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On: 15 August 2011, At: 10:05

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Communication Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcst20>

### Imagining Obama: Reading Overtly and Inferentially Racist Images of our 44th President, 2007-2008

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Available online: 15 Aug 2011

To cite this article: Ralina L. Joseph (2011): Imagining Obama: Reading Overtly and Inferentially Racist Images of our 44th President, 2007-2008, *Communication Studies*, 62:4, 389-405

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2011.588074>

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# Imagining Obama: Reading Overtly and Inferentially Racist Images of our 44th President, 2007–2008

Ralina L. Joseph

*In this article I analyze eight Internet images of President Barack Obama from the election campaign period of 2007–2008. These images were largely user-generated and disseminated and fall into two camps that each represent a form of anti-Black racism: overtly racist images and inferentially racist images. While representations of Obama as an ape, thug, or terrorist were generally recognized as clear forms of anti-Black racism, images I identify as inferentially racist operate within a postracial ideology in which Obama is figured as a messiah, whites’ “Black best friend,” or a mythical creature. For some viewers, these inferentially racist images did not incite the controversy of those read as overtly racist because the former were read as positive portrayals of uplift and progress. Yet, these inferentially racist images are reliant upon the same stereotypes of Blackness as the explicitly racist pictures, as Obama becomes a positive figure only when he can metaphorically transcend his Blackness.*

*Keywords:* Anti-Black Racism; Blackness; Obama; Post-Race; Representations of Race; Stereotypes

Within a week of moving to an area of South Seattle designated by the 2010 U.S. Census as the most diverse in the country, I was cautioned by a well-intentioned, liberal White neighbor about the frequent incidence of car burglaries in the neighborhood. In our shared parking lot the neighbor told me, gesturing to her Obama/Biden bumper sticker, that her car was burgled “even though we have an Obama sticker!”

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I was so baffled by this comment that I mumbled a goodbye, got into my car and drove away, my mind exploding with questions. Did my neighbor think that car burglars were united in their proclivity to be Obama fans? Was she really assuming that all car vandals in South Seattle were Black? Did she mean that since she was “down with the cause” by publicly endorsing Obama, her car should have been immune from what she imagined to be Black-perpetrated crime? Was her bizarre performance of Obama-fandom intended to make her appear antiracist for us, the new family of color next door?

Since Obama’s presidential election campaign I have come to intimately understand that signifiers of our first African American president are deployed by some people to express anxiety, desire, guilt, discomfort, and, oftentimes, fear of Blackness. Such fear, which I read in the case of my neighbor as an assumption of Black criminality, must be seen as part-and-parcel of a more coded, more polite, but still virulent and destructive racism against African Americans that occurs, confusingly, through a celebration of Barack Obama. This complicated performance of support, when accompanied by controlling ideas of Blackness, reveals a barely sublimated anti-Black racism that flourishes in popular discourse because, in the words of Henry Giroux, “since it is assumed that formal institutions of segregation no longer exist,” racism against Black Americans also no longer exists (Giroux, 2003, p. 193). I use the phrase “anti-Black racism” as opposed to “racism” or “prejudice” not just to signal discriminatory *feelings* of Whites towards people of color but instead to signify the *institutional, structural, and cultural forces* that foment the inequality of people of African descent in our society.<sup>1</sup> The featuring of Obama images, whether on a bumper sticker, t-shirt, poster, mug, or Facebook profile picture, is not a simple matter of one’s displaying political affiliation. As Obama is the first African American U.S. president, the production, consumption, and circulation of his image denotes conflicting emotions of race, identity, Blackness, belonging, and, yes, sometimes entrenched-yet-coded anti-Black racism.

### **The Medium is the (Racial) Message**

Visual communication scholar W. J. T. Mitchell suggested that the most effective means for scholars to gauge “the emergence of Barack Hussein Obama as a ‘cultural icon’” is to take into account “the ability of an image to ‘have legs’, to spawn copies and mutations, and to circulate across numerous geographical and media borderlines where it installs itself in human memory and imagination” (Mitchell, 2009, p. 125). In this article, in order to illustrate the communication of anti-Black racism in the Obama era, I analyze images whose digitized legs have run them around the world: Internet images of Barack Obama from the 2007–2008 election campaign. Internet images of Obama are an ideal location for contemporary negotiations of race as the Internet, according to Lisa Nakamura, is the key space for “the distinctive ways of . . . propagat[ing], disseminat[ing], and commodifi[ng] images of race and racism” (Nakamura, 2002, p. 3). Racially, different-yet-accessible Obama’s presidential campaign was truly fought, and won, over the Internet, or, as Anna Everett put it,

“Obama’s impressive political ascendancy could not have materialized without the convergence of Web 2.0 technologies” (Everett, 2009, p. 193).

