



Obama's Body and the Liberal Body Politic

LEOLA JOHNSON
Macalester College

At the height of his campaign for the Presidency, in the spring of 2008, Barack Obama was widely regarded by white liberals as a black savior figure, the type of black man recognized by critics and historians alike as a Magic Negro, a fictional character whose roots are deeply embedded in U.S. culture, and whose role is to be a healer of white angst and pain (Gabbard, 2004; Hughey, 2009). In the white liberal imaginary, Obama's post-racial persona and commitment to "bi-partisanship" made him the ideal Magic Negro politician. At a time when an unpopular conservative administration heightened divisions of class, ethnicity, and race by its handling of Hurricane Katrina and the "War on Terror," many liberals were desperate for a savior, and Obama fit the bill. In this essay, I argue that the white liberal desire for healing and wholeness shaped Obama's public persona, in ways that are apparent in multiple political discourses, including visual representations of his body.

Obama's status as the dark savior of white liberalism was enabled by his nationally televised prime time speech to the Democratic National Convention in 2004, where he said the following:

Now even as we speak, there are those who are preparing to divide us — the spin masters, the negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of 'anything goes.' Well, I say to them tonight, there is not a liberal America and a conservative America — there is the United States of America. There is not a black America and a white America and Latino America and Asian America — there's the United States of America. (Obama, 2004)

This promise of healing and unity was emphasized once again in the October 23, 2006, cover story by Joe Klein in *TIME* magazine. "excessive eagerness to find common with his ability to "transcend racial image as a healer in the period commenced also relied on a set of representations, ranging from close-of him posing in front of a statue of

These images are friendly combination that set his smiling black men who seemed too



TIME Magazine,
Oct. 23, 2006

That piece emphasized Obama's ground with conservatives," along divides" (p. 44). Obama's emerging before his presidential campaign widely circulated visual ups of his smiling visage to pictures Superman in an Illinois town.

and open but also powerful, a representation apart from those of deferential (Morrison, 1992), but also

from powerful black men who seemed too threatening. And this is

the ground out of which Barack the Magic Negro eventually grew, in the form of a worshipful discourse among liberal bloggers, as well as in the appropriation of that discourse by conservatives in dismissive YouTube mashups and talk radio rants. Obama had already achieved the status of a white liberal fetish object by the spring of 2007, when he officially opened his presidential campaign, and this, in turn, positioned him to enter the world of the Magic Negro, a very powerful imaginary white liberal world that was initially produced by Hollywood. David Ehrenstein, a journalist who writes about the entertainment industry, recognized Obama's entry into this imaginary world when he described Barack Obama as a Magic Negro in an article for the *Los Angeles Times* that was meant to be critical of white liberals.



Barack Obama with Superman

As Ehrenstein (2007) points out, the Magic Negro was especially popular in a cycle of Hollywood films produced in the 1980s and 1990s, including *The Green Mile*, *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, and *Ghost*, all of which are organized around characters who heal white men suffering from physical, psychological, or spiritual afflictions. Hollywood's Magic Negro narratives:

1. Posited a willingness by black men [and some women] to sacrifice their bodies and souls for white men.
2. Represented black men as supernatural.
3. Provided black men with no families, histories, or communities.
4. Showed black men to be harmless, gentle, and mostly nonviolent.

The Obama narrative shares some, but not all, of these characteristics. Obama is, for example, represented as very much the family man. Also, in terms of the way his body is represented, Obama breaks the Magic Negro mold. Most Hollywood Magic Negroes are dark skinned and asexual, and typically, their bodies are the least important aspects of their representations. But based on the discourse in the blogosphere, the light-skinned, hyperfit Obama is frequently sexualized and otherwise physically objectified by his fans. Thus, in the early days of his administration, the most widely circulated magazine and Internet images of Obama, featured in black and white media alike, showed him as a hyperfit sex object; a cool, sunglass-wearing business man; or a combination of those things.



Obama Doing Pull-ups. © Callie Shell

A light-skinned black president who takes off his shirt and shows off his pectoral muscles as he swims in the ocean, who can also do chin-ups in a Brooks Brothers suit on his way to giving a speech, pushes the boundaries of the Magic Negro tradition. The chin-up picture is particularly noteworthy for the way it evokes and simultaneously represses the memory of lynching, by framing Obama's image in a set of hanging ropes, in the interest of celebrating the hope of racial unity. Obama's political machinations provided the ideological frame for this repression, as he continued to push the kind of post-partisan, post-racial themes that white liberals found so



Barack Hussein Obama



*Obama Shirtless in Hawaii.
@Bauer-Griffin, Huffington Post*

attractive and healing during his campaign, although he occasionally veered from these themes underneath the media radar. For example, his appointment of Van Jones, a community organizer, green activist, and lawyer, to a job as a consultant in his administration was clearly not a post-partisan, post-racial move. Jones, a founding member of the group Color of Change and an early critic of environmental racism, had built his reputation on the kind of direct

confrontation and activism that many post-partisans love to hate. It is not surprising, then, that Jones lasted only three months in the Obama administration before being brought down by conservative critique and liberal capitulation (Franke-Ruta & Kornblut, 2009). The Jones affair illustrates some of the underlying instabilities in Obama's post-partisan, post-racial persona, but it also shows that persona to be the ground to which his administration ultimately tries to return.

