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**OBAMA AS VISUAL ICON: BLACKNESS, POST-RACIALITY, AND
MULTICULTURALISM IN THE NEOLIBERAL AGE**

By

JADIRA GURULÉ

B.A., Art History, University of New Mexico, 2010

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the body of artwork produced in support of President Barack Obama during the 2008 United States' presidential election. It situates the artistic production from this election as both a product of and tool for furthering discourses of neoliberalism, multiculturalism, post-raciality, and American exceptionalism. A critical focus is trained on the ways in which Obama as a symbol and icon indexes and organizes knowledge about race, gender, sexuality, and national belonging in the United States and examines Obama as a form of visual archive. Visual culture studies, black cultural studies, and critical mixed-race scholarship are central to this project which is foundationally concerned with better understanding the ways in which talking about and addressing the persistence of racism and systemic inequality is difficult in an era where a figure like Obama is held up to mark the attainment of a post-racial moment.

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Introduction

On election night in 2008 I was slinging coffee and cake at a local café in the Nob Hill district in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Throughout my shift, caffeine-fueled internet surfers eagerly provided the staff with updates on the polls, adding occasional commentary about the future United States that Barack Obama could build. The climate of anxious anticipation erupted into a surprising air of hysterical joy as the votes poured in and Barack Obama became the 44th president of the United States, and its first one of color. Almost immediately, I was distracted from the indoor excitement as groups of people took to the streets outside the café. I walked outside to find people cheering, shouting, holding signs of support, and dancing in the street. It was clear that this celebration was about much more than the election of a preferred candidate. The election of Barack Obama symbolized a major turning point in the racial history of the United States, which up until this point was composed of a lineage of white male leadership.

Leading up to the election of Barack Obama in 2008, images of Obama were everywhere. Beyond the usual campaign commercials, billboards, newspapers and magazine covers, Obama's face graced car bumpers, street lamps, sidewalks, alley walls, skateboards, and T-shirts. Obama had become a symbol that seemed to require visual declaration and his image inspired a wealth of artistic expression from artists both nationally and internationally, some of whom worked with the official campaign and others who created and circulated their work outside of it. Ray Noland, one of the early artists responsible for "unofficial" Obama artwork, notes, "Some will argue this was all a manifestation of the well-oiled campaign machine. But I think the culture that existed beyond the bounds of official messaging and

branding took on a powerful life of its own.”¹ And similarly, the artist and curator Holly Parker writes, “The ardent uprising of artists throughout our nation to create inspiring iconography about President Obama is a testament to the newfound hope and patriotism he symbolizes.”² It seems then, that my experience on election night in 2008 and the sentiments of the artists involved in what many of them refer to as a “grassroots art movement” run parallel and point toward an early understanding and celebration of Barack Obama as something more than a political candidate. Instead, he was viewed as a figure that both symbolized and embodied the hope and change hallmarks of his campaign.

The celebratory artwork produced during this time period both draws from and helps to construct Obama as a symbolic and iconic figure who seems to transcend politics. As Graeme Abernethy, author of *The Iconography of Malcolm X* (2013), explains, “To become iconic, a figure must attain a degree of recognition exceeding faddish celebrity. Additionally, he or she must be seen, within a finite number of images, to evoke a particular set of values or assumptions, and must do so over an extended period.”³ Obama’s iconic status is informed by a symbolic value that manifests visually time and again and is inextricably linked to the meaning associated with his racial identity, masculinity, and his significance within the historical trajectory of political leadership in the United States. This thesis will focus on a select number of these images to explore the ways that Obama is constructed visually within discourses of race, gender, and sexuality in the U.S. that frame the nation’s past, present, and future through narratives of racial progress and the arrival of a post-racial moment. I argue that these images participate in a complex discursive terrain that mobilizes Obama’s racial

¹ Hal Elliot Wert. *Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2009), 9-11.

² Don Goede and Ron English. *Abraham Obama: A Guerrilla Tour Through Art & Politics* (Colorado Springs and San Francisco: Smokemuse and Last Gasp, 2009), 6.

³ Graeme Abernethy. *The Iconography of Malcolm X*. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2013), 5.

identity through a heteronormative masculine frame that revels in Obama's symbolic challenge to the racial status quo, while incorporating his symbolism in the interest of dominant national narratives of multiculturalism, diversity and inclusion. Additionally, I posit that an exploration of this artistic climate illuminates the persisting inseparability of race and visual culture and can aid in better understanding how Obama's archive carries within it both told and untold stories of race in the United States.

Obama's racial difference is foundational to his ability to symbolize changing racial attitudes and the fulfillment of post-racial desires in the U.S. However, to say that his visible racial difference alone explains the culture of celebration that surrounded him, particularly leading up to and during the 2008 election, would be to obscure the complexities of how Obama, as a symbolic figure and icon, circulates within the national imagination. He is an icon whose race figures prominently in how he is understood in relation to the United States and while much of the racial discourse surrounding his identity is over-determined by his blackness, there has been and continues to be a wealth of public debate surrounding how his black identity is expressed and lived, how it interacts with his mixed-race identity, and how this identity does or does not inform his politics.⁴ While there have been efforts to illuminate and/or fabricate Obama's racial, ethnic, and cultural identities as negative or even un-American, this thesis is concerned with the ways in which Obama's identity is contested and configured within celebratory narratives. Examining the culture of celebration circulating around Obama's identity and symbolism, as well as the role that the visual plays in these narratives, can aid in better understanding not just the ways that Obama's symbolism is

⁴ Michele Elam. *The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 7. Elam outlines some of the parameters of these debates and describes Obama's "racial" transformation in public discourse.

informed by a number of contradictions but also the ways in which his symbolism is emblematic of much larger and more dangerous contradictions marking this racial moment in the United States. In regard to what Obama represents, this moment is one in which a political figure can be held up as a symbol of the onset of a post-racial era, while racialized systems of inequity and violence continue to be a defining characteristic of life in the U.S. This latter point is of particular importance as the last few months have been marked by nationwide protests working to spotlight patterns of unbridled police violence and excessive force directed at largely black communities and responsible for the growing death toll of predominantly black male youth.⁵ This thesis is interested in better understanding this moment, not only in how Obama's celebratory symbolic power coexists within what Dylan Rodríguez refers to as a "genocidal logic" that informs the conditions of blackness in the U.S., but the ways in which these contradictions are productive in establishing the grounds for changing the appearance of but ultimately maintaining the status quo.⁶ While I focus on celebratory racial discourses and how these contradict the current state of racialized violence in the U.S., it is important to note that the meaning behind Obama's ascendancy into the White House, his overall symbolism, and what or who he represents is contested and by no means static. This project treats 2008 as a significant moment with lingering effects but also recognizes that seven years later, with Obama still in office for his second term, the political climate in the U.S. and Obama's symbolic power has changed. With this in mind, 2008 arises as an ideological moment that is still very much with us, informing and structuring our

⁵ The shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri by Officer Darren Wilson is certainly not the first in this pattern of violence and it was not the last. This particular scenario did gain national attention and sparked protests of solidarity around the nation.

⁶ Dylan Rodríguez. "The Black Presidential Non Slave: Genocide and the Present Tense of Racial Slavery." *Political Power and Social Theory*, Vol. 22, (2011), 18. In particular, Rodríguez refers to the "genocidal social logics" of slavery that continue to inform the present of black lived experience.

current space and time. An attempt to diagnose at least some of the conditions of this era requires an exploration of how Obama's identity is posed, visually and discursively, in ways that inform neoliberal logics and discourses of multiculturalism that divorce race from systemic inequality and violence.

Race, Obama, and Neoliberal Multiculturalism

Race is never far from discussions of Obama in general and his racial, ethnic, and cultural identity figured prominently during the 2008 election working to firmly situate the election of Barack Obama as a significant moment in United States' *racial* history. In public discourse surrounding Obama, his identity is a privileged site of meaning and as a black and mixed-race public figure, his symbolic value is generated from multiple genealogies of racial discourse in United States history, allowing his difference to signify in multiple ways with broad reach and appeal. While Obama's blackness has certainly been a dominant identification, one that positions him as a key figure in conversations taking place about the meaning of blackness in the U.S., his mixed-race heritage is also an element of his public persona and is a part of a post-1990s celebrated American identity.⁷ These two versions of his identity co-exist and often complement each other in the visual realm, imbuing Obama with a multiplicity of identifications and allowing artists to pick and choose the version that speaks to them. The interaction between Obama's black and mixed-race identities will be explored throughout this thesis but for now, it is important to note that both allow for Obama to be positioned as the first United States president of color and both are incorporated into

⁷ Greg Carter, among others, notes the 1990s as a decade marked by a movement to embrace multiracial identity which led to the ability to select multiple racial categories on the census. In *The United States of the United Races*, Carter notes the prominence of mixed-race public discussion surrounding Obama despite his choice to select African American as his only racial category on the 2010 U.S. census (2013, 1). Scholars such as Michele Elam, Ralina L. Joseph, Habiba Ibrahim, and Jared Sexton also discuss the importance of the 1990s to how mixed-race identity is conceived today.

celebratory national narratives (often obscuring the violent histories informing both) and the ruse of a post-racial moment.

In *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*, Paul Gilroy writes, “However reluctant we may feel to take the step of renouncing ‘race’ as part of an attempt to bring political culture back to life, this course must be considered because it seems to represent the only ethical response to the conspicuous wrongs that raciologies continue to solicit and sanction.”⁸ Eight years after Gilroy published *Against Race*, the United States saw the election of its first president of color. For many, the election of Barack Obama in 2008 seemed to be a move in Gilroy’s direction and it seems the desire to get “beyond race” fueled Obama’s status as symbol of changing racial attitudes in the U.S. However, as our current socio-economic and political climate make clear, despite the symbolic power of Obama and his campaign of hope, the idea of a post-racial society remains just that, a hope for something not yet attained. Further, the brand of post-racialism that circulates around Obama is far from the fundamental destabilization of raciological thinking that Gilroy calls for in *Against Race*.

In a country that has presented itself as the quintessential “melting pot” and global leader of race relations working to confine histories of colonization, slavery, and genocide to the past, it could seem odd that it took so long for a person of color to occupy the highest political position in the nation. And certainly, Obama as president does represent a significant change. However, the question has now become, what does this change mean for discussions of race in the United States and more broadly? According to Dylan Rodríguez in an article called, “The Black Presidential Non-Slave: Genocide and the Present Tense of Racial Slavery,” “If the work of building a robust public conversation around the systemic,

⁸ Paul Gilroy. *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 41.

historically rooted structures of state and state-sanctioned racism seemed extraordinarily difficult before 2008, it now seems virtually impossible in the shadow of the desegregated Oval Office.”⁹ Rodríguez alludes to a present moment characterized by the ease with which one can highlight multiculturalism and point to the existence of a person of color as president for “proof” to de-legitimize claims that cite racial factors in the continuance of social, economic, and political inequality. I suggest that the task of countering these effects requires a thorough contemplation of the ways in which Obama as a symbol functions in a society that is positing multiculturalism and post-racialism as descriptors for its social, political and capitalist relations. In other words, it is important to consider how Obama as a symbol is mobilized in the interest of making the United States’ social and political climate, as well as its participation in a global capitalist economic system, appear as though they are unbiased colorblind spaces of equal opportunity.

In Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism, Jodi Melamed presents a number of considerations that are useful for understanding what she terms “neoliberal multiculturalism”, a concept that I center as the context for my discussion of Obama as a symbolic figure and icon. Melamed argues that “as white supremacy gradually became residual after World War II, it was replaced by a formally antiracist, liberal-capitalist modernity whose driving force has been a series of successive official or state-recognized U.S. antiracisms...”¹⁰ She provides an analysis that centers the productivity of “official antiracisms” and dissects how they work to both disguise race-based violence and inequality

⁹ Dylan Rodríguez. “The Black Presidential Non Slave: Genocide and the Present Tense of Racial Slavery.” *Political Power and Social Theory*, Vol. 22, (2011), 18.

¹⁰ Jodi Melamed. *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 1.

and form a new racial capitalist world order.¹¹ The text incorporates various literary examples and foregrounds how these ideas are disseminated on a broad scale through the written word. Although literature is a major object of study for Melamed, I would argue that other forms of cultural production, such as the artwork I examine in this thesis, can be discussed similarly in that these celebratory images of Obama function with a sort of implied or assumed logic of antiracism that is mobilized, like the literature that Melamed examines, as a reflection of the incorporation of official antiracist policy.

According to Melamed, the first phase of formal antiracism, racial liberalism, and its subsequent phase of liberal multiculturalism, began the process of formally incorporating a logic of antiracism into the national imaginary, and these phases ultimately lead to the current climate of neoliberal multiculturalism. Although manifesting differently in each phase, the advent of formal antiracisms essentially function to frame what is acceptable as a “race issue”, normative presentations of racial difference, the disconnection between race and systemic inequality, and the positioning of capitalism as inherently antiracist, fair, and beneficial.¹² The rise of liberal multiculturalism required a new unifying national discourse that took the language of “diversity” within academic and state institutional policy.¹³ During this phase, literature by people of color became central to establishing notions of inclusion, representation, and authenticity.¹⁴

Melamed posits that our current social, political, and economic moment is characterized by neoliberal multiculturalism which is composed of a number of shifts including, “a market ideology turned social philosophy” in which multiculturalism is seen as

¹¹ Ibid., 6.

¹² Ibid., 23-25.

¹³ Ibid., 31.

¹⁴ Ibid., 36.

the “ethic” of neoliberalism.¹⁵ For this phase, Melamed develops the notion of “differentiated citizenship,” as discussed by Aihwa Ong, in which value is attributed to human beings based on their market worth, creating new transnational subjects where “mobile individuals with human capital exercise citizenship-like claims in diverse locations,” and all others, despite actual citizenship status, are “devalued and vulnerable.”¹⁶ In other words, this moment values a normative “global citizen” who embodies diversity, individualism, freedom and productivity, terms that now have become deeply absorbed into market discourses and work to firmly remove race, ethnicity, and culture from the realm of systemic inequality.¹⁷ Not only does Obama in many ways represent the normative “global citizen” through his multi-ethnicity, travel, education, and heteronormative nuclear family, but his ability to embody such things allows for his meaning—visual, symbolic, and iconic—to be easily reproduced, marketed, and consumed in various forms and appropriated for various purposes.¹⁸

Melamed situates the election of the United States’ first president of color firmly within the logics of neoliberal multiculturalism and she elaborates on the contradictory nature of positing the election of Obama as racial progress while most indicators point toward Obama as the exception, not the rule. She writes,

Grounds for representing Obama as a multicultural global citizen are numerous: his multinational and multiracial background, his elite education at Columbia and Harvard universities, and his service as a legal and intellectual worker within the circuits of global capitalism. The fact that Obama reached the highest level of political office in the United States at the same time that unskilled or low-skilled African American men were experiencing record-high rates of unemployment and imprisonment does not demonstrate a weakening of the influence of race but proves,

¹⁵ Ibid., 138.

¹⁶ Ibid., 138.

¹⁷ Ibid., 148.

