“We Ain’t Ready to See a Black President”: Barack Obama and Post-Racialism in American Society

Thesis

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Abstract

“‘We Ain’t Ready to See a Black President’: Barack Obama and Post-Racialism in American Society” is about the news media-circulated post-racial narrative. The post-racial narrative, an extension of post-Civil Rights Era color-blind ideology, argues that the success of President Barack Obama, the United States’ first African-American president, is evidence of a society in which racism, although previously present, is no longer a stifling barrier for Blacks. A tempered version of the post-racial narrative also exists. That version argues that the success of Obama is evidence of post-racial politics, a political climate in which racism, although previously present, is no longer a stifling barrier for Black political candidates seeking high-level political offices. I will argue that both versions of the American post-racial narrative do not reflect the material reality of African Americans and are politically disadvantageous for the stigmatized group. I will also argue that the post-racial narrative was resisted by lay African Americans in a virtual African-American counterpublic space I call the digital African-American underground. And finally, I will argue that the identity politics that were operating among African Americans and Ghanaians in relation to Obama further contradict the post-racial narrative. To construct my arguments, I will use content analysis, theory, and quantitative data.
Dedication

To Mrs. B. J. Christian, my maternal grandmother.

On August 2, 2008, I helped her register to vote. And, while she was registering, I asked her why she had never voted before.

“Well,” she replied, “because nobody ever asked me to.”

On November 4, 2008, the day of the 2008 presidential election, Mrs. Christian voted for the first time. She was 75-years old. She never told me who she voted for. She did tell me that the electronic voting booth was “sort of like a slot machine.”

To Mr. C. L. Estill, my paternal grandfather. I told you President Barack Obama was going to win. And I also understand why you did not think he had a chance.

To my father, mother, sister, brother, and niece. I love you.

To my true long-time friends: Broderick, Kaela, and Vandesha.
To Jacqueline S. Scott. Rest In Peace. “Suicides have a special language,” Anne Sexton wrote in the poem “Wanting to Die.” “Like carpenters, they want to know which tools.

They never ask why build.”
Acknowledgements

The Interstate 70 West exit is a few miles away from The Ohio State University. There were several times, after unusually treacherous graduate school days, that I thought about taking that exit and heading home, permanently, to Missouri. The historical highway cuts through my hometown. I am tired, Fannie Lou Hamer “tired.” As speaker in the poem “Mother to Son” by famous African-American poet Langton Hughes states, “Life, for me,” these past two years, “ain’t been no crystal stair.”

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I am deeply grateful for your support. I am here today, because of you.
Vita

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Fields of Study

Major Field: African-American Studies, Social
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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

On July 16, 2009, then Senator Barack Obama (D-Illinois) delivered a speech to the 100-year-old National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The organization was celebrating its centennial at the Hilton hotel in its birthplace, New York City. Obama began his speech by recalling the painful legacy of the African-American experience: Slavery, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement. “Lynchings were all too common,” he said. “Jim Crow was the way of life,” he said. “And race riots were shaking cities.”

And, he continued, despite over 100 years of “remarkable achievement…we know that too many barriers remain.” He mentioned two types of barriers, individual racial animus and, according to him, the “steepest barriers,” structural inequality. Obama’s examples were dire: African Americans are more likely to be jobless, undereducated, imprisoned, sick, and uninsured than any other racial group in the United States, he said. After listing those examples, Obama addressed a recent group of naysayers. “I understand there may be a temptation among some to think that discrimination is no longer a problem in

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2 Ibid.
The recent group of naysayers to which Obama alluded, believers in the mainstream American news media-circulated post-racial narrative, use his success as ultimate proof that that racial barriers are relatively insignificant. And although he was right about their existence, he was wrong about their significance. Post-racialism is more than a “temptation,” it is a mainstream news media-circulated narrative that asserts that Obama’s success is evidence of a post-racial society, a society in which racism, although previously present, is no longer a stifling barrier for African Americans. A tempered version of the post-racial narrative also exists, that version asserts that Obama’s success is not evidence of a post-racial society but, instead, evidence of post-racial politics, a political climate in which racism, although previously present, is no longer a stifling barrier for African-American politicians seeking high-level political offices. Post-racialism is a dangerous narrative, dangerous because it is being circulated by the powerful, predominately White mainstream American news media, and is espoused by politicians, talking heads, and laymen, despite a well-documented counter-narrative of individual racial animus and deeply imbedded structural inequality in the United States. Structural inequality based on race. In addition, post-racialism allows the perpetrators of structural inequality in the United States, Whites, and not the victims of racial inequality, Blacks, to have the power to dictate when that structural inequality ends. For White post-racial proponents, structural inequality ends with Obama. Now, according to a White conservative commentator, African Americans have no “excuses,” a Horatio Alger argument that is rooted in the Protestant work ethic and argues that African Americans

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can and need to uplift *themselves* without government intervention. The no “excuses” argument has historically been espoused by Whites and people of color, including immigrant groups. For example, in the 2007 Pew Research Center survey “Optimism about Black Progress Declines: Black See Growing Values Gap Between Poor and Middle Class,” 53 percent of African Americans stated that “Blacks were responsible for their own condition,” even though 81 percent of African Americans agreed that discrimination existed in one or more areas of social life. The areas surveyed included buying a house or renting an apartment, applying to college, shopping or dining out. The no “excuses” argument, particularly the version espoused by conservatives of any race, serves White supremacist ends because it fails to recognize persistent structural inequality.

Although Obama critiqued proponents of the post-racial narrative in his speech to the NAACP, his rhetoric, like the rhetoric of other Black political leaders after he won the election, sounded similar to the post-racial crowd. “Your destiny is in your hands, you cannot forget that,” Obama told the predominately African-American audience at the NAACP centennial. “That's what we have to teach all of our children. No excuses. No

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4 Note: Horatio Alger Jr. is an American author who wrote stories about characters who overcame diversity “through unyielding perseverance and basic moral principles.” Alger’s rags to riches stories enthralled the public in the late 19th century. Now, however, Alger’s rags to riches stories are criticized by scholars who recognize that individual fortitude can and is often overcome by structural limitations.


excuses.” Obama made his “no excuses” statement in reference to the African-American community’s internalized sense of self-limitation, that, he said, “was one of the most durable and destructive legacies of discrimination.”

Obama also made his “no excuses” statement in the context of existing structural inequality. Other African-Americans, like Ward Connelly, Bill Cosby, and Clarence Thomas for example, have made similar claims but do not, unlike Obama, place their claims in the context of existing structural inequality. “The sky is the limit for Black children,” an African-American intellectual declared after the election. That theme was also reflected on t-shirts produced after the campaign. “Rosa sat down so Martin could walk. Martin walked so Obama could run. Obama ran so our children could fly,” a t-shirt with photographs of Rosa Parks, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Obama read. The same statement also appeared on posters and in text messages and emails. And an African-American civil rights leader stated that the Civil Rights Movement had ended. Is a shortsighted African-American community good? No. Does the African-American community need a crutch? No. However, these analyses are troubling because they are being made in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary as a result of an extraordinary election that no American political science department could have predicted. Can Obama, who, unlike most African Americans, grew up in close proximity to White privilege, possessed an Ivy

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8 Ibid.
League legacy, and had a middle-class Hawaiian and Indonesian upbringing, be sufficiently used as a litmus test for other African Americans? Furthermore, if an African-American child is born in structurally unequal conditions and fails to become highly successful, isn’t that child’s failure the intended and/or default consequence of structural inequality and not an example of internalized self-limitation? These are the types of questions that will be explored in “‘We Ain’t Ready to See a Black President’: Barack Obama and Post-Racialism in American Society,” a critical analysis intended to contradict the narrative of post-racialism. Chapters 1 and 2 will contradict the claims of the post-racial narrative in the American context by arguing that the narrative does not reflect the material reality of African Americans and is politically disadvantageous. Chapter 3 will further contradict the claims of the post-racial narrative in an international context, Ghana specifically, by arguing that even though Ghanaians and African Americans do not, as a result of cultural barriers, identify as a single race, a reality that is in and of itself post-racial, the identity politics that were operating for Ghanaians and African Americans in relation to Obama were mediated or predicated on race respectively. That reality contradicts the post-racial narrative. In these sections the following questions will be answered: What is post-racialism? Is the White vote for Obama legitimate evidence for a post-racial society? How did Obama prevail in the face of overwhelming racial inequality? When are Whites willing to contradict the racialized structure of the United States and empower African Americans? How does the post-racial narrative further constrict the African-American community’s ability to openly talk about racial grievances in the public sphere, a community that has historically only been allowed to show a partial face in the public sphere because of White oppression? And
finally, how do intra-racial relations between the national and international Black community confirm or deny the existence of the post-racial narrative? Before the post-racial narrative can be sufficiently problematized, the following operational definitions must be established: *Post-Racial Narrative, Post-Civil Rights Era, Post-Civil Rights Racial Ideology, News Media, New Media, Black or African-American Community, American Racism, Racist, Public Transcript, and Hidden Transcript.*

**Operational Definitions**

*Post-Racial Narrative, Post-Civil Rights Era, Post-Civil Rights Racial Ideology*

In the introduction of the book the *Social Meaning of Mental Retardation: Two Life Stories*, scholars Robert Bogdan and Steven J. Taylor assert that “to name something is, in a sense, to create it.”[^11] Although Bogdon and Taylor’s assertion is made in reference to the “misnomer” mental retardation, it also applies to the post-racial narrative.[^12] Most importantly, their assertion explains why post-racialism should be considered a narrative, a narrative that promotes a specific type of racial discourse. By discourse I mean, “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak,” which is a Foucauldian definition.[^13] *The New York Times* first printed the phrase post-racial in reference to Obama on December 24, 2006, and, since then, it has been

[^12]: Ibid., 7.
constantly reified by news broadcasters who speak it and journalists who write it.¹⁴ Post-racialism is a story, a story authored by elites and laymen and circulated by the mainstream news media, America’s most powerful storytellers, who, as sociologist Philip Schlesinger explained, “exercise power over the interpretation of reality.”¹⁵ Without the story behind the post-racial narrative, the concept would be meaningless. Consequently, post-racialism is an enigma. In the Social Meaning of Retardation, Bogdan and Taylor also assert that mental retardation only exists in the minds of those who use it and, consequently, is not real.¹⁶ “Like all clichés, it tells more about the people who use the term than it does about the ‘condition’ it is thought to point to,” Bogdon and Taylor wrote. That assertion, too, applies to the post-racial narrative. Post-racialism does not exist in American society, but rather in the minds of those who wish to see America adhere to its liberal ideals.¹⁷

The post-racial narrative is not a new concept. Before the post-racial narrative existed there was post-Civil Rights Era racial ideology, an ideology that promoted the same type of racial discourse. The post-racial narrative and the racial discourse of the post-Civil Rights Era share similarities and differences. As sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-
Silva explains in his book *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, the post-Civil Rights Era, literally the 40-year period after the Civil Rights Movement, is traditionally considered a period when race gradually declined in significance and African Americans had “all they needed to get by,” legislation passed during the Civil Rights Movement. Bonilla-Silva points to esteemed sociologist William Julius Wilson’s canonical 1980 book *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*, as an example of the type of racial ideology that developed during the post-Civil Rights Era. In the *Declining Significance of Race*, Wilson argues that traditional racial barriers “crumbled under the political, social, and economic changes of the civil rights era” and that “class has become more important than race in determining black life chances in the modern industrial period.” For Wilson, racism in the post-Civil Rights Era was viewed as “playing itself out.” Specifically, Wilson asserts that Civil Rights policies like Affirmative Action only helped middle-class Blacks achieve mobility and were blind to the needs of poor Blacks. However, he does not believe the dismal post-Civil Rights Era condition of poor Blacks is directly related to race. “Specifically, whereas the previous barriers were usually designed to control and restrict the entire Black population, the new barriers create hardships specifically for the Black underclass, whereas the old barriers were based explicitly on racial motivations derived from intergroup contact, the new barriers have racial significance only in their consequences,

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20 Bonilla-Silva, 30.
21 Ibid., 6.
Bonilla-Silva also points to neoconservative Dinesh D’Souza book *The End of Race* as an example of the type of racial ideology that developed during the post-Civil Rights Era. D’Souza’s argument, unlike Wilson’s, is racially prejudiced. “Today black culture has become an obstacle, because it prevents blacks from taking advantage of rights and opportunities that have multiplied in a new social environment,” D’Souza wrote in *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multicultural Society.* D’Souza states that Blacks have developed an “oppositional culture” that rejects the “white man’s worldview.” Bonilla-Silva vehemently disagrees with Wilson and D’Souza.

Bonilla-Silva attacks Wilson’s claim, and similar claims made by others like D’Souza, that blame the “culture” of poor African Americans for stunting the mobility of the entire African-American community, and argues that racism did not decline in the post-Civil Rights Era, but merely changed forms. According to Bonilla-Silva, before the post-Civil Rights Era, racism “was achieved through overt and usually explicitly racial practices,” and during the post-Civil Rights Era, racism was achieved through “institutional, subtle, and apparently nonracial means.” Bonilla-Silva’s analysis of post-Civil Rights Era racism is similar to a claim political scientist Tali Mendelberg makes in her book *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Racial Equality.* In that book, Mendelberg states that a “norm of racial equality” was established during the Civil Rights Movement, an informal social standard that deemed explicitly

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22 Wilson, 1-2.
24 Ibid.
25 Bonilla-Silva, 12.
racist rhetoric and actions socially unacceptable and somewhat primitive. According to Mendelberg, explicitly racist rhetoric and actions are socially unacceptable in the post-Civil Rights Era because America became committed to racial egalitarianism, on the surface at least, during the previous era. “Race is perhaps the central social cleavage in American political life. Yet American society has committed itself to making race irrelevant. The tension between the existence of racial conflict and the inability to express it produces indirect forms of communication.” Bonilla-Silva calls these indirect forms of communication during the post-Civil Rights Era color-blind racism, which, for him, is the prevailing post-Civil Rights Era racial ideology.

According to Bonilla-Silva, the trickiness of color-blind racism is that it endorses themes of the Civil Rights Movement – i.e. “equal opportunity for all”, “eradication of racist statements as legitimate in public discourse”, and “censorship of racist views on the general biological-moral character of blacks”– in a way that simultaneously maintains White privilege. Consequently, Whites make certain “semantic moves” to mask their racist sentiments in order to adhere to these themes while maintaining the status quo. Bonilla-Silva identifies four color-blind storylines that were common in the post-Civil Rights Era. He identifies these storylines by personally interviewing Whites about race relations: 1) “The past [i.e. Slavery, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement] is the past.”

27 Ibid. 7.
28 Bonilla-Silva, 66.
29 Ibid., 69.
30 Ibid., 70.
31 Ibid.
2) “I didn’t own slaves.” 32 3) “My friend or family member didn’t get a job or promotion because a Black person got it.” 33 4) “If Jews, Irish, and Asians made it, how come blacks have not?” 34 Storyline number four is similar to the conservative Horatio Algers no “excuses” argument previously discussed at the beginning of the Introduction. Although Bonilla-Silva does not include a fifth color-blind storyline, in my opinion, another exists: 5) “If Black celebrities like Oprah Winfrey can make it, other Black people can too.” Like the post-racial narrative, these five racist color-blind storylines argue that Black have no “excuses.” 35 However, the post-racial narrative adds a sixth storyline to the list of color-blind tales and, consequently, extends post-Civil Rights Era racial discourse: 6) “If an African-American can be elected president of the United States, then any racial barriers can be overcome.” That storyline, for post-racial proponents, extends and in some ways unofficially legitimizes the previous five color-blind storylines told during the post-Civil Rights Era. Obama does not merely have wealth or celebrity status like Oprah, he has national and international power. Obama, for post-racial proponents, is proof that the arguments made during the post-Civil Rights Era were legitimate. After every major historical Black accomplishment – Emancipation Proclamation, Reconstruction, Civil Rights Movement – end-of-racism arguments, mostly made by Whites, have been espoused. For example, color-blind racism emerged after the Civil Rights Movement, an historic Black accomplishment, and post-racialism, its end-of-race successor, emerged

32 Bonilla-Silva, 70.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
after the election of Obama, another historic Black accomplishment. Consequently, although the post-racial narrative extends post-Civil Rights Era racial discourse it is also, in essence, a sort of redo, meaning that post-racial proponents figuratively acknowledge that previous claims about the declining significance of race were possibly premature but that the election of Obama marks the beginning of a new, post-racial, era. Ultimately, his success is, for now, the pinnacle argument for such a claim. Of these post-racial proponent, some adhere to an amplified definition of the post-racial narrative and believe that Obama marks the beginning of a post-racial American society, while others adhere to a tempered definition of the post-racial narrative and believe that the election of Obama marks the beginning of post-racial politics. 36 Although post-racialism and color-blind racism are very similar, the racial ideologies differ in one significant way. The post-racial narrative differs from color-blind racism in that it forces African Americans to be “stage Negroes.” 37 Bonilla-Silva argues that during slavery and Jim Crow, Blacks were forced to be “stage Negroes,” or, in other words, hide their true feelings about race relations during public and private interactions with Whites. According to Bonilla-Silva, color-blind racism reversed the tide and forced Whites to be “stage Whites.” 38 Post-racialism, I argue, has re-reversed the tide and forces Blacks to be “stage Negroes” again. How can African Americans legitimately speak of racial barriers in the public sphere when a nation of White Americans witnessed a Black man break the highest racial glass ceiling, the presidency, and a significant portion of them believe that the historic feat is indicative

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37 Bonilla-Silva, 179.
38 Ibid.
of the life chances that exist for all Blacks? The answer is that some Blacks adopted a “strategic pose” during the 2008 presidential election and adhered to the public, post-racial transcript, and simultaneously developed a “hidden transcript” that critiqued the post-racial narrative in cyberspace. Specifically, text messages and emails that were intended for an African-American audience were circulated throughout a cyberspace “location” I call the digital African-American underground. The digital African-American underground is an aspect of the virtual African-American counterpublic that exists in cyberspace. A counterpublic is not a literal or figurative space where subaltern groups merely come together as a community, but is, instead, a space where subaltern groups come together and perform community, meaning that these groups use these spaces to talk/listen, organize/resist, and interpret/reframe.

References to the post-racial narrative are endless. A quick Lexis Nexis search of the The New York Times from December 24, 2006, the first time the phrase was used in the newspaper in reference to Obama, to December 31, 2009 using the terms “‘post-racial’ or ‘postracial’” generates 90 results. All the articles use the term to refer to the social category of race, however, some are used in reference to Obama and others are used in reference to other people and issues but allude to Obama. Lay people and political elites alike argue that the narrative exists, does not exist, or that it is a manifestation of a new form of racism. In response to a New York Times article published on August 19, 2009 about a Queens, New York supermarket chain being sued for sexual discrimination for allegedly hiring only women to operate its cash registers, a disgruntled

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40 Note: Interestingly, the terms “post-racial” and/or “postracial” were used to refer to racial classification in four articles published in 1971 (One), 2000 (Two), and 2002 (One).
reader who identified himself as “A” on a message board underneath the story wrote the following:

Come on now, we don’t need those ancient [anti-discrimination] laws in this post racial era. The election of [the] very first African American president has proved that those ancient laws are unnecessary and ought to be repealed. Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. is correct when he said “The Way to Stop Discrimination on the Basis of Race Is to Stop Discriminating on the Basis of Race.”41

Meanwhile, while post-racial proponents like “A” are using Obama’s success to repeal hard fought anti-discrimination laws that literally have blood, sweat, and tears behind their enactment, minority talking heads, mostly, and a few White realists are trying to counter the narrative. A few weeks earlier, in a New York Times column about Obama’s “Beer Summit” with esteemed Harvard University African-American Studies Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Sergeant James Crowley, the White police officer who arrested Gates for trying to get into his own upscale Cambridge home, newspaper columnist Frank Rich, who is White, blasted the post-racial narrative.42 “The one lesson that everyone took away from the latest ‘national conversation about race’ is the same one we’ve taken away from every other ‘national conversation’ in the past couple of years,” he wrote. “America has not transcended race. America is not postracial. So we can all say that again.”43 Rich is right, America is not post-racial. However, his assertion that “everyone” learned that lesson from the “Beer Summit” is false. Post-racial proponents, some of whom believed that Gates overreacted, did not. In an essay titled

43 Ibid.
“Barack Obama and the ‘End’ of Racism” published on February 13, 2008 in the “radical” online newsletter the Dissident Voice, Latino activist Juan Santos criticized the post-racial narrative, and Obama’s seeming adherence to the narrative by running a post-racial campaign.  

“Obama’s shot at the presidency doesn’t signal the end of racism in the U.S. It is made possible, rather, by the new form racism itself has taken,” Santos wrote, “a form that offers a prison cell to poor people of color, and, for the middle class, on the other hand, an Apartheid-style pass card stamped ‘SILENCED.’” Santos is right, the post-racial narrative does silence minorities, African Americans specifically, now their tales of racialized victimhood are becoming less legitimate in the public arena and must be relegated to counterpublic space. The public arena forces them to adopt a “strategic pose.”

Public Transcript, Hidden Transcript

According to scholar James C. Scott, the author of Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts, the public transcript is the “strategic pose” adopted by the dominant and subdominant during open and/or public interactions with each other. For the dominant, the “strategic pose” usually involves displaying power in the presence of the subdominant out of fear that showing weakness will jeopardize their “claims to legitimacy.” And for the sub-dominant, the “strategic pose” usually involves displaying deference in the presence of the dominant out of fear that failing to do so will jeopardize

45 Ibid.
46 Scott, 10-11.
their livelihoods. 47 As Paulo Freire explains in the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, the oppressors, like the oppressor, are equally invested in the system of domination that oppresses them. 48 The oppressed are invested in the system of domination that oppresses them because they fear that challenging the system of oppression will make their dismal conditions worse. 49

Contrarily, the hidden transcript is the “speeches, gestures, and practices” of the dominant and sub-dominant that “inflect, contradict, or confirm what appears in the public transcript.” 50 The hidden transcript for the dominant and subdominant is developed “offstage” among their like dominant or subdominant peers respectively. 51 For the dominant, Scott suggests that the hidden transcript usually involves corrupt actions that undermine their public claims of legality and morality behind the back of the sub-dominant, and for the sub-dominant the hidden transcript usually involves “a critique of power behind the back of the dominant.” 52 The current text will focus on the public transcript of African Americans, the sub-dominant, in the face of Whites, the dominant. The current text will also focus on the hidden transcript of African Americans, specifically a hidden transcript that was developed in the digital African-American underground during the 2008 presidential election and was intended for an African-American audience. The hidden transcript developed in the digital African-American underground contradicted the public post-racial transcript. It is important to note that the

47 Scott, 1.
49 Ibid.
50 Scott, 4-5.
51 Ibid., 10.
52 Ibid., xii and 11.
public and hidden transcript of African Americans during the 2008 election was shaped by the post-racial narrative and White fear of Black overthrow.

**News Media**

The mainstream American news media is a corporate-owned “system of power.” The mainstream American news media has the power to set agendas, persuade the public that certain issues are more important than others, frame, contextualize issues in a way where certain aspects are emphasized and others are ignored, and prime, contextualize an issue in a way that forces the public to access pre-existing schemas related to the issue being covered and use those schemas to evaluate the issue being covered or an unrelated issue or person of interest. The term news media should be understood in that context, and explains why I conduct a content analysis of *The New York Times* to construct a definition of the term post-racial. Because of its extensive readership among power brokers and journalists, *The New York Times*, considered America’s national newspaper of record, has the power to set the agendas of the public, the public’s political agenda especially, and the agendas of other dominant and sub-dominant newspapers and broadcast stations. “*The [New York] Times* sets agendas, generating and certifying issues in government, business, intellectual, professional, and academic circles throughout the country,” communications scholar Todd Gitlin wrote in his book *The

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53 Gitlin, 251.
55 Ibid.
56 Gitlin, 299.
Gitlin is right, *The New York Times* is powerful indeed.

