I see no changes, all I see is racist faces
Misplaced hate makes disgrace to races
We under, I wonder what it takes to make this
one better place, let's erase the wasted

[. . .]