¹⁸ When I refer to the image of Obama being easily marketed and consumed, I am speaking in a broad sense that points to the ways in which Obama fits easily into dominant national narratives and the ways in which his actual image, in artwork, photography, etc., was circulated globally as a commodity.

rather, that processes of racialization in the United States that attach to differentiated citizenship are informed by neoliberal calculations acting as a technology of governance.¹⁹

So in effect, this moment sees the pooling of ideologies established after WWII where the U.S. now functions within a neoliberalism that requires diversity in order to maintain and justify systemic inequalities produced by global capitalism as fair outcomes of market competition, wholly removed from race. If, as Melamed suggests, the logics of neoliberal multiculturalism began before President Obama became president, then Obama's election could be situated as a product of this dynamic, a requirement in order for neoliberalism, with its "ethic" of multiculturalism, to continue its own logic.²⁰ Furthermore, Obama being elected president, the speed with which he rose to iconic status as a symbol of racial progress, and the vast body of artistic production celebrating this symbolism through his image is indicative of the profound desire that many within the United States had to see a person of color in the highest position. This points to the fact that despite multiculturalist discourse during George W. Bush's presidency, a large portion of the population was well aware of the fact that the promises of diversity and multiculturalism were incomplete with the most glaring example of this being a presidential lineage of whiteness. The presence of a president of color changes the game. And as noted by Rodríguez and Melamed above, this change is not one that means that race no longer matters, but rather that addressing racial inequality and systemic discrimination is particularly difficult, but perhaps even more crucial "in the shadow of the desegregated Oval Office."²¹

¹⁹ Melamed. *Represent and Destroy*, 154.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, xv. Melamed offers dates ranges for each phase. She locates neoliberal multiculturalism as beginning in the 2000s.

²¹ Rodríguez, "The Black Presidential Non-Slave," 18.

The United States now has a major symbolic distraction from the racial components of systemic inequality. Obama's presence as the United States' first president of color signifies the arrival of a post-racial moment, the success of multiculturalism as an ideology of inclusion and diversity, the unbiased nature of transnational capitalism, and the appropriate heteronormative family of color. The symbolic power of Barack Obama can be situated as product of and tool for neoliberal multiculturalism and the impact of this dynamic must continue to be reflected upon as new incorporations of minority difference are absorbed into dominant ideologies. Furthermore, I argue that crucial to this reflection, is an examination of the ways in which Obama is constructed as a visual presence that circulates within the national imagination. Obama's ability to signify and symbolize the interests of neoliberal multiculturalism are inextricably linked to the visual culture that surrounds him through artwork, news media, popular culture, etc., all of which are informed by established notions of race, gender, and sexuality in the United States. Graeme Abernethy examines the iconography of Malcolm X in national memory and he applies Alan Trachtenberg's idea that images can become "'saturated with history' or dependent 'on larger stories we tell (or hear) about the man and his history.'"²² This too applies to images of Obama and the history that saturates these visuals is not just Obama's own personal history but that of the nation as well.

Obama as Archive

The symbolic value of Obama and the importance of seeing it inscribed on and through his body, as though his body is where this symbolic meaning originates and is strengthened, both incorporates and exceeds the bounds of Obama as an actual person or political figure, moving him into the status of cultural icon. It is within this climate that I

²² Graeme Abernethy. *The Iconography of Malcolm X*. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2013), 2.

argue for situating Obama, the symbolic figure and icon, as an archive itself that is filled to the brim with history and meaning that includes but does not necessarily always require the actions or words of Obama himself. This archive is large and informed by historical processes as well as the contemporary climate. It is in a process of constant evolution as Obama, the media, and cultural producers continue to add to and re-work what Obama represents and symbolizes as well as how we see and hear him. What I am referring to with Obama as an archive, or alternatively, Obama's archive is understood as different from but in contact with an archive of visual material that features Obama. This, perhaps more traditional archive, would be composed of texts—images, television, print, etc.—that directly feature or reference Obama and the posters and prints examined in this thesis are certainly a part of this type of archive. However, I argue that situating the icon of Obama as an archive itself expands the view of the discursive and ideological elements that make up Obama's symbolism and it illuminates additional possibilities for understanding the ways in which his symbolic value is constructed in a highly visual manner that circulates particular and sometimes contradictory narratives about national identity and history. Obama's symbolic value is informed by historical and contemporary practices, events, and figures that may or may not be directly referenced in a depiction of him, yet his meaning is interpreted in relation to these processes for they are the conditions of possibility that allowed Obama to reach icon status. To expand the notion of the archive beyond what may be readily available in a given image allows for a broader consideration of the context in which a particular image is being produced or interpreted, despite whether or not these references are made explicitly. It is, in a sense, a way to grapple with a symbolic figure that is "saturated with history."²³ For example,

²³ Ibid., 2.

not all images of Obama will explicitly reference the civil rights movement of the 1960s or the multiracial movement of the 1990s, yet that does not mean that these moments or how they are constructed in dominant national memory are not underlying elements informing an artist's choice to represent Obama in a particular way.

The images that I discuss are part of an archive of material that features Obama directly but I consider this body of artistic production as part of Obama's larger archive to examine how these images are in conversation with other images, texts, discourses, and ideologies that ultimately allow for a broad range of interpretations. Obama's archive is a place where other archives, historical narratives, and icons converge, each taking on meaning in relation to the other, which then produces meaning about how Obama functions in relation to the nation. Obama's archive is informed by historical and contemporary constructions of visual culture, race, gender and sexuality, all of which influence how he is depicted and interpreted. In order to fully understand how the iconic Obama functions as an archive, it is necessary to further explore why the visual is so important in constructing Obama's symbolic value and the ways in which traditional notions of the "archive" need to be re-thought to illuminate how a symbolic figure can index and organize knowledge about the nation's past, present, and future.²⁴

Visual culture and the rise of Obama as a symbol of national racial progress cannot be separated from one another for, as authors such as Shawn Michelle Smith note, race is "fundamental to and defined by visual culture."²⁵ With this in mind, the prominence of visual imagery featuring Obama during the 2008 election speaks to the ways in which race is

²⁴ A more traditional conception of the archive may locate it as a documentary apparatus composed of material records and objects with seemingly transparent and unmediated access to the past.

²⁵ Shawn Michelle Smith. *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 3.

crucial to how Obama is understood. The keywords that underscored Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, hope and change, are ideas that are in frequent use in the political realm as politicians either explicitly or implicitly call upon these notions to signal how their election will promote a better future. However, when coupled with Obama's image, it is his visible racial difference that distinguishes him from previous candidates and presidents. This visible difference functions to move these phrases beyond the realm of mere political rhetoric and instead validate and add an aura of tangibility to these claims as if to say, "Obama is what hope and change *look* like." And while Obama's symbolic value informs most visual representations of his body, this thesis focuses on artistic renderings of his image because these mediums allow for a range of deviations from Obama's actual appearance and they illuminate each artists' interpretation of his symbolic appeal. I situate this artwork as both reflective of and helping to construct, in particular, the racial and gendered elements of Obama's archive.

While Obama's racial difference is almost always foregrounded in artistic portraits, the form in which this racial difference is represented shifts depending on the context and surrounding debates that privilege either his blackness or his mixed-raced heritage. So while the idea that he is the United States' first president of color is rarely challenged, how he embodies racial difference is often presented ambiguously, a point that sheds light upon one of the major contradictions within celebratory public discussions of his identity and the notion of post-raciality in general—that as a person of color and the president he is held up as a symbol of a post-racial moment that simultaneously works to disavow the importance of race and yet, requires the reification of racial categories to illustrate a nation moving beyond them. But the fact that Obama doesn't fit neatly into any one racial or ethnic category tends

to illicit certain levels of anxiety and requires endless efforts of fractioning racial/ethnic sub-categories in order to make sense of his identity and body.

The desire to make sense of and categorize racialized bodies is highly informed by visual modes of identification and Shawn Michelle Smith, among others, outlines the long history of photography as a visual tool for ‘documenting’ the ‘truth’ of the racialized Other as well as positioning the mixed-raced body as a challenge to visual modes of determining race.²⁶ What is important to note about this visual and racial history is that Obama’s symbolic value is informed by it while also working to organize and re-circulate this information in particular ways within the national imagination. Obama’s simultaneous racial specificity and racial ambiguity is a large part of what makes it possible, on the one hand, to circulate and consume his image so broadly, and on the other, spark anxious and quite racist debates over ridiculous items such as whether or not he is a citizen of the United States. The image of Obama is able to symbolize and call upon complex visual histories as part of what Shawn Michelle Smith terms a “visual genealogy,” in which photographs and other images do not exist in isolation but rather they are “signs that enter into conversation and contest with other photographs.”²⁷ While photography is a large part of Obama’s visual genealogy, it is certainly not the only medium informing Obama as a symbol in general or the artwork produced for the 2008 election, much of which draws from a long history of political and revolutionary poster art from around the world.

²⁶ Shawn Michelle Smith explores these themes in both *Photography on the Color Line* (2004) and *American Archives* (1999). However, other scholars engage these themes as well. See also, Coco Fusco. “Racial Time, Racial Marks, Racial Metaphors,” in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* eds. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003); Nicholas Mirzoeff. “The Shadow and the Substance: Race, Photography, and the Index,” in *Only Skin Deep* (2003); Fatimah Tobing Rony. *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996). Rony explores similar subject matter but in regard to cinema.

²⁷ Shawn Michelle Smith. *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 158.

The visual is a crucial component of the meaning-making processes surrounding Obama as a symbolic figure and icon, yet his “visibility” is composed of both visual and non-visual components. In his article called, “Obama as Icon,” W.J.T. Mitchell notes the importance of considering Obama’s sonic presence as part of what informs his visual one: “If human history is heard as well as seen, an audio-visual record of events and processes, then Obama’s election is, at this level, a revolutionary event, not merely in the quantity but the quality of what we can call his ‘visibility’.”²⁸ Understanding the “quality” of Obama’s “visibility” as something that is informed as much by what is heard through speeches, addresses, interviews, etc., as it is by what is seen, is a point that can shed light on how his iconic power calls upon and organizes knowledge. This relates to what Nicole R. Fleetwood refers to as a sort of “synesthesia” where, “...the visualization of black bodies can be heard...or can produce a range of sensory experiences beyond but rooted in the seeing of blackness.”²⁹ In this way, Obama as an archive becomes an intertextual visual experience that draws meaning from areas that exceed what is being shown or the visual realm altogether. This thesis understands intertextuality as a mode of meaning-making within an image by calling upon other images, texts, and histories that signify beyond the formal content of the image.³⁰ The notion of intertextuality extends the idea of a visual genealogy in that it allows for the recognition of how each image calls upon or references other textual formats, incorporating these texts into the complex and multifaceted conversations that these images and Obama as an archive are engaged in, therefore using the visual to establish a

²⁸ W.J.T Mitchell. “Obama as Icon,” *Journal of Visual Culture* (2009), 125.

²⁹ Nicole Fleetwood. *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 3.

³⁰ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 265.

discursive genealogy that may include both visual and non-visual elements. This also helps to foreground the idea that much of the labor of Obama's symbolism exists in its representative power, in the power of his iconic image to call upon and organize the memory of specific historical narratives, such as a legacy of male leadership during the civil rights movement—through photo, poster, sound-bite, etc.—that often privilege the tale of racial progress and promote the forgetting of the work that has yet to be done.

Understanding how Obama's archive treats masculinity is of critical importance for as Erica R. Edwards points out in her book, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* (2012), the “charismatic leadership scenario,” in which there is an investment in the fiction of charismatic heteronormative black male leadership as the only realm of possibility for black social and political advancement, enacts three forms of violence. According to Edwards, the first violence of the charismatic scenario is that it reduces the complexity and heterogeneity of the black liberation struggle to a focus on prominent male figures. The second form of violence is that of attempting to locate social change in a system of masculinist authority that is fundamentally antidemocratic, and the third is the “epistemological violence of structuring knowledge of black political subjectivity and movement within a gendered hierarchy of political value that grants uninterrogated power to normative masculinity.”³¹ Edwards understands Obama's election, his persona, and his symbolism as part of this fixation on the charismatic leader that is fundamentally a narrative fiction that eliminates or excludes scenarios that fall outside the bounds of this type of hierarchical leadership and threatens to foreclose opportunities for antiracist politics.³²

³¹ Erica R. Edwards. *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), xv.

³² *Ibid.*, 193.

Contemplating the iconic and symbolic figure of Obama as a visual archive requires a bit of deviation from traditional ways of conceptualizing the archive as a documentary apparatus or place composed of material records and objects that seemingly provide transparent and unmediated access to the past.³³ In doing so, however, I posit that it can illuminate the ways in which he is imbued with and organizes certain types of knowledge while obscuring others. In this effort, I center the notion of archives as “ideological projects” for as Shawn Michelle Smith notes, “The archive is a vehicle of memory, and as it becomes the trace on which an historical record is founded, it makes some people, places, things, ideas, and events visible, while relegating others, through its signifying absences, to invisibility.”³⁴ To frame Obama as an archive allows for a way of viewing the artwork of 2008 as both a reflection and component of this archive that places these images in conversation with the many other elements, historical and contemporary, that inform Obama’s iconic and symbolic status in ways that often exceed but frequently incorporate and return to the visual realm. Obama as an archive provides a scope of view that travels outside areas where he has direct influence or participation, to include other histories, narratives, and discourses that set the stage for Obama to ascend into symbolic and iconic status in the first place. Understanding the ways in which broad and diverse discourses collide and conjoin within a figure who holds such a visible and visual position in the national imagination is crucial because, as Smith reminds us, archives help create the historical record rather than simply providing a window into history and do so by making some things visible while disappearing others. I argue that Obama’s archive aligns with dominant understandings of

³³ I am basing my discussion of the traditional notion of the archive on dominant definitions of the term such as that contained in *Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary, Second Edition*. (New York: Random House, 1998), 110.

³⁴Smith. *Photography on the Color Line*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 8.

race, gender, and sexuality as well as what is considered political, while obscuring and rendering mute other versions or subject positions. Situating Obama as an archive and technology for generating meaning provides an opportunity to train a critical eye on the productive capacities and potential risks of his symbolism and iconicity within public discourse. The celebratory elements of Obama's archive make visible a linear story of national masculine racial progress. And through its signifying absences, it obscures and renders invisible the violent history of race in the United States, the persistence of racism and systemic inequality, and the gendered forms that this violence takes.

Theoretical Considerations

This thesis utilizes the work of a number of scholars who theorize and explore the transformations of the meaning of race, blackness and mixed-race in particular, as well as its attendant gender and sexual components in the realms of visual and popular culture in the United States. Authors such as Shawn Michelle Smith, Leigh Raiford, Nicole Fleetwood, Paul Gilroy, Habiba Ibrahim, Michelle Elam, and Stuart Hall offer concepts that are crucial to this project's understanding of blackness as a complex and contested identity, key word, concept, and signifier.³⁵ In order to grapple with this often contradictory terrain, I center Raiford's notion of a "dialectics of seeing," a concept that she borrows from Walter Benjamin and expands in order to grapple with the Black Panthers as part of a visual web of being both "subject and commodity."³⁶ Of particular use, is the way in which Raiford

³⁵ Shawn Michelle Smith. *Photography on the Color Line* (2004) and *American Archives* (1999); Leigh Raiford. *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Nicole R. Fleetwood. *Troubling Vision* (2011); Paul Gilroy. *Against Race* (2000); Habiba Ibrahim. *Troubling the Family: The Promise of Personhood and the Rise of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Michele Elam. *The Souls of Mixed Folk* (2011).