The agendas that the news media set, frame, and use to prime pre-existing schemas usually benefit the “dominant economic class,” which, in the American case, is the White middle class and above. Ostensibly, journalists are charged with serving the public interest by collecting information, extracting the information that is important, and repackaging that information in an objective form that the public will accept as “The News.” However, journalists are susceptible to external pressure from publishers, news executives, advertisers, politicians, interest groups, and themselves, which often leads them to present a “preferred,” read hegemonic, picture of the world. As communications scholar Robert M. Entman concluded after his content analysis of broadcast reports about four white girls who were razor cut by two Black girls in Chicago, “The Whites’ perspective on the event dominated the story.” The same applies to post-racialism. When it comes to presenting a “preferred” picture of the world, the national news media does not act alone. As Gitlin explains, the “dominant economic class” also indirectly “disseminates ideology” through school systems, the advertising industry, entertainment industry, art industry, government bureaucracies, and

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57 Gitlin, 299.
58 Ibid., 254.
59 Ibid., 250.
60 Ibid., 250 and 257.
62 Gitlin, 254 and 257.
corporations. However, the national news media’s role in disseminating the post-racial narrative will be the primary focus of the current text.

New Media

The term New Media refers to blogs, social networking sites, personal broadcast sites, and electronic communication systems like email, instant messaging services, and text messaging. New Media challenges the dominance of Old Media – i.e. Newspapers, Broadcast Stations, Radio Stations– because it allows the public to bypass traditional gatekeepers like journalists, news executives, and publishers.

American Racism, Racist

American racism is a “system of domination” based on race. In the American system, “Whiteness” is privileged and “Blackness” is not. Although “Blackness” is not the only form of racial Otherness that is disadvantaged by American racism, I will only speak of “Whiteness” and “Blackness” instead of “Whiteness”, “Blackness,” “Brownness,” “Redness,” and “Yellowness” because my research is primarily focused on America’s racial binary, the race relations between Whites and Blacks. (I do focus on an international conception of Blackness in Chapter 3.) In the article “White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness,” sociologist Ruth Frankenberg defined “Whiteness” as the “production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage.”

“Blackness” can be understood as the opposite of “Whiteness.” Blacks are subordinate,

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63 Gitlin., 254 and 257.
65 Ibid., 386.
Blacks are marginal, Blacks are structurally disadvantaged. As Frankenberg explains, “any system of differentiation shapes those on whom it bestows privilege as well as those it oppresses.” Consequently, “Whiteness” shapes the life-chances of African Americans. Frankenberg uses “Whiteness” instead of racism because “it may be more difficult for white people to say that ‘Whiteness has nothing to do with me.’” Bonilla-Silva describes racism similarly. According to Bonilla-Silva, racism is not merely an “ideological or attitudinal phenomenon” but also a “social system,” a “network of social relations at social, political, economic, and ideological levels that shapes the life chances of various races.” For Bonilla-Silva, racist ideologies and attitudes “support and structure [the] racialized social system.” Consequently, although the racial caste system in America was created and is largely controlled by Whites, both Whites and Blacks fuel it, meaning that Whites and Blacks can be consciously or subconsciously racist. As Frankenberg explains in the article, although she and other White feminists never intended to ‘be racist,’ their “well-meaning” intentions, because of their privileged location in the system of domination, “had little affect on outcomes.” “I…was at best failing to challenge racism and, at worst, aiding and abetting it,” Frankenberg wrote.

Black or African-American Community

Since the United States is stratified by race, there are several different racialized communities of color that are a part of the larger American community. The larger

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66 Frankenberg, 379.
67 Ibid., 383.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 380-381.
71 Ibid., 380.
American community is also racialized, racialized White, meaning that it, unless stated explicitly, has a White face and is characterized by all of the positive attributes that are associated with Whiteness, which was explained in the previous section. As scholar George Lipsitz cleverly deduces from the use of the term “Negro problem,” an old euphemism for race relations in the United States, “Americans,” unless otherwise specified, means “White.” 72 That is because White is normative. Racialized communities of color are thought to deviate from the larger White American community. The African-American community is one of the several racialized communities of color in the United States, meaning that it has a Black face and is characterized by all of the negative attributes that are associated with Blackness, which was explained in the previous section. Ultimately, the African-American community is a marked social location of subordinance, marginality, and disadvantage for people African descent. The African-American community, like other racialized communities in the United States, was created by external and internal actors: External actors, White people specifically, contributed to the creation of the African-American community, and internal actors, African-American people themselves, contributed to the creation of the African-American community. “Negroid” or “Black” was a haphazard category developed by early European conquerors (i.e. the Dutch, Portuguese, and British) that was used to categorize Africans of various ethnicities in the New World. “Black” was later reified by race-based institutions like chattel slavery, de jure segregation, also known as Jim Crow, and de facto segregation. Consequently, modern-day people racialized as Black in the United States who are the

product of these race-based American institutions will, in the current text, constitute the Black or African-American community, and are distinguished from African and Diasporic African immigrants and naturalized citizens in America who are not the product of these race-based American institutions. My reasoning will be further explained shortly.

As a result of the haphazard label “Black,” and the race-based institutions that reified it, African Americans like other Diasporic Africans experienced a significant amount of cultural erasure. For example, African Americans like other Diasporic Africans, cannot identify their African ethnicity like Africans in America. And, it can be argued, that African Americans experienced a greater amount of erasure than Afro-Caribbeans and Afro-Latinos. Even today, the Caribbean and Latin America are places were a high levels of African retentions remain, mainly because the racial binary in these regions was not as stringent – the United States, for example, had a “One Drop Rule”– and the amount of slaves transported to these regions was greater than the amount transported to the United States – of the 12 million slaves shipped to the Western Hemisphere, North America received 6 percent and the Caribbean and Latin America received 68 percent.73 (The Deep South, which had greater number of African slaves imported than other parts of the South, also has a high levels of African retentions – i.e. South Carolina, Louisiana.) Basically, African Americans have a political, socio-cultural, and historical experience that is different from Black people from Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Although it should be noted that there are various sub-

cultures in the African-American community –Gullah Geechi culture on the islands of South Carolina for example– each sub-culture is the product of the same colonial American oppression. Consequently, my definition of the Black or African-American community excludes Black immigrants and naturalized citizens from Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean because these groups, although racially similar to African-Americans, are culturally different. That is, Blacks from the United States, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean are, to a large degree, different racially homogenous ethnic groups. I recognize the same argument is harder to make for first, second, and third generation Black Africans, Afro-Latinos, and Afro-Caribbeans who slowly become detached from their home countries and decide to embrace or appropriate the Black or African-American experience. Consequently, the African-American community should not be thought of as “A Thing Within Itself,” or fixed quantity, but an “ever-evolving” community that is transitory.74 Black immigrants from Africa, Latin American and the Caribbean, and their descendents, are frequently willing themselves into the African-American community.

My definition of African-American community is more nuanced than the federal definition. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, a Black person or African American is any United States-born or naturalized citizen that has “origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as ‘Black, African American, or Negro,’ or provide written entries such as African American, Afro American, Kenyan,

Nigerian, or Haitian.”75 (The U.S. Census counts multiracial people with Black ancestry as part of the total Black population.)76 Consequently, African immigrants from Black African countries like Nigeria, Kenya and Ghana, and Diasporic Africans from the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean are, despite wide ranging political, socio-cultural, and historical experiences, legally considered members of the Black or African-American community. I do not to exclude Black people from Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean who are immigrants or become naturalized citizens of the United States because I think African Americans whose roots are largely in the United States are superior. Rather, I exclude them to acknowledge that sometimes African Americans who share the racialized historical experience in the United States exclude these Black people (African, Afro-Latino, Afro-Caribbean) from the African-American community I defined, and sometimes these Black people (African, Afro-Latino, Afro-Caribbean) exclude themselves from the African-American community I defined because of cultural differences. My nuanced definition will not become important until Chapter 3 when I discuss the deep cultural divisions between African Americans and Africans, specifically Africans from Ghana, and how these cultural divisions caused both groups to cling to different parts of Obama’s identity during the 2008 presidential election.

As previously stated, Whites are not solely responsible for the development of the African-American community, African-Americans are too. African slaves of various ethnicities who were haphazardly categorized as “Negroid” or “Black” began to embrace

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the socially constructed label in order to create a community. Creolization, interracial and intra-racial miscegenation, and oppression aided and abetted their racial solidarity. Overtime, the newly formed Black or African-American community created several cultural institutions that were integral to their survival: Black music, the Black church, and the Black press. These cultural institutions still exist, and are used by African-Americans to fight against racial oppression. Consequently, the African-American community can also be thought of as a self-made political organizing tool. As political scientist Michael Dawson explains, as a result of African Americans racialized experience, a significant number of African Americans believe their “life chances are linked to the fate of the race.” Dawson credits “informal and formal African-American sociopolitical networks” like the Black Family, the Black Press, and the Black Church for creating African Americans’ sense of a linked fate. “These networks and institutions have been largely responsible for crystallizing the shared historical experiences of African Americans into a sense of collective identity, and they have also played a key role in shaping the development of black political ideologies,” Dawson wrote.”

Dawson also states that “as long as race remains dominant in determining the lives of individual blacks” it is rational for African Americans to “follow group cues,” or based their political decisions on a sense of a linked fate. Dawson calls this rationale the “Black Utility Heuristic.” Dawson’s “Black Utility Heuristic” explains why most African-American political ideologies (Radical Egalitarianism, Disillusioned Liberalism,

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78 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
Black Marxism, Black Feminism, Black Nationalism), with the exception of Black Conservatism, are left of center ideologies that recognize the importance of race and result in the vast majority of African Americans voters supporting the Democratic Party, the party that has the most progressive racial agenda. For example, 98 percent of the African Americans who voted in the 2008 presidential election voted for Barack Obama, the Democratic candidate. In general, 80-90 percent of African Americans who have voted in presidential elections since 1964 have voted Democrat. These statistic suggest, as Dawson contends, that African Americans follow racial group cues when making important political decisions. Therefore, although my use of the term African-American community in the current text might seem essentialist, my essentialism is based on the political rationale of the African-American community and the intellectual rationale of Dawson and recognizes that, politically speaking, the African-American community is not monolithic but is largely in agreement that race is a problem in the United States.

According to a Pew Research Center poll of 2,884 Whites, and 812 Blacks conducted a year after Obama was elected, in response to the question “Has the country done enough to give Blacks equal rights with Whites?” 54 percent of White Americans polled agreed that the “country had made the necessary changes” and 36 percent of White Americans polled agreed that “more changes are needed.” Conversely, 13 percent of Black Americans polled agreed that the “country had made the necessary changes,” and 81

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81 Dawson, Black Visions, 17-21.
percent of Black Americans polled believe that “more changes are needed.” The statistics suggests that a majority of the Whites polled see America as post-racial, and the majority of Black Americans do not. African Americans share a political will.

Now that my operational definitions have been established, I will explain my research methodology and give an overview of each chapter.

Methodology

Since the current text is a contribution to the multidisciplinary field of African-American studies, a multidisciplinary approach is necessary. The current text is an exploratory study based on an array of qualitative methodologies, primarily, and a few quantitative methodologies, secondarily. The primary qualitative methodology used is content analysis. Since several forms of the term post-racial were circulated by the mainstream news media in reference to Obama, a content analysis of newspaper articles from The New York Times will be used to construct their definitions. Specifically, the definitions of the various forms of the term post-racial are constructed from 25 newspaper articles that were published between December 24, 2006, which was the first time The New York Times used the term post-racial in reference to then Senator Obama (D-Illinois), and November 5, 2008, which was the day after the presidential election. In order to accurately depict the media’s characterization of the post-racial narrative and measure the public’s response, an analysis of the mainstream American news media’s use of the term in newspaper articles and their readers’ use of the term on message boards and in letters to the editor is both realistic and necessary. Content analysis is also

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necessary because few scholarly publications exist about the post-racial narrative. In fact, right after Obama was elected the scholarly discussion of the post-racial narrative mostly occurred in the public sphere: in newspaper articles, on television programs, and on the public lecture circuit. However, now the scholarly discussion of post-racialism in the private sphere has rapidly increased. There are even a few books that have been published or are forthcoming about the post-racial narrative. In December 2009, for example, a collection of essays titled *Whose Black Politics? Cases in Post-Racial Black Leadership* was released. In the book, which was edited by political scientist Andra Gillespie, various scholars debate about the meaning and significance of the media circulated narrative. I will also conduct a content analysis of text messages and emails that were intended for an African-American audience and exchanged during the 2008 presidential election via the digital African-American underground. These text messages and emails, with the exception of one, were randomly sent to me from my family, friends, and associates. I requested that an email I call the “etiquette chain letter” be sent to me after hearing a biracial colleague of mine laughing about it. The etiquette chain letter was randomly sent to her. She is African-American and Southeast Asian. In addition, historical analysis will also be used. Historical analysis is necessary to show that popular culture, often overlooked in the academy, does not exist in isolation, and often has historical links.84 As Stuart Hall explains in his canonical essay “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular,’” the study of popular culture “yields most when it is seen in relation to a more general, a wider history.”85 As previously mentioned, a few

85 Ibid., 230.
quantitative methodologies will be used. Specifically, I will use election data which includes exit poll results, surveys conducted before the election measuring racial tolerance, and statistics measuring structural racial inequality to support a few of my arguments. The following is an overview of each chapter.

Chapter Overview
Chapter 1

Chapter 1 is about the use of the term post-racial in reference to Obama. The chapter begins by defining the phrase “post-racial” in reference to society and politics and in reference to the archetypal 21-century African-American politician and political campaign. Then, the White Vote for Obama is problematized. The White Vote is the primary piece of evidence that post-racial proponents use to argue that society, read White people, have transcended race. I argue, however, that the twenty-first century bigot exists on a continuum and that there were, indeed, “racists for Obama” as one Politico article asserted.86 I pose three different reasons why racist White voters were able to vote for Obama. First, I suggest that some racist White voters allowed their concerns about the economy to trump Obama’s race. I relate this reality to legal scholar Derrick Bell’s interest convergence theory. Second, I suggest that some racist White voters can tolerate Blacks in public spaces like politics but not private spaces like their family tree. Third, I suggest that some racist White voters clung to Obama’s literal and figurative Whiteness. Whites were able to do this, I argue, because of a psychological process known as subtyping, which occurs when a person or group of people observe another person who belongs to a category but violates the stereotypes of that category and allow that person

to “evade general notions about that category.”87 Later, I place the fact that a significant number of White people were able to vote for Obama despite harboring racial hatred in the context of a larger historical narrative. Since the 1933 Olympic Games, which starred African-American track sensation Jesse Owens, Whites have been able to rally around Black celebrities that symbolically represent the American liberal ethos even in the midst of White Supremacy culture.88 I suggest that Obama is the new Owens. Finally, even if the White Vote was evidence of a post-racial society, which I argue it is not, the structural inequality in the United States counters the hegemonic narrative. The magic of Obama is not that his success is evidence of a post-racial society, but rather that he won the election in the midst of deeply imbedded racial animus and structural inequality. I conclude the chapter by interrogating the mainstream American news media’s motivation for circulating the narrative. I argue that the mainstream American news media was motivated by internal factors such as America’s liberal ethos, and external factors such as America’s world standing.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 explores the consequences of post-racialism, specifically how the narrative further constricts the African-American community’s ability to talk about race in the public sphere. To explore that phenomenon, I focus on text messages and emails about Obama that were circulated throughout the digital African-American underground, a cyberspace slave cabin of sorts where some African Americans presumably meet

87 Corrine McConnaughy and Ismail White, “Identity Politics Complicated: Race, Gender, and Election 2008” (Working Paper assigned in Political Science 712: Gender and American Politics at The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, October 13, 2009), 8-9.
electronically to informally position themselves in regard to the White-dominated body politic. I argue that the digital African-American underground possibly became an essential site of resistance during the 2008 presidential election because traditional African-American counterpublics like the Barbershop, Black Church, and music industry were, as a result of Obama’s race, under the microscope of the predominately White, mainstream American news media. A more covert communication strategy was possibly needed to fend off White agitators, I argue. I also argue that the digital African-American underground was used to create a hidden transcript that countered the public post-racial narrative. Finally, I argue that digital African-American underground discourse that encouraged African Americans to adopt a “strategic pose” of humbleness was a contemporary manifestation of a historical trend that occurs when African Americans reach racial milestones.  


Chapter 3

Chapter 3 is about identity politics in relation to Obama. The focus of that chapter is on the different perceptions that Africans, specifically Ghanaians, and African Americans have of Obama. I argue that while identity politics in regards to Obama were operating for both groups, Ghanaians largely grasped onto Obama’s “Africaness,” and African Americans largely grasped onto his “Blackness,” two separate identities that, for the majority of members in both groups, are not interchangeable. My argument is

89 Scott, xii.
supported by a literature review of qualitative and quantitative studies that conclude that, although Africans and African Americans share phenotypical characteristics and a legacy of oppression, racial solidarity between both groups is tenuous because of cultural barriers. I conclude by interrogating how the tenuous relationship between Ghanaians and African Americans provides a different perspective of the post-racial narrative, a post-racial narrative related to Black identity. Ghana is used as a case study because Obama visited the West African country in July 2009, his first visit to sub-Saharan Africa as president, and the visit was widely covered by the national and international news media. In addition, I studied abroad in Ghana a month before Obama’s visit, and am more familiar with Ghanaians’ perceptions of Obama than the perceptions of other sub-Saharan Africans. Finally, Ghana is significant because of its history. Ghana’s involvement in the slave trade, colonial resistance, and Pan-Africanism has historically made the country attractive to African-American political leaders, sojourners, and tourists.

Conclusion

The current text concludes by discussing the nature of news media-circulated narratives. I argue that media circulated narratives like post-racialism, which, at best, is reductionist, and, at worst, serves political ends, change the way those who author the narratives orient themselves to the objects of the narratives, and change how the objects of the narratives orient themselves to the authors and each other. And when narratives change the behavior of the authors and the objects that is hegemony.

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“Changes”

…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
Take the evil out the people they'll be acting right
'cause both black and white is smokin' crack tonight
and only time we chill is when we kill each other
it takes skill to be real, time to heal each other
And although it seems heaven sent
We ain't ready, to see a black president…¹

*Tupac Shakur, Rap Artist*

CHAPTER 1: “We Ain’t Ready to See a Black President:”
Barack Obama and Post-Racialism in American Society

Introduction

The possibility of a Black American president was hilariously improbable, according to Black comedians at least. After Jesse Jackson announced his first bid for the presidency in 1983, Eddie Murphy joked in his standup routine *Delirious* that there was actually a way that Jackson could win the election. “You know he got a chance he could win. White dudes like to do [expletive] like that, vote for the wrong dude as a goof,” Murphy said. The crowd laughed. “They get drunk and [expletive], and go in there and say, ‘Let’s vote for Jesse Jackson,’” Murphy continued while pretending to pull a lever. “And then the next day they’d be like this, ‘He [expletive] won!’” The crowd roared.¹

Before General Colin Powell announced, contrary to expectation, that he would not campaign for the presidency in 1996, Chris Rock predicted during his standup routine *Bring on the Pain* that the Black republican would lose. “You know how I can tell Colin Powell can’t be president? Whenever Colin Powell is on the news White people give him the same compliments, *always* the same compliments. ‘He speaks so well.’ ‘He’s so well-spoken.’” Rock said. The crowd laughed. “What do you mean he speaks well? Did he

have a stroke the other day? He’s a [expletive] educated man. How the [expletive] do you expect him to sound you dirty [expletive]?” Rock roared.¹ The underside of Murphy and Rock’s humor was the dark reality of racism in the United States: A sober White man would not vote for a Black presidential candidate, Murphy thought. General Powell cannot transcend racist Black stereotypes to win the presidential election, Rock concluded. Now, Murphy and Rock’s comedic jabs about the unlikelihood of a Black American president seem like ancient artifacts from a 20th century time capsule.

On November 4, 2008, then Senator Barack Obama (D-Illinois) became the first African American to be elected president of the United States. The historic feat shattered what has unofficially been characterized as the highest racial glass ceiling in America, the presidency, a ceiling that Americans thought was impossible to crack for several reasons.

*The System only allows the Black politician to obtain a certain amount of power.*² *The Black politician lacks the drive and political clout to obtain the highest office.*³ *White voters are too racist to vote for the Black politician.*⁴

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The Black politician would be too bitterly, self-interested to attract White voters. Thus, the reality of Obama’s groundbreaking success complicates perceptions of racial inequality in America: Does the reality of an African-American president mark the end of the “American dilemma?” Yes, according to some politicians, talking heads, and laymen. Sadly, the mainstream American news media agrees. According to the mainstream news media, Obama’s success is evidence of a “post-racial” society, a society in which racism, although previously present, is no longer a stifling barrier for Blacks. “The media can stare at their own monitors in innocent bewilderment: ‘Where? I don’t see any racism. Do you?,’” wrote English scholar Jared Gardner in a newsletter focused on race and ethnicity. A tempered version of the post-racial narrative also exists, that version asserts that Obama’s success is evidence of post-racial politics, a political climate in which racism, although previously present, is no longer a stifling barrier for African-American politicians seeking high-level political offices. The tempered version of the post-racial narrative will be discussed later in the chapter. The post-racial narrative has been espoused by journalists, pundits, and activists ever since Obama announced his bid for the presidency. After Obama won the presidential election, however, the argument, for the news media, was solidified. “Obama: Racial barrier falls as voters embrace call


Unfortunately, the post-racial narrative hinges on the success of one African-American, Obama, and does not consider numerous structural inequalities that exist in the African-American community such as wealth, educational attainment, and mass incarceration. Consequently, the question becomes, to what extent is Obama’s success evidence of a “post-racial” society? To fully answer that question, a content analysis of 25 newspaper articles from *The New York Times* was conducted. The primary purpose of conducting a content analysis of America’s national newspaper of record was to construct an accurate definition of the media circulated term post-racial.⁹ In addition election data, which includes exit poll results, a survey conducted before the election measuring racial tolerance, and statistics measuring structural racial inequality will be used to support my arguments. Finally, qualitative data from informal interviews will be used to support the quantitative data. Given that racism is embedded in the structures of American society, Sen. Barack Obama’s groundbreaking success, although evidence of increased racial tolerance, is not evidence of a post-racial society.

*The Definition of Post-Racial*

The term post-racial, also spelled postracial, is frequently used by the mainstream American news media. The mainstream news media use the term to describe American society and politics. The media also use the term to describe new African-American

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⁹Note: The articles that were used to construct the definition were published between December 24, 2007, which was the first time *The New York Times* used the term post-racial in reference to Senator Barack Obama, and November 5, 2008, which was the day after the presidential election.; Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 299.
politicians and their deracialized political campaigns. On December 24, 2006, *New York Times* journalist Jeff Zeleny speculated whether Obama was, “the post-partisan, post-racial, post-baby boom embodiment of a new brand of politics.”\(^{10}\) That was the first time the newspaper used the term in reference to Obama. According to *The New York Times*, a post-racial African-American candidate avoids framing his or her campaign around the issue of race. Post-racial candidates usually attempt to avoid race completely or, at the very least, reference the issue indirectly. For example, on the campaign trail Obama made race-neutral references to slavery, Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement in traditional speeches. He spoke of slaves and abolitionists “who blazed the trail toward freedom,” and “a [emphasis added] King who took us to the mountaintop and pointed the way to the promise land.”\(^{11}\) Obama’s race-neutral references to racially contentious moments in American history did not indict Whites as perpetrators or paint Blacks as victims. (The exception to the rule, of course, was Obama’s speech on race.)\(^ {12}\) Essentially, race becomes a relic of the past that is always overcome for post-racial candidates like Obama. The purpose of avoiding the race issue is to attract White voters. White voters are usually repulsed by Black politicians with a “Black Agenda,” but are needed to win gubernatorial, senatorial and presidential elections, high-level political positions that the

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post-racial Black politician craves. Black voters are needed too. So, post-racial African-American candidates must present themselves as Black, but digestibly Black. “If black and white voters alike react to Mr. Obama's values, then he will really have taken the nation into post-racial politics,” *The New York Times* guest columnist Juan Williams wrote on November 30, 2007. Notice Williams’ application of the term post-racial to politics, not society. Williams was specifically referring to Obama’s potential to determine whether racism, which has historically been problematic for Black politicians seeking high-level political offices, was still a stifling barrier in American politics. (Post-racial politics should not be confused with post-racial political candidates or deracialized campaigns.) Although Williams’ version of the post-racial narrative is tempered, it ignores the fact that African Americans, like women, have not reached parity at the local, state, or federal level of politics and it also ignores the fact that race baiting continues to be used to derail political campaigns nationwide. Obama, of course, is the face of the new post-racial school of African-American politicians. The other post-Civil Rights Era politicians that the news media has inducted into this new school of Black Politics are Deval Patrick, the first African-American governor of Massachusetts, Arthur Davis, U.S. Congressman from Alabama, Jesse Jackson Jr., U.S. Congressman from Illinois, Cory Booker, the mayor of Newark, New Jersey, and Mark Nutter, the mayor of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.