Obama’s Internet images cannot merely be read as race-neutral reflections of our president. Instead, because of Obama’s unique position as “the first” and his racialization as Black, Obama images must be read as indelibly racialized representations that, for some readers, express and reflect a discourse of sometimes-explicit, sometimes-coded twenty-first-century anti-Black racism. Such racialized discourses flourish through visual imagery as, according to Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2001), who echoed fellow visual communication scholars like Mitchell (2009), Stuart Hall (1997), John Berger (1972), and Nicholas Mirzoeff (2002), images “are central to how we represent, make meaning, and communicate in the world around us” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 1). Subsequently, images have tremendous power to create and re-create what are still the most meaningful signs in the twenty-first-century United States: race and racism.

Over the campaign, thanks to my students, colleagues, friends, and family who knew about and subsequently fed my early obsession with Obama, I compiled a significant database of Internet images that were often accompanied by an anti- or pro-Obama blog or Web site and sold merchandise adorned with their images. These representations had a particular resonance; they were so compelling or appalling that people chose to attach them to blogs or Facebook accounts, or to purchase t-shirts, mugs, or bumper stickers with their images. When many of these images first surfaced in the last year of Obama’s presidential campaign it was generally accepted that the media was biased towards him. While this might have been true for *some* mainstream press, over the Internet racist images of Obama during the campaign and beyond abound. When people voted, they did not only think about “official” Obama coverage in the *New York Times* and on CNN but also about pictures from email forwards and images in the blogosphere. The Obama Internet images I amassed are largely not real pictures but rather are images created with morphing technologies, exhibiting some combination of graphics, photography, and human construction. Technology met appealing physicality in Obama. The technology itself is important here, as Marshall McLuhan’s famous phrase “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964) illustrates: Some Obama Internet images are slicker and more real looking than others and the seamlessness of the technology, available to all of us with basic, user-friendly software, hides the fact that these are human-created controlling images featuring virulent old and new stereotypes.

### **From the Overt to the Inferential or From “Racist” to “Postracial”**

As my database of images grew to incredible proportions, I first divided my pictures into two major camps, which, inspired by Stuart Hall’s (1981) formulation, I called “overtly racist” and “inferentially racist.” Hall argued that while overt racism is easily identifiable as “an openly racist argument” or “a racist policy or view,” inferential racism is the coded racism of “apparently naturalized representations of events

and situations relating to race, whether ‘factual’ or ‘fictional,’ which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of unquestioned assumptions” (p. 28). Hall noted the dangers and continued existence of overt racism but argued that inferential racism is far more troubling because it employs the same ideologies that fuel overt racism, but “it is more widespread and in many ways, more insidious, because it is largely *invisible*” (Hall, 1981, pp. 36–37).

Racist images of Black American men, including those of Barack Obama, largely fit film scholar Donald Bogel’s formulation of a violent, threatening Black male brute (Bogel, 1973/2001). I built on Bogel and sorted the overtly racist images of Obama into three groups: ape, thug, and terrorist/Osama Bin Laden. I include discussion of overtly racist images here because they are an essential part of U.S. racial history and they illustrate the tenacity and enduring nature of such stereotypes. Interestingly, the monkey, thug, and terrorist-themed images of Obama might have had an unexpected effect: galvanizing African American support for Obama, as Adrienne Maree Brown noted, “nothing unites us like racism” (Brown, 2009, p. 31). In other words, because Obama was clearly recognizable as the victim of anti-Black racism vis-à-vis overtly racist images and sentiments, he must be like us African Americans, the other victims of such abuse. So why did these racist images fail to garner more mainstream press? The tacit acceptance of racist images of Obama over the Internet illustrates a widespread assumption that they were either a joke—and so exempt from being offensive—or, if designated as “offensive,” isolated acts of hatred, and dismissible feelings of a few instead of emblematic statements illustrating structural and institutional racism. Dora Apel called the “it was only ‘a joke’” excuse the “ideological escape hatch” for allegations of racism (Apel, 2009, p. 134).

However, those more overtly racist images are only half of the story. In order to uncover the coded, anti-Black racism that my neighbor so effectively performed, I have also included discussion of images of Obama where the racism is harder to spot or is inferential. Twenty-first-century anti-Black racism largely operates through what media scholars and critics have dubbed “post-race,” the assumed “after” moment of racism that became the keyword of Obama media coverage. The genealogy of post-race scholarship can be linked to Whiteness studies critiques of the “invisible” power of Whiteness (Dyer, 1997; Lipsitz, 1998; Morrison, 1993) and critical race scholars’ critiques of the fallacy of colorblindness (Gotanda, 1991; Guinier & Torres, 2002; Harris, 1993). The most recent movement of “post-race” scholarship unpacks the cementing of inequality through its ostensibly “utopian” discourse (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Forman & Lewis, 2006; Joseph, 2009, 2011; Ono, 2010; St. Louis, 2002; Watts, 2010).