³⁶ Leigh Raiford. *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 143.

describes the Panther's dialectic of seeing as a dynamic of visual push and pull between emergence and incorporation.³⁷ While it would not be difficult to argue that the image of Obama was always already "incorporated" into dominant ideologies and discourses, this concept is useful for teasing out the nuances of the emergent appeal of Obama's symbolism as that which challenges the dominant racial paradigm in the United States, while noting his simultaneous incorporation into and commodification for the façade of a post-racial, multicultural nation. This is an engagement that runs throughout and I also rely on various fields of study including visual culture, black cultural studies, and critical mixed-race studies to explore this dialectic.

Overall, this thesis is indebted to the work of Stuart Hall. In particular, Hall's work is central to the underlying concerns of this project that seek to grapple with United States' cultural politics and the ways in which race circulates within it. Hall's move to understand popular culture in an explicitly political way that trains a critical eye on binary constructions of high/low, good/bad, authentic/inauthentic are influential in my approach to the artwork from the 2008 presidential election and have been critical foundations informing the work of other black cultural theorists whose work is also crucial to this project. As Hall writes, "Part of the problem is that we have forgotten what sort of space the space of popular culture is. And black popular culture is not exempt from that dialectic, which is historical, not a matter of bad faith. It is therefore necessary to deconstruct the popular once and for all. There is no going back to an innocent view of what it consists of."³⁸ In response to Hall's call to deconstruct the popular, I examine the grassroots art movement of celebratory Obama

³⁷ Ibid., 144.

³⁸ Stuart Hall. "What is this 'black' in black popular culture?" in *Social Justice*, Vol. 20, Nos. 1-2. 107.

imagery in the hope of illustrating how its role in popular American culture is far from innocent as well.

While black cultural studies is a major force in this thesis, my examination of the ways that blackness functions and signifies around Obama is also considered in relation to his mixed-race identity and critical mixed-race scholarship. Historically, but also particularly after the multiracial movement of the 1990s, mixed-race and black identities exist in contested relation to one another. I utilize scholarship by authors such as Michele Elam, Habiba Ibrahim, Ralina L. Joseph, Jared Sexton, and Greg Carter to tease out the tensions between these two as political configurations and personal identities and the ways that they both conflict with and complement each other.³⁹ Obama is a figure who has been able to tread the line between these two identities, often being claimed by different communities at the same time, and both allow him to represent multiple constituencies while also symbolizing the arrival of a post-racial moment.

With all of this in mind, this thesis poses the following questions: How is Obama, as a symbolic figure, inscribed with particular versions of past, present, and future narratives of race in the United States? In what ways is Obama distinct as a black (masculine) icon and in what ways does his image conform to dominant notions of black masculinity? How might some of the artwork provide insight on the contested nature of Obama's public identity and symbolism? How is Obama visually constructed as the neoliberal multiculturalist global citizen? How might these images reflect contemporary ways of visualizing national identity

³⁹ Elam. *Souls of Mixed Folk* (2011); Ibrahim. *Troubling the Family* (2012); Ralina L. Joseph. *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013); Jared Sexton. *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Greg Carter. *The United States of the United Races: A Utopian History of Racial Mixing* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2013).

and belonging? How does Obama's symbolic status as multicultural and post-racial icon obscure the persistence of racism and systemic inequality in the United States? How does the focus on Obama's masculinity participate in dominant discourses that obscure the historical and contemporary presence and participation of those who inhabit other subject positions?

This thesis considers the 2008 election and the speed with which Obama's image rose to symbolic and iconic status as a significant juncture, one marked by the maintenance of American exceptionalist discourses of multiculturalism, post-raciality, and the melting pot, as well as the addition of a new, and quite visual, validity to these discourses which have routinely been called upon to obscure or erase claims to the persistence of racism and systemic inequality. It is within this scholarly climate that I make my most broad intervention and assert that understanding visual culture in the U.S. as inextricably tied to the visualities of race is crucial and now means that in order to fully understand the effects of this dynamic, critical attention must be paid to how Obama has, does, and might circulate within the national imaginary. This imaginary is highly visual, complex, multi-faceted, often contradictory, and in constant flux. I argue that this moment of artistic production is key to understanding the ways in which talking about and visualizing race, culture, and national belonging have shifted since the election of President Obama. This shift should not be confused with change for the dominant and historical discourses of race are still very much that which structures the discourses in circulation around Obama. However, Obama's presence does have an impact on how these discourses are constructed and deployed in relation to history.

The images that I examine are part of a collection compiled by Hal Elliot Wert and published in the book, *Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints* (2009).⁴⁰ I also utilize other publications that follow the trajectory of Obama artwork and include essays, letters, and statements from some of the artists who were involved in this production.⁴¹ I selected these images for the ways that they reflect and participate in constructing Obama's symbolism in relation to race and gender. The images are all very different from one another but when considered in relation they illuminate two, of the many, thematic constructions that are applied to Obama: that he is the culmination of the black liberation struggle and/or that he signals a moment when blackness is able to take on meaning beyond the black liberation struggle. These themes may seem at odds with each other but they meet in Obama's archive and find ways to co-exist. I focus on images that were produced and circulated leading up to, during, or just after the 2008 presidential election for what they may tell us about the significance of that moment and its lingering effects.⁴² To elect the United States' first president of color for a second term was also an important moment but it was not marked by the same level of intensity, elation, and overwhelming wealth of artistic production as the election in 2008.⁴³ I read these images to provide an analysis of at least one interpretation of how they reflect and help construct the discursive terrain of Obama's archive and I consider

⁴⁰ Hal Elliot Wert. *Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2009).

⁴¹ Whether or not this moment should be considered an "art movement" may be up for debate but there are a number of essays in which artists and curators refer to this climate as such. Some of these include: Shepard Fairey's, "The Birth of Hope." Shepard Fairey and Jennifer Gross (eds). *Art For Obama: Designing Manifest Hope and the Campaign for Change* (New York: Abrams Image, 2009), 8; Holly Parker's "Iconoclasts Take On the Icon." Don Goede and Ron English (eds). *Abraham Obama: A Guerilla Tour Through Art & Politics* (Colorado Springs and San Francisco: Smokemuse and Last Gasp, 2009), 6.

⁴² The exact dates of production for each image are somewhat unclear as they are presented in this collection without dates and instead as part of a time period that includes the few years leading up to the 2008 election, the year 2008 itself, and the months following the election. Some of the images are dated by the artists, most of which say 2008, but it is equally unclear whether their intent was to mark the year of production or the election with which the images are associated.

⁴³ There was a great deal of artistic production and celebrity support for the 2012 election but the celebratory climate of 2012 in general was not as intense in 2008.

the intertextual nature of these images as they call upon other diverse textual formations and both visual and non-visual genealogies of meaning.

The Collection

The collection that is at the center of this thesis is that contained in the book *Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints*, which features images that were compiled and annotated by historian Hal Elliott Wert. I argue that it is equally important to understand this collection of images and commentary as an ideological project, one that presents information about the artistic climate during the 2008 election in ways that take for granted the culture of celebration surrounding Obama and work to frame how these images should be interpreted in relation to each other as well as the broader historical context of political poster art. The collection presents an outline of what considerations are important in regard to this moment as Wert works to legitimize the collection and the association of a grassroots art movement with Obama. For example, on a couple of occasions the eclectic nature of the collection is mentioned for it is a compilation of artwork that varies in style and approach by artists with differing backgrounds and these differences are accounted for by positing them as reflections of Obama's broad reach to a grassroots community of artists as well as the diversity contained within the nation as a whole. With this sort of framing, the collection and Obama as a politician are presented as representative of the nation at large and neither the collection nor the symbolic resonance of Obama's archive are interrogated for what they obscure or leave out.

The focus on grassroots organizing and art is key to Wert's understanding of the significance of this moment for it marks a shift away from a general political attitude of cynicism and skepticism toward the decidedly hopeful tone of the Obama campaign. While

Wert presents minimal context or speculation on why Obama's brand of hope resonated so powerfully, he does note the divided political views that characterized the nation during the presidency of George W. Bush.⁴⁴ I would add that a consideration of the events of September 11, 2001, a moment that forever changed the U.S. national imaginary, the nation-state's relationship to its citizens, and U.S. interactions abroad, is also helpful in this endeavor. While the attack on the twin towers was a national tragedy, the response to the attack continued the climate of fear. As the U.S. entered the War on Terror, that saw escalated violence domestically and abroad, the media fueled fear and despair with reports of rising death tolls from the war and color-coded terrorist attack alert systems. In a climate of rampant racialized violence, heightened Islamophobia, and the steady stream of war and fear broadcasted through all media outlets, Obama's entrance onto the political stage as a person of color with the hope and change rhetoric of his campaign as well as his ability to appear as a man of the people, certainly had a powerfully seductive quality.

This climate becomes particularly interesting when considered alongside an understanding of Obama as part of what Cathy J. Cohen refers to as the "third wave" of black politics in which black politicians and officials no longer appeal to black communities as their main constituency. Instead, in the "third wave" race takes a back seat to and becomes coded in a language of class. These candidates market themselves as signifiers of the end of racial divisions and foreground their ability to bring everyone together in the name of nation. Cohen explains,

This new generation of hopemongers repeatedly characterize themselves as uniters, as political inspirers above the fray, as individuals who are not beholden to any one community, social location, or political identity but are able and willing to reach

⁴⁴ Wert. *Hope*, 148.

across the aisle, across communities, across races to reimagine and remix our political community.⁴⁵

This ideology marks much of the Obama campaign rhetoric where Obama engaged issues of race and identity in calculated and context dependent ways that were ultimately designed in the interest of mass appeal.⁴⁶ This particular political moment is reflected in and fostered by collections such as *Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints* where race is an undeniable presence but one that is only discussed in uncritical moments where the point is to forward the notion of American diversity, unity, and hope in the Obama era.

The collection begins with a forward written by the artist Ray Noland, whose work will be discussed in chapter two. Here Noland talks about his experience and motivations for creating his images and the evolution of the movement altogether. Wert authors the introduction, the epilogue, and the brief descriptions in conjunction with the images at the end of the book. The introduction begins by framing this collection as one reflecting a unique moment of grassroots and street art where artists anonymously took to the streets to plaster images of Obama support in public spaces.⁴⁷ It then details how the movement grew and began to incorporate more artists, essentially creating two parallel Obama campaigns, the official one and the grassroots one, running alongside each other using different tactics to reach the same destination.⁴⁸ The bulk of the book features the images in full page color with only the artist name, title, and dimensions of the poster at the bottom of the page. It is not until the end of the book, after the epilogue, that the images are presented in an index format

⁴⁵ Cathy J. Cohen. *Democracy Remixed*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 212.

⁴⁶ Cohen. *Democracy Remixed*, 217. Cohen contextualizes her discussion of race and Obama through an analysis of two of his speeches, his 2004 Democratic National Convention speech and the 2006 “More Perfect Union” speech in which she notes their different treatments of race driven, in the first case, by the idea of unity and breaking down racial divides and, in the second case, the need address his association with Reverend Jeremiah Wright Jr. after he made public and controversial comments about race.

⁴⁷ Wert. *Hope*, 11.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

with Wert's description and commentary alongside them. The epilogue provides a genealogy for political posters in the United States beginning with lithography making its way to the U.S. in the early nineteenth century. There is a particular focus on how U.S. politicians utilized the art form as well as how artists incorporated their support for a particular candidate into popular culture forms such as the gig poster. Additionally, Wert outlines how the use of the poster as a form of political advertisement ebbed and flowed in relation to the advent of other technologies such as radio and television. He notes that posters were in heightened use during the 1960s and 1970s civil rights and anti-war protests and he associates Obama with figures that are a part of this legacy. Wert describes Obama's appeal in this way:

Obama's credentials with the left on the major issues were already impeccable by the time he announced his candidacy on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Springfield, Illinois. He had opposed the war in Iraq from the start, he opposed the surge, and he promised to extract the country from another quagmire. Better yet, he was an articulate mixed-race American who understood the younger generation. The candidate inspired the young and reignited the passions of aging boomers as had John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy, Eugene McCarthy, and George McGovern.⁴⁹

Wert describes Obama as inspirational and capable of reaching a broad audience and does so with an assumed positive association with his mixed-race heritage and position within a male genealogy of iconic figures before him much like the charismatic leadership scenario that Edwards critiques. The treatment of race and gender are points that I would like to draw out from this quote, and the framing of the collection overall, that inform underlying assumptions within the ideological project of Obama's archive more broadly.

In general, race is a haunting presence in the collection in that an interaction with Obama's racial identity in the artwork is undeniable, yet the textual components of the book

⁴⁹ Ibid., 149.

make only surface references to race. Wert identifies Obama's mixed-race heritage as a positive trait, through the use of the phrase "better yet," (as though his identity is the icing on his political cake), and positions these images within a visual legacy of civil rights political imagery. However, he does little to illuminate the prominence of race in how Obama is depicted within these images, what this means in relation to Wert's version of a political poster genealogy populated by white men, or what this means for how Obama is understood in relation to the nation and history more broadly. Rather, the celebratory tone in referencing Obama's racial identity and positioning him among a civil rights and anti-war legacy with limited discussion about the reasoning behind these associations implies that to a certain extent, these associations are common sense, which obscures the ideological work at the heart of these associations in the first place.

In regard to gender, the quote above assumes that the legacy of which Obama is a part is a masculine one. The epilogue's discussion of political posters that preceded those for the 2008 election feature mostly male politicians with the exception of a brief discussion of Hilary Clinton as a contemporary example. As I hope to demonstrate throughout this thesis, normative masculinity is a tool that is repeatedly deployed to make sense of and organize what Obama means in relation to the nation, particularly when his racial identity is pictured as ambiguous and malleable. The masculinity-centered depictions of Obama as well as the genealogies that he is imagined to be a part of reflect the male-centered artistic climate that is presented within this collection. Whether or not this is a reflection of the larger Obama art community or the result of Wert's own personal bias in collecting and presenting this body of

work, it is difficult to ignore that this collection is overwhelming populated by male artists.⁵⁰ The reasons for this are difficult to sort out but it is an important consideration when grappling with the fact that Obama's archive traffics in masculinity to the point where the roles, efforts, and experiences of women in the past and now become obscured. Interesting trends emerge in the work that is created by women in that in many cases, Obama's physicality is de-emphasized, he takes on a particularly youthful appearance or, as is the case with one of Amy Martin's pieces (Figure 1), Obama is not present at all. Martin's image features a woman and child, surrounded by vegetation. The child is looking toward the sky and reaching out to grasp butterflies that are fluttering around the word 'hope'. Wert notes that Martin wanted to create an image that "appealed to Midwestern women," and her emphasis on what appears to be a mother and daughter evokes an explicitly feminine genealogy as the woman in the image raises her daughter to a hopeful sky and future. The vegetation that surrounds them and the clear blue sky are reminiscent of a mid-western field and their comfort within this setting alludes to the idea that this woman and child may come from a family where hope for the future is also figured in their ability to cultivate the land. This poster references the Obama campaign through the use of the word hope and the campaign logo that is incorporated into the largest butterfly's wings. However, the distance from Obama's physicality seems so intentional in a collection that, for the most part, features Obama as the masculine embodiment of hope, it is almost as though in order to create an image that allows for other forms of identification, Obama's physical presence must be downplayed or removed altogether. When considered alongside many of the other images,

⁵⁰ Not all of the images have identified artists and some are collaborative pieces but a rough count of the male artists is around 86, in contrast to the estimated 12 women.