Post-Racial Candidate

The media perceives the African-American post-racial politician as the foil of his or her Civil Rights Era forbearer. The post-racial African-American politician is usually an Ivy League educated lawyer, ambitious optimist, and comfortable in White spaces (country clubs, golf courses, galas), unlike the Civil Rights Era politician who is usually a public educated minister, practical pessimist, and uncomfortable in White spaces. The mainstream news media accurately recognizes that the former’s plight is the result of the latter’s struggle. So although the mainstream news media characterizes the post-racial candidate as more ambitious than his or her Civil Rights Era forbearers, it recognizes that the racial glass ceiling was lower for the older politicians. In a The New York Times article titled “Post-Race,” journalist Matt Bai wrote the following:

Black leaders who rose to political power in the years after the civil rights marches...have always defined leadership, in broad terms, as speaking for black Americans. They saw their job, principally, as confronting an inherently racist white establishment, which in terms of sheer career advancement was their only real option anyway. For almost every one of the talented black politicians who came of age in the postwar years...the pinnacle of power, if you did everything right, lay in one of two offices: City Hall or the House of Representatives. That was as far as you could travel in politics with a mostly black constituency.

17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
Members of the Civil Rights Era school of African-American leadership include Jesse Jackson Sr., a Civil Rights activist and former two-time Democratic presidential candidate, James Clyburn, a U.S. Congressman from South Carolina and the House Majority Whip, John Lewis, a U.S. Congressman from Georgia, and Charles Rangel, U.S. Congressman from New York. All four politicians actively participated in the Civil Rights Movement. And all four politicians did not think Obama could win. Society had changed and the older Black leaders failed to notice. Like their political spawns, society too had become post-racial, according to the mainstream news media at least.

*Post-Racial Society*

For the mainstream news media, the success of the post-racial candidate is evidence of a post-racial society, a society in which racism, although previously present, is no longer a stifling barrier for Blacks. Black politicians could not represent majority White districts, cities and states if the majority of Whites were racist the media concludes. Thus Obama’s success is ultimate proof of a post-racial American society because he was able to garner a significant amount of White support nationwide. The post-racial narrative is similar to post-Civil Rights Era color-blind ideology in that race, a socially constructed phenomenon that has historically been problematic for Americans, is

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19 **Note:** In August, Steve Cohen, a White Democratic incumbent who was running for a house seat in Tennessee, beat his chief rival Nikki Turner, a Black woman, after she tried to compare him to a Ku Klux Klan member. Cohen became the first white man elected in more than 30 years to represent Memphis in the Tennessee legislature. “The results are pretty clear,” Cohen said. “(The majority Black district) voted firmly for the postracial politics that has carried a new generation to power.” *The New York Times* published an article titled “Congressman Wins Despite Ad Tying Him to Klan” on August 8, 2008. It was the only article that I analyzed where the term ‘post-racial’ was used to describe Black constituents willingness to vote for a Black candidate. Usually, the post-racial narrative is used by *The New York Times* to refer to White overcoming post-racial barriers.
deemed relatively insignificant.\textsuperscript{20} Even Black liberals fall victim to the post-racial narrative by claiming, for example, that the “sky is the limit” for Black children as a result of Obama’s success like African-American intellectual Cornel West did, or, more significantly, that the struggle for civil rights has ended like the Reverend Ralph Abernathy suggested on the eve of

\textbf{Inauguration Day:}\textsuperscript{21}

This has been a 390-year relay. And the civil rights movement, being the last leg in that relay, to get us to the point, because African-Americans have been struggling and bleeding and dying for 400 years to be able to be considered equal, to participate equally in society. And now today, tomorrow, we elect an African-American as president of the United States is the chapter in the book of life has ended for us. But new chapters must begin.\textsuperscript{22}

Since race is deemed insignificant, remedies for inequality due to race such as Affirmative Action are also deemed insignificant.\textsuperscript{23} “The entire argument for race preferences is that society is institutionally racist and institutionally sexist, [that] you need affirmative action to level the playing field,” Black conservative activist Ward Connerly said after Obama won the Democratic Primary. “The historic success of

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\textsuperscript{23}Note: In Colorado, for example, a state that Obama won by 53 percent, an anti-Affirmative Action initiative was narrowly defeated. In Nebraska, a state that McCain won by 57 percent, an anti-Affirmative Action initiative was passed.; Dan Frosch, “Vote Results are Mixed on a Ban on Preference,” \textit{New York Times}, November 7, 2008, under “U.S.,” \url{http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/08/us/politics/08affirm.html?scp=1&sq=affirmative%20action%20nebraska&st=cse} (accessed October 1, 2008).
\end{flushright}
Senator Obama, as well as Senator Clinton, dismantles that argument.” Connerly believed the Democratic Primary was a post-racial and post-gender moment. White conservative CNN analyst Bill Bennett made a similar statement after Obama won the election. “Well, I’ll tell you one thing it means, as a former secretary of education. You don't take any excuses anymore from anybody who says the deck is stacked, I can't do anything, there's so much built in, this and that,” Bennett said.24 Like color-blindness, the post-racial narrative shifts the blame of racial inequality from Whites to Blacks. Unfortunately, post-racial proponents and their color-blind predecessors fail to recognize that racism has not diminished but metamorphosed and that deep structural inequalities exist.

**The White Vote for Obama**

White voters’ support of Obama is key to the post-racial argument. Ironically, however, Obama lost the White vote overall.25 In fact, he only won the White vote in two sub-categories, white Democrats (85%), unsurprisingly, and White voters between the ages of 18-29 (54%).26 In all other sub-categories of White voters under the categories of “Sex and Race,” “Age and Race,” “Income and Race,” “Education and Race,” and “Race and Party ID,” Obama lost the White vote by 2-18 percentage points.27 (He lost the white Republican vote by 83 percentage points, but that is a sub-category that he could not have

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27 Ibid.
realistically won.) Please see “Table 1.1: The Breakdown of the White Vote for Obama.”

The results are based on CNN exit poll of 17,836 respondents.28

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Obama</th>
<th>McCain</th>
<th>Percentage Points</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
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<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>White Men</td>
<td>41%</td>
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<td>-16 Points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Women</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>-7 Points</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>18-29</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>+10 Points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-44</td>
<td>41%</td>
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<tr>
<td>45-64</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>-14 Points</td>
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<tr>
<td>65 and Older</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>-18 Points</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Income</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Under $50,000</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>51%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Over $50,000</td>
<td>43%</td>
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<td>Independents</td>
<td>47%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>-83 Points</td>
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Table 1.1: The Breakdown of the White Vote for Obama

Obama losing the White vote overall is not an anomaly that can be blamed solely on his race. The truth is that no Democratic presidential candidates since the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Amendment have won a majority of the White vote. Despite losing the White vote overall, however, Obama won a larger percent of the White vote (43.5%) than

any former Democratic presidential candidate since Jimmy Carter (47%). In 1992, Bill Clinton won 39 percent of the White vote, in 1996 Clinton won 43 percent of the White vote. Al Gore and John Kerry received 42 percent (2000) and 41 percent (2004) of the White vote respectively. Obama winning a slightly larger share of the White vote than any former Democratic presidential candidate since Jimmy Carter is not an anomaly that can be attributed to post-racialism. However, for post-racial proponents the difference is key: A Black presidential candidate was able to attract slightly more White voters than previous White Democratic presidential candidates since Carter, including Clinton and Gore who are both from the South. However, the difference could be attributed to Obama’s unique appeal, although Clinton was extremely charismatic, or the influx of newly registered votes, which was approximately 3.5 million according to an Associated Press survey. On the surface, the White vote is not problematic, but a deeper analysis proves otherwise.

Post-racial proponents presuppose that bigoted Whites are a small minority, a minority that could have theoretically cost Obama the election. The problem with that presupposition is that post-racial proponents are operating with an antiquated definition

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of bigot. The 21st century bigot is not the overtly racist bigot of yesteryear, the age-old bigot who possesses a visceral response to Blackness. The 21st century bigot is also not the mythical uneducated rural, white Democrat in western Pennsylvania whose primitive racial fear physically prevents him or her from voting for a Black candidate, or the mythical uneducated, rural White Republican in southern Missouri whose primitive racial fear physically prevents him or her from switching parties because of race. Contrarily, the 21st century bigot shudders at the thought of being deemed a racist, and often publicly performs seemingly color-blind acts such as chatting with a Black person at a cocktail party to avoid the abhorred label; he or she “otherizes softly.” Scholar Tali Mendelberg attributes the contradictory phenomenon to Whites adherence to the “norm of racial equality,” which is the idea that explicitly racist actions and statements are socially unacceptable and somewhat primitive, it is an informal social standard that was established during the Civil Rights Movement. Whites adhere to the “norm of racial equality” out of fear of being labeled racist, not because they do not possess racist notions. Consequently, the 21st century bigot that adheres to the “norm of racial equality” either consciously relegates explicitly racist thoughts and actions to the private sphere and publicly performs color-blindness or relegates explicitly racist notions and actions to the subconscious and is completely unaware of his or her racial bias.

33 Note: Even president-elect Barack Obama was optimistic about the America’s racial climate. He assumed that Whites who wouldn’t vote for him because of race would also not agree with his politics and therefore he would not lose votes solely due to race.
36 Ibid, 8.
If post-racial proponents were operating with a 21st century definition of bigot then “The White Vote,” although it is an illegitimate measure of racial inequality, might be analyzed differently. For example, post-racial proponents might ask… Why do a majority of Whites still identify with the Republican Party, a party that has, for the past 40 years, used race as a wedge issue, a party that tried to paint Obama as an Other? And more broadly… What privately held racist beliefs do the 43.5 percent of Whites who voted for Obama possess? But post-racial proponents fail to ask these questions because, from their point-of-view, electing a Black candidate, a Black presidential candidate particularly, is inversely related to bigotry: Obama won the election by an overwhelming majority, 365 electoral votes to 173 electoral votes for McCain; which means that bigots are a dwindling minority on both ideological spectrums. The 21st century American society is post-racial! “While there are still bigots in America, they are in unambiguous retreat,” The New York Times editorial columnist Frank Rich wrote after the election.37 The truth is, however, that a significant number of bigots have not retreated, but metamorphosed rather into seemingly racially tolerant bigots or “reasonable racists.”38 As Politico.com explained, there are “racists for Obama.”39

Interest Convergence Theory

Some “racists” for Obama do not publicly espouse their racist beliefs. In the Politico article “Racists for Obama?” by Ben Smith, an Obama canvasser working in a White, working-class Philadelphia neighborhood was “blown away” by the amount of

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38 Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era, 141.
White voters who publically used racial epithets in reference to Obama. Interestingly, the Obama canvasser told Politico, these same White voters were “undecided.” They would call him a [racial epithet] and mention how they don't know what to do because of the economy,” the Obama canvasser said. Although, the White voters’ use of racial epithets in reference to Obama could be due to a timelag in language, it suggests that they subscribe to a system of racial hierarchy despite being undecided about voting for Obama because of the economy. The voters’ indecision about whether to vote for Obama could be an example of interest convergence, a concept articulated by critical race theorist Derrick Bell which suggests that Whites will make a decision that benefit minorities when the decision benefits the majority.

Although Bell articulated the concept in the context of the law, specifically the Supreme Court’s landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision, the concept, on a micro level, relates to the voters’ decision-making process. The voters’ “possessive investment in Whiteness,” which overall systematically “channels rewards, resources, and opportunities” from minorities to Whites, was, in conflict with their monetary interests. Divesting in Whiteness benefits minorities. “The economy is trumping racism,” Howard University Law School Dean Kurt Schmoke said. “A lot of people who we might think wouldn’t vote their pocketbook because of race — now they are.”

Despite evidence supporting Bell’s interest convergence theory, it cannot explain the White vote entirely. For a significant number of Whites, the

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41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
explanation is simpler: Blacks can be tolerated publicly but not privately. “I wouldn’t want a mixed marriage for my daughter, but I’m voting for Obama,” Sharon Fleming, the wife of a retired Virginia coal miner, told a Los Angeles Times reporter before the election. Fleming’s statement is evidence of the public-private contradiction, a contradiction ignored by the mainstream media but acknowledged by scholars. “In a certain sense, White brothers and sisters want to pat themselves on the back, ‘I don’t see race anymore. I’m color-blind. I’m closer to Martin,’” Princeton University professor West told a group of students during a public rally for Obama at The Ohio State University. “No, quit lying. You’re just more open to the quality of a Black man in public space.” Although whether or not Fleming is racially prejudiced is debatable, the latter part of West’s statement applies to her ability to vote for Obama. She is comfortable with a Black man in a public space, even at the highest level of American politics, but not in her family. There might be another explanation too.

Subtyping

Fleming might not be uncomfortable with Black men in general, in regard to her daughter specifically, but she might be comfortable with Obama. Although some Whites believe that African Americans, in general, are inferior, Obama, in their opinion, is different. “Not all whites associate the generic term African-American with Obama,” University of Maryland Political Science Professor Ron Walters said. “They give him

credit for having half Caucasian ancestry, and give him credit for his education, and give him credit for his obvious ability to take complex subjects and parse them.”49 Essentially, Walters’ argument is that prejudiced Whites were able to cling to Obama’s literal and figurative Whiteness. Literally: Obama’s mother was White. He was raised by White grandparents. Figuratively: Obama is intelligent, articulate, and refined, adjectives that are socially color-coded “White.” The phenomenon Walters describes is a mental process called subtyping. Subtyping occurs when a person or group of people observe another person who belongs to a category but violate the stereotypes associated with that category and allow that person to “evade general notions about that category.”50 The person is usually considered an “exception that proves the rule.”51 The observers in this case are White people, the person in this case is Obama, and the category in this case is African American. As a result of subtyping, the person who violates the stereotypes of the category do not change the observer or observers general notions about that category but, instead, is cast aside as atypical.52 Subtyping can be viewed as a mental solution to cognitive dissonance, the psychological discomfort that occurs when new information or actions contradict previously held information or actions. Interestingly, data suggests that Whites did indeed give Obama credit for his Whiteness, his literal Whiteness at least. According to a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center a year after Obama was elected, in response to the question “Do you think of Obama as Black or Mixed Race?”

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50 Corrine McConnaughy and Ismail White, “Identity Politics Complicated: Race, Gender, and Election 2008,” ( Working Paper assigned in Political Science 712: Gender and American Politics at The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, October 13, 2009), 8-9.
51 Ibid.
52 McConnaughy and White, 8-9.
53 percent of Whites agreed that Obama was “Mixed Race” and 34 percent of Blacks agreed that Obama was “Mixed Race.”53 Despite the existence of racists for Obama, the mainstream news media assumes that even these individuals although “significant” were in the “minority.”54 However, a recent study suggests otherwise.

**Stanford Race Study**

According to a Stanford Study of 2,227 adults (Democrats, Republicans and Independents) between August 27, 2008 and September 5, 2008, approximately 40 percent of Whites have at least one prejudiced view of Blacks.55 Of the Democrats who were surveyed, over 30 percent had at least one prejudiced view of Blacks and 58 percent of them planned to vote for Obama.56 Question 11, for example, asked respondents how well 14 different attributes described Blacks. Respondents could choose among the following responses: extremely well (EW), very well (VW), moderately well (MW), slightly well (SW), or not at all (NA).57 Of the Whites who were surveyed, 67 percent of them thought the attribute “lazy” described Blacks somewhat (EW, VW, MW, SW), 13 percent thought the attribute “lazy” described Blacks “very well” or “extremely well.”58 In addition, 74 percent of the Whites who were surveyed thought that Blacks were somewhat unintelligent (MW, SW, NA), 29 percent thought the attribute “intelligent”

56 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
described blacks “slightly well” or “not at all.” And lastly, 76 percent of the Whites surveyed thought the attribute “violent” described Blacks somewhat (EW, VW, MW, SW), 20 percent thought the attribute “violent” described Blacks “extremely well” or “very well.” The Stanford Study reveals a continuum of racial bigotry, a continuum the media ignores. Yes, the bigot of yesteryear is no longer in the majority, but the number of 21st century bigots is, at the very least, a significant minority. Based on the quantitative data and qualitative interviews there are four types of bigots that exist in 21st century America: 1. The bigots who will not vote for a Black candidate and publicly espouse their beliefs. 2. The bigots who will not vote for a Black candidate, but not publicly espouse their beliefs thereby creating the Bradley effect. (Bigot types 1 and 2 are the only types of bigots that the mainstream news media discussed.) 3. The bigots who will vote for a Black candidate but publicly espouse their racist beliefs. 4. The bigots who will vote for a Black candidate but will not publicly espouse their racist beliefs. (Bigot types 3 and 4 were largely ignored by the mainstream media.)

The Stanford Study has a few drawbacks. The first drawback is reactivity, the tendency of subjects of social research to change their behavior as a result of participating

60 Ibid.
61 Note: The Bradley Effect refers to the theory that some prejudiced Whites will lie to pollster about their intentions to vote for a Black candidate and then cast their ballot for a White candidate in the voting booth. The theory is named after Tom Bradley, former Democratic mayor of Los Angeles, who lost the 1982 gubernatorial election to George Deukmejian, a Republican. Recent analysis of the 1982 gubernatorial election suggests that Bradley lost the race for other reasons, namely his stance on gun control. Note: As a result of research conducted by professors at the University of Washington, the media also speculated about a “reverse Bradley Effect.” The University of Washington professors found that some Whites, and Blacks to a lesser extent, lied to pollsters about their intention to not vote for Obama and then cast their ballot for him in the voting booth. (Ben Smith, “A Reverse Bradley Effect?,” Politico, October 9, 2009, under “blogs,” http://www.politico.com/blogs/bensmith/1008/A_reverse_Bradley_Effect.html (accessed March 6, 2010).
in a study. Reactivity in this context is closely related to White people’s adherence to the “norm of racial equality.” Although the survey included a series of questions unrelated to race and attempted to measure covert and overt racism with questions explicitly and implicitly related to race, the explicit race related questions might have cued Whites to the fact that the survey was intended to measure racial tolerance and thus forced them to alter the degree of their answer. For example, a White person might have wanted to answer “not at all” on the positive attributes in question 11 but changed their answer to “slightly well” because of the discomfort associated with confronting his or her racist views. To offset reactivity, the researchers conducted the survey online. As the researchers indicated, studies have shown that people are more likely to be honest about taboo subjects like race when survey questions are asked online. However, approximately 5 percent of the participants refused to answer question 11, the question most explicitly related to race. The second drawback is that the adult participants were selected randomly from a database of landline telephone numbers. Most young adults only have cell phones. Young adults tend to be more racially tolerant. Despite the survey’s drawbacks, the qualitative and quantitative data suggests that Obama’s win is merely evidence that Whites, at best, are more tolerant of racial differences in a public political context, tolerant meaning that Whites are able to vote for a Black candidate even if it conflicts with their racially prejudiced views.

A Reductionist Argument

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62 Babbie, 290.
Even if the post-racial narrative that Obama’s success is evidence of a post-racial society was accurate, the explanation would still be problematic because it is reductionist, that is, there are structural presuppositions, namely that racism is a individualistic rather than structural phenomenon, and the object of explanation, American’s racial climate, is confined to a limited set of factors, the White vote for Obama.64 Put simply, the exception or “deviant case”, the first African-American president, cannot be used to prove the rule, post-racialism in American society: That type of reasoning is illogical.65 For the sake of argument let us assume that the Whites who voted for Obama were not racist and that the Whites who did not were motivated to vote against Obama solely because of ideological reasoning, then how do post-racial proponents explain the structural inequality that continues to exist? Are African-Americans consistently “unlucky,” as scholar Manning Marable sarcastically suggests in the introduction of his book The Great Wells of Democracy, or does America promote exclusionary policies that negatively impact people of color?66 And, on a micro-level, how do post-racial proponents explain the success of Edward Brooke (R-Massachusetts) in 1967, the first African-American senator elected since Reconstruction, and the success of L. Douglass Wilder (D-Virginia) in 1990, the first African-American governor of any state?67 Were these Black, Civil Rights Era politicians operating in a post-racial society? No. Brookes and Wilder won statewide elections that cannot be used as a litmus test for society. Were

65 Babbie, 7.
these Black, Civil Rights Era politicians operating in post-racial states? No. Brookes was elected in Massachusetts toward the end of the Civil Rights Movement, and served during Boston’s historic school desegregation crisis in the mid-1970s, a crisis that produced racist protests that mirrored the historic protests over the Little Rock (Arkansas) Nine in 1957. And Wilder was elected in Virginia during a time before White suburbanites invaded the Northern part of the state and transformed it from “your grandfather’s Virginia,” a racially divided Republican state, to a key potentially Democratic swing state. Until the 2008 presidential election, Virginia had swung Republican in every presidential election since 1964, the year the Voting Rights Act was signed. Were these Black, Civil Rights Era politicians operating in an era of post-racial politics? No. There have only been three Black U.S. Senators since Brookes, one of whom was appointed by the governor of Illinois to replace Obama after he was elected president, and two Black governors since Wilder, one of whom was a lieutenant governor and assumed office after the governor of his state resigned because of a sex scandal. Consequently, the individualistic post-racial argument collapses.

Structural Racial Inequality

A quick analysis of the structural inequality in America also collapses the post-racial argument. The most obvious indicator of structural inequality is the uneven distribution of wealth. According to the Pew Hispanic Trust Survey, the median net worth off Black households in 2002 was $5,988, which was less than seven percent of the median net worth of White households, which was $88,651.68. The wealth gap between

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Whites and Blacks can mostly be attributed to homeownership rates, 74.3 percent of White families owned their homes in 2002 while only 47.7 percent of Black families owned their homes.\(^6\) As a result of exclusionary policies instituted by the Federal Housing Authority, policies that diverted a majority of government-backed private home loans to Whites during the 1960s and 1970s, Blacks are less likely to own homes.\(^7\) In neighborhoods where Blacks do own homes, the property values are usually worth less than homes of comparable size owned by Whites because Black neighborhoods are more likely to have a city dump, nuclear waste site or highway nearby, which is the result of another form of structural inequality, environmental racism. The pollution associated with environmental racism causes chronic illness. Chronic illness, coupled with the fact that a disproportionate amount of Blacks are underinsured, leads to decreased life expectancy, which in 2004 was approximately 69 to 76 for Blacks and 75 to 80 for Whites, and high infant mortality rates, which in 2004 was approximately 12-15 deaths per 1,000 live births for Blacks and approximately 5-6 deaths per 1,000 live births for Whites.\(^7\) Black homeowners were not the only ones facing the reality of structural racism. During the 1950s and 1960s, Urban Renewal destroyed thousands of units of inner city housing where federal and local governments had segregated Blacks.\(^7\)


\(^7\) Lipsitz, 5.