In her essay "Speaking In Tongues," novelist Zadie Smith (2009) argues that Obama is one of the most flexible racial figures in history. But there are important limits to this flexibility, and most importantly, there is no room in this world of post-partisan, post-racial healing for black anger. Even when his liberal base has gotten angry with him for not fighting his opponents hard enough, Obama continues to present himself publicly as the post-partisan, post-racial Magic Negro. There are almost no representations of an angry or physically aggressive Obama in the media, even in the numerous Photoshop images that circulate on the Internet of Obama as a superhero, as in this representation of Obama as a smiling Jedi.

It will be interesting to see if Obama eventually finds a way to show his anger, or if the era of Obama will open up more space for representations of black anger, although given growing white anxieties about race, there is reason to expect that it will not. Increased immigration from the Global South, falling rates of white reproduction, and the de-industrialization of work, as well as the enduring influence (and, for some, the threat) of the Women's Movement on politics and culture, have combined to produce these white anxieties, and while conservative White men, such as Pat Buchanan, have been especially worried about these developments, white liberals are worried about them, too (Colombe, 2002).



Barack Obama Windu

In summary, Obama's position as a post-partisan, post-racial figure closes off the space for him to express the kind of anger that is routinely shown by his white counterparts, such as Joe Wilson, who famously called him a liar during a speech to a joint session of Congress (Scherer, 2009). Obama's response to this interruption was stern, but it wasn't angry, and his demeanor on that occasion probably saved Wilson from harsher approbation from his Congressional colleagues.

Another restriction on Obama's representation will likely come out of the inevitable disappointment of white liberals as they come to grips with the fact that Obama is not a black savior, especially given the profound difficulties he faces in governing a nation that may be in a period of irreversible decline. This kind of disappointment is already apparent in the health care debate, which has produced a white liberal backlash against Obama for failing to secure single-payer healthcare or a comprehensive public option. At the height of that debate, some liberal bloggers, most notably Jane Hamsher and her crew at FireDogLake, began to refer to Obama as a "sell-out" and a "corporatist" (Smith, 2009). A theme running through FireDogLake's critique is that Obama is an incompetent politician who doesn't play "hardball" with his enemies.

It will be telling to see how this emerging idea of his incompetence is expressed in future representations of his body. Should we expect a racialized version of the send-ups of Gerald Ford as clumsy, or the migration of existing images of Obama as clown from the racist edge to the political mainstream? What is clear, regardless of representations to come, is that no character outside the Hollywood image factory, including Barack Obama, can actually fulfill the liberal desire to be rescued by a Magic Negro.

References

- Colombe, A. (2002). White Hollywood's new black boogeyman. *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 45. Available at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc45.2002/colombe/index.html>
- Ehrenstein, D. (2007, March 19). Obama the 'magic Negro.' *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved August 26, 2009, from http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-ehrenstein19mar19_0,5335087.story
- Franke-Ruta, G., & Kornblut, A. E. (2009, September 5). White House says little about embattled Jones. *WashingtonPost.com*. Retrieved January 1, 2010, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp>
- Gabbard, K. (2004). *Black magic: White Hollywood and African American culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Hughey, M. W. (2009). Cinethetic racism: White redemption and black stereotypes in "magical Negro" films. *Social Problems*, 56, 543–577.
- Klein, J. (2006, October 23). Why Barack Obama could be the next President. *TIME*, 44-49.
- Morrison, T. (1992). Introduction: Friday on the Potomac. In T. Morrison (Ed.), *Race-ing justice, engendering power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the construction of social reality* (pp. vii – 3). New York: Pantheon Books.
- Obama, B. (2004). *The American promise*. Speech presented at the 2004 Democratic Convention. July 24, 2004. Boston, MA. Retrieved August 26, 2009, from <http://www.barackobama.com/speeches/index.php>
- Scherer, M. (2009, September 10). "You lie!" Representative Joe Wilson's outburst. *Time.com*. Retrieved January 1, 2010, from <http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1921455,00.html>
- Smith, B. (2009, December 2). Jane Hamsher leads Left away from White House. *Politico*. Retrieved January 1, 2010, from http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1209/30131_Page2.html
- Smith, Z. (2009, February 26). Speaking in tongues. *New York Review of Books* 56(3). Retrieved February 10, 2010, from <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/22334>

Photo References

Barack Hussein Obama with Capitol in the Background. Accessed February 9, 2010, at <http://www.thedailygreen.com/environmental-news/latest/obama-climate-4711111807>

Barack Obama with Superman. Accessed February 9, 2010, at <http://obama.senate.gov/photo/001122.html>

Barack Obama Windu. Accessed February 9, 2010, at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/42311564@N00/2344160764/>

Obama Doing Pull-ups. © Callie Shell / Aurora for *TIME*. (2008, April 5). Accessed February 9, 2010, at <http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0810/callie-bp.html>

Obama Shirtless in Hawaii. @Bauer-Griffin, Huffington Post. Accessed February 9, 2010, at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/12/22/obama-shirtless-in-hawaii_n_152873.html

TIME Magazine Covers Archive. Accessed February 9, 2010, at <http://www.time.com/time/>