Building on scholarship in these areas, I interpret inferentially racist and postracial images of Obama as those that strip him of Blackness or imagine him to transcend the controlling images of Blackness. I sorted my collection of inferentially racist images into groupings of messiah, magical creature, and best friend to Whites. While it will be obvious to most readers why the images I am characterizing as anti-Obama are overtly racist, the pro-Obama images can be harder for some to decode as racist and indeed, their covertly racist nature is what makes them so dangerous as they are

unreadable or excusable to many. While the overtly racist images can be condemned but largely dismissed because of their isolated, outmoded, and/or comedic nature (that is just one bonehead opinion; no one thinks like this anymore; can't you people just take a joke?), inferentially racist images are harder to read as racist because of the possible good intentions behind such iconography. However, what I aim to illustrate here is the discursive terrain where, for some liberal, White viewers, postracial, Black-transcendent images of Obama function as covertly racist devices not only because they are reliant upon the notion that Obama's very success is contingent upon his abandonment of Blackness but also because, as my opening anecdote demonstrates, they are used to excuse anti-Black racism.

As racialization is an open circuit with no singular truth, in my analysis of Obama Internet images, I will provide my preferred reading, which is structured by my critical race, gender, and media studies sensibilities, but—where possible—I will also propose alternate readings in order to leave open the possibility that the images can be read in multiple ways by multiple viewers (Bobo, 1995). The openness of Obama images is further complicated because, despite the fact that audiences create multiple readings for representations, since these images are rooted in the midst of an election campaign, most viewers of the images understand that they must be either for or against them, as voters are for or against Obama.

In this article, I present readings of eight images that illuminate the overt and inferential ideologies of race and racism in our ostensibly postracial Obama moment. While representations of Obama as Black male brute and Black-transcendent messiah are contradictory, ambivalent, and seemingly bifurcated, they illustrate the complicated, discursive dance of Blackness and the bottom-line denigration of racialized difference and African American identity.<sup>2</sup> In order to illustrate how the inferentially racist images are reliant upon the overtly racist ones, I structure the next two sections according to a problem to solution model. The first section, "From Devolution to Evolution," reveals the problem of biologically and morally degraded Obama (Obama as ape and terrorist) and solves it by offering up the solution of messianic Obama. In the second section, "From that Ridiculous and Scary Black Guy to My Black Best Friend," the problem of socially deficient African Americans (Obama as thug) is solved by the solution of Obama as the safe Black figure (Obama as my Black best friend).

While Obama is represented as a postracial subject, or a race-transcending "new Black man," in Mark Anthony Neal's formulation (Neal, 2006), he is also understood through old school, racist tropes of threatening, violent, unintelligent, Black masculinity. This representational paradox illustrates that the now-prevalent ideology of post-race, particularly as it applies to African American subjects, is reliant upon its dichotomized opposite, racist, hypermasculine images. In other words, as stereotypes are formed through dichotomies, the postracial is always reliant upon the racial, which often defaults, in the case of Obama representations, to the racist. The fact that Blackness must be transcended in the images I identify as inferentially racist illustrates the indelible denigration of Blackness in U.S. popular and political culture and the impossibility of the U.S. arriving at a postracial state. Presidential election

campaign images of Barack Obama portended both his electability, through the hope promised in the pro-Obama image of Black transcendence, and his postelection vulnerability, through the fear deployed in the anti-Obama image of the Black male brute.

### **From Devolution to Evolution**

My first four readings illustrate the overt/inferential binary of the devolution of humanity through Obama (as ape and terrorist) to the evolution of humanity through Obama (as messiah). Possessing Blackness is the cause of devolution while losing Blackness paves the way to evolution. The imaging of Obama as ape activates the entrenched stereotype of people of African descent as monkeys. Eugenicists, clergy, politicians, and others perpetuated the myth of Black people's proximity to monkeys through a combination of religion, economics, and pseudo-science. The Obama-as-monkey image entered the public sphere through the figure of Curious George: After listening to a caller telling conservative radio show shock jock and hate-monger Rush Limbaugh how her 12-year-old daughter thought Obama looked like Curious George, a Marietta, Georgia bar owner, began selling the Obama/Curious George shirts from his establishment (ABC News, 2008). While the connection was posited as a child's so-called innocent observation by Limbaugh, and objectors were dismissed as oversensitive liberals and minorities, scholars have long postulated that Curious George, the monkey stolen from Africa by the Man in the Yellow Hat, was an analogy for slavery (Coats, 2001; Zornado, 2001).