\(^7\) Lipsitz, 7.
Renewal destroyed more inner city housing than it created. The inequality between Blacks and Whites is unending.

Exclusionary policies that decrease the likelihood African-Americans will accumulate wealth also lead to a cycle of poverty. In 1999, 21 percent of Blacks lived in poverty, compared to seven percent of Whites. That same year, the median family income for Blacks was $35,999, compared to $61,284 for Whites. Poverty leads to crime. Although Blacks are approximately 13 percent of the United States population, at midyear 2006, Black men were 41 percent of the prison and jail population and Black women were 35 percent. Most Blacks are imprisoned for non-violent crimes. For example, although Blacks account for 14 percent of all illegal drug users they make up 55 percent of all drug convictions. The disproportionate amount of Blacks in prison and jail can also be attributed to the separate but ostensibly equal public education system that still operates in the United States 54 years after Brown v. the Board of Education, an education system that systematically deters Blacks from college. Inner city schools spend less than their suburban counterparts per student. Property taxes are used to fund public schools and inner city schools are often located next to businesses, which are not required to pay property taxes, and low-cost homes and apartments that are usually rented and not owned. Consequently, schools that are under-funded cannot offer competitive salaries to attract the best human capital (i.e. administrators, educators and staff) or provide the best

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73 Lipsitz, 5.
74 Marable, 7.
75 Ibid.
77 Sabol, Minton, and Harrison, 9.
learning capital (i.e. books, computers, and college prep courses). Prison statistics are proof of the inequity. By the end of 2000, more Black men were in prison (791,600) than were enrolled in colleges and universities nationwide (603,032).78 A cycle is produced.

*The Voting Rights Act*

The post-racial narrative threatens to continue that cycle. On June 22, 2009, six months and two days Obama assumed office, the Supreme Court “avoided” a question about whether Congress’s decision to reauthorize Section 5 of the 1965 Voting Rights Act for 25 more years was necessary “in the new era of American racial politics,” the post-racial era.79 Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act requires nine states, mostly in the South, and regions of seven other states to obtain federal approval or “preclearance” for changes in election laws or redistricting decisions.80 Section 5 was included in the 1965 Voting Rights Act to prevent states and counties from intentionally creating laws that undermined Black suffrage. Opponents of extending the provision argue that the “the
South had changed” and Section 5 penalizes the South for “past history.” That argument is reminiscent of the color-blind “past is the past” argument that Bonilla-Silva identifies in his book *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, which is mentioned in the Introduction. “The evil that Section 5 is meant to address may no longer be concentrated in the jurisdictions singled out for preclearance. The statute's coverage formula is based on data that is now more than 35 years old, and there is considerable evidence that it fails to account for current political conditions,” Chief Justice John Roberts wrote. Justice Clarence Thomas, the court’s only African-American, concurred, and argued that America’s new era of post-racial politics was enough evidence to declare the provision unconstitutional. “The violence, intimidation and subterfuge that led Congress to pass Section 5 and this court to uphold it no longer remains,” Thomas wrote. Although neither Obama nor the 2008 presidential election was explicitly mentioned in the opinion, Roberts wrote that the “historic accomplishments of the Voting Rights Act are undeniable,” despite the fact that African American have not reached parity at any level of politics. The legal question was sparked by *Northwest Austin Municipal Utility District Number One v. Holder*. In the case, the

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82 Bonilla-Silva, *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, 70.


84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.
plaintiff, a small utility district in Texas, seeks to bailout of its federal requirement to get preclearance for changes made to its election laws and redistricting decisions because there was no evidence that it had discriminated on the basis of race in its elections. The plaintiff argued a denial to bailout would render Section 5 unconstitutional. The Federal District Court rejected the plaintiff’s claim arguing that Section 4 only applied to counties, parishes, and subunits that register voters, not to entities like the district, which does not register voters and that Section 5 was constitutional. The Supreme Court decided to compromise and allow the utility district to bailout because legal precedent, the Voting Rights Act’s “structure,” and “underlying constitutional concerns” allowed it to fit the definition of a “political subdivision,” but opted not to assess the constitutionality of the 2006 reauthorization of Section 5. “Judging the constitutionality of an Act of Congress is ‘the gravest and most delicate duty that this Court is called upon to perform,’” Roberts wrote. The debate about the constitutionality of Section 5 of the 1965 Voting Rights Act shows how post-racial narrative-like discourse can affect progressive social policies.

Liberalism and the Post-Racial Narrative

90 Ibid., 2.
91 Ibid.
92 John Powell, “Post-racialism or Targeted Universalism,” Denver University Law Review 86 (Special Issue): 800.
The post-racial narrative eases America’s liberal conscience, liberal in the “classical Lockian sense.” American liberalism values the individual rights of citizens as long as those rights do not do not infringe upon others; particularly the individual rights of citizens to Fairness, Equality, and limitless Opportunity. According to American liberalism, these individual rights are best ensured by a democratic government and a free capitalist market. Since the foundation of the United States, however, its racial climate, particularly in regards to African Americans, has contradicted its liberal ethos. For example, Thomas Jefferson’s famous “all men are created equal” provision in the Declaration of Independence was never intended to apply to Black people. Jefferson’s statement epitomizes liberalism and was the foundation on which American was built. Nearly 100 years passed before Jefferson’s famous provision was legally extended to Blacks with the passage of the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments, and another 100 years before Jefferson’s provision was fully enforced with the passage of the 1964 and 1965 Civil Rights Acts. The time lag between the passage of the Civil War amendments and the enforcement of those amendments through Civil Rights legislation was partially due to the fact that anti-racism was not incorporated into American liberalism until the 1940s when America’s fight against anti-Semitic fascism in Germany made the country question its own racial fascism. The Double-V campaign that was launched by the African-American community and called for a victory at home against racial prejudice and a victory against the enemies abroad fueled America’s self-reflection on racial prejudice. “Narratives about race relations regard [World War II] as a turning point,”

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historian Ruth Feldstein wrote in the book *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930 to 1965*. At that point, “Racism was inherently un-American; it was a ‘dilemma,’ as Gunnar Myrdal wrote in 1944, because it contradicted democracy, or the ‘American creed.’” In America, liberalism is essential for democracy, the ‘American creed.’

Interestingly, sports historian Gerald Early reaches a similar conclusion about anti-racism being incorporated into American liberalism, although his conclusion is based off Whites’ willingness to support African-American track runner Jesse Owens during the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, despite the significant amount of racial segregation in America. The 1936 Olympics closely preceded World War II. Adolf Hitler attended the 1936 Olympic Games in hopes that German athletes would prove through a series of gold medal victories that Nazi Germany was strong and the Aryan race was superior. That hope was shattered after Owens won four gold medals in the 100-meter dash, 200-meter dash, the broad jump, and the 400-meter relay. Although other African Americans won medals, Owens gold medal victories were thought by the Black Press particularly to have dealt a “serious blow” to the Aryan Supremacy beliefs of Hitler and his Nazi regime. Hitler left the games in disgrace. According to Early, Owens victory was not only a blow to Nazi Germany but a significant milestone for American race relations. “It was

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95 Ibid.
98 Wiggins, 73-76.
discovered that all Americans could sort of rally around and identify with a Black person symbolizing their country and that’s very important,” Early said in the documentary *Journey of the African-American Athlete*. Owens symbolized the liberal American creed abroad in the midst of deep domestic racial animus and structural inequality. Perhaps, Obama is the new Owens.

**Conclusion**

In America, “liberalism is hegemonic.” In the beginning of the book *The Liberal Tradition in American Political Thought Since the Revolution*, political scientist Louis Hartz writes that the “American community is a liberal community” and that liberalism in America is so pervasive that it approaches “moral unanimity.” But how does liberalism specifically relate to the media circulated post-racial narrative? Communications scholar Todd Gitlin answers that question in his book *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media and the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*. In the book, scholar Gitlin argues that hegemony “delivers the news.” For Gitlin, hegemony is “an historical process in which one picture of the world is systematically preferred over others, usually through practical routines and at times through extraordinary measures.” According to Gitlin, the dominant frames that journalists use are a reflection of the hegemonic worldview that structures their society. Consequently, if liberalism is indeed hegemonic then the dominant frames that journalist use will paint that “preferred” liberal picture of the world. As a result of framing stories in a way that

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101 Ibid.
102 Gitlin, 257.
103 Gitlin, 257.
adheres to America’s “preferred” liberal picture of the world, journalists attribute societal problems to “individuals rather than systemic structures.” Consequently, a societal problem like racism is blamed on a “few bad apples” rather than the structure of American society. Journalists error similarly when characterizing societal progress. Indeed, the post-racial narrative frames Obama’s success—which, as a result of his race, is progress—in a way that adheres to America’s hegemonic liberal worldview. The post-racial narrative declares that America is indeed Fair, Equal, and Limitless. And the post-racial narrative attributes that success to a single individual. Ultimately, Post-racialism allows “America to give itself a pat on the back.”

The post-racial narrative also allows other countries to give America a pat on the back. Hours before Obama won the 2008 presidential election, a group of CNN political pundits and analysts pondered about what an Obama victory would mean for the United States. “The effect of an Obama victory, if it happens, on the international reputation of the United States will be so profound and so immediate, that I don't think there is anything comparable in American history in terms of an immediate change in public perception,” CNN legal analyst Jeffrey Toobin said. “Winning World War II maybe,” Bennett said after Toobin’s remarks. The exchange between Toobin and Bennett might explain why the mainstream news media-circulated post-racial narrative despite

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105 McLeod, Kosicki, and Pan, 249.
overwhelming evidence to the contrary.\(^{108}\) As a result of the Iraq War, Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, Illegal Wire Taps, Hurricane Katrina, and the Recession, the United States international reputation was tarnished. The country desperately needed a victory to restore its reputation, a race victory even. Racism has historically been the United States’ Achilles heel, a vulnerability that could easily be exploited by political rivals who sought to dismiss the country grandiose claims to Freedom, Equality, and limitless Opportunity for all. Therefore, Obama was the ultimate prop for the American news media, a prop that, if successful, would allow the world, not just America, to see its “legacy of slavery, segregation and racism in the rearview mirror.”\(^{109}\) And so perhaps the mainstream, news media-circulated post-racial narrative operated as a subconscious or conscious propaganda campaign intended to restore America’s international glory.

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“We Wear the Mask”

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be overwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!1

Paul Laurence Dunbar, Poet

CHAPTER 2: “I Heard it Through the Grapevine”
The Importance of the Digital African-American Underground During the 2008 Presidential Election

Introduction

A few days before then Senator Barack Obama (D-Illinois) won the 2008 presidential election, a humorous chain letter started appearing in email inboxes. The subject line of the chain letter was “November 5 Etiquette For My People.”

“This is for those of you who may not know how to act in the likelihood of an Obama victory at the polls,” the first line of the chain letter declared. “If Obama wins, there will be a lot of people, some of our co-workers included, who will be afraid that an Obama presidency will usher in the end of days. They’ll be watching us on November 5th for signs.”

The chain letter included a list of 13 “behaviors” that African Americans should “avoid” at work, “at least for a few days,” to prevent a White backlash. “No crying or shouting, ‘Thank you Lord,’” was at the top of the list. “No high fives,” immediately followed. And toward the end of the list, “Please no ‘Moving On Up’ music, we are going to try to

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2 A. G., e-mail message to author, February 24, 2008.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
remain humble.” Although the chain letter was humorous, the prescription for humbleness was real. Historically, African Americans have engaged in the politics of respectability to achieve racial progress. The politics of respectability can be understood as African Americans’ consciousness capitulation to White fear of Black overthrow. African Americans frequently engaged in the politics of respectability during the Civil Rights Movement. The sentiment of humbleness was echoed by a member of the Black elite. On November 8, 2008, prominent African-American attorney Vernon Jordan, the former president of the Urban League, told a predominately African-American crowd at The Ohio State University’s Department of African American and African Studies Community Extension Center not to force the White man “to the back of the bus” or “slap high fives in the hallway” if Obama won the election. Unlike the chain letter, Jordan’s tone was serious. Ironically, despite the fact that electing an African-American president would be a groundbreaking event, an event that for a significant number of African Americans would produce a wide range of emotions, Jordan, like the chain letter, encouraged members of the African-American community to “keep the peace and keep a lot of folks from getting nervous.” The chain letter’s allusion to White fear of Black overthrow was also real. Historically, White Americans have always feared Black overthrow, even though it was, in some instances, and still is, materially impossible for African Americans to dominate. For example White planters in the South feared slave rebellions, particularly in slave states where African Americans greatly outnumbered

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8 A. G., e-mail message to author, February 24, 2008.

Note: “Moving On Up” was the theme song for the hit television show *The Jeffersons*. *The Jeffersons* was a hit television show about an African-American couples whose dry cleaning business becomes successful and allows them to “move on up” to a luxury apartment on a ritzy, predominately White side of Manhattan.

9 Vernon Jordan, “Presidential Election 2008” (lecture, Department of African American and African Studies Community Extension Center, Columbus, OH, November 2, 2008).

10 A. G., e-mail message to author, February 24, 2008.
Whites, and Whites also feared the Black Panther Party, a militant African-American organization that emerged during the late 1960s and advocated the use of violence against racial oppressors. Obama’s success sparked similar fears. Throughout the campaign a significant number of White voters confessed that the possibility of a Black president was scary. “Because they would be out of control, and think they could take over,” a White dental hygienist from Western Pennsylvania told her Black patient in an effort to explain why America was not ready for a Black president.11 The patient was a very light-skinned Black man with European features; the dental hygienist did not realize he was Black.12 These fears continued after Obama was elected president. At a Tax Day Tea Party Nation Protest in Madison, Wisconsin on April 15, 2009, a White man held a sign that said, “Obama’s Plan, White Slavery.”13 The Tea Party Nation is a conservative grassroots organization that frequently protests Obama’s legislative agenda for being socialist, fascist, and anti-Christian. Usually these protests have racial undertones like the “Obama’s Plan, White Slavery” sign. Please see “Figure 2.1.: The Tax Day Tea Party Nation Protest Photo” below.

12 Ibid.
Although it is almost impossible to measure the chain letter’s popularity, an article titled “No We Can’t, Black People: Five Things Black People Shouldn’t Do If Obama Wins” that appeared on the African-American online magazine *The Root* provides a little insight. The authors of the article, Christopher Beam, a *Slate* political reporter, and Chris Wilson, an editorial assistant at *Slate*, were inspired by the chain letter. “There’s been an e-mail going around advising black folks on unacceptable behavior if Barack Obama wins,” Beam and Wilson wrote at the beginning of the article. “We at *The Root* thought we’d add a few tips of our own.” The fact that the chain letter went from email to an online African-American magazine suggests that it had an audience. But the racial exclusivity of the chain letter’s actual audience cannot be determined. However, the racial exclusivity of the chain letter’s actual audience is not as important as its existence, specifically its method of circulation, content, and intended audience. The existence of the chain letter is evidence of a vibrant virtual African-
American counterpublic sphere, the digital African-American underground. The digital African-American underground is an electronic subaltern space that is unlike the Internet in that it ostensibly exists beyond the gaze of Whites in personal email inboxes and text message queues. The digital African-American underground is used to launch boycotts, electronic prayer circles, and Internet website sit-ins. The digital African-American underground is used to encourage people to electronically sign Internet petitions too. All of these forms of resistance were evoked by members of the digital African-American underground during the 2008 presidential election to support Obama.14 “The revolution will not be televised,” African-American songwriter-poet Gil Scott Heron declared in 1970.15 The digital African-American underground disproves Heron’s declaration. No, Mr. Heron, the revolution will not be televised, it will be digitized.16

The electronic quasi-revolution that occurred in the digital African-American underground during the 2008 presidential election was in opposition to the post-racial revolution that occurred in the public sphere. Despite the post-racial revolution’s unfounded claim that Obama’s successes was evidence of a society in which racism, although previously present, was no longer a significant barriers for Blacks, racial tension was omnipresent in the public sphere. For example, White journalists were constantly looking for the Black perspective, campaign rhetoric was constantly misconstrued/properly interpreted as racist, and Obama’s Blackness was constantly

14 Note: Before the 2008 presidential election, the digital African-American underground was most notably used to launch a “‘viral’ Civil Rights Movement” on behalf of the Jena 6, six African-American teen boys who were arrested for beating up a White male classmate in a small Louisiana town named Jena. Five of the six boys were charged with attempted second-degree murder for beating up the boy, and the other was charged with attempted second-degree battery. After a massive grassroots protest that was largely sparked and organized in cyberspace, all six of the boys were acquitted. Anna Everett, *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009), 199.
16 Everett, 149.
questioned, dissected, and used to defame. Racial tension was also omnipresent in the American-American counterpublic sphere, the digital African-American underground particularly. The etiquette chain letter is proof of that reality. Dialogue circulated throughout the digital African-American underground frequently characterized the United States as a racially divided country, a characterization that contradicted the post-racial narrative. In addition, dialogue circulated throughout the digital African-American underground characterized Obama’s success as a moment for Black revenge, another characterization that contradicted the post-racial narrative. And finally, dialogue circulated throughout the digital African-American underground characterized certain events as examples of White oppression, yet another characterization that contradicted the post-racial narrative. The dialogue that circulated throughout the digital African-American underground not only invoked these racialized claims during an ostensibly post-racial moment, but also racialized a seemingly post-racial space, cyberspace. Furthermore, the mere existence of the digital African-American underground, a subaltern counterpublic, suggests that the public sphere is not an all inclusive post-racial space, but an exclusive racialized space which forces marginalized groups to create their own publics, even in cyberspace.

A proper analysis of the digital African-American underground during the 2008 presidential election necessitates two types of arguments: 1) Arguments about the significance of the digital African-American underground during the 2008 presidential election. 2) Arguments about the significance of the dialogue that circulated throughout the digital African-American underground during the 2008 presidential election. The significance of the digital African-American underground during the 2008 presidential
election begins with the media circulated post-racial narrative, which was discussed previously. As a result of the post-racial narrative, the behavior and speech of African Americans was *further* limited in the public sphere and African-American counterpublic space became necessary. The digital African-American underground space was particularly necessary because traditional African-American counterpublic spaces like the church, barbershop, and music community were invaded by the White-dominated mainstream media as a result of Obama’s Blackness. The digital African-American underground was a space where resistance was evoked in an effort to reclaim Obama’s success by countering the post-racial narrative. The digital African-American underground was also a space where resistance was evoked in an effort to rally support for Obama, protest slights against Obama, and his family, and generate Black pride. The significance of the dialogue that circulated throughout the digital African-American underground during the 2008 presidential election begins with history. In general, digital African-American underground dialogue that encouraged African-Americans to support Obama by capitulating to White fear and digital African-American underground dialogue that was militant and contradicted the post-racial narrative were manifestations of African Americans’ DuBosian double-consciousness, their “warring” Black and American identities. Specifically, digital African-American underground dialogue about the 2008 presidential election that urged African Americans to capitulate to White fear of Black overthrow, was the contemporary manifestation of a historical trend that occurs when African-Americans reach racial milestones. However, before a proper analysis of digital African-American underground dialogue can begin, the electronic subaltern space must

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be situated in the context of previous scholarship about the existence of the public sphere, revisionist scholarship about the existence of subaltern counterpublics, specifically the African-American counterpublic, and previous scholarship about African-Americans and the Internet.

**Part I**

Theorizing the Digital African-American Underground

*The Origins of the Public Sphere and Subaltern Counterpublics*

German philosopher Jürgen Habermas articulated the concept of the public sphere in his 1962 book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. In the book, he defined the bourgeois public sphere as a “sphere” where “private people come together as a public” beyond the realm of “public authorities” to debate “the general rules of governing relations.”

18 Essentially, for Habermas, the public sphere was the “people’s public use of their reason.”

19 In the book, Habermas argues that certain conditions allowed the bourgeois public sphere to develop in the 18th century and that those conditions no longer exist in the modern era. Critical theorist Nancy Fraser critiques Habermas’ conception of the public sphere in her essay “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy.” In the essay, Fraser contends that underneath Habermas’ conception of the bourgeois public sphere are four problematic assumptions: 1) Participants in the public

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19 Ibid.
sphere can “bracket status differentials” and participate as equals.\textsuperscript{20} 2) A single public sphere is more democratic than competing public spheres.\textsuperscript{21} 3) Deliberation in the public sphere should be focused on the common good, and competing private interests or issues.\textsuperscript{22} 4) The ideal public sphere requires a “sharp” separation between civil society and the state.\textsuperscript{23} She identifies these assumptions by analyzing the revisionist scholarship of others scholars such as Joan Landes, who argues, based on her analysis of 18\textsuperscript{th} century France, that Habermas’ conception of the public sphere was intentionally masculinist, Geoff Eley, who argues, based on his analysis of 19\textsuperscript{th} century France, England and Germany, that the masculinist nature of the public sphere was essential and rooted in class formation, and Mary Ryan, who argues, based on her analysis of 19\textsuperscript{th} century America, that women of various classes and ethnicities who were excluded from the public sphere developed alternate routes of access to public political life.\textsuperscript{24}

Fraser contests the assumption that participants in the public sphere can “bracket status differentials” and participate as equals.\textsuperscript{25} Fraser argues that Habermas’ conception of the public sphere as equally accessible was never realized, which he and other revisionist scholars acknowledge, and that women and people of color were excluded.\textsuperscript{26} And that even when these groups were “legally licensed” to participate that “informal impediments” to equal participation persisted.\textsuperscript{27} She also questions whether a public sphere that is situated in a structurally unequal society can ever be a space where

\textsuperscript{20} Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in \textit{Habermas and the Public Sphere}, ed. by Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992,) 117.
\textsuperscript{21} Fraser, 17.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 118.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 113-115.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 117.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 118.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 119.
participants who exist within these structural cleavages can participate as equals. In addition, Fraser contests the assumption that a single public sphere is more democratic than competing public spheres. According to Fraser, “participatory parity” is better achieved by a competing “multiplicity of publics.” She calls these competing “multiplicity of publics” “subaltern counterpublics.” Fraser concludes that a competing “multiplicity of publics” is better for both stratified and non-stratified societies, but for different reasons. She argues that for stratified societies a competing “multiplicity of publics” widens the amount of discursive space and allows those who are oppressed to be heard, whereas for non-stratified societies, societies that are culturally diverse but do not have systems of oppression based on class, gender or race, a competing “multiplicity of publics” allows that cultural diversity to flourish. As Fraser explains, subaltern counterpublics are spaces where “discursive opinions” and “social identities” are formed. Fraser also contests the assumption that deliberation in the public sphere should be focused on the common good and not competing private interests or issues. Fraser argues that different people will have different concerns and/or different opinions about different concerns and that “discursive contestation” is necessary. In addition, Fraser argues that some issues that affect subordinated groups are deemed private concerns and only become public concerns after these groups force them to be through “discursive contestation.” For example, Fraser states that feminists who thought domestic violence was a public concern were in the minority until their “sustained discursive contestation”

28 Fraser, 120.
29 Ibid., 117.
30 Ibid., 127.
31 Ibid., 122-123.
32 Ibid., 118.
made it a public concern. Consequently, “discursive contestation” is not only inevitable but necessary. And finally, Fraser contests the assumption that the ideal public sphere requires a “sharp” separation between civil society and the state. Fraser argues that divorcing the public sphere or competing public spheres from the state only allow them to be mere bodies of “opinion formation removed from authoritative decision making.” Fraser’s theoretical analysis of the public sphere—particularly her discussion of equal access and participation, the existence of competing subaltern counterpublics, and discursive contestation—provide a necessary foundation for the conceptualization and legitimization of the African-American counterpublic.