Martin's piece illuminates the intense focus on Obama's masculinity and how this is an otherwise normalized and unquestioned element of his symbolism throughout the collection.

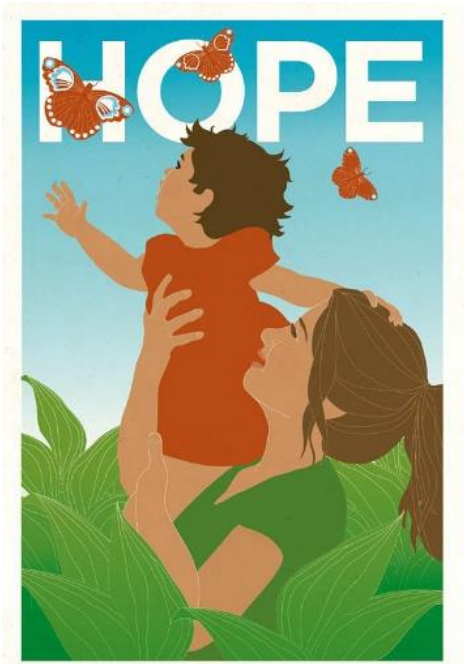


Figure 1: *Hope* by Amy Martin in Wert's *Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints* (2009), pgs. 131 & 183. This image taken from: <http://www.amymartinillustration.com/posters>

My point here is that discourses of normative masculinity are crucial to how Obama is understood and it is also a key element dominating the production of this body of artwork. Wert's collection doesn't seem to be particularly aware of this gendered imbalance and instead focuses on Obama's ability to inspire political artwork from a community of outsider and technologically savvy "hip-hop, skateboarder, guerilla artists," and eventually more established artists as well.⁵¹ While this thesis focuses on images created by male artists, I want to situate this as a reflection of a perhaps male dominated artistic climate and/or a male dominated retelling of this moment that mirrors the male-centered discourses that Obama is a part of. This gender imbalance matters for as Edwards illuminates, the focus on charismatic

⁵¹ Wert. *Hope*, 151.

heteronormative black male leadership is violent in the ways it obscures an understanding of what type of work and what type of bodies are necessary for social and political change. Edwards reminds us that, “Transformative social and political change demands ‘relentless acts of memory,’ not refuge in a sanitized past or flight to illusion of charismatic national care.”⁵² The dominant narratives within this collection and Obama’s larger archive reflect a sanitized memory and legacy of the fiction of charismatic leadership that has an impact on how social and political activism are remembered and likely how they will be imagined for the future.

Chapter Summaries

In chapter one, I examine the ways in which Obama is discursively produced as a symbol and icon representing the culmination of the civil rights movement in order to provide insight on artwork that calls upon the visual legacies of this time period. Of importance for this section is an examination of how Obama is conceived of as black (in ways that often obscure or ignore his mixed-race parentage) and how this identity carries with it a certain racialized, gendered, and sexual genealogy that informs his archive. Here, I explore the following images: *Hope*, by Shepard Fairey, *Today is a Big Day*, by Patrick Moberg, and *That One*, by Justin Hampton. These images, aside from being portrait busts of Obama in similar mediums, are quite different from one another. However, in their own way, each image calls upon a similar visual genealogy. Through these images and their surrounding discourse, I argue that Obama’s archive is informed by particular narratives that situate him as the inheritor of a male dominant civil rights legacy, imbued with an “appropriate” form of black heteronormative masculinity that reinforces narrow conceptions

⁵² Edwards. *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*, 193.

of blackness, masculinity, heterosexuality, and social movement activism more broadly. This chapter also provides a critical examination of Obama's iconicity and the ways in which this iconography both draws from dominant understandings of blackness and black leadership while potentially obscuring other perspectives and subject positions.

In chapter two, I engage images that deviate from the civil rights discourse. These images maintain their intertextuality but call upon visual genealogies that do not reference the iconic photos and figures of the civil rights movement in the same way or at all, and that trouble the boundaries of blackness as a monolithic signifier of identity and experience. Importantly though, these images still traffic in Obama's racial identity as the site that imbues them with significance. To put it differently, in these images it is Obama's racial difference—be it his blackness or mixed-race background—that adds power to and complicates their intertextual references. This section explores the following images: *Coast to Coast*, by Ray Noland, *Obama Extended*, by Matt Dye, and *Superman Obama*, by “Mr. Brainwash”. This section will examine how race and a hyper-masculinity inform these images and will explore the insight that applying a “post-black” lens may add to a broader understanding of the way Obama signifies beyond civil rights discourse but still as a part of the U.S. racial progress narrative.⁵³ This chapter grapples with the contested nature of the term “post-black” and does not seek to label any particular image or artist under this heading. Instead, I consider this chapter to be engaged in current debates over the meaning of “post-black” in relation to art, black and non-black artists, and Obama. Additionally, I find “post-

⁵³ My understanding of the term “post-black” is elaborated in chapter two but for now it is important to mention that I am taking some liberty with the term, one that is normally used to describe black artists and authors, and instead understanding it as an influential element of this artistic climate where both black and non-black artists are grappling with Obama's blackness and black identity. In this way it becomes a lens through which to examine artwork, and to a lesser extent, the artist.

black” and the conversations surrounding the term to be a useful lens through which to begin sorting out the images of Obama that do not necessarily appeal to blackness as a monolithic signifier of his identity. Derek Conrad Murray’s work is helpful here as he explains that, “Post-blackness can also be understood as issuing from a general attitude of ambivalence toward compulsory solidarity, insularity, and intracommunity demands to maintain a sense of racial pride.”⁵⁴ Situating “post-black” as one of many strands informing the 2008 artistic climate, I use this concept to explore the ways in which black and non-black artists have chosen to position Obama as racially different without an absolute emphasis on dominant conceptions of blackness but in ways that are still tied to historical debates over the meaning of blackness and its relationship to the United States. Additionally, this chapter will explore how Obama as an archive indexes blackness as a pop culture commodity and how this dynamic interacts with debates over both post-black and post-raciality.

⁵⁴ Derek Conrad Murray. “Mickalene Thomas: Afro-Kitsch and the Queering of Blackness.” *American Art*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Spring 2014), 9.

Chapter One: Grassroots Art and a Civil Rights Legacy in Obama

In her book, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (2011), Leigh Raiford explores the “dialects of seeing” that informed many aspects of the Black Panther Party’s relationship to and struggle within visual culture and the dominant media in the U.S.⁵⁵ She writes, “The dialectics of seeing that coalesced around the Black Panther Party from its inception in October 1966 through the split of the Newton and Cleaver factions in 1971 can best be viewed as a complex process of emergence and incorporation, a cycle of call and response in which visuality, and photography in particular, played a key role.”⁵⁶ While there are distinctions that need to be made between the Black Panther Party and the ways in which images of Obama circulate in visual culture, positing a dialectics of seeing as a struggle between emergence and incorporation can aid in illuminating the tensions and contradictions of a political climate that celebrates a presidential candidate as something new, different, and even revolutionary when the political platform he espouses and works within is still very much aligned with the dominant political structuring of the state.

According to Raiford, the visual push and pull that existed around the Black Panther Party’s image was characterized by an “emergent visibility” in which the Panthers carefully and self-consciously made choices about how to present themselves visually, both to their communities and the broader public, as a way of manipulating the dominant media’s use of spectacle and restaging the visualities of blackness. “Their presence on the streets and in the papers (their own and mainstream publications), bearing arms and wearing self-styled

⁵⁵ Leigh Raiford. *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011). Raiford attributes the notion of “dialectics of seeing” to Walter Benjamin but expands it to fit her purposes within the text.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

uniforms, enticed and frightened viewers with new ways of conceiving black politics, black efficacy, and black subjectivity.”⁵⁷ However, this ability to entice and frighten also made the Panthers a target for containment and their image was incorporated into dominant media as the type of spectacle that skewed their politics as radical and violent, and “the Panthers appeared as the villains in a Hollywood Western whose treachery must be overstated to make their defeat that much more satisfying and to aggrandize the valor of the hero—in this case, local and federal law enforcement.”⁵⁸ Ultimately then, the Panthers forwarded an image with an emergent appeal that threatened the status quo, therefore placing them in perpetual risk of being incorporated into delegitimizing media narratives in a tug-of-war struggle over the broader meanings of their visuality.⁵⁹

The dynamic that Raiford identifies surrounding the image of the Panthers is evident in Obama’s visuality but is also distinct. The racial climate within the United States is different now, in the era of Obama, than it was in the 1960s and 1970s. Decades later, the black liberation struggle is often considered both over and relatively successful in the face of the “official antiracist” policies that Melamed discusses, and has been incorporated into dominant national memory in ways that often serve triumphalist and American exceptionalist narratives.⁶⁰ This directly informs another key distinction between the Black Panthers and

⁵⁷ Ibid., 144.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 165.

⁵⁹ The political and symbolic struggle of the Black Panther Party is also discussed by Erika Doss in “‘Revolutionary Art Is a Tool for Liberation’: Emory Douglass and Protest Aesthetics in the *Black Panther*.” In *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and Their Legacy*, edited by Kathleen Neal Cleaver and George Katsiaficas. (New York: Routledge, 2001). Also see, Jane Rhodes. *Framing the Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon* (New York: New Press, 2007).

⁶⁰ Melamed. *Represent and Destroy* (2011). Also, Nikhil Pal Singh, in *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2004) discusses the ways in which the civil rights movement is treated as though it has ended and then mobilized in dominant discourses to picture racism as though it no longer exists. He advocates for a broader view of the black liberation struggle that recognizes its earlier beginnings and that it is still an ongoing process.

Obama's visuality in that, while the Panthers sought to challenge and disrupt violent structures of state-sanctioned inequity and racism, Obama did not (in 2008) nor does he now, pose a significant challenge to the established order. Instead, at the most basic level, by running for president, Barack Obama aligns himself with the current political structure of the United States—along with its imperial and global capitalist interests—and has agreed to participate in the media spectacle required of a politician, meaning that while his image is also carefully calculated, it is done so in the interest of mass appeal rather than establishing and asserting subjectivity in the face of systemic violence. Further, while his running platform certainly differed from what the nation experienced during the eight year term of George W. Bush, it was and still is well within the bounds of dominantly acceptable political discourse in the U.S. In other words, there is a big difference between challenging the racial and capitalist state from the ground-up and running for president of that state even if the goal may be to change from within. In this way, it would not be difficult to argue that Obama and his image were always already incorporated into dominant ideologies and discourses. However, the culture of celebration that surrounded Obama in 2008 and the visual manifestations of this, point to his emergent appeal as something new, different, and potentially destabilizing to the status quo that was both fostered through his campaign rhetoric as well as something assigned to him by his constituency. Therefore, this chapter finds Raiford's application of a dialectics of seeing as a useful starting point and reworks it to explore the ways it plays out on an already "incorporated" figure with "emergent" appeal, a subtle and simultaneous push and pull that complicates Obama's symbolism. When I discuss the emergent aspect of Obama's visuality I am considering the ways in which this visuality circulates in discourse that celebrates Obama as a symbol of a racially transcendent moment

and as a figure that challenges and disrupts the status quo. When I speak of his being incorporated I am referring to the fact that running for/being president requires a certain level of acceptance of the validity of existing structures and therefore means that Obama and his image reflect a dominant ideological and structural standpoint where any significant challenge to the status quo is unlikely. Through exploring the tension between these two as they play out through Obama as an archive, I hope to illustrate the ways that Obama's emergent appeal is largely a product of his identity, not his politics. Additionally, while Raiford explores the Black Panther's visuality, this chapter will focus on how the legacies of the civil rights movement inform and interact with Obama's identity and symbolic power, revealing emergent/incorporation parallels with how the civil rights movement circulates in national memory as well.

This chapter argues that Obama's archive draws from a visual genealogy of the civil rights movement during the 1960s in the United States that situates Obama as the culmination of this movement and the inheritor of a male-dominant history of iconic leadership that skews the history of this movement while affirming more conventional historical renderings and posits Obama as post-racial icon. The images that will be discussed circulate within the discursive terrain of this genealogy, both reflecting and shaping the tension between Obama's simultaneous emergent appeal and incorporation into dominant logics in highly visual ways. I will first explore the ways that the notion of a grassroots poster and print movement imbue images of Obama, and by extension Obama's overall symbolic value, with an oppositional and revolutionary air that informs and bolsters his emergent appeal. I will then examine the ways in which Obama's identity as both mixed-race and black are figured in celebratory ways that obscure the violent histories of race in the United States

as well as how both identities, in often contradictory ways, allow for Obama to be positioned as the culmination of the civil rights movement which relies on a gendered and racial understanding of temporality or what Habiba Ibrahim refers to as “racial time”.⁶¹ The last section of this chapter will explore the civil rights legacy in dominant national memory that privileges icons from the movement in ways that obscure and depoliticize this history and its relevance in this contemporary moment. Additionally, I will explore the ways that this depoliticization through national narrative sets the stage for Obama to enter as a symbolic and visual legacy of this movement in ways that focus signifying power on his identity. Overall, in each section I hope to demonstrate the ways that this dominant discursive terrain and the images that are a part of it reflect a dialectical push and pull between emergence and incorporation. I argue that this dynamic works to fashion Obama as a highly consumable masculine symbol of change that feeds discourses of neoliberalism and multiculturalism in the U.S.

Grassroots and Street Art

One of the unique elements of the visual climate of Obama support for the 2008 election is the extent to which much of this imagery was created by artists who were not working for the official campaign. Instead, many artists around the nation felt compelled to organize at grassroots levels, often working with “street artists” like Shepard Fairey, the creator of the iconic *Hope* poster. As Fairey puts it, “One of the most remarkable things about the grassroots art movement surrounding Obama’s campaign was that, for the first time since maybe the sixties, there was a genuine movement where artists felt like there was an

⁶¹ Ibrahim. *Troubling the Family*, xxvi.

opportunity to engage in democracy and use art as a tool of communication.”⁶² Artists, art collectors, and curators tell a story of how posters featuring Obama sprang up in public spaces overnight and served as a call to action to rally support for the presidential candidate.⁶³ Obama’s ability to symbolize the reinvigoration of democracy inspired a wealth of artistic production and this production, much of which took the form of poster and print, helped to bolster this democratic vision through its ability to call upon a history and art form imbued with a revolutionary, ground-up, and emergent aesthetic. Notably, the production of Obama inspired artwork, in particular the poster, was not limited to the United States as artists around the world participated in creating this body of Obama imagery. It is possible that, as the United States has attempted to disguise imperial interests behind the mask of exporting and protecting democracy worldwide, that Obama’s ability to embody and authenticate democratic ideals once again was part of his appeal on a global stage as well.