Related to the Obama-as-Curious-George association come images of Obama morphed with a monkey. In one such image, while the text, "Obama in '08" differs with just one word, "in," from his campaign slogan, that word serves the function of postulating that evolution to monkey-man is as far as Obama, signifier for all Black people, has come in the twenty-first century. Obama becomes not a cute cartoon character and not a product of human-human miscegenation, but of animal-human miscegenation. The result is not one of a utopian, raceless American future, but the tragic, dystopian future that might occur if Obama-ape were to become president. The linkages between the Obamas and monkeys have continued throughout his presidency (Delonas, 2009; "Glenn Beck," 2010).

Just as Obama represents Blacks devolved into monkeys, he also represents the furthest devolved human, the ultimate villain terrorist, Osama bin Laden. Post-9-11, anti-Obama images tweak longstanding White fears of African American men by adding the corollary dread that he is secretly a Muslim terrorist. A March 2008 Pew poll revealed that 10% of Americans believed this Internet-spread rumor to be true; that number rose to 12% in June 2008, 13% in September 2008, and 18% in August 2010 (Pew Research Center, 2010). Visually, this fear is evident in morphing images of Obama and Osama Bin Ladin that circulated around the Internet, including an image that was forwarded to me in an email with a subject heading "B Hussein OSama" (2008). In addition to circulating through email, this image was featured on a Web page accompanied by an April 2008 story whose title announced, "Islamic

Support for Obama Coming Out in the Open in California” (O’Malley, 2008). On this Web site the title for the photograph changed from the email-circulated title to “B Hussein Obama is a Stealth Muslim.”

A darkened Obama wears a turban, white shirt, and facial hair that are seen in the vast majority of U.S. media with reference to radical Islamic terrorists. Posed in front of the White House, the image flips the classic and genial presidential photograph. Obama’s eyes glare out of the picture, challenging the viewer. Gone is the “million dollar smile,” he is often described as—and accused of—having. In its place is a deadly serious look. The accompanying text asserts that the “change” promised in the Obama campaign is one where the interests of terrorists will take precedence. The red (in the text), white (in the costume and White House), and blue (in his button) are presented as a grotesque perversion of true patriotism. The bottom text, “just wait . . .,” functions as a menacing threat that encourages viewers to let their minds run wild about the possibilities of the first Black terrorist president, a close relation to Osama Bin Laden, the arch villain of the twenty-first century. Obama becomes a secret operative planted by terrorists; as soon as he becomes president, his true, violent nature will surface. While it is impossible to imagine Obama supporters claiming this image, as Obama fans are worldwide, one can imagine that in the Arab world such an image (without the text) might be embraced as Obama as one of us. In a related vein, John Carlos Rowe wrote that “even controversial images such as the photograph of Obama in Kenya wearing a traditional African headdress, dubbed incorrectly by Republicans as a ‘turban,’ have contributed to the globalization of the Obama logo” (Rowe, 2009, p. 207).

The devolution trope makes particular sense when viewed against the inferentially racist idea that Obama is to be loved because he has evolved past ape-like or terrorist Blacks or Muslims. Where his Blackness drags him down to a subhuman or villainous nature, his transcendence of Blackness allows him to arrive at a state past race and even past humanity. From his very beginnings on the national political scene Obama has been touted by his own campaign and sometimes the national press as hope incarnate for the Democratic Party and the entire United States. The branding statements of the 2008 Obama campaign were “hope” and “change,” two words that took on a racialized connotation when read against the heavy weight of anti-Black images like those seen in the devolution trope. Using this logic, Obama’s candidacy, his campaign argued, meant that Americans were hoping for and even changing not only the current presidential regime but the entrenched racial divide in the United States. Obama’s transcendent Blackness was posited, in a mostly coded fashion, as the key to his ability to create change, the key to his candidacy. The visual equivalent of these words came through imagery produced by Obama’s campaign.