The African-American Counterpublic

The African-American counterpublic is indeed a subaltern counterpublic as defined by Fraser. Political scientist Michael Dawson theorizes in his book Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies that the African-American counterpublic was formed by the “historically imposed separation of blacks from whites,” which excluded them from the “official” public sphere, and African Americans’ conception of autonomy as an “institutional principle” and “ideological orientation.” According to Dawson, Black discourse since the Civil War has been focused on the creation of autonomous, Black political, economic, and social institutions and the demand for rights that will allow them to participate fully, and autonomously in the public sphere. Dawson’s theory about the origins of the African-American counterpublic provides a necessary foundation for the conceptualization and legitimization of the African-American counterpublic.

33 Fraser, 129.
34 Ibid., 128-132.
35 Ibid., 118.
36 Ibid., 136.
counterpublic closely relates to Fraser’s theory about the origins of subaltern counterpublics. As Fraser explains, a single public sphere, particularly in a stratified society like the United States, does not allow for subordinated groups like people of color to have a space to articulate “their needs, objectives, and strategies,” since, in stratified societies, “unequally empowered social groups tend to develop unequally valued cultural styles.”38 Additionally, Fraser states that subaltern counterpublics are “parallel discursive arenas” where subordinated peoples create and circulate “counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.”39 Fraser’s idea that subaltern counterpublics are formed as a result of exclusion relates to Dawson’s idea that the Black counterpublic was created by force, force being White oppression.

Fraser’s idea that subaltern counterpublics allow subordinated people to circulate counterdiscourses relates to Dawson’s idea that the Black counterpublic was created by African-Americans’ conception of autonomy, discourse that countered the White-dominated public sphere’s discourse of the ever-dependent Negro. “The historiography records that members of subordinated social groups—women, workers, people of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics,” Fraser contends.40 Indeed, Black Americans have found it advantageous to constitute the African-American counterpublic. In 1994, a group of scholars writing under the pseudonym The Black Public Sphere Collective, a collective that Dawson was a part of, defined the African-American counterpublic. The Black Public Sphere Collective’s definition is worth quoting at length.

38 Fraser, 123 and 120.
39 Ibid., 123.
40 Ibid.
The black public sphere—as a critical social imaginary—does not centrally rely on the world of magazines and coffee shops, salons, and highbrow tracts. It draws energy from the vernacular practices of street talk and new musics, radio shows, and church voices, entrepreneurship and circulation. Its task is not the provision of security for the freedom of conversation among intellectuals, as was the case with the bourgeois public spheres of earlier centuries. Rather, it marks a wider sphere of critical practice and visionary politics, in which intellectuals can join with the energies of the street, the school, the church, and the city to constitute a challenge to the exclusionary violence of much public space in the United States.41

Although The Black Public Sphere Collective’s definition of the African-American counterpublic seeks to identify a subaltern space that avoids the pitfalls of Habermas’ conceptualization by emphasizing, for example, that it is a space where intellectuals “can join with the street,” the reality is that the African-American counterpublic does not. As Fraser explains, subaltern counterpublics are not “virtuous” and often “practice their own modes of informal exclusion and marginalization.”42 Indeed, the African-American counterpublic has been critiqued by scholars like Dawson for adhering to masculinist norms, for being elitist, and for being non-existent.43 The latter two critiques will be addressed.

The African-American counterpublic still exists, however, in some instances aspects of the African-American counterpublic have been overlooked, and, in others instances, aspects of the African-American counterpublic are changing forms.44 That notion sharply contrasts with Dawson’s mid-1990’s notion that “a black public sphere does not exist in contemporary America,” a notion that he rearticulated in 2001.45

42 Fraser, 124.
44 Harris-Lacewell, 7.
45 Ibid.
Dawson conceives of the African-American counterpublic as a formal set of institutions, communication networks, and practices that are used to discuss and promote solutions to the political disenfranchisement and economic instability in the Black community. For Dawson, the African-American counterpublic primarily consists of the Black church, traditional Black press (i.e. Black newspapers), and race-based organizations and social clubs. However, as Princeton University political scientist Melissa Harris-Lacewell contends, Dawson’s conception is somewhat elitist and does not consider the fact that lay African Americans, in addition to the Talented Tenth, have “carved out” a significant number of informal spaces where they can “engage in everyday talk,” “everyday talk” that challenges the ideological notions of White hegemony. Essentially, Dawson conceives of the African-American counterpublic as an entity constructed from the top down as a result of defacto, and later, dejure segregation and African Americans conception of autonomy. Although Harris-Lacewell agrees with Dawson’s analysis of the origins of the African-American counterpublic, she believes the African-American counterpublic is also constructed from the bottom up. For Harris-Lacewell, the “everyday talk” of lay African Americans plays a critical role in the formation of the African-American counterpublic even though the primary purpose of the discourse is not political and is, instead, used for identity and interest formation. Consequently, Harris-Lacewell

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46 Dawson, 41.
47 Harris-Lacewell, 7.
48 Dawson, 27.
49 Harris-Lacewell, 4-11.
includes Black-owned barbershops, Black Entertainment Television, and Internet sites like Black Voices in her conception of the African-American counterpublic, the latter of which is representative of Harris-Lacewell’s attempt to redefine the traditional definition of the Black Press. Harris-Lacewell also includes the Black church in her conception of the African-American counterpublic. However, her idea of the Black church does not start and end with the “messianic” Black leader in the pulpit and his or her subordinate leaders (Assistant Pastors, Deacons and Deaconesses, and Bible Study Teachers) but includes the “everyday talk” of the lowest ranking members of the congregation. All of these elements of the contemporary African-American counterpublic are spaces, literally or figuratively, where seemingly apolitical discussions allow Blacks to informally position themselves in regard to the White-dominated body politic.

*Digital African-American Underground*

Although I am writing in the vein of Harris-Lacewell’s reconceptualization of the African-American counterpublic as an entity that is formed from the top down and the bottom up, I attempt to augment her definition by proposing the existence of and offering an analysis of a digital African-American underground. The digital African-American underground is a wholly abstract virtual space that exists in the confines of email inboxes and cell phones. Unlike the elements of the African-American counterpublic that Dawson and, to a lesser extent Harris-Lacewell identify, the digital African-American underground cannot be located and ostensibly exists beyond the gaze of Whites. By contrast, even though the Internet site *Black Voices* that Harris-Lacewell mentions in her scholarship is a virtual African-American counterpublic space, it can be easily located by

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typing in the web address http://www.blackvoices.com/. In addition, blogs, social networking sites, and messages boards, which are also part of the virtual African-American counterpublic, can be easily located too. The aspect of the virtual African-American counterpublic that I attempt to deconstruct, which I call the digital African-American underground, does not include easily locatable virtual spaces like Web sites and is essentially an electronic form of word-of-mouth, a 20th century form of communication that operates similarly to the African-American rumor culture identified by scholar Patricia A. Turner in her book *I Heard it Through the Grapevine*. A place where orality (conversation) and literacy (writing) are blurred and neither are privileged. The only way to be included in the digital African-American underground is to be forwarded a chain letter or sent a text message by another member. Inclusion in the digital African-American underground is beyond the receivers control. Members of the digital African-American underground cannot go to a place, type in an address, or sign up to be a member. In fact, for non-members of the digital African-American underground, the only evidence that the ostensibly subversive community dialogue exists can be heard in questions like “Did you get that email about…?” or “Did you get that text…?” between members. The digital African-American underground also differs from others aspects of the African-American counterpublic because its racial designation as “African-American” is not because of its origins in the African-American community, or its African-American leadership or membership but, instead, because of its content, content that is intended for an African-American audience. Consequently, I am not concerned about whether African Americans are only forwarding or receiving these text

52 Everett, 13.
messages and emails to other African Americans. Instead, I am concerned about whether the content that is circulated via the digital African-American underground is intended for an African-American audience and why the content that is circulated has been relegated to the electronic space. My analysis of the digital African-American underground suggests that the African-American counterpublic is not disintegrating but, instead, overlooked in non-traditional spaces and changing forms. Film and media studies scholar Anna Everett reaches a similar conclusion in her book *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace*. “…It appears that computer mediated communication (CMC) is refashioning the concept and utility of a viable black public sphere in the new millennium,” Everett wrote.  

Although Everett’s conclusion is primarily based on easily locatable Internet spaces like websites, blogs, and social networking sites, her analysis applies to the digital African-American underground. The digital African-American underground is simultaneously replacing and extending traditional aspects of the African-American counterpublic sphere. But the African American counterpublic is not the only space that it is redefining.

**African Americans and the Internet**

The digital African-American underground is redefining the Internet, a space that was initially considered a White-dominated electronic frontier. Everett explores that assumption in *Digital Diaspora*. According to Everett, early surveyors of the Internet believed that African Americans suffered from “Black technophobia,” a term she uses to describe the perception that African Americans were afraid of the new technology.  

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53 Everett, 14.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., 19.
Early surveyors of the Internet believed that African Americans suffered from “Black technophobia” as a result of their subpar education, naturally inferior intellects, and/or limited access to the Internet. Contrarily, Everett finds in her content analysis of the Internet that African Americans were “homesteading on the electronic frontier” in the technology’s earliest days, and that African Americans’ participation online significantly increased during the mid 1990s. Blacks did not suffer from “Black technophobia” in the 1990s Everett concludes, but, instead, “Black technophilia.” Even African-American children in inner city Harlem were fighting for computer literacy in after school programs. In fact, Everett not only finds that the African Americans were claiming electronic space on the Internet, but she also finds that African Americans were claiming electronic space on the Internet in order to resist. To revise an old social protest slogan: African Americans were taking “It” from the street to the Internet, and, in others instances, African Americans were taking “It” from the Internet to the streets. “It” being social protest dialogue and computer literacy. To illustrate that point, Everett provides an in-depth analysis of the Million Woman’s March in Chapter Two of *Digital Diaspora*. Everett finds that Black women used the Internet, email specifically, to orchestrate the massive, grassroots movement and to debate about the coverage of the massive, grassroots movement later. According to Everett, the “Internet’s counterlogic of decentralization,” allowed these women to bypass traditional media (i.e. newspaper,

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56 Everett, 19-20.
58 Ibid., 29-31.
59 Ibid., 29-31.
60 Ibid., 49 and 52.
television, and radio), which marginalizes women and people of color, and “reposition themselves at the center of public life in America, if only for a day.” The digital African-American underground potentially allows Blacks to reposition similarly. At the end of Everett’s discussion about the Million Woman’s March in Chapter Two, she challenges the slogan of the short-lived 1980s television program South Africa Now. “If it’s not on TV, it doesn’t exist,” the program began. Everett modifies the show’s slogan. “If it’s not on TV, it most likely does exist on the Internet,” she wrote. As a result of the existence of the digital African-American underground the slogan needs to be re-modified. “If it’s not on TV, it most likely does exist on the Internet, or beneath the Internet in the digital African-American underground,” especially when the mainstream news media is invading traditional African-American counterpublics.

The Invasion of Traditional African-American Counterpublics

The existence of the digital African-American underground is particularly significant in regards to the 2008 presidential election, because, as a result of Obama’s Blackness, traditional African-American counterpublics like the church, barbershop and music industry were under the microscope of the media – the traditional mainstream news media (Television, Newspaper and Radio), and the alternative new media (Blogs, Social Networking Sites, and YouTube). Journalists were constantly in search of the “Black Perspective,” especially when campaign surrogates made racially charged statements. As

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63 Everett, 78.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
a result, Black rhetoric expressed in traditional African-American counterpublic spaces became public discourse. “Much of the time, blacks have a pretty good sense of what whites think, but whites are oblivious to common black perspectives,” wrote New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof in an opinion piece titled “Obama and Race.” He continued. “What’s happening, I think, is that the Obama campaign has led many white Americans to listen in for the first time to some of the black conversation — and they are thunderstruck,” Kristof rightly concluded, alluding indirectly to the existence of the African-American counterpublic and the hidden transcript that it produces. The column was written in response to Obama’s “Speech On Race,” a speech Obama delivered to quell the controversy surrounding statements made by his former pastor the Reverend Jeremiah A. Wright. In a sermon titled “Confusing God and Government” delivered at the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago on April 13, 2003, Wright spoke about the ungodly political actions of the United States, specifically the War in Iraq. “War does not make for peace,” he said. “Fighting for peace is like raping for virginity.” Toward the middle of the sermon Wright focused on the Prison Industrial Complex and its attack on the African-American community.

The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three strikes law and then wants us to sing God Bless America. Naw, naw, naw. Not God Bless America. God Damn America! That’s in the Bible. For killing innocent people. God Damn America for treating us citizens as less than human. God Damn America as long as she tries to act like she is God and she is Supreme.

68 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
Instead of broadcasting the entire passage above, major broadcast stations constantly looped the underlined portion, which a significant number of Whites interpreted as unpatriotic, at best, and racist, at worst. Obama acknowledged the disconnect in his “Speech on Race.” He also, like Kristof, indirectly acknowledged the existence of the African-American counterpublic and the hidden transcript it produces.

For the men and women of Reverend Wright’s generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away; nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years. That anger may not get expressed in public, in front of white co-workers or white friends. But it does find voice in the barbershop or around the kitchen table. And occasionally it finds voice in the church on Sunday morning, in the pulpit and in the pews. The fact that so many people are surprised to hear that anger in some of Reverend Wright’s sermons simply reminds us of the old truism that the most segregated hour in American life occurs on Sunday morning.

Notice Obama’s allusion to the public transcript, the anger that does not get expressed by Blacks in public with “white co-workers or White friends,” and his allusion to the hidden transcript, the anger that is expressed by Blacks “in the barbershop or around the kitchen table. And occasionally…in the church on Sunday Morning.” The Reverend Wright controversy was a classic example of African-American counterpublic speech, Black Liberation Theology specifically, entering the public sphere as a result of Obama’s Blackness. Even Obama recognized that fact. The previous passage from his “Speech on Race” is proof.

There are other examples of African-American counterpublic speech entering the public sphere during the 2008 presidential election. The African-American community’s “Is [Obama] Black enough?” debate is an example. In fact, an article about the debate

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73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
titled “So Far, Obama Can’t Take Black Vote for Granted” by journalist Rachel L. Swarns appeared on the front-page of The New York Times. Unsurprisingly, the journalist visited an African-American barbershop to find sources close to the debate. Swarns wrote:

At the Shepherd Park Barber Shop here, where the hair clippers hummed and the television blared, Calvin Lanier summed up the simmering ambivalence. Mr. Lanier pointed to Mr. Obama’s heritage — he is the American-born son of a black father from Kenya and a white mother from Kansas — and the fact that he did not embody the experiences of most African-Americans whose ancestors endured slavery, segregation and the bitter struggle for civil rights.\(^7\)

For Whites, who, in general, are unfamiliar with the intra-racial politics of the African-American community that often leads to the exclusion of other Blacks based on culture, the “Is [Obama] Black Enough?” debate was a peek into African-American counterpublic discourse. Jesse Jackson’s tasteless, off-air admission that he wanted to “cut [Obama’s] nuts off” is yet another example of Black counterpublic speech becoming public discourse.\(^6\) Jackson’s comment was evidence of a generational divide between old guard Civil Rights leaders and new era post-racial African-American politicians. This African-American counterpublic political fissure was also covered by The New York Times in an article titled “Post-Race: Is Obama the End of Black Politics?” by Matt Bai on August 6, 2008.\(^7\) Finally, the last example of African-American counterpublic speech becoming public discourse involves the music industry. On July 28, 2008, Ludacris released a song

titled “Politics” in which he voiced his support for Obama and blasted Senators Hillary Clinton and John McCain.78 “[Obama] said I handled my biz, and I’m one of his favorite rappers. Would give Luda a special pardon, if I’m ever in the slammer,” Ludacris rapped. He then concluded, “Better yet put me in office, make me a vice president, Hillary hated on you, so that bitch is irrelevant.” 79 Two days after the song was officially released, The New York Times published a blog that chastised the rapper for “going too negative.”

“Politics” was originally released on a mixtape titled “Gangsta Grillz: The Preview.” A mixtape is an underground, disc jockey-produced compilation album that is, unlike a major album release, only bought by hip-hop aficionados. However, the song quickly became a viral video on the Internet and, consequently, caught the media’s attention. As a result of Obama’s Blackness even the underground world of hip hop was not off limits to the tentacles of mainstream White journalists. The invasion of traditional African-American counterpublic made the digital African-American underground more necessary. The post-racial narrative did too.

Post-Racialism

The post-racial narrative posits race as a 20th century relic, a feat that some Americans have attempted to achieve since the end of the Civil Rights Movement with post-Civil Rights Era color-blind ideology. By positing race as a 20th century relic, 21st century Black racial grievances and pride become even more illegitimate in the public sphere. Even First Lady Michelle Obama’s pride was deemed illegitimate during the

79 Ibid.
2008 presidential election. At a campaign event in Madison, Wisconsin on February 18, 2008, First Lady Michelle Obama said, “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.” Mrs. Obama’s words were castigated by numerous people, White liberals and conservatives, who thought her comments were “strikingly ungracious,” “unpatriotic” and evidence of “undigested racial anger.”

Although she expressed pride, she was characterized as bitter. “How can an Ivy League-educated, African-American woman who is close to becoming the First Lady of the United States claim that she has never been proud of her country?” liberal and conservative White critics wondered, as if Mrs. Obama’s success was evidence that she did not endure hardship. “She sure seems to have a non-trivial chip on her shoulder,” wrote Mickey Kaus, a columnist for Slate, a liberal online magazine. Her comments suggest “that America is not fundamentally good but flawed, but rather fundamentally flawed and only occasionally good,” wrote John Podhoretz, a columnist for Commentary, an online conservative magazine. Podhoretz continued, “Michelle Obama — from the middle-class South Shore neighborhood of Chicago, Princeton 85, Harvard Law 88, associate at Sidley and Austin, and eventually a high-ranking official at the University of

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Chicago — may not be proud of her country, but her life, like her husband’s, gives me every reason to be even prouder of the United States.” 84 White critics misused Mrs. Obama’s “proud” rhetoric to characterize her as an “Angry Black Woman” who was unappreciative of America’s limitless Opportunity – limitless Opportunity ostensibly proven by her and her husband’s post-racial success. 85

The Root: An Online African-American Magazine

On the online African-American magazine The Root, the post-racial narrative was frequently mentioned by contributors in news stories, opinion pieces, and columns during the 2008 presidential election. Usually contributors used qualifiers in reference to the post-racial narrative, qualifiers such as the phrase “so-called” that was, among other phrases, a clear indicator that the contributors did not agree with the media circulated narrative’s claims. 86 For example, after esteemed Harvard University African-American Studies Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. was arrested by a White police sergeant for trying to get into his own upscale Cambridge home, author Keith Josef Adkins, a Black award-winning playwright, wrote, “It’s absolutely ridiculous to think we live in a post-racial America and profiling black men is part of the DNA of America.” 87 Similarly, in another column on The Root about the increasing diversity of comic book characters and

their audience, contributor Adam Serwer, a White writer, wrote “even here…post-racialism rears its nagging, pleading head.” Serwer was reflecting on a comment made by a middle-aged man at the New York Comic Con, an annual comic book convention in New York City. “You know, when you put on a mask, you don’t have skin color, you’re just a hero like everybody else,” the man told Serwer in reference to the African-American superhero Black Panther. And in another column on The Root about the Republican Party’s decision to elect Michael Steele, an African American, as its chairman, contributor Sophia A. Nelson, an conservative African-American political analyst, wrote, “The party seemed afraid not to elect either [Ohio Secretary of State Ken] Blackwell or Steele as chairman in a so-called, post-racial Obama presidency world.”

Blackwell, like Steele, is African-American. Although contributors like Adkins, Serwer, and Nelson make fleeting references to the post-racial narrative in their columns, other contributors, like Marc Lamont Hill, an assistant professor of urban education and American studies at Temple University, devoted entire columns to debunking the narrative. Hill’s critiques are similar to the critiques of post-racialism discussed in Chapter 1.

After Obama's recent success with white voters…many have announced America's transition into a post-racial moment… For whites, an Obama victory would serve as the final piece of evidence that America has reached full racial equality. Such a belief allows them to sidestep mounds of evidence that shows that…black people remain consistently assaulted by the forces by white supremacy. For many black people, Obama's success would provide symbolic value by showing that the black man…can make it to the top. Although black faces in high places may provide psychological comfort, they are often

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Hill’s comments, like Adkins, Sewers, and Nelson’s, are constructed for a virtual African-American counterpublic space, *The Root*, that is intended to give people with marginalized perspectives on various aspects of the Black experience a public voice. *The Root* is a virtual African-American counterpublic space that allows marginalized voices to bypass traditional media gatekeepers who promote dominant narratives like post-racialism. However, although *The Root* is a non-traditional counterpublic space, it suffers from the same “top-down” elitism that traditional African-American counterpublics do. Most of the contributors to *The Root*, although usually Black, are middle to upper-middle class professionals who have achieved notoriety in their respective fields. Contrarily, the digital African-American underground was not intentionally created to give African Americans a voice, and consists of the “everyday talk” of laymen, “everyday talk” that laymen construct as private African-American in-group speech. Speech that is often more militant than the speech found on public virtual African-American counterpublic spaces like *The Root*. The digital African-American underground, unlike *The Root*, is also not easily locatable.

**Part II**
The Digital African-American Underground

*Emails*

The American Negro has a double-consciousness. At least, that is what the esteemed African-American scholar W.E.B. DuBois theorized in his canonical book *The
Souls of Black Folks, which was published in 1903. According to DuBois, the Negro was born with a “veil” and “gifted with a second-sight” in a country that “yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.” The “other world” DuBois alludes to is the White world, a world that exists within the mind of the Negro.

It’s a peculiar sensation this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.92

The excerpt above is probably the most quoted passage from The Souls of Black Folks and has been reconfirmed and contested by scholars over the last century. A few days after Obama won the 2008 presidential election, African-American political scientist Melissa Harris-Lacewell wrote a column titled “We, The People” for The Nation that situated Dubois theory of double-consciousness within the context of the election.93

According to Harris-Lacewell, Obama’s election signified a momentary healing of the DuBosian double-consciousness, an instance when she and other African Americans could feel Black and American simultaneously.94 She extrapolated on that idea on her personal blog “The Kitchen Table.”95

As I stood in a sea of black, brown and white faces I waved a flag for the first time in my life. And I really meant it. I felt truly patriotic. I felt keenly the DuBoisian double consciousness that is such an ordinary part of my life… And then I felt the dualism close. I felt no distance at all between my blackness and my Americaness. It was an experience that I cannot describe. It is not one that I was seeking or that I even

91 Dubois, 56.
92 Dubois, 56.
94 Ibid.
knew existed. But the moment I felt myself become a citizen and wept for the joy and exhilaration of it.96

On January 12, 2010, Harris-Lacewell visited The Ohio State University.97 And when asked about the existence of a digital African-American underground she discussed the electronic subaltern space in the context of her aforementioned theory about the election of Obama.98 The election of Obama allowed for the healing of the double-consciousness for a moment, she emphasized, but that healing quickly deteriorated and African Americans felt part Black and part American again, which is how they felt before the election.99 According to Harris-Lacewell, digital African-American underground dialogue that vacillated between urging African-Americans to capitulate to White fear of Black overthrow and militant Black pride represent that conscious dualism.100

The chain letter “November 5th Etiquette for My People!!” is a perfect example digital African-American underground dialogue that encouraged African-Americans to capitulate to White fear of Black overthrow. Although the etiquette chain letter was briefly discussed in the previous section, an in-depth analysis will be provided here. As previously mentioned the etiquette chain letter included a list of 13 “behaviors” that African Americans should “avoid” at work, “at least for a few days” after an Obama victory to prevent White backlash. “No crying, hugging, or shouting, ‘Thank You, Lord,’ at least not in public,” was at the top of the list. “No high-fives, at least not unless the area is clear and there are not witnesses,” immediately followed. And toward the end of

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97 Melissa Harris-Lacewell, “Social and Behavioral Sciences Seminar on Civil Rights” (lecture, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, January 12, 2010).
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.