Political art, particularly the poster, has been used around the world as both political propaganda and revolutionary tool. The appeal of the art form is tied to the ability to print large numbers of images that can draw attention and send relatively quick messages in public spaces with a certain degree of artist anonymity, if desired. Curator Margaret Timmers explains,

By its nature, the poster has the ability to seize the immediate attention of the viewer, and then to retain it for what is usually a brief but intense period. During that span of attention, it can provoke and motivate its audience – it can make the viewer gasp, laugh, reflect, question, assent, protest, recoil or otherwise react. This is part of the

⁶² Shepard Fairey. “The Birth of Hope,” *Art for Obama: Designing Manifest Hope and the Campaign for Change*, 8-9.

⁶³ Wert. *Hope*, 11. Holly Parker. “Iconoclasts Take On The Icon,” *Abraham Obama: A Guerrilla Tour Through Art & Politics*, 6.

process by which the message is conveyed and, in successful cases, ultimately acted upon. At its most effective, the poster is a dynamic force for change.⁶⁴

While Timmers provides a succinct overview of how the power of the poster functions, Stuart Hall's model of encoding and decoding is useful for teasing out the ways that political posters are involved in what he calls a "complex structure of dominance" in which the processes of production, circulation, distribution, consumption, and reproduction interact with and influence each other while still remaining distinct in the overall process of communication.⁶⁵ Further, Hall notes the centrality of discourse for, "...it is in the discursive form that the circulation of the product takes place, as well as its distribution to different audiences."⁶⁶ In this way, we can see these posters as part of a multifaceted process of meaning-making at different levels that are situated within a certain discursive terrain. And while Hall also notes that there is no one way of disseminating or interpreting meaning, certain meanings tend to predominate and the use of political posters throughout history has been largely successful at sending the intended message to the target audience, which in Obama's case was likely a liberal community of eligible voters.⁶⁷

In regard to the poster as a form of advertisement, the ability of the viewer to successfully decode the intended meaning is aided by the frequent application of text—title, caption, label, etc.—in conjunction with the image. Roland Barthes argues that the text/image combination serves the purposes of both anchorage and relay for the intended message.

Barthes explains that the placement of text within or alongside an image is intended to

⁶⁴ Margaret Timmers (ed). *The Power of the Poster*. (London: V&A Publications, 1998), 8.

⁶⁵ Stuart Hall. "Encoding, Decoding," *The Cultural Studies Reader*. Simon During (ed.) (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 91.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 101-103. More specifically, Hall locates three possibilities for interpreting or decoding messages: the dominant-hegemonic position in which a message is taken with little or no mediation, the negotiated position in which the audience may accept some but not all of the intended message being sent, and the oppositional position in which the viewer rejects the intended message and instead employs an alternate framework.

grapple with a sign's polysemous characteristics and guide the audience into a certain interpretation. Anchorage text directs the viewer to a certain level of perception or explanation in relation to the image and relay serves the purpose of adding meaning that is not readily available within the image itself.⁶⁸ These two functions of text can exist simultaneously within an image and are a common characteristic of the posters circulated within the public sphere, adding to their ability to send powerful messages quickly. Further, as is the case with the collection I examine, the images are removed from their original context, compiled in a book together, and annotated. The notes that are presented alongside the images within the collection would not have been present originally, yet they reflect one interpretation of the images and serve the purpose of anchorage and relay in my own interaction with them, therefore playing a role in the interpretation that I present here as well.

The combination of text and image and the framing of this collection as a whole are key in validating the notion of this artwork as a grassroots art movement and positioning them as part of a genealogy of social movement imagery. As potent tools for igniting change, posters have been key elements of social movements in the United States as ways of strengthening and activating local communities as well as making global connections. For example, posters were in high circulation during the Chicano movement as well as the civil rights movement and George Lipsitz notes,

Poster images reinforced organic solidarity within the Chicano Movement, but they also helped create connecting ideologies to link *chicanismo* with anticolonial nationalist struggles around the world. Informed by images of international solidarity prominent in Cuban poster art during the 1960s, infuriated by the massacre of protesting students in Mexico City shortly before the 1968 Olympics, and inspired by the affinities between antiracist campaigns in the U.S. and anticolonial movements

⁶⁸ Roland Barthes. "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Visual Culture: The Reader*, eds. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore: Sage Publications, 1999), 37-38.

overseas, Chicano artists gave broad exposure to international issues in their posters.⁶⁹

At their core then, posters have been a major part of oppositional struggles and the artwork created during the 2008 election draws from this historical legacy in many ways while also complicating what this artistic and political legacy means in this contemporary moment.

While many of the artists who produced artwork featuring Obama in 2008 refer to this body of work as a “grassroots art movement”, the lines between visual media that was organized and directed by the official campaign and those that were created on the artists’ own accord are significantly blurred. Shepard Fairey and his piece, *Hope*—the image that became one of the most recognizable and highly circulated images of the 2008 election—is one example of this dynamic (Figure 2). This image features Obama from the shoulders up in red, white, and blue with dark stenciled lines delineating his facial features. Obama’s face is directed at the viewer but his gaze is pensive and focused, directed slightly upward and off into the distance. His bust rests atop large blue letters spelling out the word HOPE and the campaign logo graces the lapel of his suit jacket.⁷⁰ In this image, Obama is imbued with the strength and focus required of a national leader. His forward and distant gaze suggest a future-oriented progress and the word “hope” anchors the image and directs an association of Obama with this positive connotation.

⁶⁹ George Lipsitz. “Not Just Another Social Movement: Poster Art and the Movimiento Chicano,” in *Just Another Poster? Chicano Graphic Arts in California*, ed. Chon A. Noriega, (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001), 78.

⁷⁰ Wert. *Hope*, 157. Wert attributes the campaign logo design to Sol Sender, Andy Keene and Amanda Gentry.



Figure 2: *Hope* by Shepard Fairey in Wert’s *Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints* (2009), pgs. 132 & 184. This image taken from: <http://ghcollections.com/>

Shepard Fairey, a self-described “street artist”, decided early on that Barack Obama was a presidential candidate that he wanted to support with his artwork. However, the questionable legality of his usual artistic tactics earned him a few arrests and his concern over whether or not this might negatively affect the Obama campaign prompted him to seek permission to create and distribute an image.⁷¹ After receiving the green light, he began circulating his portrait of Obama with the campaign’s permission but in a manner still his own. “I put my Obama illustration to work as a grassroots tool in the same way I would any of my work: I made the image, posted it online (including a high-resolution download), and printed up posters and stickers, which I started putting up around L.A. and sending out to

⁷¹ Fairey. “The Birth of Hope,” in *Art For Obama*, (2009), 7.

other parts of the country.”⁷² The image attracted significant attention and soon the Obama campaign contacted Fairey with an invitation to design a number of images to sell in efforts to raise money for the election season.⁷³

While Fairey felt compelled to visually support Obama and to do so in a sort of “ground-up” way, the fact that he obtained permission from the campaign and was eventually enlisted to create artwork for fundraising, blurs the line between the official and the unofficial in ways that mimic the overall tension between emergence and incorporation that circulates around Obama. This dynamic is not unique to Fairey, as a number of other artists produced images with certain degrees of autonomy in style and circulation techniques but still under the general direction from the campaign to “keep it positive.”⁷⁴ Whether or not all of the artists who produced Obama artwork received this campaign instruction, interpreted it in the same way, or chose to follow it is unclear. However, this alludes to a dynamic where artists worked with a certain degree of autonomy that was delicately guided by the official campaign which, I would argue, gestures at the fact that the campaign enjoyed this unsponsored advertising and recognized the emergent appeal of imagery being created out of a genuine will to support the candidate while their need to present guiding words in the first place also implies a certain level of awareness that they had little control over the outcome. In Fairey’s case however, the *Hope* poster exploded, gracing the covers of “*Time*, *Esquire*, *Smithsonian*, etc.” and became one of the most recognizable images for the 2008 election.⁷⁵ A major factor in the popularity of Fairey and this image has to do with Fairey’s ability to tread the line between insider and outsider as well as how this made Obama appear capable

⁷² Ibid., 7.

⁷³ Ibid., 8.

⁷⁴ Ron English. “Introduction,” in *Abraham Obama*, (2009), 1.

⁷⁵ Wert. *Hope*, 184.

of walking the line between carefully calculated politician and genuine representative of the people.

The unofficial, grassroots, and ground-up aesthetic that informs much of the artistic renderings of Obama proved highly productive for the campaign in circulating the image of Obama as youthful and cool, and a man of people. In “The Politics of Tagging: Shepard Fairey’s Obama,” Erika Schneider explains, “Fairey’s identification as a ‘radical type’ demonstrates precisely what the Obama campaign appreciated about the artist. By using the street artist’s work, the campaign excited members of the youth culture, a demographic courted by the senator. Street art offered hipness because of its outsider status.”⁷⁶ The “outsider status” of Fairey and many other artists, in combination with the medium and modes of circulation that involve the artists placing their work in public spaces or utilizing the internet, all provide the artwork, and in turn Obama, with an air of accessibility that fosters a sense of newness and change in the political sphere—the reinvigoration of democracy.

The social movement and activist history associated with grassroots artistic production informs the celebratory artwork produced in 2008 and Obama as an archive. Elements of Obama’s symbolism sparked this body of artwork and, in turn, this body of work helps to situate Obama within a legacy of visual culture that was a core element of oppositional movements intended to challenge the status quo, including but not limited to the 1960s civil rights movement. This visual genealogy imbues Obama with an emergent and revolutionary appeal that is strengthened by the artists’ ambiguous connections to the official

⁷⁶ Erika Schneider. “The Politics of Tagging: Shepard Fairey’s Obama,” in *The Iconic Obama, 2007-2009: Essays on Media Representations of the Candidate and New President*, eds. Nicholas A. Yanes and Derrais Carter, (Jefferson and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2012), 98.

campaign—as though the artwork is an authentic, non-politically tainted expression of the nation’s desires. Importantly, while the election of Barack Obama itself does not pose any significant challenge to dominant structures and ideologies, this artwork and Obama as an archive are able to draw significant symbolic power from the visual history of oppositional social movements in ways that obscure their political ambitions and place them in the realm of normative discourse. This artistic and political legacy is but one way that Obama, as a figure incorporated into the United States dominant political system, is imbued with an emergent appeal. This dynamic is strengthened by Obama’s racial difference and the prominence of racial discourse surrounding him in a United States’ context where the idea of moving beyond race and racism is a core element informing national identity and means that there are few images of Obama that can or should be read without a consideration for the role that race plays.

Fairey’s image utilizes a three-tone color scheme of red, white, and blue that is not uncommon in images of United States’ political figures and political poster art more broadly. However, in noting the prominence of racial discourse in regard to Obama, it is possible that the artist’s choice to represent Obama with a multi-toned face could be interpreted as also in dialogue with his racial identity. The red, white, and blue tones that make up Obama’s face could be seen as a reflection of his racial ambiguity and his ability to represent multiple racial groups. Or alternatively, the fact that the colors are red, white, and blue could imply that the specificities of his identity matter less than his ability to signify a racially transcendent moment where the most important thing is that he represents the arrival of post-raciality in the United States.

Post-Race, Mixed-Race, or Black?

The term post-race, as a descriptor with a great deal of purchase to describe this contemporary moment in the United States, is an ambiguous and contradictory term with potentially dangerous implications. In his article, “Trayvon, Postblackness, and the Postrace Dilemma,” Richard Purcell notes that the term is somewhat new but that the ideological underpinnings of its use draw from a long history, particularly after WWII, of attempts to grapple with the violent problems that race-thinking endorses.⁷⁷ As he explains, post-race in this moment as it circulates around Obama, “is but one moment in a series of state-sanctioned, organic, and imaginative attempts to move beyond the problematics of race and representational strategies based on it.”⁷⁸ Post-race then, is a term that recognizes the need to move beyond race yet, particularly in this moment, it also seems to be an urgently hopeful term that attempts to reach a shining destination without carving the path to get there. This becomes particularly problematic when the term is deployed to describe the now rather than a future potential or goal, for as Paul Gilroy asserts in his admittedly utopian discussion of post-racial potential, “The political will to liberate humankind from race-thinking must be complimented by precise historical reasons why these attempts are worth making.”⁷⁹ In relation to Obama, who is celebrated as a post-racial icon to symbolize the notion that race is no longer a factor that structures opportunity, the term becomes a contradictory way of holding up an individual as an emblem of new possibility that casts a shadow over the

⁷⁷ Richard Purcell. “Trayvon, Postblackness, and the Postrace Dilemma,” *Boundary 2*. (Fall 2013), 140-142.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 143-144.

⁷⁹ Paul Gilroy. *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 12. Gilroy urges that a break away from race-thinking is necessary and notes the ways that a commitment to race as a structural force hinders philosophical and political possibilities at best, and at worst, mimics European fascism. However, the post-racial ideology that he argues for is one carefully calculated and informed by historical processes, not the historical amnesia that informs use of the term post-race now.

racially-based systems of inequality in the United States. The discourse surrounding race and opportunity then, becomes one of individual determination and hard work that stigmatizes the racialized poor as lazy, criminal, underserving, etc.⁸⁰ However, applying the term post-race to a figure like Obama actually reveals the way in which the United States can't seem to let go of race, for in attempts to demonstrate a nation being beyond it, constant reference must be made to the racial identity of the successful. And because the visual is so profoundly intertwined with race, Obama, as a public figure with high levels of visibility, becomes the poster-child for this discourse. While Obama's racial and ethnic identity are contested in the public sphere, his racial difference is always on display because it is what allows him to conjure the post-racial illusion in the national imagination. It is also important to remember that because post-race requires race to function, Obama's identity, in particular his blackness, always exceeds the bounds of post-racial discourse, illuminating just how committed we as a nation are to race and how Obama as a symbolic figure and icon would be illegible without it.

In many ways, public discussion surrounding Obama's identity is over-determined by his blackness. However, a great deal of attention has also been directed at his mixed-race heritage which has a complex relationship to racial configurations in the U.S., a history that is indexed in Obama's archive in celebratory ways that privilege the multiracial being as emblematic of a multicultural nation. The terms multiracial or mixed-race are used to describe a number of racial and ethnic combinations, but there are particularities that require

⁸⁰ Lisa Marie Cacho in, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012), goes into detail about the ways in which rights and value are stripped from racialized communities relegating them to a state of "social death." Also, Khalil Gibran Muhammad in, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010), provides a genealogy for the historical construction and association of blackness with criminality.

attention when considering the mix of black and white, especially within the context of a nation founded on racial slavery, longstanding tenets of antiblackness, and white supremacy.⁸¹

In her book, *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (2004), Shawn Michelle Smith provides an in-depth look at an archive of photographs compiled by Du Bois for the American Negro Exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition. In this collection, Du Bois appropriates the photographic documentary style of eugenicists like Francis Galton in order to displace and highlight the contradictions of visual modes of identifying racial difference and hierarchies that informed the work of Galton and other “race scientists.”⁸² Smith details the multifaceted and complex ideological aims of this archive, but of particular interest for this present discussion is that Du Bois incorporated photographs of biracial youth with the intention of upsetting the notion that racial ancestry could be gleaned purely from someone’s appearance. Smith writes,

White hysteria over the ‘threat’ of racial passing at the turn of the century both spurred an increased fervor in racial surveillance and marked the extent to which a long history of forced interracial mixing during and after slavery had blurred the boundaries of white privilege. Du Bois’s photographs of a young, blond, very pale African American child challenge white supremacists’ investment in separating the races by signaling an undeniable history of physical union between them.⁸³

Here, Smith references the anxiety that revolved around racial mixing, the history of sexual violence that permeated racial slavery, and the use of the mixed-race body to visually illuminate the short-comings of systems of racial categorization. This anxiety fueled the enforcement of the “one-drop” rule in which a person determined to have even the tiniest

⁸¹ Smith. *Photography on the Color Line*; Elam. *Souls of Mixed-Folk*; Joseph. *Transcending Blackness*; Sexton. *Amalgamation Schemes*; Ibrahim. *Troubling the Family*; etc.