In pro-Obama images, like the official Obama.com campaign Web site homepage image, he appears angelic and savior-like. Light(ened)-skinned Obama, clad in ethereal all-white, is featured against a background of sky and clouds. He is shot from below, and so appears powerful in the frame, but not particularly large, and thus not menacing. His brow furrows slightly as he takes on the country’s burdens, but



his skyward gaze signifies his divine guidance for these burdens in the new dawning of America. Directly left of Obama is his ubiquitous campaign image, described by Marita Sturken as a “play on traditional codes of American patriotism . . . from the suggestion of a field of wheat waving in the wind (a key American icon) and of sunrise (evoking Reagan’s very powerful ‘Morning in America’ theme of the 1980s)” (Sturken, 2009, p. 171). Obama becomes the postracial healer in this image, an almost-White, postracial sign of a utopian, racial strife-free future. To some cynics (or perhaps realists), Obama was celebrated as a liberal, multicultural messiah solely to deny, to ignore, or to silently excuse anti-Black racism. Obama himself, recognizing and attempting to dismiss this discourse, noted in his speech, “A More Perfect Union,” that naysayers dismissed his candidacy as “the desire of wide-eyed liberals to purchase racial reconciliation on the cheap” (Obama, 2008, para. 19). The logic follows, if Obama is president, how can racism possibly exist?

Following the Obama savior comes the even holier presence of the Obama-Messiah. This trope was so ubiquitous during the campaign that comedian Jon Stewart’s satire news program *The Daily Show* had a series of bits skewering the desires of the left to make Obama into the savior (Stewart, 2008). Taking such a message even further, Barack Obama, symbolizing the long-awaited union of the bifurcated United States, portends the end of racialized strife and perhaps race itself. In this equation, Obama becomes the messiah. Sun radiates off the beautiful, golden form of Obama like a halo (Noland, 2008). Messiah Obama’s direct, mind-controlling stare and dictate “Believe” functions as a religious command from a cult leader. Art historian Cherise Smith read the image as signaling a “common Christian visual trope signaling divinity” (Cherise Smith, personal communication, March 5, 2010) and Marita Sturken wrote that the imaging of Obama as “close-to-messiah status” through “a broad array of amateur art” is a signifier of kitsch, which has “long been the primary aesthetic of American patriotism” (Sturken, 2009, p. 171). The Web site from which this image comes features an extensive collection of photographs, art work, music videos, and news clips, all of which evidence or drily skewer the notion of messianic Obama. The message is twofold and contradictory: Part is a critique of Obama-worship, a warning and mocking of Obama propaganda, and part is a celebration, a fostering of hero-worship. As Obama as messiah images circulate in a larger U.S. culture in which Blackness is demonized, such images seek to identify Obama outside of Blackness; both ends of the devolution/evolution binary are reliant upon ideologies of anti-Black racism.

### **From That Ridiculous and Scary Black Man to the White Guy’s Black Friend**

Devolution to evolution are two of many anti-Black racist tropes operative in U.S. culture. A related pair are the overtly racist problem of the thug Black man who is solved by the inferentially racist figure of the Black best friend. Scholars of Black masculinity note a contradictory fear and appeal of African American men. In his discussion of the figure of the Black jazz man, Herman Gray wrote that for Black men

“as a ‘different’ sign of the masculine he was policed as much as he was celebrated and exoticized by White men and women alike” (Gray, 1995, p. 401). Jane Rhodes described how the controlling image of Black men as a threat comes from a White supremacist-authored, in the words of Rhodes, “discourse of ‘Negrophobia’ . . . which hich included the “stereotype of the Black brute” as a “bestly, lascivious rapist” (Rhodes, 2006, p. 33). Ronald L. Jackson, III, made sense of the brute (also known as the buck) stereotype as “an indiscreet, devious, irresponsible, and sexually pernicious beast.” Jackson illustrated that this stereotype revealed much of White fears of race mixing and “miscegenated offspring, hence defying the code of White racial purity” (Jackson, 2006, p. 41). While such stereotypes reveal nothing about actual African American men, they showcase White fear of and desire for Black masculinity.

Reading Blackness as a threat can also be understood as a way to avoid dealing with racialized, gendered, and structural inequality. The discourse of Black threat and the avoidance of structural inequality links to, for example, anthropologist Oscar Lewis’s “culture of poverty” thesis and its policy implications in the 1965 “Moynihan Report,” where African American inequality was blamed on faulty culture instead of racist institutions (Lewis and Farge, 1959). Ideologies of Black threat function as a way to exculpate White Americans from having to take responsibility for their role in the propagation of racialized inequality. Furthermore, images of Obama as a “Black male threat” can be understood as a form of “playing the race card,” a campaign strategy, in the words of Ronald Lee and Aysel Morin, of “instigat[ing] racial priming and call[ing] forth racial stereotypes” (Lee & Morin, 2009, p. 386).