Note: I attended the event and posed the question to Harris-Lacewell.
the list, “No doing the ‘George Jefferson’ dance, unless you’re in your office with the door closed.” 101 Interestingly, the author uses “not-in-public” qualifiers at the end of each aforementioned prohibition, which suggests that although these celebratory behaviors are normal responses to achievement that would accurately reflect African-Americans’ genuine feelings about an Obama victory, African Americans cannot perform them in the company of Whites. The etiquette chain letter encouraged African Americans to mask behavior and speech that violated the public transcript in the White-dominated public sphere, and to relegate that hidden behavior and speech to counterpublic space. Although the word Whites is not explicitly used, it is implied by the dichotomy author’s erects between his people who eat “barbeque ribs or fried chicken,” do the “cupid shuffle or electric slide,” and say “Boo Yeah! and In your face!,” which are stereotypical Black behaviors, and the other people who might be “afraid” “nervous” or angry. 102 The White versus Black dichotomy is further reified by the author’s use of the words “we,” “us,” and “they.” The etiquette chain letter is also evidence of African Americans’ sense of linked fate. Essentially, the etiquette chain letter implies that all African Americans must avoid these behaviors or all African Americans will suffer. Harris-Lacewell acknowledged receiving a similar chain letter. 103 According to Harris-Lacewell, she received a chain letter that encouraged African-Americans who had Obama bumper stickers on their cars to be courteous in public in order to prevent jeopardizing the

101 Note: George Jefferson was a character on the hit television show The Jeffersons. The character was played by actor Sherman Hemsley. The Jeffersons was a hit television show about an African-American couples whose dry cleaning business becomes successful and allows them to “move on up” to a luxury apartment on a ritzy, predominately White side of Manhattan.
102 A. G., e-mail message to author, February 24, 2008.
103 Melissa Harris-Lacewell, “Social and Behavioral Sciences Seminar on Civil Rights” (lecture, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, January 12, 2010).
Democratic candidate’s chances unnecessarily.\textsuperscript{104} Similarly, the bumper sticker chain letter that Harris-Lacewell received encouraged African Americans to mask behavior and speech that contradicted the public transcript in the White-dominated public sphere, and relegate that hidden behavior and speech to counterpublic space. That trend has historical roots.

\textit{Historical Roots of African-Americans’ Public and Hidden Transcripts}

Historically, African Americans have had to adopt a “strategic pose” in the White-dominated public sphere, especially in regards to race relations\textsuperscript{105} The concept of a “strategic pose” was articulated by scholar James C. Scott in \textit{Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts} and can be understood in the context of the African-American experience as a figurative mask that Black Americans wear to hide their socially unacceptable opinions about racial inequality in the United States. The poem “We Wear the Mask” by African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar discusses African Americans’ figurative mask in somber detail. “We wear the mask that grins and lies/It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes/This debt we pay to human guile; With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,” Dunbar wrote. The excerpt from “We Wear the Mask” clearly describes how the “mask” African Americans wear in the public sphere is a falsity that disguises the truth. Scott deems the “grins and lies,” fake “smiles,” and “shaded eyes” that Dunbar describes the public transcript, or the “open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate.”\textsuperscript{106} Although Dunbar does not explicitly identify Whites as the antagonist, it is implied. According to Scott, subordinate groups adopt a “strategic pose”

\textsuperscript{104} Melissa Harris-Lacewell, “Social and Behavioral Sciences Seminar on Civil Rights” (lecture, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, January 12, 2010).
\textsuperscript{105} Scott, xii.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 2.
while interacting with dominate groups for several reasons, but usually because the dominant group can “harm or help…in some way.”  

Scott’s analysis applies to the interaction of African Americans, the subdominant group, and Whites, the dominant group. African Americans often temper their behavior and speech while interacting with Whites out of fear that their behavior and speech will be castigated or misinterpreted. Racism causes Whites to castigate and/or misinterpret Black behavior and speech that violate an unspoken “Stay In Your Place” social standard. For example, Black pride is often misinterpreted by Whites as separatist, Black intelligence is often misinterpreted as uppity and, and Black dissatisfaction is often misinterpreted as ungratefulness. In Chapter 8 of the book *Multicultural Social Work Practice*, scholars Derald Wing Sue and Monica McGoldrick discuss the non-verbal and verbal miscommunication that occurs between White social workers and Black clients.  

While Black Americans may misinterpret White communication styles, it is more likely that Whites will misinterpret Black styles. The direction of the misunderstanding is generally linked to the activating of unconscious triggers or buttons about racist stereotypes and fears they harbor. As we have repeatedly emphasized, one of the dominant stereotypes of African Americans in our society is that of the hostile, angry, prone-to-violence Black male.  

Instead of constantly being castigated or misinterpreted by Whites for their behavior and speech, a significant number of African Americans strike a “strategic pose.”  


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107 Scott, 1.  
109 Ibid.  
110 Scott, xii.
pose” in the White-dominated public sphere. Although a thorough analysis of African-American sports history yields a significant number of examples of African-American athletes who struck a “strategic pose” in the White-dominated public sphere in order to be a “credit to their race,” boxer Joe Louis is the best example. Interestingly, Louis was forced to adopt a “strategic pose” not because of his personal behavior and speech, but because of the behavior and speech of his predecessor Jack Johnson, the first African-American heavyweight champion. As historian Randy Roberts explains in the documentary Joe Louis: America’s Hero Betrayed, Johnson “saw it as his job in life to piss of White America.” Roberts is right, Johnson did not “stay in his place.” He married White women, flaunted his wealth, and gloated after defeating opponents. He “inspired so much hatred in White America, that during the 19 years after the end of his reign Black fighters were prevented from competing in the heavyweight championship.” “White Americans generally reacted to Johnson’s heavyweight reign as, ‘This is proof of the danger in letting a Black man have real opportunity,’” biographer Chris Mead said in the documentary. Conversely, Louis’ agents forced him to adhere to a White-friendly script in the public sphere. He was not allowed to take photographs with White women. He was not allowed to gloat after defeating opponents. “If he [cheered] it could start a riot,” African-American comedian Dick Gregory explained in the documentary, referring to the race riots that erupted after Johnson won the heavyweight

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111 Scott, xii.; **Note:** Although that reality might seem unusual initially, it is understandable given the fact that African Americans achieved a significant number of “firsts” in entertainment industries like sports. Initially, these were the only industries that allowed African Americans to breakthrough and compete, and even these industries engaged in racists practices before and after African Americans broke the color line.  
112 Scott, xii.  
114 Ibid.  
115 Ibid.  
116 Ibid.
championship in 1910. Louis’s agents essentially handed him “a set of rules” and told him that he needed to “follow these rules.” The purpose was to make Louis appear to be the complete opposite of Johnson. “[W]e want you to be humble at all times,” biographer K. Smith said in the documentary, imitating Johnson’s agents. According to scholar David K. Wiggins, author of *Glory Bound: Black Athletes in White America*, being humble meant that Louis “couched [his] complaints of racial discrimination in words acceptable to whites,” to prevent Whites from misinterpreting his complaints as “acting like a Nigger.” Wiggins’ description of Louis’ behavior is a clear example of how the behavior and speech of African Americans, the subordinate group, is forced to conform the standards of Whites, the dominant group. Although the dominant group never completely “controls the stage,” as Johnson proves, “their wishes normally prevail.” Louis’ African-American fans also struck a “strategic pose” in the White-dominated public sphere. In the documentary, former President Jimmy Carter recalls the day Louis won the heavyweight championship.

I was 14 years old and our family had the only radio in the area. Some of our African-American neighbors came and asked my father if they could come and listen to the fight. So daddy thought there would be three or four of them, but when the time for the fight came, I would guess about 40 showed up. It was very interesting because the customs of the south then prevailed, and there was not a sound out of the Black listeners. Nothing. Just absolute quiet after Louis won. And then they walked across the railroad, a couple hundred yards away and all hell broke loose. They celebrated all night long until early–almost daylight.

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117 Note: Boxing during the early 20th century was more than a sport, it was a litmus test for racial superiority, so when Johnson won the heavyweight championship Whites were humiliated and often unleashed their humiliation on African Americans.
119 Ibid., 4.
120 Ibid., 4.
Carter’s recollection is intriguing because it an example of a public transcript of humbleness, the “strategic pose” that was adopted by the African Americans as a result of the “customs of the South,” and a hidden transcript of pride, the “offstage dissent” of the African Americans that occurred across the railroad tracks “behind the backs” of Whites. The African Americans who watched the fight at Carter’s house were elated by Louis’ win, but were afraid that expressing that elation on the White side of the railroad tracks would have negative consequences.

At the end of the etiquette chain letter, the author writes “Now go vote!!!” The author’s command is directed to African Americans, the etiquette chain letter’s intended audience. The author’s “now go vote” command signals a shift in the etiquette chain letter’s purpose. Whereas the previous 13 prohibited behaviors advise African Americans to strategically capitulate to White fear of Black overthrow, the “now go vote” command advises African Americans to non-violently resist White fear of Black overthrow by voting. “Now go vote [for Obama the African-American candidate that will change the status quo],” the etiquette chain letter implies. Essentially, the author wants African Americans to take “It” from the Internet to the streets. Although it can be argued that non-violent resistance is a form of capitulation in that it assuages White fear of Black overthrow, it is also different in that it directly, rather than indirectly, challenges White dominance. Other chain letters circulated throughout the digital African-American underground encouraged non-violent resistance too. For example, a chain letter with the subject line “Don’t Buy The Dolls” encouraged African-Americans to boycott the stuffed

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122 Scott, 4 and xi.
123 A. G., e-mail message to author, February 24, 2008.
124 Ibid.
125 Ibid.
126 Ibid.
Sasha and Malia Obama figurines made by Ty Dolls, the toy company that makes Beanie Babies.\textsuperscript{127} “They don’t want to pass his bills, but they want to make money off his children,” the author said.\textsuperscript{128} “And I’m willing to bet that the CEO didn’t vote for Obama!”\textsuperscript{129} The author’s use of the word “they” implies that the he or she is attacking White members of Congress, specifically members of the nearly all-White Republican Party who are resistant to Obama’s legislative agenda. The doll chain letter ended, like most chain letters, with a command. “Pass It On!” the author wrote. The author’s “Pass It On!” command is evidence that he or she intended to use the digital African-American underground to launch a boycott of the dolls.\textsuperscript{130} Another chain letter with the subject line “Our President” encouraged African Americans to electronically circle Obama in prayer.\textsuperscript{131} “We got him!” the author of the prayer chain letter wrote at the beginning.\textsuperscript{132} Like the author of the doll chain letter, the author of the prayer chain letter encouraged African Americans to “keep this going!”\textsuperscript{133} “Folks, if you have not noticed… No president has ever worked this hard for our country. Many wonder, does he ever sleep??,” the author of the prayer chain letter wrote.\textsuperscript{134} “Only god can sustain such energy, knowledge, and person. Will you please join me in this prayer…?”\textsuperscript{135} A prayer, specifically written for Obama, was included in the chain letter. An excerpt from the prayer is below.

\begin{quote}
Lord, we pray for optimum health, mental clarity, and political prosperity for President Barack Obama. We pray that what he lacks in
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item 127 K. J., e-mail message to author, February 11, 2008.
\item 128 Ibid.
\item 129 Ibid.
\item 130 Ibid.
\item 131 E. J. B., e-mail message to author, July 16, 2009.
\item 132 Ibid.
\item 133 Ibid.
\item 134 Ibid.
\item 135 Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
political “experience” you make up for with supernatural wisdom and power. We also pray that when his enemies come upon him they will stumble and fall; and that your love will fill his heart to the end that “your will” be done through him… In Jesus’ precious name, Amen. 136

“All you are asked to do is keep this circulating if you are so inclined. May God bless and keep you,” the prayer chain letter ended. Voting, boycotting, prayer… These are all forms of resistances evoked by the authors of the chain letters. Whether these chain letters actually persuaded the intended African-American audience to resist in these ways cannot be determined.

A chain letter with the subject line “These Pictures Should Be In Every School” encouraged African Americans to share three computer-generated illustrations with “our younger generation.” 137 The school chain letter, unlike the etiquette, doll, and prayer chain letters, was merely intended to generate Black pride. In the first illustration, Air Force One is flying in the sky, a bust of Obama is on the left, and an African-American man is bent over on the right. The African-American man is dressed in hip hop clothing. His pants are sagging below is buttocks. “To fly on this... You have to look better this,” the illustration reads. In the second illustration, the White House is in the background and a bust Obama is on the left, and the African-American man is standing on the right with his hands inside his sagging jeans. “To live in this crib... You have to look the part,” the illustration reads. In the third illustration, the U.S. Capitol is in the background and a bust of Obama is on the left, and the African-American man is standing with his back toward the audience. “Change has come. Pull them up. You can’t move forward. If the world only sees your behind.” (Please see “Figure 2.2: Obama and Thug Photo” below.) The illustrations were created by King Photography and Graphics. The company’s name is on

136 E. J. B., e-mail message to author, July 16, 2009.
137 K. J., e-mail message to author, July 24, 2009.
the bottom of the illustrations along with order information. Although the illustration were copy written material intended for purchase, members of the digital African-American underground appropriated them to generate Black pride. By appropriating website material for digital African-American underground use, members of the electronic subaltern space ensure that other interested parties are privy. Essentially, members of the digital African-American underground who appropriate website material deem that material newsworthy and proceed to deliver that news instead of banking on other interested parties to discover it. Similarly, a White House photo of an African-American boy touching Obama’s hair was appropriated by members in the digital African-American underground to generate Black pride. The original caption of the photo read: “President Barack Obama bends over so the son of a White House staff member can pat his head during a family visit to the Oval Office May 8, 2009. The youngster wanted to see if the President's haircut felt like his own.” The chain letter caption read: “The little boy wanted to see if the present’s hair felt like his own. This picture is worth more than a thousand words. It may generate many thousands of words and thoughts.” Or, the hair chain letter may generate Black pride, yet another form of resistance evoked. (Please see “Figure 2.3: Obama “Can I touch your hair?” Photo” below.)

139 K.C., e-mail message to author, June 1, 2009.
Text Messages

A few hours after Obama won the presidential election on November 4, 2008, a flurry of humorous, racially charged text messages about the significance of the historic moment were circulated via cell phone throughout the digital African-American underground. Most of the text messages posited Obama’s success as a moment of vengeance for Black America, not a moment to capitulate to White fear of Black overthrow like the etiquette chain letter previously discussed. The text messages that were circulated are below:
1. They didn’t want to give us 40 acres and a mule so we will take 50 states and a White House!
2. All White people must report to the cotton fields tomorrow at 7 a.m. for orientation.
3. Make sure you carry plenty of water because there will be lots of salty crackers out today!
4. You know why it’s cold outside? Because people said it would be a cold day in hell before a Black man would become president. Bundle up bitches!
5. Rosa sat down so Martin could walk. Martin walked so Obama could run. Obama ran so our children could fly.

Text Messages One and Two explicitly counter the post-racial narrative by acknowledging that racial grievances still exists among African Americans and Whites, and that African Americans will and should seek revenge for those racial grievances. Specifically, Text Message One argues that Whites failed to address African American racial grievances, and therefore African Americans were forced to do something radical, namely “take 50 states and a White House.” Text Message Two jokingly implies that African Americans desire to enslave Whites or, more simply, treat Whites like Whites have treated African Americans. “Now, as a result of Obama, it is Whites’ chance to do the work African American people did for over 400 years,” the text message implies. Text Message Three cautions African Americans to prepare for angry, read racist, Whites who will be mad that the president is African-American. Notice the use of the racial slur “cracker,” a derogatory term for Whites. Text Message Four demands that people in general, and White people specifically, who thought an African-American president was impossible to “Bundle up bitches!” or quickly become accustomed to that reality. A Black female member of the digital African-American underground echoed this sentiment in response to a chain letter with the subject line “Urgent: Please Support Our President” that encouraged Obama supporters to electronically “sit-in” on an online MSNBC poll about Obama’s performance and give the newly elected president good
According to the urgent chain letter, “Republicans” were “flooding [the poll] with ‘F’ votes in an attempt to do “everything in their power to downplay the excellent work that President Obama is doing to lead the country.”

“Pass this address on, and go to it to vote, it only takes a moment to do so,” the author of the urgent chain letter wrote. Before forwarding the urgent chain letter to over 70 family members, friends, and co-workers, Patti Jackson an African-American woman wrote the following:

In reality my opinion to MSNBC’s poll is; We already voted and he won so get with the program and get used to it. Fox News and MSNBC have both been very negative and prejudice towards Mr. President Obama so I will not be taking their poll. Now if it was CNN, then I would take a look at it. But no I’ve placed my vote and thus far he is doing just fine in my eyes.

Notice how Jackson’s “get with the program” demand is similar to Text Message Four’s “Bundle up bitches!” demand. Jackson’s response is significant because it explicitly states that racial “prejudice” is to blame for Obama’s negative performance ratings. Jackson also suggests that certain major broadcast stations exercise racial prejudice in their news coverage. Finally, Text Message Five has a nostalgic tone of pride and does not possess the militant tone of the other four text messages, however, the word “our” is evidence of the African-American speaker’s possessive investment in Obama’s success.

Without the word “our,” Text Message Five reads quite differently. All five text messages either resist the post-racial narrative and/or offer a counter narrative. Although, the text messages are jokes, the humor cannot be easily dismissed. In the book Our Souls to Keep: Black/White Relations in America, scholar George Henderson asserts that

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140 K.W., e-mail message to author, March 12, 2009.
141 Ibid.
142 Ibid.
143 Ibid.
144 Ibid.
145 Ibid.
African Americans use humor as a mask. “Black humor, particularly as addressed to Whites masks disappointment, anger, and sometimes self-debasement,” Henderson writes. “In many ways, black humor is inexpensive therapy.” Underneath the five humorous text messages lie Black pride (5), anger (1, 2), excitement (1, 2, 3, 4), revelry (3, 4), nostalgia (5), and vengefulness (1, 2). Henderson is right. Black humor can be used as a mask, which is another form of resistance.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the book *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*, political psychologist Ashis Nandy offers a redefinition of Western colonialism. According to Nandy, a “second form” of Western colonialism exists, a form that colonizes subjects’ minds and bodies. Consequently, the modern West, according to Nandy, has transformed from a “geographical and temporal” entity to a “psychological category.” “The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside; in structures and in minds,” Nandy wrote. As a result, Nandy contends, Western colonialism now “survives the demise of its empires.” Ultimately, according to Nandy, the modern West is an intimate enemy that exists in the minds of its non-Western victims. Interestingly, African-American educator Carter G. Woodson reaches a similar conclusion about White Oppression in his book *The Mis-Education of the*

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148 Nandy, xi.
149 Ibid.
150 Ibid.
151 Ibid.
152 Ibid.
According to Carter, White oppression is ever-present in the minds of its African-American victims.

If you can control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his action. When you determine what a man shall think you do not have to concern yourself about what he will do. If you make a man feel that he is inferior, you do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status, for he will seek it himself. If you make a man think that he is justly an outcast, you do not have to order him to the back door. He will go without being told; and if there is no back door, his very nature will demand one.154

Throughout *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Carter, like Nandy, “takes the psychological resistances to colonialism seriously,” meaning that both scholars recognize that a subjugated group’s resistance to an ever-present *mental* enemy is equally as important, if not more important, as a subjugated group’s resistance to a physically present enemy.155 That logic legitimizes the digital African-American underground as a potential site of resistance. Although the electronic subaltern space is not necessarily impermeable to White critique, it can be exclusively used by African Americans to challenge the ever-present White enemy within.

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154 Ibid.
155 Nandy, xii.
“Heritage”

…Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?¹

Countee Cullen, Poet

¹Famous Poets and Poems, “Heritage by Countee Cullen,” Famous Poets and Poems,
CHAPTER 3: “Our Son is There, in the White House, God Bless Us”
Barack Obama, Blackness, and the Continuity and Discontinuity of Racial Identification

Introduction

The welcome reception President Barack Obama received when he arrived in Accra, Ghana on Friday, July 10, 2009, was, as The New York Times accurately described it, “ electrifying.” When Obama stepped off Air Force One, he was “mobbed” by dancers, drummers, and “seemingly the entire Ghanaian government.” Before his motorcade started winding through the West African country’s capital city, thousands of people had already crowded streets, rooftops, and balconies. Others peaked out of windows, dangled from scaffolding, and even climbed trees in a desperate attempt to see the United States’ first African-American president. But Ghana’s excitement about Obama’s visit was palpable months before the American president’s arrival. “Savior-

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like” welcome signs, posters, and billboards decorated the city. For example, one small poster, hanging outside of a clothing store bore his portrait and read, “Daddy, My Hero.” Adjacent to that poster, was another poster that bore Nelson Mandela’s portrait that also read, “Daddy, My Hero.” (Please see “Figure 3.4: Mandela Poster and Obama Poster Photo” below.) The implicit comparison of Obama to Mandela, South Africa’s former president, was hard to miss. Several hotels, restaurants and barbershops across Ghana appropriated Obama’s name: Obama Hotel, Obama Restaurant, and Great Obama Spot, a bar. In addition, a significant number of regional artisans, the woodcarvers and Adinkra Cloth makers specifically, used his portrait and campaign symbol respectively to promote their businesses. (Please see “Figure 3.2: Ghanaian Woodcarver and Obama Poster Photo” and “Figure 3.2: “Ghanaian Artisan’s Shop and Photos of Obama Photo” below.) The list goes on… T-shirts made out of Obama Kente Cloth were already hanging outside of street side shops. (Please see “Figure 3.1: Obama Kente Cloth Shirt Photo” below.) When a racially mixed group of American tourists walked through Kejetia market, an old, portly Ghanaian woman shouted, “Obama people! Obama people! Obama people!” There were also three songs written in Obama’s honor that were continuously played on local television networks: “Akwaaba Obama” by Quick Action featuring Santana, “Akwaaba” by the All-Stars, and


6 Note: The word “Daddy” in Ghana, like the word “Uncle,” is a slang term used to imply that a male figure possesses a paternal connection to his followers like a father possesses to his child. The paternal connection allows the male figure to wield great power, influence, and care over his followers. Note: “Akwaaba” means welcome.

“Barack Obama” by Blakk Rasta. The song “Barack Obama” was performed by Blakk Rasta at a breakfast with Obama, President Atta Mills, the leader of Ghana, and other Ghanaian dignitaries. “It’s a great moment for Ghana and Africa,” Emmanuel Tsawe, a bus driver in Ghana told a Reuters reporter the night Obama arrived. His 43-seat bus was covered with Obama posters. “We have to celebrate our own.”

The welcome reception Obama received when he arrived in Accra, Ghana was “electrifying” indeed, mostly because of his identity. That fact was anticipated by the mainstream American news media who constantly, as expected, parsed the symbolism for their audience weeks before his arrival: The first African-American president of the United States is, as a result of his Kenyan father, a generation removed from the African continent and will be visiting a predominately Black, sub-Saharan African country for the first time since his election, the mainstream news media reported. Never mind that he had visited Egypt a month earlier, that visit, the mainstream news media stated indirectly, would be unlike his visit to Ghana because of the country’s regional location, and, more importantly, its racial identity. “Not counting Egypt, where he will travel next month,”

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New York Times reporter Peter Baker wrote, “it will be Mr. Obama’s first trip to Africa as the first African-American president.” A visit to Black Africa, historically, but wrongly, considered real Africa by explorers, historians, and reporters, would be a “homecoming” for the 43rd African-American president of the United States, not a visit to “European Africa.” Well, not exactly a homecoming, some reporters contended, because Obama’s real “ancestral homeland” of Kenya was too dangerous to visit as a result of a recently contested political election. The American media was not the only stakeholder that perceived Obama’s visit to Ghana as a homecoming, Ghana did too. The proof is embedded in the aforementioned bus driver’s statement. “We have to celebrate our [emphasis added] own,” he said. For example, before Obama’s speech to the Ghanaian parliament, Mills introduced the rock-star president proudly. “You're welcome. You're welcome,” Mills said. “You've come home.” Even Obama framed his visit to Ghana as a homecoming. “I have the blood of Africa within me,” he declared proudly. “And my family,” Obama continued, stopped by the audience who interrupted him with applause. “My family’s own story encompasses both the tragedies and triumphs of the larger African story.” For a moment Obama was not an African American but, as Kenyan scholar Ali Mazrui describes, an “American African,” African, not American, being the

noun. And most Ghanaians agreed. That reality presents a complex case study of identity politics.