⁸² Shawn Michelle Smith. *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 51.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 63.

amount of black ancestry would be deemed black in the interest of protecting white property, entitlement, and privilege. However, in *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (2008), Jared Sexton notes that the degrees to which the one-drop rule was enforced shifted with the historical context and whether or not black resistance was posing a significant threat to structures of white supremacy.⁸⁴

The decade of the 1990s in the U.S. saw the reformulating of the history of mixed-race politics into a politics of multiracialism that, with a bit of historical amnesia, paved the way for contemporary celebrations of the mixed-race individual as emblematic of the downfall of the “one-drop” rule in a nation where racism ended with the civil rights movement.⁸⁵ A number of scholars grapple with how these discourses influence the overall treatment of race in the U.S. and Greg Carter’s book, *The United States of the United Races* (2013), examines the celebratory history of mixed-race advocacy spanning from the late eighteenth century and culminating in our contemporary moment. His text seeks to complicate the notion of progress often associated with the mixed-race figure and he acknowledges that, “...even though the number of people who identify as mixed race is small, they hold immense figural power for the nation as symbols of progress, equality, and utopia.”⁸⁶ Furthermore, Michele Elam notes that 1990s mixed-race advocacy lead to the birth of mixed-race studies in academia, the increasing commodification of the notion of mixed-race, shifts in popular culture aesthetics, and, of course, the option to check multiple racial

⁸⁴ Jared Sexton. *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism*. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 12.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸⁶ Greg Carter. *The United States of the United Races: A Utopian History of Racial Mixing*. (New York and London: New York University Press, 2013), 2.

categories on the U.S. census.⁸⁷ Additionally, both Carter and Elam highlight that multiracial identity politics during this time period often took visual form and they discuss the 1993 *Time* magazine cover, which identified a computer generated female face composed of multiple different races as the future face of America. Both authors note this as being one of the most well-known and controversial examples of the media's interest in picturing the multiracial being as the personification of national racial progress.⁸⁸ This image signals both lingering anxieties and certain levels of fascination that circulate around the hybridity of the mixed-race body.

This body of scholarship calls attention to the significant impact that multiracial advocacy of the late twentieth century has on contemporary discourses of race in the U.S., but these authors also uncover a number of problematic assertions that inform these politics. Both Sexton and Elam note that the discourse surrounding the mixed-race individual as progress implies that multiracial people and interracial sexual encounters are something new. As Carter's text demonstrates, the hopeful sentiment surrounding racial mixing has a long history, and as Smith notes, racial slavery cannot be separated from a history of interracial sexual violence. Thus, to treat racial mixing as a new and therefore progressive phenomena, obscures and forgets this history and the ways that these histories of violence and relations of power inform the present. Additionally, by positing the multiracial figure as that which defies and breaks down racial categorization or the relevance of race-thinking in general, casts those with monoracial identifications as somehow committed to narrow definitions of race that are

⁸⁷ Michele Elam. *The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), xiii-xiv.

⁸⁸ Elam. *Souls of Mixed Folk*, 4. Carter. *United States of the United Races*, 15.

out of step with the progress narrative that the multiracial being symbolizes.⁸⁹ This logic functions somewhat similarly to that informing post-race logic in that neither post-raciality nor multiracialism see the breakdown of racial categorization and instead, both require the reinscription of race as a defining element of their logic. In other words, because both logics require the existence of race and racial categories to define them, there is no fundamental disruption to the meaning and weight that race holds in United States society.

One of the major critiques posited by Jared Sexton is that the multiracial politics of the 1990s privilege heteronormative sexual coupling through locating it as the necessary starting point for the creation of the celebrated multiracial figure and as inherently antiracist. In the process however, these politics must rescue the interracial sexual relationship from a history of violence and attempt to do so in ways that sever the ties between racialization and sexuality while privileging the heterosexual nuclear family structure. Sexton asserts, “In seeking to gain moral distance from age-old racist fantasies of interracial sexuality as the realm par excellence of the perverse, the pathological, and the pornographic, the new multiracial consciousness eschews the sexual dimensions of racialization (and vice versa) in favor of axiological pronouncements on ‘love,’ ‘romance,’ ‘family,’ and ‘childrearing.’”⁹⁰ In other words, in order to recuperate the interracial sexual relationship from its racialized and violent past in a way that can be celebrated alongside the multiracial being, everything else about it must register in the normative realm, or as Elam puts it, “. . .the representations of the mixed race nation make race mixing palatable under cover of conservative ‘family values.’

⁸⁹ Sexton. *Amalgamation Schemes* (2008), 5. Elam. *Souls of Mixed Folk* (2011), 11.

⁹⁰ Sexton. *Amalgamation Schemes*, 8.

Though it was once beyond the legal and social pale, interracial marriage is rehabilitated as a model for the American Way.”⁹¹

Habiba Ibrahim, in her book *Troubling the Family: The Promise of Personhood and the Rise of Multiracialism* (2012), offers insight on the multiracial movement’s investment in normative family dynamics that rely on particular constructions of a gendered “racial time.” Ibrahim argues for an understanding of time as always already racial and an embodying process which “is to recognize that racial time powerfully structures both the social realization of personhood and the social delegitimizing of other forms of embodied life.”⁹² She goes on to explain that the temporality at work in the multiracial movement is that of “family time” which posits a normative and chronological conception of subject formation, a progression into personhood, which undergirded the multiracial movement’s logic of the “civil right to have multiracial families.”⁹³ According to Ibrahim, this particular use of language posited the multiracial movement as an extension of the 1960s fight for civil rights but in a way that ultimately overshadowed and ignored the influence of second-wave feminism and placed the movement in an uneasy temporal relationship with social movements that came before it. Ibrahim argues that because of this “historical aporia” the multiracial movement of the 1990s trained its focus on the future which took form in the (male) offspring of the interracial union.⁹⁴

As both Ibrahim and Sexton note, the multiracial movement of the 1990s framed its identity politics and advocacy through discourses of civil rights, featuring the mixed-race

⁹¹ Elam. *The Souls of Mixed Folk*, 37.

⁹² Ibrahim. *Troubling the Family*, 3.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

population as one who's "right to recognition" is being violated.⁹⁵ The multiracial movement may cite a genealogy of civil rights discourse but in actuality this dynamic may serve to further vilify monoracial groups and uphold tenets of antiblackness. Here, Sexton argues, "Blacks are thus depicted in the multiracial imagination as a conglomerate anachronism, perpetuating disreputable traits of antebellum slave society and presenting a foremost obstacle to the progress of liberal society today: white supremacy in blackface, antiblackness turned upside down."⁹⁶ This antiblackness is masked by multiracial discourse that invokes a civil rights legacy while obscuring the politics. Further, this position posits mixed-race identity as inherently antiracist as well as identity as somehow synonymous with political reform.⁹⁷ This point is a result of what Ibrahim points out as the unacknowledged feminist influences on the multiracial movement that foregrounded the notion that "the personal is political" and allowed for the multiracial movement's focus on heterosexuality and childrearing as an alibi for its unstable racial politics.⁹⁸

The interface between blackness and multiracialism are elaborated by Ibrahim as she explores Obama's public racial identity about a decade after the height of the 1990s multiracial movement. She notes how Obama was able to acknowledge his mixed-race heritage while still being able to identify as black in ways that took the position of both the attainment of multiracial personhood and black advancement.⁹⁹ She describes that the era of Obama is marked by another shift in the notion of racial time that interacts with post-raciality to neutralize both race and gender and "It is this current relinquishing of race-based

⁹⁵ Sexton. *Amalgamation Schemes*, 45.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁹⁷ Elam. *The Souls of Mixed Folk*, 9.

⁹⁸ Ibrahim. *Troubling the Family*, 7.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 162.

inequities in public and politics, in combination with the ossification of yesterday's civil rights activism, that likely became the temporal conceptualization of Obama's publicity."¹⁰⁰ Further, she posits that the supposed gender neutrality that allows a black male to stand in as representative of the black community as a whole, obscuring the particular experiences of black women, is a product of black radical activism of the 1960s and 1970s. This legacy moves into this contemporary moment and frames black male leadership in familial or kinship terms that, for example, allow Obama to be posited as a descendant of a race-neutral Martin Luther King in what she calls a "forefather/progeny paradigm."¹⁰¹ While the authors above as well as Ibrahim note that blackness and multiracialism exist in a tenuous relationship to one another, Obama's symbolic ascendancy represents a particularity of this moment in which multiracialism and blackness can co-exist in the same figure. Importantly, the masculine form on which Obama's promise of personhood is dependent, overshadows the existence of women of color feminist critiques of racial, sexual, and gender-based oppression and forwards an understanding of history and our present moment as one where masculinity can stand in for all.

Obama's archive includes elements of the long and fraught history of attempting to deal with the multiracial body in a society where racial categorization is a major structuring factor. In particular, public discussion and debate surrounding his mixed-race heritage draws significantly from the rhetoric of the 1990s multiracial movement. Importantly, as Carter notes, while Obama did publicly discuss his heritage during the election, mixed-race or multiracial were not terms that he often used to describe himself but rather, "...he let the public apply this label to him..." which may have been a tactic to avoid alienating any one

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 163.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 163.

group of voters.¹⁰² In either case, contemporary discourses surrounding multiracialism proved to be quite productive in framing his symbolic value in a positive and progressive light. Obama as a mixed-race icon draws from the “newness” of multiracial discourse, bolstering his emergent appeal and providing distance from violent racial histories that often position blackness as a problematic antagonism to national narratives that prefer to safely contain slavery and Jim Crow in the past. Additionally, the way that contemporary multiracial politics draw from the language rather than the politics of civil rights discourse allow for Obama to be positioned as a logical extension of civil rights which culminates in his being elected president and securing the nation’s badge of post-raciality. The notion that identity is enough to signify political reform directly informs the ways in which neutralized versions of social movement history circulate within Obama’s symbolism and privilege his identity as the site of meaning rather than his politics.

What is important to note from this discussion of mixed-race discourse is that it informs Obama’s symbolic value, imbues him with an emergent appeal, calls upon a depoliticized legacy of civil rights that conflates identity with politics, and incorporates mixed-race discourse into dominant and long-standing notions of heteronormativity and antiblackness in a color-blind disguise. However, it is also crucial to consider the shift in multiracial discourse that marks Obama’s ascendancy as a symbolic figure in that his mixed-race heritage and black identity are able to co-exist in his masculine genealogy that masquerades as gender and race neutral.¹⁰³ While these two versions of his identity are often articulated in contradictory ways, the discourses of blackness that circulate around him, in

¹⁰² Carter. *United States of the United Races*, 211.

¹⁰³ Ibrahim. *Troubling the Family*, 163.

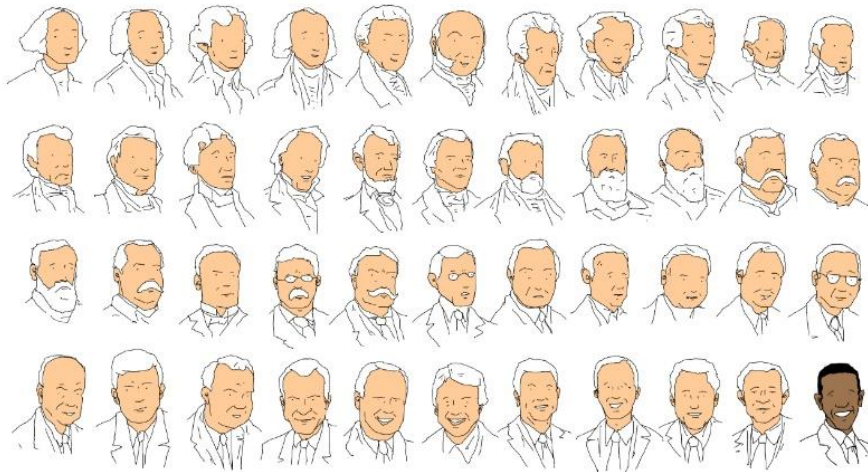
conjunction with his mixed-race heritage, allow for his simultaneous positioning within legacies of civil rights and celebratory discourses of post-raciality.

The post-racial is illustrated in relation to Obama's blackness in a piece by Patrick Moberg called *Today is a Big Day* (Figure 3). In this image, Moberg presents a series of caricatures depicting all forty-four United States' presidents.¹⁰⁴ The piece is a bit comical and each president's face is cartoonish and composed of simple black lines with various renditions of white hair atop the same shade of light tan skin, repeated forty-three times over. The forty-fourth face, however, is very dark brown with black hair and a dazzling white-toothed smile. In an image such as this, in conjunction with the accompanying title, it is quite clear that what makes this particular day a "big day" is President Obama's racial difference from his forty-three predecessors. Importantly, Obama's skin tone in the image is represented as much darker than Obama's is in real life, firmly situating Obama as the United States' first *black* president. This image then, notes Obama's racial difference but foregrounds that difference not as one of ambiguity, rather the point is Obama's blackness. This image draws from a visual and historical genealogy that first posits Obama's racial specificity as the site of significance and second, frames the significance of this moment in black and white terms. The repetitive white-faced portraits depict the long history of whiteness that occupied the White House to which Obama's face provides an abrupt break. So much disruptive power is implied in the presence of his face, which signifies in relation to whiteness, illustrating Obama's racial intervention within the terms of the black/white binary that shapes much of how race relations are conceived in the United States. It does so by foregrounding Obama's

¹⁰⁴ Hal Elliot Wert. *Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints* (2009).

blackness and calling upon it as a monolithic and stable signifier of meaning.¹⁰⁵ It is as if to say that despite Obama's mixed-race heritage, his blackness is what means most in his position among the masculine legacy of presidents, for in the historical legacy of the fight for civil rights, blackness becomes the most legible form of challenge. The complexities of Obama himself, as well as the complexities of the historical formations that make his election a significant moment are flattened out. The association of leadership with masculinity goes unchallenged and what Obama represents is a shift in the racial components of this legacy of men. One might suppose that Moberg intended this image to be read as the attainment of black equality in general, but what we see aligns with Ibrahim's assertion that black male leadership is privileged to stand in for the black community as a whole. This image frames Obama's promise of racial equality and opportunity in terms of his ability to take a place amongst this masculine genealogy. Additionally, it is almost as though this image is attempting to push Obama to be blacker, ostensibly more black than his mixed-race heritage might otherwise allow, to avoid complexity and thus risk the clear-cut significance of blackness as a sign of progress.

¹⁰⁵ There is significant debate about whether or not the "black-white" binary mode of thinking through race relations in the United States is sufficient to understand the specificities of the ways in which different populations are racialized. As Sexton notes, there are frequent calls to "move beyond" this binary construction and multiracialism is often posited as a site at which this becomes possible (6). Within the field of comparative race studies this debate often takes form around the populations that are excluded from consideration within a black-white binary while others acknowledge that processes of racialization in the United States hold conceptions of blackness and whiteness as foundational to their structuring. In regard to Moberg's image, I am mainly concerned with the ways in which conceiving of race in solely black and white terms helps to create blackness as a monolithic signifier of meaning that is constructed in relation to whiteness.