Such priming occurs in one Obama image, where a brown-skinned Black man, barely recognizable as the most famous African American man today, grins widely out of the picture, his teeth and mouth obscured by bright silver grills. A black bandana is tied around his head and his small, cartoonish frame is cocked to one side, posed in a stance of bravado or buffoonery. The image, produced for a Web site that displays satirical images of celebrities, is flanked by an all-red declaration: “Obama: Going for the African American vote.” While the image is starkly, blatantly racist, multiple significations arise from the combination of the image and the words. The implied meaning is that Obama is pretending to be Black and thus has to perform as a stereotypical O.G. (Original Gangsta) in order to garner African American votes. Supporting this idea, on the “Google image” version of this picture, the caption below the photograph reads, “Barack Obama is Now Totally Black.” The joke arises from the idea that Obama is “not really Black” (as “real Black” men look like the one in the picture), but instead a postracial figure who has magically transcended the forces of racialization.

I first saw this picture when the race between then-Democratic presidential nominee contenders Hillary Clinton and Obama began heating up and Obama dealt with the accusation that he was not “Black enough” and that African Americans would not vote for him. This image signifies that Obama’s suit-wearing, law professor persona is merely a front, a cover-up for the threatening Black man that he must surely

be. White America is being tricked by Obama's veneer of civility as his intrinsic nature, as a Black man, is flashy, menacing, and inarticulate. Indeed, with a mouth full of metal, cartoon-Obama looks as though he can barely speak, illustrating the stereotype of the unintelligibility of African Americans. This stereotype was referenced by Senator Joe Biden, who commented in February of 2007 only a year before he became Obama's own vice presidential running mate, "I mean, you got the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy. I mean, that's a storybook, man" (Thai & Barrett, 2007, para. 3). In a quintessentially postracial *and* anti-Black racist move, Biden recycles the vituperative stereotype of African Americans as the antithesis of well-spoken, intelligent, hygienic, or attractive, and the parodying of Obama in this cartoon image illustrates the first, if not all four, of those descriptors. Similarly, Jane Rhodes described how African Americans have been represented along what she calls an arc of memory, from the happy, contented slave, the foolish, grinning Sambo who both wants and deserves his servitude, to the defiant, violent revolutionary, the Black Panther who threatens the culture and lives of Whites (Rhodes, 2006). White fear and desire structure this binary and representations of Obama showcase both extremes; the Obama thug image arises from both the Sambo and the Black male threat. Images such as these reveal, as Robin Means Coleman wrote, "cultural domination remains a dilemma in America. . . . [S]uch domination is seen through the representation of Blackness, first, by casting it as deficiently different and, second, by reducing the culture to the ridiculous" (Coleman, 2003, p. 422). Obama remains both ridiculous and deficient in his cartoon parody.

As cultural representations do not operate in isolation, this image is one of a number of Obama-as-thug images. Alongside cartoon images comes a picture of the "real" Obama O.G. as shown in another Obama image. Although it has been impossible for me to chronologically order the images, as they are on the Web, it appears as though this "photograph" is a logical progression from the cartoon. From the picture of ZZ Top in the background, Obama's face appears to be photoshopped onto a photograph of a musician at a record industry establishment. In this embodiment of Obama there is no question as to if he is "pretending to be Black." He is a hugely muscular, fully tattooed gangsta, showing off his flashy, egocentric jewelry and worthy of the first Google image title of the picture, "Barack Obama Bling Bling."

But would all viewers see such an image in such a negative light? What about a counterreading to this image in which Obama-supporters, and not Obama-detractors, embrace the picture? Google image's second title, "Barack Obama 'cuz he's gangsta" recalls the title of the rapper Shyne's 2000 hit "That's Gangsta," reflecting and mass-popularizing a colloquialism where "gangsta" equates to cool. The song's lyrics refer to flashy jewelry, drunkenness, oral sex, and drug dealing, all of which are substantiated by the repeal, "that's gangsta" (Shyne, 2000). If one reads these lyrics not literally but as a metaphor for power and control, it is possible to imagine a young Obama supporter selecting this type of image as his Facebook image in order to celebrate Barack Obama as the ultimate gangsta. In this image, Obama's racial ambiguity, which can help stoke identification with Obama, is also apparent as

he can be read as not just African American but also various interpretations of brown, from Latino to Pacific Islander. Additionally interesting is Obama's chosen expression: The photograph features a sweet smile. He wears a cross at a moment in which his "secret Muslim religion" was a rumor over the Internet and the inclusion of the cross on this image argues implicitly that the Obama-as-Muslim rumors are lies.

As the inferential images become operative through the overt ones, Obama imaged as a violent, threatening Black male brute is only half of the picture; he is also figured as the postracial, Black-transcending savior. In postraciality, people of color like Obama become the special, safe minority. He does not make Whites uncomfortable by bringing up issues of race, racialized difference, or racialized inequality; that is, he does not play the race card. He is a token who is valuable for his mere presence. He is often physically attractive. This last quality particularly informed media obsession with the Obamas, as Gayatri Spivak summed up much popular sentiment: "The First Couple and their daughters are American Idols" (Spivak, 2009, p. 192). In the post-civil rights era politicians and pundits celebrate an image of postraciality through Barack Obama as the bridge to racial utopia.