Figure 3.1: A shirt made out of President Barack Obama Kente cloth in Ghana.

Figure 3.2: A poster of Obama hanging on the door of a Ghanaian woodcarver’s shop.


Note: According to Mazrui, African Americans are American first and African second and American Africans are African first and American second. In addition, African Americans are the product of the Diaspora of Slavery and American Africans are the product of the Diaspora of Colonization. His distinctions between African Americans and American Africans are very similar to the distinctions I make in the Introduction.
According to anthropologist Edward M. Bruner, Ghanaians, unlike African Americans, possess a non-essentialist orientation to race, which means that race for Ghanaians is not a “single overriding classificatory criterion for the sorting of human beings.”15 Bruner’s analysis is based on qualitative data he collected in Ghana from Ghanaians and African-American tourists and expatriates. Interestingly, Mazrui reaches the same conclusion in his book *The African Predicament and the American Experience*, a book about African American and “American African” relations in the United States. Mazrui concludes that African Americans, products of the Diaspora of Slavery, give race more relevance in their lives, approximately 65 percent the scholar guesstimates, than American Africans, products of the Diaspora of Colonization, approximately 35 percent.16 For Mazrui to reach the same conclusion in the context of the United States is interesting given the fact that race is *extremely* salient in the powerful Western country. Together, however, Bruner and Mazrui’s analysis are particularly interesting when applied to the identity politics that were operating among Ghanaians and African Americans.

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16 Mazrui, 32.
Americans, in relation to Obama, an African-American man of Kenyan descent. The reality of Obama’s heritage sparks a few questions. How do Ghanaians orient themselves to race? Do Ghanaians largely identify with Obama’s Blackness, “Africanness”, or both? Similarly, how do African Americans orient themselves to race? Do African Americans largely identify with Obama’s Blackness, “Africanness”, or both? And finally, how do Ghanaians’ and African Americans’ orientation to race complicate the narrative of post-racialism? Answers to these questions are not easy. Qualitative data suggests that Ghanaians’, do, in general, have, as Bruner suggests, a non-essentialist orientation to race, which means that their reception of Obama as “our own” was mediated by race but largely predicated on his literal and imagined “Africanness,” the fact that unlike most African Americans, his wife Michelle Obama for example, he is, as a result of his Kenyan heritage, a generation removed from the African continent. Ghanaians’ cultural attachment to Obama is largely an intra-continental sub-Saharan pan-Africanist attachment. Contrarily, African Americans, in general, have, as Bruner suggests, an essentialist orientation to race, which means their reception of Obama as their own was mediated by culture but largely predicated on his race, or Blackness. That said, the orientation of Ghanaians and African Americans to race is contextual, meaning that it greatly depends on the personal, individual racial ideology, and the political, sociopolitical conditions and history. However, intra-racial conflicts between Ghanaians and African Americans in Ghana and the United States suggest that both groups do, in general, possess different orientations to race.

17 Note: I use the term mediated here to suggest that race was the means by which Africans made a cultural connection to Obama. My hunch is that if Obama had North African ancestry, Ghanaians wouldn’t have been as excited about him.

18 Note: I use the term mediated here to suggest that culture was the means by which African Americans made a racial connection to Obama despite his White and African ancestry.
In Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, Obama was at the center of an analysis of a post-racial narrative that claims the United States racial barriers have largely deteriorated; a narrative that ignores the material realities of African Americans and undermines their political struggle and achievements. However, in Chapter 3, Obama will be the springboard for an analysis of a post-racial narrative about the contemporary continuity and discontinuity of racial identity nationally and internationally, which is illuminated by the identity politics operating among Ghanaians and African Americans and the intra-racial conflicts among Ghanaians and African Americans. Specifically, the intra-racial conflicts between Ghanaians and African Americans suggests that both groups largely do not, as a result of cultural barriers, identify as a single race, a reality that is in and of itself post-racial. However, the identity politics that were operating among Ghanaians and African Americans in relation to Obama were mediated or predicated on race respectively. That reality further contradicts the post-racial narrative. Obama is an ideal springboard for this argument because of his cosmopolitanism.\(^{19}\) As a result of being the president of the United States, he is the country’s First Citizen (“politēs”).\(^{20}\) However, as a result of the president of the United States’ commanding international influence, firstly, and Obama’s race, Kenyan ancestry, and loose Islamic ties, secondly, he is also the world’s First Citizen (“comos”).\(^{21}\) Consequently, it is important to investigate the international implications of the post-racial narrative, a narrative that hinges on his success. Ghana is an ideal West African country to locate this argument because of its history. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, for example, was literally launched from its

\(^{20}\) Ibid.
\(^{21}\) Ibid.
coast. In addition, Ghana was the first sub-Saharan African country to gain independence from colonial power in 1957. And finally, the country’s first president, the American-educated Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, espoused Pan-African ideology, a belief birthed by Disaporic Africans during the late eighteenth century that all people of African descent should transcend intra- and inter-ethnic differences and organize politically as “One.”

That history, unlike the history of other West African countries, deeply resonates with an educated stratum of African Americans who tour and move to the country each year.

**African American Tourists and Expatriates in Ghana**

Although a precise explanation for the different orientations that Ghanaians and African Americans have to race, and by consequence the African Diaspora, may not exist, the fact that these different orientations are real and create turmoil cannot be disputed. As scholar Obiagele Lake noted in his article “Toward A Pan-African Identity: Diaspora African Repatriates in Ghana,” which was based on a series of interviews with 84 repatriates living in Ghana, “Most diaspora Africans agreed that Ghanaians accept them socially, but not culturally.” For African-American tourists and expatriates who travel to Ghana, the trip is essentially a pilgrimage, a pilgrimage intended to reconnect the descendents of African slaves to their ancestors. Consequently, the experience for African-American tourists and expatriates is usually emotional. Upon entering slave fortresses like Elmina, for example, African-American tourists often burst into tears.

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24 Bruner, 291.
25 Bruner, 293.
Other African Americans refuse to pay entry fees to slave castles on the bases that their ancestors did not pay to leave the country and they, as descendents, will not pay to return.\textsuperscript{26} African Americans, usually expatriates, also stage performances, pray and fast inside slave castles in order to reconnect with their ancestors.\textsuperscript{27} In the article “Is the Black Man’s History Being ‘White Washed?’” about the attempt of museum officials at Cape Coast Castle to renovate the slave dungeon, Imakhüs Robinson describes her experience.

As I stood transfixed in the Women’s Dungeon, I could feel and smell the presence of our Ancestors. From the dark damp corners of the that hell-hole I heard the whimpering and crying of tormented Mothers and Sisters being held in inhumane bondage, never knowing what each new day…would bring. Strange white men that kept coming in to look at them, feeling them, examining their private parts as if they were some kind of animals; removing them for their own sick pleasures, while waiting the Devil ships that would take them into a four hundred year long hell.\textsuperscript{28}

Not all African Americans have an emotional experience like Robinson. In the book \textit{Black Power}, critically acclaimed African-American writer Richard Wright chronicles his travel experience in Ghana during the 1950s. While Wright is there, he visits Elmina and is “awe-inspired” by the castle’s “majesty,” an impression that is distinctly different from Robinson’s. Some Ghanaians do not see the pilgrimage of African-American tourists and expatriates as a homecoming. For them, slave castles like Elmina are primarily revenue generating tourist attractions, and the typical African-American response to these historic sites is “too emotional.”\textsuperscript{29} Other Ghanaians feel that African-Americans benefited from slavery since, as a result of living in a fully developed westernized country, they are

\begin{footnotes}
\item[26] Bruner, 298.
\item[27] Ibid., 291.
\item[28] Ibid., 294.
\item[29] Ibid., 293.
\end{footnotes}
usually wealthier and better educated.\textsuperscript{30} Some Ghanaians also criticize African Americans, expatriates specifically, for being racist, because of their exclusion of Whites from events in Ghana that celebrate Diaspora history.\textsuperscript{31} In the past, the Robinsons, the African-American owners of the seaside resort One Africa, have not allowed Whites to attend their reenactment of the slave trade “Through the Door of No Return,” which is performed inside a slave castle.\textsuperscript{32}

\textit{Theorizing Ghanaians’ and African Americans’ Different Orientations to Race}

In the article “Tourism in Ghana: The Representation of Slavery and the Return of the Black Diaspora,” Bruner attributes the different perceptions that African Americans and Ghanaians have of the African Diaspora to their different conceptualizations of “Blackness.”\textsuperscript{33} African Americans, Bruner argues, have an essentialist conceptualization of “Blackness” that is primarily based on skin color while Ghanaians do not.\textsuperscript{34} Bruner states that while Ghanaians recognize the similarity in skin color between themselves and African Americans that “criterion” barely influences how the West Africans classify human beings.\textsuperscript{35} Bruner’s thesis is complicated by the fact that he is referring to a specific stratum of the African-American community, educated, middle-class African Americans who are conscious about their community’s historical struggle and see Ghanaians as brothers as sisters. As Lake notes in his article, the majority of the diasporic Africans in Ghana had at least a bachelor’s degree, were wealthier than the average Ghanaian and, most importantly, desired to connect spiritually, emotionally and

\textsuperscript{30} Bruner, 296.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 295.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 295-296.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 301-302.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
The same cannot be said for other African Americans who do not make the trip, which is confirmed in qualitative studies of African-American and sub-Saharan African relations in the United States. Despite the fact that Bruner’s thesis is based on a small portion of the African-American population, his idea that Ghanaians possess a non-essentialist view of race is pretty accurate. That fact is evident in their use of the term “Obruni,” a term that literally means “One From Beyond the Horizon” and figuratively means “Foreigner” or “Stranger” and is used in reference to Americans, White and Black, Europeans, Asians and others that are not Continental Africans. In addition, the term “Obruni” is used in reference to Ghanaian mulattoes, who usually have lighter skin than most Ghanaians, and their descendants regardless if they are lighter or darker skinned. The term “Obruni” is often considered offensive by African-American tourists and expatriates who want to be embraced as “Brothers” and “Sisters.” Scholar Saidiya Hartman explores the issue in her book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, which is about her experience in Ghana. Hartman finds, like most African Americans who travel to Ghana, that, as the use of the term “Obruni” implies, her national identity eclipses her racial identity in the West African country. Essentially Hartman is faced with the limits of her racial identity, an identity that was formed by an absurd American system that binds people together by race despite wide-ranging cultural differences. “Obruni forced me to acknowledge that I didn’t belong any place. Obruni lurked like an undertone in the hustle of street peddlers. People said it casually in my face, until I sucked my teeth and said ‘ehh!’” informing the speaker that first, I knew what

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36 Lake, 26-27.
37 Bruner, 295.
the word meant, and second, I didn’t relish the label,” she writes. “But then I learned to accept it. After all, I was a stranger from across the sea. A black face didn’t make me kin.” Hartman is right, a Black face in Ghana does not make an African American kin. So what, besides the fact that he is the president of the United States, is different about Obama?

University of Princeton philosophy professor Kwame Anthony Appiah attributes the different orientations that Africans and African Americans have to race, and by consequence the African Diaspora, to culture. According to Appiah, although African and African-American history share similar themes, the cultural contexts are profoundly different. Although he recognizes that “colonial Africans” were subjected to “different degrees” of European racism under different colonial circumstances, he contends that Africans were less inclined to cling to “New World” “folk theories” of race because colonialism, unlike slavery in the United States, was wrought in majority African contexts and did not disrupt African families.40 Ironically, however, in an article by scholar Emmanuel K. Akyeampong, about the Lebanese community’s experience in Ghana, a group of people who are resented for the same social reasons African Americans resent Africans who come to the United States, Akyeampong notes that the Mediterranean “sojourners” are also rejected in the predominately Black African country because of their race.41 Although Akyeampong’s analysis of the Lebanese’ experience in Ghana does not invalidate Appiah’s claim, it does suggest that while Africans do not

39 Hartman, 4.
chronically “cling” to race like African Americans, they do sporadically “cling” to race under certain sociopolitical circumstances. Appiah’s analysis of Africans’ orientation to race is below:

What race meant to the new Africans affectively, however, was not, on the whole, what it means to educated blacks in the New World. For many African-Americans, raised in a segregated American society and exposed to the crudest forms of discrimination, social intercourse with white people was painful and uneasy. Many of the Africans, on the other hand, my father among them, took back to their homes European wives and warm memories of European friends; few of them, even from the ‘settler’ cultures of East and southern Africa, seem to have been committed to ideas of racial separation or to doctrines of racial hatred. Since they came from cultures where black people were in the majority and where lives continued to be largely controlled by indigenous moral and cognitive conceptions, they had no reason to believe that they were inferior to white people and they had, correspondingly, less reason to resent them.42

Although, Appiah rightly acknowledges that Africans and African Americans experience White oppression in profoundly different cultural circumstances, he wrongly asserts that Africans do not harbor resentment toward Europeans. His problematic assertion might be the result of the fact that his analysis about African race relations is largely based on the African bourgeois, a class of African people who were close to the White colonial leadership and treated better than poor Africans. The reality is, however, that there are Africans who hate White colonizers, and there are Africans who are victims of self-hatred.

African Resentment of Europeans and Self-Hatred

In Black Power, Wright meets a young Ghanaian man who wants to be a detective to catch the British criminals who stole his country’s “land, gold and diamonds.”43 “You see, sar, we don’t like the British. I met American soldiers during the war and they were

42 Appiah, 6-7.
nice, sar,” the young man says. “Oh sar, you don’t know the English!” he continues. “You can’t trust them, sar!”44 The young Ghanaian man’s admission that he does not like the British contradicts Appiah’s assertion that Africans do not harbor resentment toward Europeans. In addition, Appiah’s assertion that colonialism did not affect African pride and self-confidence is also wrong. African-American tourists and expatriates often complain that White Europeans are served before them. African-American historian Walter Rucker, who has taken a study abroad group of undergraduate and graduate students to Ghana for the past five years, experienced this phenomenon at Coconut Grove Beach Resort in Cape Coast.45 Although he was the first person at breakfast one morning, a White European man was served before him.46 In addition, the assistant tour guide for Rucker’s study abroad group stated off-handedly that when he was a boy the local fisherman that him and his brother used to help in Accra would give them extra fish because of their “advantage:” The brothers were lighter-skinned. (As previously stated, in Ghana, Lighter-skinned children, who are usually the product or the descendents of an interracial union, are often called “Obrunis.” The term “Obrunis” in that context functions as a term of endearment, which seems to imply that lighter-skinned children possess a certain type of privilege.47) Finally, in Black Power Wright meets a Nigerian Supreme Court Justice on the ship to Ghana, the justice is an anglophile that Wright deeply disagrees with politically. “I like to live well. I love good food, good whiskey,” the Nigerian judge tells Wright, distinguishing himself from the “natives running naked in the bush.” “You don’t know Africa. There are men in Nigeria who still enjoy human

44 Wright, 96.
46 Ibid.
47 Lake, 30.
Although, Nigerian judge’s statements could be simply read as a class divide, his characterization of African “natives” is eerily similar to deeply racist European travel accounts. All of these examples complicate Appiah’s assertion that Africans do not harbor resentment toward European colonizers and do not feel inferior. An analysis of African and African American relations in the United States will further complicate Appiah and Bruner’s analyses.

African and African-American Relations in the United States

The relationship between Africans and Africans Americans in the United States, is perhaps more tenuous than it is abroad. The problem is due to mis-education, misperception, and mistrust on the both sides. In a newspaper article titled “A Diverse – and Divided – Black Community: As Foreign-Born Population Grows, Nationality Trumps Skin Color” published in The Washington Post on February 24, 2002, journalist Darryl Fears explored the tension. Fears’ conclusion was ironically post-racial: A new African-American community was forming in the United States, he wrote, a community where nationality and culture are more important than race. His conclusion will be discussed in more depth later. Dr. Marvin Dunn, a psychologist who was quoted in the article, summarized the tension rather bluntly. “Whether you talk to Haitians, Bahamians, Jamaicans or Africans about African Americans, you hear the same things: ‘They are violent, they don’t respect their elders, they have no sense of family, they don’t

48 Wright, 32.
want to work, they depend on welfare,’” Dunn said. 51 “When you talk to African Americans about the immigrants, you hear, ‘They’re here to take our jobs. They’ll work for nothing. They’re cliquish. They smell. They eat dogs. They think they’re better than us.’” 52 He concluded, “It’s shocking, the amount of animosity and suspicion. There’s no moral high ground here.” 53 Fears, the reporter, seemed to attribute the problem to cultural context, like Appiah. “Unlike black people in the United States, West Indians and Africans grew up among black majorities that were ruled by black governments,” he wrote. 54 Fears is right about the populations in Black African and Caribbean countries, but wrong, to a certain extent, about the governments. Despite Fears’ intellectual mishaps, he was right about the strained relationship of Africans and African Americans, their strained relationship has several consequences: 1) The potential for a transformative social, political and economic partnership in the United States and abroad is undermined. 2) Africans in the United States feel less American. 3) African Americans in the United States and abroad who see Africans as their Brothers and Sisters feel less connected to their African roots. 4) Africans and African Americans are marginalized by an ironic group of oppressors, other Black people. “I love black people, but there is a negative relationship between immigrants and African Americans,” a 34-year-old Ghanaian-American Odehyee Abena Owiredua told The Washington Post. “They look down at me, not at me. I feel inferior around them. It’s the ignorant questions I get. ‘Do you guys live

51 Ibid.  
52 Ibid.  
53 Ibid.  
54 Ibid.
in houses over there?’ When I get those kinds of questions from black Americans, I feel very hurt.”

Research Studies Conducted About African and African-American Relations

Three qualitative studies confirm The Washington Post article’s analysis. The first study was conducted by sociologist Tamar Becker at the University of California - Los Angeles during the 1967-1968 school year, ten years after Ghana became the first independent sub-Saharan African nation. His findings were published in an academic article titled “Black Africans and Black Americans on an American Campus: The African View.” In that study, Becker interviewed 57 Black African students from 16 different sub-Saharan countries. He found that Whites confer a certain amount of prestige upon African students, not African Americans, on college campuses, prestige that African students are reluctant to shun. “Whenever people find out that I am an African, they treat me nicely, but when I am just a black man, they treat me badly,” an Ethiopian student stated. (A similar observation was made in The Washington Post article.) Unfortunately, Becker found, the prestige Whites confer upon African students, among other historical, geographical and culture factors, leads to negative social relations between African and African-American students. In fact, Becker found that the African students intentionally distanced themselves from the African-American students and

57 Ibid., 176.
58 Becker, 176.
gravitated toward Whites in order to protect their privileged status, despite acknowledgements that their treatment by Whites felt, at times, disingenuous.59 “You would think that I am going to be some type of president in my country!” a Nigerian student said.60 Although Becker does not investigate the motives of Whites who confer prestige upon the African students, the Nigerian student’s admission seems to suggest that it might have been a conscious or subconscious attempt to divide and conquer a potentially powerful racially homogenous group. Becker also found that African students distanced themselves from African-American students and gravitated to Whites because, according to the African students, the African-American students were harder to communicate with because, as one student stated, “Negroes are from a lower class” and “uneducated.61 “I don’t meet Afro-Americans on my level,” a Nigerian student said.62 The African students specifically felt that the African-American students were uneducated about Africa, and resented African-American students who “falsely” identified with the continent.63 A Rhodesian student said, “Negroes are ashamed of their race because of ignorance, and when they see me they think of Tarzan and ask me how it feels to live in a tree.” A Congolese student felt similarly. The African American, according to him, was “a confused person. He does not have an identity.”64 Finally, African students were annoyed by the African-American students’ hyper-focus on race relations, which, in general, was deemed by them as “an American,” not African, problem. “When I talk to Negroes the racial problem always comes up,” a Nigerian

59 Ibid., 172-173 and 176.
60 Ibid., 176.
61 Becker, 178.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 177.
64 Ibid.
student said. “I find it rather boring.” The African students’ admission that the “racial problem” was annoying seems to suggest that while the American system, and the African Americans students who were an extension of that system, sought to characterize the African students as Black, the African students felt inclined to resist that system. The tendency of the African students to gravitate toward Whites, was perceived by the African-American students as being “brainwashed.”65 “It makes them hate us,” a Ghanaian student said in reference to the African-American students’ perceived resentment of the African students’ relationships with Whites.66 Unsurprisingly, the African students did not think they were brainwashed, but, instead, thought that African-Americans suffered from an inferiority-superiority complex either in relation to Africans or in relation to themselves.

Although Becker believed that the prestige that Whites conferred upon African students was a source of the problem, he thought that culture was a problem too. African students, he wrote, possessed a Protestant work ethic that allowed them to “ease” into the United States higher education system and White middle-class society. African students orientation toward achievement differed from their African-American counterparts, for African students successfully completing college was “inextricably linked” to national duty and personal fulfillment.67 According to Becker, there was a feeling in the African-American community, especially among militants, that college was for the “White man” and that personal educational attainment undermined the Black community’s struggle.68 Becker does not provide a source for that claim, so it is hard to know where he got that

65 Becker, 178.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Becker, 178.
misguided, unsubstantiated view. Becker also found that there was a social class gap between African and African-American students. Most of the African students perceived themselves as members of the intellectual and political elite in their home countries and competed vigorously among their compatriots to attend college abroad.\textsuperscript{69} He does not describe the social class of the African-American students he refers to in the study, which probably included members of the African-American elite and several first generation college students. Finally, Becker characterized the experience of Africans as a “net gain,” which meant that those interviewed felt that the United States in general, and the racial climate specifically, was better than expected.\textsuperscript{70} Although, over time the “net gain” that African students experienced slowly diminished it was fundamental in shaping their attitude toward the United States. The primary problem with the study is apparent in the title, only Africans were interviewed, which means that the reader only gets a feeling of how the African students perceived the African-American students, and only the African students’ perception of how the African-American students perceived them. But there are other problems too. The study is limited to a college campus, which means that class, education level, and the proximity that each group has to the other is skewed. In addition, the college was located on the West Coast. The relationship between Africans and African-American students might have been drastically different at a university in a city like New York during the late 1960s where Africans, and West Indians for that matter, have historically made up a significant portion of the population. Finally, the study was conducted over 40 years ago, newer studies are needed to estimate whether the situation has improved, remained constant, or worsened.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 171.
Two additional studies that were analyzed, one conducted during the early 1990s and the other conducted during the beginning of the 21st century, confirm that little has changed. In the first study, psychologists Jean S. Phinney and Mukosolu Onwughalu at California State University in Los Angeles used a survey to measure racial identity and perception of American ideals among 93 African students and 113 African-American students, most of whom were middle to upper middle class, although the socio-economic status of African students tended to rank higher than the African-American students.71 (Please see additional information in footnote.) Their findings were published in an academic article titled “Racial Identity and Perception of American Ideals Among African American and African students in the United States” in 1993.72 Unlike Becker who used qualitative methods to measure the problem, Phinney and Onwughalu use quantitative methods to measure the root of the problem. In the study, the researchers found that, race became more salient for African students overtime.73 Second, the researchers found that more African students thought American ideals were more applicable to their experience than African-American students, a finding that was reminiscent of Becker’s “net gain” finding in the earlier study.74 Phinney and Onwughalu noted for example that the African students, like African-American repatriates and tourists in Ghana, come to the United States with an “idealized view” and, as a result are, 


Note: There is an inversion that happens with class among Africans and African-American in the United States and Abroad. African-American tourists and repatriates tend to be wealthier than the average Ghanaian, and African immigrants, those that immigrate legally and are not refugees, tend to be wealthier than African Americans. "Historically, every immigrant group has jumped over American-born blacks," historian Eric Foner said in a New York Times article “More Africans Enter U.S. Than in Days of Slavery” by Sam Roberts that was published on February, 21, 2005. "The final irony would be if African immigrants did, too."