NOVEMBER 4, 2008

Figure 3: *Today is a Big Day* by Patrick Moberg in Wert’s *Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints* (2009), pgs. 53 & 163. This image taken from: <http://www.patrickmoberg.com/blog/id:420/november-4-2008>

Scholars like Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall warn against essentialist notions of black identity and the limiting authenticating narratives that accompany this type of thought. Both authors argue for a hybrid and diasporic view of blackness that understands, in Gilroy’s terms, the “Black Atlantic,” as a framework for understanding the intercultural and transnational history of slavery that produced inherently hybrid and diverse identities.¹⁰⁶ To be clear, the anti-essentialism that Hall and Gilroy engage is not the same as the hybridity celebrated within 1990s multiracial discourse that privileges a combination of racial identities over monoracial identifications. Instead, both Gilroy and Hall seek to complicate what it is that ‘black’ signifies as both a racial and ethnic category, noting a complex and historical web of mixing instigated by the forced dispersal of people across the globe. Hall argues that to essentialize and fix “black” as a signifier works to de-historicize difference

¹⁰⁶ Hall. “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?”, 110. Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 15.

and, "...as always happens when we naturalize historical categories (think gender and sexuality), we fix that signifier outside of history, outside of change, outside of political intervention. And once it is fixed, we are tempted to use 'black' as sufficient in itself to guarantee the progressive character of the politics we fight under the banner – as if we don't have any other politics to argue about except whether something's black or not."¹⁰⁷ Hall notes the tendency to assume a political perspective based on identity which is a tendency illustrated in Moberg's piece and the discourse surrounding Obama. Obama, because he is black, is placed within a teleological narrative of progress where his blackness becomes his political significance. Contrary to Hall's call to consider the "diversity, not the homogeneity, of black experience," much of the discourse that circulates around Obama as black either attempts to place Obama within a particular understanding of blackness or police whether or not he represents an authentic black subject. In either case, the signifier 'black' and its frequent association with the masculine form, is used to call on specific meanings and histories, while obscuring others.

Attempting to locate or define how blackness functions as an identity, concept, and signifier is a tricky business and, given Hall and Gilroy's assertions that blackness is multifaceted in experience and global in history, means that attempts to discuss the meaning of blackness must embrace a level of instability and resist the desire to 'fix'. However, in his article "Post-Black, Old Black," Paul C. Taylor offers a set of criteria which he sees as informing dominant configurations of blackness, black identity and community.¹⁰⁸ He distinguishes between "thick" and "thin" racial identities that are determined to different degrees by three broad criteria. He writes,

¹⁰⁷ Hall. "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?," 111.

¹⁰⁸ Paul C. Taylor. "Post-Black, Old Black," *African American Review*, Vol. 41, No. 4, (2007), 632.

First, to put it crudely, it involves African appearance and ancestry. Second, it involves being subject to the norms that society attaches to the thin identity of African appearance and ancestry. Different subgroups in society will have different conceptions of these norms, but we could without too much trouble construct an idealized set of typical norms, either for specific subgroups or for the hegemonic attitudes in US society as a whole. Finally, black identity involves certain probabilities of experiencing the typical conditions of black life.¹⁰⁹

Taylor locates the presence of African appearance and ancestry as a sort of minimum requirement for black identity, a thin racial identity, that is then thickened by how one interacts or is positioned within the “social location” of blackness, which includes both conceptions of and pressures to display “racial norms” and race as a determining factor in things such as socioeconomic status.¹¹⁰

In relation to these defining guidelines, Obama occupies a somewhat precarious position and while there was certainly a great deal of celebration surrounding Obama as the first *black* president, whether or not he displays an authentic or “thick racial identity” has been a hot topic particularly within the realm of racial satire. Interestingly, this satire often utilizes the visual realm, one of the areas called upon most frequently to represent Obama as black, to also challenge his racial authenticity. For example, just before the election in 2012, Chris Rock created a sketch for the Jimmy Kimmel show that opens with Chris Rock stating, “Hi, I’m Chris Rock with a special message for white people. In times like these, you need a white president you can trust and that white president’s name is Barack Obama.” The sketch continues as Chris Rock lists Obama’s “white” characteristics from his interest in golf to his mom jeans, noting at one point that, “Barack Obama is whiter than Snookie, the tanning mom, and Tara Reid,” as Obama’s face appears onscreen surrounded by images of the women sporting artificial tans. Beyond the canned laughter, the sketch is certain to inspire at

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 634.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 633.

least minor giggles as Chris Rock points out that the United States' first president of color actually embodies a fair number of white stereotypes. What is particularly interesting about this sketch is Rock's association of whiteness with trust, alluding to the idea that blackness on the other hand, is deemed untrustworthy particularly by white people. While the poignancy of this critique is curbed by humor, its relevance in the face of public racist attacks against Obama is not diminished. This sketch highlights Obama's racial ambiguity or the thinness of his racial identity but with added commentary about the persevering status of blackness in the United States. Despite the theme of illuminating Obama's white characteristics, an underlying element of Rock's critique is the assumption that Obama is black and therefore should "act" black. The sketch is framed as though blackness is knowable, quantifiable, and determined in relation to whiteness.

Riding the line between a thin and thick black identity may or may not be intentional for Obama on a personal level but either way, it proved beneficial to Obama's campaign and the specific ways in which his identity was articulated should not be ignored. While Chris Rock pokes fun about enticing white voters with Obama's whiteness, beyond the realm of satire Obama's blackness was also articulated in ways that distanced him from the United States' violent racial past, a past that is crucial to structuring the social locations of blackness that Taylor discusses in our present. As noted earlier, while Obama does not regularly identify himself as mixed-race, his racial heritage is something that he was clear in articulating—he is the son of a mother from Kansas and a father from Kenya, Africa.¹¹¹ Importantly, as Dylan Rodríguez notes, this expression of his father's heritage means that he is not the descendant of slaves and further, he is actually the descendant of slave-owners on

¹¹¹ Angela Nelson. "Popular Culture in the Age of Obama," in *Iconic Obama*, (2012), 11.

his mother's side.¹¹² And as Angela Nelson explains in her article, "Popular Culture in the Age of Obama,"

Representing himself as an African American without a sentiment of anger or bitterness toward the United States because of its wrongdoings or toward American whites because of the transgressions of their primogenitors; an African American who has bought into the idea that America and its proverbial dream can materialize for all of its citizens—including those who were once slaves—enables (American) whites to connect with a possibility that American racism is a thing of the past.¹¹³

The ability to signify racism as a thing of the past and appease white guilt is one of the most troubling components of what Obama symbolizes for it seals the past as over and done and ignores the ways in which the "genocidal logics of slavery," to borrow from Rodríguez, continue to inform and shape our present. Further, it again highlights the interracial sexual relationship as the site at which racism evaporates as the descendant of slave-owners joins an African man to produce the United States' first president of color. And while this narrative makes it possible for Obama to be distanced from the history of slavery, the lingering violences of this history are indexed in Obama's archive through its signifying absence. Its intentional distance from this legacy illuminates the fact that only certain brands of blackness—ones that force no reckoning with structures of white supremacy nor any recognition of the "present-tense of racial slavery," to borrow from Rodríguez again—are able to be incorporated into the United States presidential legacy.¹¹⁴ In this light, it becomes clear that Obama embodies a particular kind of blackness that allows room for black Americans to racially identify with him and what he symbolizes while being able to skirt a

¹¹² Dylan Rodríguez. "The Black Presidential Non-Slave: Genocide and the Present Tense of Racial Slavery," *Political Power and Social Theory*, Vol. 22, (2011), 25.

¹¹³ Nelson. "Popular Culture in the Age of Obama," in *Iconic Obama*, 11.

¹¹⁴ Dylan Rodríguez. "The Black Presidential Non-Slave."

full acknowledgment of the historic status of blackness in the U.S. and avoid conjuring white guilt.

While this is certainly one of many contradictory elements of Obama's symbolism, what is more contradictory is that despite this articulation of his blackness, Obama still holds a great deal of figural power as a black icon who is visually positioned within legacies of the black experience that are particular to United States' history. I argue that this is largely because the work that Obama's symbolism does for the status of blackness in the United States exists in the realm of representation, a politics that, as Hall notes, there is no escaping.¹¹⁵ Put differently, whether or not Obama displays a thick or thin racial identity in ways that are representative of the social locations of blackness in the U.S., in much the same way that Patrick Moberg's poster demonstrates, Obama emerges as a very visual intervention into a historical legacy dominated by whiteness and racialized stereotypes.

Hall notes the long historical presence of what he calls "the racialized regime of representation" and locates a number of ways in which racialized communities work to counter these negative representations including, "the attempt to substitute a range of 'positive' images of black people, black life and culture for the 'negative' imagery which continues to dominate popular representation."¹¹⁶ Historical and contemporary "racialized regimes of representation" surrounding blackness, and in particular black masculinity, traffic in stereotypes of black male criminality, violence, and hyper-sexuality. In this context then, Obama as a calm and cool, educated and articulate, married family-man holding the highest political office in the nation certainly offers a powerful counter to this negative imagery.

¹¹⁵ Hall. "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture," 111.

¹¹⁶ Stuart Hall (ed). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997), 272.

However, as Hall explains, the existence of positive images does little to displace negative ones or unsettle the ideologies informing them.¹¹⁷ Further, in *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (2005), Herman Gray problematizes the commitment to representation as the sole site of challenging structures of racism as he acknowledges that this moment is one in which racial and ethnic identities are threatened with forms of incorporation and commodification that dilute their disruptive potential, “In this circulation, representation of the black social body, like that of the black physical body, is the object of administrative management, legal regulation, social control, and even cultural fascination by the state, the news media, and the entertainment industry.”¹¹⁸ Within this climate, Obama is held up as an emergent emblem of change within the politics of representation but in ways that do nothing to challenge the binary structuring of positive/negative imagery or good/bad blackness. Instead, his position within this binary works to further stigmatize the non-heteronormative nuclear family, the uneducated, etc. and becomes incorporated into a regime of representation that privileges particular types of black male icons that are highly consumable and productive in maintaining national narratives of racial progress.¹¹⁹ The most significant example of this is the way that Obama is positioned within dominant recollections of the civil rights movement in ways that obscure broader understandings of blackness and posit identity as synonymous with political reform.

Obama as Icon and the Culmination of the Civil Rights Movement

The civil rights movement occupies a prominent and somewhat precarious position in national memory and it is a moment that emerged as oppositional and revolutionary, but now

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 274.

¹¹⁸ Herman Gray. *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005), 21.

¹¹⁹ Ibrahim. *Troubling the Family* (2012) and Cacho. *Social Death* (2012).

has been largely incorporated into dominant narratives of racial progress. The profound level of social unrest directed at the ways in which racialized violence and exclusion structured life in the United States lingers in the national imagination as a reminder of our troubling racial history but even more so, it has become emblematic of the moment when we, as a nation, triumphed over racism and made it a thing of the past. Further, narratives that are constructed about this moment in our national history work to frame it in ways that privilege individual leadership, decontextualize the political aims, and as a result, obscure how this legacy should function in our present.

The politics of memory, particularly concerning iconic moments within national history, is complex and like archives, the ways we structure narratives around history and commemorate significant events are ideological projects that illuminate aspects that are productive in consolidating a dominant national identity while obscuring other elements of history. As part of a national visual memory, the civil rights movement is remembered through a handful of iconic images that depict significant events and figures and tell us how and what to remember about this moment in our nation's past. A consideration of the ideological underpinnings of how this history is recollected in the present is important for it structures the conditions that allow for a figure like Obama to be positioned as the culmination of the political aims of this movement based on his racial identity, not his politics. Two points stand out in this regard: the way that the civil rights movement circulates around the iconic figure of Martin Luther King Jr. and the ways in which certain elements of the movement's political critiques are obscured to privilege a political discourse that is easily co-opted in the pursuit of uncritical celebratory narratives of American exceptionalism.

For example, dominant historical narratives of the United States direct a heavy focus on what Owen J. Dwyer refers to as the “Great Man” paradigm, and the way that the civil rights movement is remembered is no exception. According to Dwyer, this structuring of history works to individualize historical narratives as they center prominent figures as well as create a story that resonates at a national level.¹²⁰ This is certainly the case with the civil rights movement as Martin Luther King Jr. is the key figure associated with the movement and his image is connected to this event through photographs, media, and memorials that have become so iconic in national memory that it becomes difficult to imagine the movement beyond him. Indeed, the iconic King becomes synonymous with the movement and who he is becomes inseparable from this history. However, the prioritizing of male leadership casts a shadow over the work and participation of women and frames the movement in ways that obscure the importance of ground-level and local organization.¹²¹ In addition, while the civil rights movement represents an antiracist moment in our history that disrupts the dominant racial paradigm of history leading up to it, the framing of the movement as the product of a few “great men” works to create a narrative that is easily incorporated into the gendered structuring of nation overall where men are fit for leadership and worthy of remembrance and the meaning of women’s roles is constituted in relation to male success. On this Dwyer explains,

In fact, the most prominent role allocated to women at civil rights memorials, or for that matter the role accorded to the vast majority of movement participants, is that of allegory. This echoes the longstanding tradition within Western art of employing the female form not to commemorate individual women but rather to embody some

¹²⁰ Owen J. Dwyer. “Interpreting the Civil Rights Movement: Contradiction, Confirmation, and the Cultural Landscape,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*. (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2006), 10.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

feminized virtue or vice, in the process confirming an individual's masculinized character and destiny.¹²²

Privileging iconic male leadership with a focus on the national rather than local not only obscures and erases other elements of this movement, it formulates a dominant memory about this moment in ways that fundamentally re-structure its reality. Women and other forgotten participants working at local levels were crucial to the movement's successes yet this re-structuring focus on a few larger than life figures presents the movement as a product of male leadership alone which then informs the ways we think about and define social movement activism in our present. At its core, the "Great Man" paradigm is based on a profound misunderstanding of how social movements function.

Additionally, the dominant memory that circulates around King is fraught with contradictions as well. In his article, "The Good, the Bad, and the Forgotten: Media Culture and Public Memory of the Civil Rights Movement," Edward P. Morgan explains that during the movement in the 1960s, King was not an entirely celebrated figure. Rather, the politics he espoused, the connections he made between domestic racial violence and United States imperialism abroad, were threatening to existing structures and thus often debated and delegitimized in dominant media.¹²³ Morgan describes the interplay between a 'good' King and a 'bad' King in the dominant media which set the stage for the movement's meaning to circulate around the individual as well as delineate what type of politics were acceptable to carry on through memory into the present. The result is that the 'bad' MLK who challenged capitalism, structural inequality, and war is obscured and forgotten while, "The iconic King is thus claimed to support just about any cause justifiable within the boundaries of

¹²² Ibid., 12.