Barack Obama's presentation of his gendered identity was also key to his Black transcendence and electoral success: Yes, he is male, but his performance of his "masculinities," in the words of R. W. Connell and Jackson Katz, a postfeminist brand of nontraditional, nonessentialized maleness (Connell, 2005; Katz, 2006), helped mark his gendered progress and distance from the other presidential candidates, including "traditional" feminine and feminist Democratic contender Hillary Clinton, and the "traditional" masculine and decidedly unfeminist Republican contender John McCain.<sup>3</sup> His controlled masculinity additionally serves to distance him from stereotypes of threatening Black masculinity. Obama embodies a metrosexuality fetishized in the press by descriptions of his careful grooming habits, Spartan diet, and cool, unflappable demeanor.<sup>4</sup> In the popular press, Obama's metrosexuality and multiraciality, which deviate from hegemonic U.S. notions of masculinity and race, have not been read as deviant but rather as valuable and accessible as they present him as the antithug, the safe Black friend to Whites.

The visual iteration of "my Black best friend" Obama is evident in another picture, a fetishistic pro-Obama image ("Barack Obama is My Homeboy," 2007). This retro-appearing image came from a Web site that billed itself as a "grassroots supporter website" that sold various "tools to promote Obama with." While the text racializes Obama as a "homeboy," a 1980s-era term for a Black man far from "presidential" in attributes, the image is a "real" Barack Obama who is smiling and in his formality, appears presidential. Balanced against "homeboy" is the use of Obama's first and last name in a formal address. The "my" claims possession of Obama as a safe African American man valued for his nonthreatening difference and his postracial appeal. The photo and words position him as the "Black friend" of the White liberal—the one who functions as convenient proof to stave off accusations of racism.

Perhaps for some Whites, icons of Blackness are preferable to real-life African Americans so that no actual Black people are needed to fulfill White desire for

Blackness. Eric King Watts and Mark Orbe wrote about a similar urge whereby Whites' consumption and circulation of racialized and fetishistic iconography of African Americans allows for "white folks [to] *claim* identification with Black (mediated) experiences" (Watts & Orbe, 2002, p. 5). With the same text and a different image, like the previous thug images, the message would be overtly and not inferentially racist and the picture would not appear to safely appeal to what I believe is the intended demographic of young White men. In a counterreading, this image could be read by an Obama-detractor as evidence of Obama-supporters' trading in "reverse discrimination," highlighting Obama's perceived lack of substance, as his popularity and ascendance to the Democratic presidential nominee is simply because he is Black, or dismissively, in code, "a homeboy."

A similar demographic might embrace Obama as unicorn or the Obamacorn ("Obamacorn: Yes we can!," 2008). Obama, starkly white in this image, echoes the white unicorn in this similarly retro, 1980s-styled image. The kitschy Obamacorn plays into the ostensibly magical, mystical presence of Obama that is an extrapolation of his special, unique, and postracial appeal that enables him to become a sign of the future. Obama's own new media campaign chose the unicorn as their mascot and even two years into Obama's presidency the unicorn-Obama image continues to have a following on Facebook. Again, if one were to read counter to the preferred reading of this text as an Obama-detractor might, the message might be that Obama is nothing but mystical presence. As he is devoid of substance yet imbued with magical mind control, his followers are so blinded by his mythology that they foolishly put their faith in a mythical creature. Douglas Kellner described Obama's hyped success during the last year of the election campaign as "the Obama Spectacle," a series of "technologically mediated events" that "involve an aesthetic dimension" and that are generally "sensationalistic tabloidized stories" (Kellner, 2009, pp. 707–708). The Obamacorn plays to the Obama spectacle trope.

Part of Obama's Black-transcending, postracial appeal comes through the popular idea that Obama is everybody and anybody: W. J. T. Mitchell called him "a highly ambiguous blank slate on which popular fantasy could be projected" (Mitchell, 2009, p. 126) and Rajaopalan Radhakrishnan described his image as "the ultimate Rorschach that will unite us all as Americans in crisis" (Radhakrishnan, 2009, p. 153). Victor Margolin wrote that Obama "becomes a screen onto which people all over the world can project their own aspirations" (Margolin, 2009, p. 187), and Ellis Cashmore characterized images of Obama as "perpetual evocations inducing in the conscious mind a mental image of what the future will or could be like" (Cashmore, 2009, p. 202). Obama, like other postracial or Black transcendent figures, is popularly read as a cipher (Maira, 2009, p. 41), who can be imagined as any and everything in accordance with the desires of the viewing public. However, in this "Obama is us" formulation, the one thing he never appears to be is African American. Positioning Obama as anyone and everyone but African American thus functions as a metaphoric sloughing off of his Blackness. Once again, the postracial, Black transcendent, inferentially racist images reveal themselves to be truly anti-Black racist ones.