72 Ibid., 127.
73 Ibid., 134.
74 Phinney and Onwughalu, 134.
unlike African-Americans, more aware of the advantages than the disadvantages of living in the country.\textsuperscript{75} Third, Phinney and Onwughalu found that although more African students felt that American ideals were more applicable to their experience than African-American students, African-American students felt more American, a finding that echoes Mazrui’s distinction between African Americans and “American Africans.”\textsuperscript{76} Fourth, the researchers found that racial identity was unrelated to the African students’ self-esteem, but significantly related to the self-esteem of the African-American students.\textsuperscript{77} African-American students who expressed racial pride, had higher self-esteem.\textsuperscript{78} And finally, the researchers found that applicability of American ideals was unrelated to the African students’ self-esteem and negatively related to the African-American students’ self-esteem, that is, African-American students who had higher self-esteem tended to think that American ideals were less applicable to them.

Although the study critically examines the source of the tension between African and African-American students, there are several problems. The primary problem is that the researchers used the word “ethnicity” on the questionnaire as a stand-in for race since the survey “was designed for use with diverse ethnic groups.”\textsuperscript{79} The researchers assumed that since race was salient in the United States and since, with time, “ethnicity” became more salient for the African students, that the African students interpreted “ethnicity” to mean race instead of “foreign.” The researchers never thought about whether the African students interpreted ethnicity to mean “African,” which Becker noted in his study constricts national identity and ultimately becomes a separate racial identity for African

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 131. 
\textsuperscript{76} Phinney and Onwughalu, 135.; Mazrui, 14 and 32. 
\textsuperscript{77} Phinney and Onwughalu, 137. 
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 138. 
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 132.
students living in the United States. In addition, if the African students did interpret “ethnicity” to mean “race” and ultimately to mean “Black,” the question becomes whether they merely saw “Black” as an adjective or a unifying, oppressive political experience like the African-American students. The researchers also made a few gross generalizations about the African students’ experience: 1) African students, as a result of living in predominately Black countries, grow up in situations where race is not salient, and therefore are less likely to have negative experiences related to race. 2) Since race is not as salient in sub-Saharan countries, skin color politics hardly exist. The segregation that often exists in formerly colonized countries between Africans and White European expatriates, in addition to the abundance of ads for skin lightening creams in African countries like Ghana contradict Phinney and Onwughalu erroneous claims. In the third study, scholars Jennifer V. Jackson and Mary E. Cothran used a 20-item survey instrument to explore relationships between African, African American and African Caribbean people living in the United States. Their findings were similar to Becker, Lake, and Phinney and Onwughalu: Africans were perceived to be “brainwashed” by Whites. African Americans were accused of having a “slave mentality.” And the existence of an inferiority-superiority complex was also mentioned by Africans and African Americans. Interestingly, in most cases, the relationship between Africans and African-American people was more tenuous than African-American and African-Caribbean

80 Becker, 174.
81 Phinney and Onwughalu, 137.
82 Ibid., 137.
84 Ibid., 597.
85 Jackson and Cothran, 596.
relations and African and African-Caribbean relations. At the end of the article, Jackson and Cothran offered a solution.

“African people must accept their common ancestry without putting others down by accentuating feelings of superiority. African descendants of slaves must get rid of emotions and mental baggage (from slavery and colonization) and unify themselves as one people.”\textsuperscript{86}

For now, that solution seems unfeasible. Even Obama, who bridges both worlds, gets caught in between African and African-American socio-cultural politics.

\textit{Obama and Post-Racial Identity Politics}

At the beginning of the 2008 presidential election, in 2007 that is, most African-Americans had not warmed up to Obama.\textsuperscript{87} He was a largely unknown candidate, beyond his wildly moving speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston, and his chances of winning, in the minds of most Americans, African Americans in particular, seemed slim since he was a Black man running against a White, seemingly unstoppable frontrunner, Hillary Clinton. But those are not the only reasons that African Americans did not latch on to Obama. African Americans did not think he was “Black enough.”\textsuperscript{88} African Americans thought he was “identifiably Black,” but they did not think he was culturally Black.\textsuperscript{89} (Technically Obama is biracial, like several people attempted to emphasize throughout the election, but in a country like the United States with a stringent

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 601.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
racial binary, he is considered Black by most Americans. The candidate also considers himself to be Black.) As scholar Kwaku Larbi Korang suggested, African Americans thought Obama was an “ethnic outsider,” an “ethnic outsider” who was outside of “normal [American] race relations.”

Obama was an “ethnic outsider” for two reasons: He was raised by his White mother and White grandparents. And, more importantly, his “Black” was African. “I’ve got nothing but love for the brother, but we don’t have anything in common,” Debra J. Dickerson, an African-American author and essayist wrote in a Salon article in 2007. “Now, I’m willing to adopt him. He married black. He acts black. But there’s a lot of distance between Black Africans and African-Americans.” Eventually, skeptical African Americans did “adopt” Obama, Dickerson hints at some of the reasons African-Americans adopted him in her essay, but not all. The primary reason African Americans began to take a second look was because he won the Iowa caucus at the beginning of the primary. After African Americans decided Obama was viable, they began to look deeper at his background, personality, and political resume. Several aspects of Obama “Blackened” him. His wife Michelle Obama, an African American woman raised on the Southside of Chicago and the descendant of South Carolina slaves, “Blackened” him, and most likely struck a chord with a significant number of African-American women who are not blind to the fact that highly successful

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92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.
Black men, like Obama, frequently marry White women. “It’s true. A lot of black women fell for Barack Obama the moment they saw his wife.” Vanessa Williams wrote, a writer for African-American online magazine *The Root.* ⁹⁴ “Gotta love brothers who show their affection to dark-skinned girls. Gotta love it even more when the brother is the president.”⁹⁵ Indeed, highly successful Black men do “outmarry” at a higher rate than Black women, because Black women are perceived to lack the “value” of other races of women.⁹⁶ In addition, Obama’s track record for helping minorities “Blackened” him. Obama’s affiliation with the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright, the Black pastor of the predominately black Trinity United Church of Christ, “Blackened” him. Finally, the racially tinged language that was used against him by the Clinton campaign during the South Carolina primary “Blackened” him as well. All of these factors eventually made Obama culturally “Black.” And, for an African-American community that had been desperate for a hero since King, that was enough. Collectively, the African-American community decided that they were willing to prop him up him for political gain.

Ghanaians embraced Obama for the same reasons African Americans, in the beginning of the 2008 presidential election, did not. That fact is evident in newspaper articles about Obama’s visit to Ghana. “Since he is from Africa, he is half-African, this is the time we should show we are brothers and we should give the support to him. “In fact, that is the main reason that we felt that this is one of us,” Nancy Sam told a *Voice of*

⁹⁵ Ibid.
America reporter before Obama’s visit to Ghana. Sam was the lead organizer for Friends for Obama, Ghana, a group that was responsible for erecting some of the largest billboards to welcome Obama to the West African country. She is Ghanaian. According to Sam, after members of her organization realized that they could not “physically” donate money to the Obama campaign during the election, they decided to convince family members in the United States to donate the money for them. “They have to do everything they can to make this dream of Obama come to pass,” Sam told the reporter.97 Aku Ammah-Tagoe, a Ghanaian reporter for Newsweek, embraced Obama similarly. Ammah-Tagoe described Obama as an “adopted son.” “That makes sense,” Tagoe wrote in reference to his/her characterization of Obama as an “adopted son.” “Obama is the embodiment of Africa’s promise, one of the brightest stars to emerge from a continent that is largely maligned or ignored.”98 Notice how Ammah-Tagoe implies that Obama is from Africa even though he was born in the United States. Ammah-Tagoe also described Obama as a American African, not an African American. “In classic Ghanaian fashion, people here have decided that this Kenyan-American is really ‘our son,’” Ammah-Tagoe wrote.99 Sam and Ammah-Tagoe’s embrace of Obama is similar to Tsawe’s, the Ghanaian bus driver discussed previously. “We have to celebrate our own,” he said.100

99 Ibid.
All three are Ghanaians are making a cultural attachment to Obama that is mediated by race.

Conclusion

Although the different orientations that Ghanaians and African Americans have to race causes conflict, scholars believed, years before Obama, that the problem had positive post-racial implications. Bruner, for example, concluded his article “Tourism in Ghana” with the idea that diaspora-indigenous relations, which he found to be mostly negative, were a lesson for the racially divided United States. “In my view, not to ‘see’ African Americans as black provides a liberating corrective for an American society beset with racial problems, where race, defined solely by skin color, is widely perceived as a ‘natural’ and biologically given categorization,” he wrote.101 Becker concluded his article “Black African and Black Americans on an American Campus” similarly. “Only a significant reduction of race as a socially relevant factor in the internal stratification system in the United States would appear to be able to resolve the strain in relations between the two groups,” he wrote.102 Even Fears, the journalist who wrote the Washington Post article, came to a post-racial conclusion after talking to a Ghanaian woman he interviewed. “America's black community, which now includes more West Indian and African immigrants than ever, is no longer the monolithic group that many politicians, civil rights advocates and demographers say it is,” he wrote.103 The different reactions that most Ghanaians and African Americans had to Obama, is proof of all three

101 Bruner, 302.
102 Becker, 180.
men’s claims… When Black African people rejoiced after the election, “‘Our son is there, in the White House, God bless us.’”\textsuperscript{104} And when African-American people rejoiced after the election, “Right now, he is a newer-age Martin Luther King. He is making quantum leaps for black people.”\textsuperscript{105} Most of the African people were clinging to Obama’s literal and imagined “Africanness” and most of the African-American people were clinging to his “Blackness.” The two identities that, for both groups, are hardly interchangeable. And two identities that, for both groups, involves race.


CONCLUSION

Ultimately, “‘We Ain’t Ready to See a Black President’: Barack Obama and Post-Racialism in American Society” is an analysis about the danger of American news media-circulated narratives. Narratives circulated by the mainstream news media reduce reality to archetypes and, consequently, obscure the complexities of the truth.1 “Slippage” occurs, meaning that although the post-racial narrative commends Whites for doing the cultural work of voting for an African-American president, their role as oppressors remains unmentioned and the role of African Americans as the oppressed goes unmentioned too.2 Basically, racism is still characterized as a “Negro Problem” that Negroes overcame.3 In addition, the post-racial narrative about White racial tolerance does not follow a previous mainstream news media-circulated narrative about White racial intolerance. Racism has not been widely acknowledged by the media since the Civil Rights Movement, now the post-racial narrative acknowledges that racism existed during that nebulous post-Civil Rights Era of over 40 years, while simultaneously declaring that it is now over. That is because, narratives like post-racialism serve political

“[Narratives] are the means by which sense is made in and of the world; they also provide the means by which those who hold power (or influence the maintenance of power) make or attempt to make sense of the world for others,” scholar Wahneema Lubiano wrote in the academic article “Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels: Ideological War by Narrative Means. “Such narratives are so naturalized, so pushed by the momentum of their ubiquity, that they seem to be reality.” In the article, Lubiano refers to the collection of negative stories told about the African-American community, specifically negative stories about Black women. However, the post-racial narrative is, ostensibly, a positive story, which is why the narrative is so incredibly dangerous. Obama’s success is wrapped in positive cloak. See, Black America, hard work pays off; and the hard work of your community has paid off. Now, Whites are no longer “gleefully” counting the Negroes’ “bastards and prostitutes” and using that against them, but instead counting their first African-American president of the Harvard Law Review, voilà fifth African-American senator in the United States, voilà first African-American president of the United States and using him against them. In the post-racial narrative, Obama is the unlikely African-American hero who is proof that racism no longer exists. In reality, Obama is the unlikely African-American candidate who somehow emerged despite the United States’ painful legacy of racism, racism that continues to linger.

The mainstream news media-circulated post-racial narrative is hard to combat with a counter-narrative. As discussed previously, the mainstream news media has an immense amount of agenda-setting power. And the nature of the post-racial narrative further constricts the behavior and speech of the African-American objects of the

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4 Lubiano, 327-328.
5 Ibid.
narrative, the narrative’s likely critics. Since the objects of the post-racial narrative are
African-American people who are already marginalized in the public sphere, the task of
combating the mainstream news media-circulated narrative is especially difficult.
Consequently, the marginalized objects of the post-racial narrative must retreat to
counterpublic spaces in order to successfully circulate a counter narrative. As society
progresses these spaces either disintegrate completely, remain stable, or metamorphose in
a new media space. In regard to the African-American community, the traditional Black
press (i.e. Black newspapers) is almost obsolete, but the Black church has remained
relatively stable, and Black virtual spheres (Websites, Social Networking Sites, Blogs,
Message Boards, Chat Rooms, Email, and Text Messages) are growing daily. The Black
virtual spaces, particularly those spaces that are a part of the digital African-American
underground, can, in an age where YouTube and White journalists looking for “the Black
perspective” are infiltrating traditional Black counterpublic spaces, be used by the Black
community to challenge mainstream news media-circulated narratives that challenge the
Black Freedom Movement in an ostensibly subversive way. Often that is the intent of the
dialogue that is circulated throughout the digital African-American underground.
Specifically, dialogue that is circulated throughout the digital African-American
underground alludes to America’s racial binary, Black revenge and White oppression,
racialized discourse that contradicts the post-racial narrative.

The racial identity politics that were operating among Ghanaians and African
Americans in relation to Obama, the world’s First Citizen, also contradict the mainstream
news media-circulated post-racial narrative. As previously discussed, Ghanaians
reception of Obama as “our own” was mediated by race but largely predicated on his
literal and imagined “Africanness.” Contrarily, African Americans reception of Obama as *their* own was mediated by culture but largely predicated on his race, or Blackness.⁶ Although the identity politics operating among Ghanaians and African Americans were predicated on vastly different identities, culture and race respectively, race, or Blackness, for both groups was involved. That reality further contradicts the post-racial narrative. Unfortunately, the mainstream news media failed to recognize that reality. However, the truth is that Ghanaians and African Americans largely do not, as a result of cultural barriers, identify as a single race even though race is salient, although to different degrees, for both groups. That reality, in some ways, confirms the post-racial narrative. Interestingly, an American journalist and two scholars who assessed Ghanaian and African American relations in the United States and in Ghana years *before* Obama came to a post-racial conclusion: 1) Race hardly binds Africans and African Americans together. 2) Consequently, African and African American relations are tenuous and lead to intra-racial conflict. 3) In order to solve the intra-racial conflict between Africans and African Americans, racial categories nationally and internationally need to be destabilized. Although the term post-racial was not used, the journalist and the two scholars evoked a post-racial narrative, a post-racial narrative related to the continuity and discontinuity of racial identity.

In the book *The Politics of Disablement*, British sociologist Michael Oliver contends that the difference between the natural world and the social world is that “human beings give meanings to objects in the social world and subsequently orient their

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⁶ Note: I use the term mediated here to suggest that culture was the means by which African Americans made a racial connection to Obama despite his White and African ancestry.
behavior towards these objects in terms of the meanings given to them.” 7 Oliver’s contention is in reference to disability. 8 “If it is seen as a tragedy, then disabled people will be treated as if they are the victims of some tragic happening or circumstance,” Oliver wrote. “This treatment will occur not just in the everyday interactions but will also be translated into social policies, which will attempt to compensate these victims for the tragedies that have befallen them.” 9 Although Oliver’s contention is in reference to disability, it also applies to the post-racial narrative. The authors of the post-racial narrative believe that racism, although previously present, is no longer a stifling barrier for African-Americans, while a significant number of the African-American objects of the narrative believe that racism is present and still has the ability to structure their life chances. The authors of the post-racial narrative believe that African Americans no longer have an excuse for not succeeding at the highest levels, while a significant number of the African-American objects of the narrative expect more of themselves, as a result of Obama, but are aware their racism lingers and has the ability to stifle their success. The authors of the post-racial narrative believe that social policies like the Voting Rights Act, that were established during the Civil Rights Movement, are no longer needed, while a significant number of the African-American objects of the post-racial narrative fear that those legislative gains will be repealed. The authors of the post-racial narrative speak forcefully about the existence of a post-racial society, while a significant number of the African-American objects of the narrative strike a “strategic pose” that masks their feelings about the continued existence of racism and relegate their racial grievances to the counterpublic sphere. Oliver is right. “If men define situations as real, they are real in

8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 2-3.
their consequences,” W.I. Thomas wrote in 1966.\textsuperscript{10} Hopefully, the so-called post-racial “reality” has been challenged.

\textsuperscript{10} Oliver, 2.
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Sent: Tuesday, February 24, 2009 10:35 AM
To:

From:
To:
Subject: FW: November 5th ETIQUETTE for My People!!
Date: Wed, 29 Oct 2008 01:18:51 +0000

This is for those of you who may not know how to act in the likelihood of an OBAMA VICTORY AT THE POLLS!

If Obama wins, there will be a lot of people (some of our co-workers included) who will be afraid that an Obama presidency will usher in the end of days. They'll be watching us on November 5th for signs of the end times.

To keep the peace and keep a lot of folks from getting nervous, we should develop a list of acceptable celebrations and behaviors we should probably avoid - at least for the first few days:
1. No crying, hugging or shouting "Thank you Lord" - at least not in public
2. No high-fives - at least not unless the area is clear and there are no witnesses
3. No laughing at the McCain/Palin supporters - Well at least no pointing!
4. No calling in sick on November 5th. They'll get nervous if too many of us don't show up. (Try to be on time and not your normal late arrival)
5. We're allowed to give each other knowing winks or nods in passing. Just try to keep from grinning too hard.
6. No singing loudly, We've come this Far By Faith (it will be acceptable to hum softly)
7. No bringing of barbeque ribs or fried chicken for lunch in the company cafeteria for at least a week (no chitlins at all - this may make us seem too ethnic)
8. No leaving Kool-aid packages at the water fountain (this might be a sign that poor folks might be getting a break through)
9. No Cupid Shuffle or Electric Slide during breaks (this could indicate a little too much excitement)
10. Please no Moving on Up music (we are going to try to remain humble)
11. No doing the George Jefferson dance (unless you're in your office with the door closed)
12. Please try not to yell----BOOOO YAH or IN YOUR FACE!

13. Just in case you're wondering, Doing the Running Man, cabbage patch, or a backhand spring on the highway is 100% okay.

I just want to make sure we're all on the same page when Obama brings this thing home - UNLESS HE GETS MORE THAN 400 ELECTORAL COLLEGE VOTES AND THEN...ALL BETS ARE OFF!!!!

NOW GO VOTE!!!

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FW: Don't Buy The Dolls
From: Jones, Kamara Rochelle
Sent: Thu 2/26/09 11:57 AM
To:

-----Original Message-----
From:
Sent: Wed 2/11/2009 1:16 PM
To:
Subject: FW: Don't Buy The Dolls

From:
Sent: Wednesday, February 11, 2009 1:08 PM
To:
Subject: Fwd: Don't Buy The Dolls

Sent: Wed, 11 Feb 2009 12:45 pm
Subject: Fwd: Don't Buy The Dolls
Subject: Fw: Don't Buy The Dolls

-----Forwarded Message-----
>From:
>Sent: Feb 9, 2009 9:12 AM
>To:
>Subject: Fw: Don't Buy The Dolls
>
>
>
> LEAVE THE SASHA AND MALIA DOLLS ON THE STORE SHELF. DON'T BUY THEM.
>
> They don't want to pass his bills but they want to make money off his
> children. And I'm willing to bet that the CEO didn't vote for Obama!
>
>
> Pres. Obama called for a "new era of responsibility" in his inaugural
> address, and a company that makes toys has shown just how irresponsible
> it can be. The company has made 2 dolls and named them Malia and Sasha.
>
>
> The CEO of the company first said they were not named for the Obama
> children, they were just given popular names. (How many children has he
> met named Malia?) However, in a televised interview, he smugly said "we
> live in a capitalistic society". Is he saying anything goes if it
> brings in money?
>
>
> Mrs. Obama is not happy about the dolls, as no mother would be. There '
> s nothing the White House can do about the company putting the dolls on
> the market, but there is something we can do: DON'T BUY THE DOLLS.
>
>
> The Obama children should not be used as objects for a company 's
> profit. Please send this letter to everyone you know. We, The People,
> can see that no profit is made.
>
>
> PASS IT ON!
>
>
>

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/pm/default.aspx?ac=68807246#mpgID=6226bcd#ebemailfooterN062>
Our President

Sent: Thursday, July 16, 2009 9:16 AM

Prayer is what it's going to take....we got him! Amen??

It only takes a spark..

Folks, If you have not noticed....NO President has ever worked this hard for our country. Many wonder, does he ever sleep?? Only God can sustained such energy, knowledge, and person.

Will you please join in this prayer...

Let's keep this going!

Lord,

We pray for optimum health, mental clarity and political prosperity for President Barack Obama. We pray that

what he lacks in political 'experience' you make up for

with supernatural wisdom and power.

We also pray that when his enemies come upon him they
will stumble and fall; and that your love will fill his heart
to the end that ‘Your will’ be done through him.

We pray mightily for his protection. As we plead the Blood
of your son, Jesus, over him and his family. We reverently
ask you to dispatch legions of angels to protect them from
all hurt, harm, danger as he serves as the President of the
United States of America.

We thank you and praise you for answering our sincere prayers,

In Jesus’ Precious Name, AMEN

All you are asked to do is keep this circulating if you are so inclined..
May God bless and keep you...
FW: Checking In - These pictures should be in every school

Sent: Friday, July 24, 2009 3:02 PM
To:

And the Lord spoke to me saying, "Keep Praying, and stay focused."

THIS PICTURE SHOULD BE IN EVERY SCHOOL

Please share this with our younger generation.
To live in this crib...

You have to look the part.
CHANGE HAS COME.

PULL THEM UP.
YOU CAN'T MOVE FORWARD.
IF THE WORLD ONLY SEES YOUR BEHIND.

For Photography & Graphics, please contact: singleimagegraphic@gmail.com or call 800-788-2288. Model: LaShay Holmes.
Pres. Obama- DOES YOUR HAIR FEEL LIKE MINE??

Sent: Monday, June 01, 2009 7:35 PM
To:
Cc:

"It's not about the time in our life... It's about the life in our time."

This little boy wanted to see if the president's hair felt like his. This picture is worth more than a thousand words. It may generate many thousands of words and thoughts.

We found the real 'Hotel California' and the 'Seinfeld' diner. What will you find? Explore WhereItIsAt.com.

Pillsbury® - Sign Up Now and get tasty recipes, meal ideas, coupons and more.

Hotmail® goes with you. Get it on your BlackBerry or iPhone.
FW: URGENT: please support our President

From:
Sent: Thu 3/12/09 12:58 PM
To:

Subject: RE: URGENT: please support our President

In reality my opinion to MSNBC’s poll is; We already voted and he won so get with the program and get used to it.
Fox News and MSNBC have both been very negative and prejudice towards Mr. President Obama so I will not be
taking their poll.
Now if it was CNN, then I would take a look at it.
But no I’ve placed my vote and thus far he is doing just fine in my eyes....

From:    
Sent: Thursday, March 12, 2009 1:46 PM 
To:      

Subject: URGENT: please support our President

Please see the link below and vote to support the President.
Subject: FW: URGENT: please support our president

MSNBC has a poll up about Obama’s performance as President so far. Republicans are flooding it with “F” votes. When I looked at the poll it showed 61% with an F grade. It seems that the Republicans are very determined to do everything in their power to downplay the excellent work that President Obama is doing to lead the country.
Pass this address on, and go to it to vote, it only takes a moment to do so.

http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29493093/

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