### Conclusion: Messiah No More

During the 2008 presidential campaign, Internet images of Barack Obama showcased explicitly and inferentially racist representations that share the ideology of anti-Black racism. Explicitly racist representations of Obama drew upon old controlling images of African Americans, like the association between Black people and monkeys and the predilection of Black men to be thugs. Overtly racist representations also drew upon newer, post-9-11 images like associations of Obama and terrorists, especially Osama bin Laden. Postracial images of Obama often feature him with lightened skin, a calm, beatific, knowledgeable gaze, and various iconography that links him to a celestial, otherworldly, and god-like presence. Overtly racist images created and reflected hysteria about America's perpetual second-class citizen, African Americans, taking on the country's most vaulted and powerful position. Inferentially racist images created and reflected the hope that Obama, as a postracial candidate, would heal the gaping racialized wound in this country. Such representations surged immediately before and after the election, and before and after the inauguration.

Then Obama became president. He was not just a hope, an image, a symbol. He was a man who had taken on the most difficult job in the world, at perhaps the most difficult time in history. Any action he took would disappoint a large number of the American people, both those who had and had not voted for him. As of May 2010, Obama's approval ratings showed incredible polarization, with a Gallup poll showing Whites approving at 43% and Blacks at 89%, and Democrats approving at 82% and Republicans at 14%. Obama's approval ratings in the first year of his presidency were recorded as the most polarized numbers for a first-year president in Gallup history (Jones, 2010). As soon as Obama took action, even in a thoughtful, conciliatory, moderate manner, he was condemned by the right and left. Any action he took illustrated that he was not the postracial messiah, but merely a man, and a Black man at that. Postinauguration Internet images of Obama reflected such a change as the inferentially racist images of Obama decreased and the overtly racist ones increased.

When dissatisfaction with Obama's promised hope and change grew, so did the tea party movement. Participants of the tea party movement produced and circulated their own set of racist Internet images, notably Obama as witch doctor (to protest health care reform) and Obama as the Joker from *Batman* (to protest Obama's so-called radical socialist/fascist/anarchist nature). While political scientists like Christopher Parker have proven the racist (and homophobic) proclivities of tea party activists (Parker, 2010), anti-Black racism as a persistent force in Obama's approval ratings is largely dismissed in the mainstream media. What does the story of Obama's shift in imagery from postracial messiah to flawed Black man tell us? Like so many other pieces of evidence about race in America, for example, from differential rates of poverty to microaggressions, such a shift demonstrates that in the United States of the early twenty-first century, anti-Black racism circulates largely unfettered. In Internet images, despite changes to radicalized iconography and the shift from overt to inferential racism, we have not yet arrived at a postracial state and Blackness is still demonized, even by Obama fans.

## Notes

- [1] The term “anti-Black” or “antiblack” racism is used with considerable regularity by race scholars throughout a wide variety of disciplines. I see it most often in the social sciences, including Giroux (2003); Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith (1997); Muhammad (2010); and Brewer and Heitzeg (2008), who wrote, “whereas all communities of color suffer from racism in general and its manifestation in criminal justice in particular, ‘Black’ has been the literal and figurative counterpart of ‘White.’ Anti-Black racism is arguably at the very foundation of White supremacy” (p. 627).
- [2] Because of space constraints I have not been able to consider the role that Obama’s multi-raciality plays in the “Black transcendent” and postracial formulation. For more on mixed-race and post-race, see Catherine Squires (2007), *Dispatches from the Colorline*, and Ralina L. Joseph (Forthcoming) *Transcending Blackness: Multiraciality and Anti-Black Racism from the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial*.
- [3] Obama’s performance of his masculinity can also be understood in relation to his partner Michelle’s performances of postfeminism; Michelle Obama is presented in the media as a well-educated, professional woman who has chosen to be a family caregiver and not a career woman, a “mom-in-chief,” and not an explicitly political part of her husband’s administration. Mrs. Obama’s presentation of her gendered self helps re-center Mr. Obama in a traditional, patriarchal role (see Joseph, 2011).
- [4] During the election campaign, he was affectionately teased for such characteristics by a variety of bloggers and *New York Times* op-ed columnist Maureen Dowd.

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