¹²³ Edward P. Morgan. "The Good, the Bad, and the Forgotten: Media Culture and Public Memory of the Civil Rights Movement," in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (2006), 151.

mainstream ideological assumptions.”¹²⁴ The destabilizing politics of King and the broader movement are cleansed and re-worked as King is reduced to his “I Have a Dream” speech and molded into narratives of American exceptionalism that, far from challenging the persistence of racism, structural inequality, capitalism, and imperialism, actually disguise and aid the United States in these projects.¹²⁵

Morgan also discusses an interesting point about how the act of remembering the civil rights movement, visiting a memorial, or watching a film or documentary posits the movement as a triumphant moment of the past, which in the present, allows an audience to celebrate an antiracist national identity without actually having to grapple with racism in the process. He notes, “Instead of active, discursive democracy, we get spectator democracy. And we get the illusion that spectator democracy—which offers something for everyone—is democracy.”¹²⁶ The ability to be a spectator of rather than a participant in social activism as well as celebrate it as a complete and triumphant moment is one of the ways in which the legacy of the civil rights movement is depoliticized. Placing black male leadership on a pedestal that obscures the participation of women and others at local levels as well as the political legacy of this moment as a whole, imbues both the figure and the movement with an iconic symbolism that structures the realm of possibility for how we can think about and remember this legacy in present. Further, it sets the stage for other iconic figures, like Obama, to be positioned as part of this legacy as a result of identity, framing the meaning of blackness in relation to a very particular version of United States history that finds legibility in genealogical masculinity.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 146.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 146.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 159.

The way that black iconicity organizes knowledge about blackness and black lived experience in the U.S. is troubling for scholars such as Nicole Fleetwood and Leigh Raiford because, as Fleetwood writes, “Black iconicity serves as a site for black audiences and the nation to gather around the seeing of blackness. However, in the focus on the singularity of the image, the complexity of black lived experience and discourses of race are effaced. The image functions as abstraction, as decontextualized evidence of a historical narrative that is constrained by normative public discourse...”¹²⁷ And Raiford notes that the tendency to “iconize” figures, events, and images can lead to narrow definitions of “legitimate leadership, appropriate forms of political action, and the proper place of African Americans within the national imaginary.”¹²⁸ The ability of the iconic to frame ways of knowing and understanding blackness is a dynamic that is certainly present in the ways that the civil rights movement is logged in national memory and it is a dynamic that informs Obama’s archive where Obama as icon is the product of icons that came before him. Ibrahim’s notion of the forefather/progeny paradigm is useful here as it illuminates the significance of iconicity in establishing a patriarchal form of kinship where Obama is situated as the descendent of Martin Luther King and in the process absorbs dominant meanings associated with King.¹²⁹ The way that King is remembered directly informs how Obama is interpreted in relation to the nation and this formulation of male kinship continues the association between racial equality, masculinity, and leadership that forecloses the possibility of considering the past and present in ways that might allow for alternative subjectivities. This dynamic is also remarked upon by Edwards who argues that the focus on charismatic heteronormative black

¹²⁷ Fleetwood. *Troubling Vision*, 10.

¹²⁸ Raiford. *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare*, 3.

¹²⁹ Ibrahim. *Troubling the Family*, 163.

leadership only fosters the idea “that change is impossible in the absence of charismatic leadership.”¹³⁰

The speed with which Obama rose to the status of cultural icon cannot be separated from his symbolic value and its visual components. His visible racial difference informs and constructs his symbolic value and it is these two together that inform his iconicity and then call upon and reference other momentous figures and events that situate Obama as part of a particular historical legacy. Importantly, while Obama is an icon with many fluctuating identities, all of which have productive capacities depending on the context, it is his black heritage that tends to be foregrounded, in male-centered ways, when situating Obama within the racial spectrum of United States history as the culmination of the civil rights movement. This movement, and the figures that are associated with it, namely Martin Luther King Jr., occupy a similar symbolic and iconic status as that of Obama and they all circulate within the national imagination in both visual and non-visual ways.

I would like to recall W.J.T. Mitchell’s article, “Obama as Icon,” in which he notes Obama’s visibility as something that is “heard as well as seen” in order to illuminate the ways in which Obama as an archive registers a civil rights legacy and hails a particular version of black experience in the United States.¹³¹ While these symbolic connections are already highly visual, the intertextual nature of the images from 2008 call upon and make reference to both visual and non-visual ways of recalling this history. Fleetwood locates this dynamic as something that is prominent with the ways in which blackness is seen and heard and she refers to it as a sort of “synesthesia” where, “...the visualization of black bodies can be heard...or can produce a range of sensory experiences beyond but rooted in the seeing of

¹³⁰ Edwards. *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*, 192.

¹³¹ W.J.T Mitchell. “Obama as Icon,” *Journal of Visual Culture* (2009), 125.

blackness.”¹³² In this way, artwork that features Obama can be a visual experience that draws meaning from notions of blackness that exceed “what is being shown” or the visual realm altogether. I argue that much of this is the result of his iconicity where his image is held up as representative of and in reference to a particular knowledge base surrounding black male leadership.

For example, in an image by Justin Hampton called *That One* (Figure 4), Obama is centered in the foreground from the shoulders up, facing the viewer directly. Behind him and slightly to the left are portraits of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and President Abraham Lincoln who are also gazing out at the audience. Behind Obama to the right are portraits of Robert F. Kennedy and Frederick Douglass. All of the figures together create a sort of arrow with Obama positioned at the point, leading them forward in front of a star-studded red, white, and blue backdrop. In relation to Obama, who is featured in bold black and tan, the figures of the past behind him are slightly faded and appear as ghostly bodies rising from history and memory to watch their legacy move forward through Obama.

¹³² Fleetwood. *Troubling Vision*, 3. See also, Alexander G. Weheliye. *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005).



Figure 4: *That One* by Justin Hampton in Wert's *Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints* (2009), pgs. 114 &179. This image taken from: <http://www.justinhampton.com/product-category/stickers/>

This image sends messages about a number of things and if we apply Mitchell's call to recognize the audio qualities of the visual or Fleetwood's notion of synesthesia, it is possible that, for example, a viewer may see the image of Martin Luther King Jr. and "hear" his "I Have a Dream" speech. The image then, is a site at which the visual and auditory associations with the icon of Martin Luther King, imbued with his own symbolic synesthesia, can become incorporated and blended into Obama's symbolic meaning. Here, Obama is placed at the top of a pyramid legacy of men who are icons held up in dominant national memory as those who fought to end slavery and gain civil rights before him. Notably, while the figures behind Obama also teeter between a dialectic of emergence and incorporation, they all fought political battles that were explicitly about foregrounding racial liberation and equality. Obama's position amongst them is not about his politics but rather who he is, the first *black* president of the United States. The political battles fought before him create the platform on which Obama is able to stand as the culmination of these efforts. In being

situated amongst these figures, Obama is imbued with their symbolic power and memory as well, again visually lending him an emergent and revolutionary aura. However, the way his image functions in the context of persisting racism and systemic inequality, is more along the lines of what Roderick Ferguson locates as the problem during the 1960s student movements where “the struggles taking place on college campuses because of the student protests were inspirations for power in that moment, inspiring it to substitute redistribution for representation, indeed encouraging us to forget how radical movements promoted the inseparability of the two.”¹³³ Much of the labor of Obama’s symbolism exists in his representative power, in the power of his iconic image to call upon and organize the memory of specific historical narratives—through photo, poster, sound-bite, etc.—that incorporate racial difference and the memory of the civil rights movement to privilege the tale of racial progress and distract from the fact that representation is not a substitute for redistribution. Furthermore, this is a legacy of male efforts that through their iconicity remove the accomplishment of electing a black president from the realities of black lived experience in the U.S. Obama as an icon supplies a decontextualized image that frames how fights for social justice should be remembered, how they should be viewed in the present, and informs how they may be imagined in the future.

In this image it is possible that while Obama is standing in as the culmination of fights for racial equality centered around blackness, his mixed-race heritage is part of what allows him to become the descendant of a multiracial genealogy of men. In contradistinction to Moberg’s image, where Obama is depicted as though he is only black and that his blackness is what distinguishes him from the legacy of men before him, Hampton’s image

¹³³ Roderick A. Ferguson. *The Reorder of Things: The University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 8.

positions Obama as a part of the legacy before him and this legacy is figured as a multiracial one. While it is possible that Hampton was attempting to call upon Obama's mixed-raced identity, this reference does not result in the same visual manipulation of Obama's appearance in the way that Fairey's image does. Instead, these three images come into conversation with each other in ways that illuminate that to a large degree Obama's symbolic value allows for his identity to be constructed and molded into different forms of similar narratives. Obama arises as a figure capable of housing black and mixed-raced identities and discourses under the banner of a post-racial and multicultural nation.

Conclusion

The dialectics of seeing that coalesces around Obama as a push and pull of emergence and incorporation is constructed in highly visual ways. The intertextual nature and symbolic synesthesia of celebratory images of Obama allow them to draw meaning from both visual and non-visual resources that participate in shaping but also reflect Obama's archive as an ideological project that privileges certain versions of history while obscuring others. Obama as an archive is informed by and helps to structure contested terrains of knowledge about race, gender, sexuality, social movement activism and United States history both through its signifying presences and absences. Obama's emergent appeal is fostered through a visual culture that positions him as a post-racial icon and culmination of long-term struggles for social and racial justice that, above all else, draw meaning from his identity. However, as a presidential candidate turned president whose political platform is not explicitly about foregrounding racial equality, Obama does not propose any significant political restructuring and instead requires that the memories of oppositional movements be politically neutralized and incorporated into dominant national narratives in order to accommodate his position as

their legacy and culmination. Just as the civil rights movement is called upon to bolster narratives of American exceptionalism that celebrate the end of racism and ignore its persistence into the present, Obama's symbolism aids this project and furthers discourses of neoliberal multiculturalism.

While this chapter focused on the contested terrain of Obama's identity in ways that call upon his blackness and mixed-race identity to position him as the culmination of the civil rights movement and post-racial icon, the next chapter will examine the ways in which Obama's racial and ethnic identity are visually represented as ambiguous and distanced from the notion of blackness as a fixed signifier of meaning in relation to the black liberation struggle. This chapter will explore debates surrounding post-blackness in the hopes of better understanding the ways in which Obama, as ambiguously racially different, still allows him to be positioned within discourses of neoliberal multiculturalism as well as how distancing Obama from dominant notions of blackness interacts in a climate where state violence enacted upon the black male body is still a very real issue informing the daily lives of many.

Chapter Two: Post-Black, Racial Transcendence, and Masculinity

The visual realm is a major element informing Obama's archive that allows for this archive to index and organize histories, discourses, and knowledge about race, gender, and the black liberation struggle in the United States. Importantly, while this archive traffics in visuals that imbue Obama with symbolic value and place him amongst a legacy of iconic male leadership, they do so by referencing other forms of knowledge that help construct both the visual and non-visual genealogies from which his archive draws. Race and Obama's identity are fundamental to the way he inhabits the national imagination. I argue that his racial identity is often visually presented as the site to which Obama's significance as an iconic figure is tethered and how this racial identity is communicated is inextricable from the gendered legacies that it draws from.

While Obama is often positioned as racially specific in a way that calls upon blackness as a fixed signifier of meaning, his mixed-race heritage has also proven beneficial to celebratory narratives surrounding his identity. Obama's mixed-race background lends his identity, and therefore his image, a certain level of ambiguity that manifests in artistic representations. Artists treat his appearance as malleable, as though his body is the canvas upon which different varieties of hope and ideas about identity and national belonging can be expressed. Obama is frequently positioned as a figure rooted in but capable of resonating beyond blackness and as a figure who represents the aspirations of the nation at large. This, in conjunction with Obama's label as post-racial icon and public figure, create the context for black and non-black artists alike to depict Obama's racial difference in ways that don't necessarily rely on blackness as a fixed signifier of meaning and that work to incorporate and relate his visuality to a genealogy of iconic images outside of the civil rights legacy. In these

images, Obama is depicted as a racially transcendent figure but one who is also racially tied to blackness.

This chapter draws from discussions in chapter one but it is structured differently. Chapter one is concerned with the ways in which Obama is constructed as the culmination of the civil rights movement and how both his and the movement's iconicity were/are engaged in a dialectic of seeing that manifests as a tug of war between an emergent appeal as challenge to the status quo and their incorporation into dominant ideologies and national narratives that depoliticize these legacies. Therefore, the images discussed in chapter one are thematically related and draw from a discursive terrain of social movement activism, iconic male leadership, and blackness as a dominant signifier of meaning. This chapter, however, explores images that are thematically quite different from one another and instead they are linked by the way they treat Obama's identity as ambiguous and malleable. Further, these images are all highly intertextual and the significance of their meaning derives from their ability to call upon a variety of forms of popular culture, Obama's identity, and gender in ways that imbue him with an emergent aura of "cool" while still incorporating Obama into dominant understandings of race, gender, and their role in popular culture. In this way, the dialectics of seeing explored in chapter one still very much informs the context for the images in chapter two. However, in order to better understand the context and discourses circulating within and around these images, this chapter is less concerned with explicating the dialectics of seeing and instead focuses on the insight that applying a "post-black" lens may provide as artists play with Obama's visuality and the boundaries of racial identity.

I situate post-black as a concept informing the discursive terrain in which these images are produced and circulated. While it is a debated term in the realm of black cultural

production and identity, I posit that the ideas informing this concept move beyond black cultural production, also informing artistic depictions of black figures, in this case Obama, by non-black artists. I do not seek to label any particular artist or artwork “post-black,” rather this chapter notes how Obama is also considered a post-black icon and I argue that the association of Obama with the end of race or post-raciality informs some elements of the dominant deployments of post-black since his election. Both post-black and post-race, as distinct and somewhat competing concepts, create a dynamic where artists can position Obama as a figure that visually challenges dominant constructions of blackness. Further, I argue these discourses that, in part, work to distance Obama from the weight of race and its violent history create a climate that may make it easier for non-black artists to feel comfortable depicting the black body without necessarily having to consider the historical and contemporary complexity surrounding the imaging of blackness.

An important note is necessary regarding the racial and ethnic identities of the artists whose work is discussed in this chapter. Through the source material that features the artists’ work as well as through their websites and other digital media, it is not always clear how the artists identify themselves in regard to race, ethnicity, culture, nation, gender, and sexuality. What is clear, however, is that some identify or have been identified as black or African American while others do not identify this way or have not been identified at all, pointing to a climate in which artistic renderings of Obama are created by artists with varying backgrounds, heritages, and experiences. Therefore, when information on how an artist may identify is available it will be included but more importantly, this analysis is concerned with how discourses of post-blackness may be interpreted and deployed in the general climate where Obama is being depicted by both black and non-black artists alike.

This chapter will examine three images from the 2008 election that present a celebratory, yet playful view of Obama that differs from those explored in chapter one. The content and theme changes with each image as they reference iconic figures or images that all work to maintain masculinity while troubling racial boundaries. Before considering the images, however, it is necessary to examine the parameters and implications of post-black discourse. The first section of this chapter will attempt to locate a working definition for the term post-black, examine how it interacts with scholarship on mixed-race identity, explore how it interacts with “post-race,” and how it will function as a lens through which to view the images discussed in this chapter. The subsequent sections will examine each image in relation to thematic associations that I see as informing the intertextual references being made within the image. Artist Ray Noland, one of the original artists to create Obama inspired imagery, created a series of images for the 2008 election many of which draw from sports iconography, basketball in particular, and this section will explore his image *Coast to Coast* in relation to a context that celebrates and commodifies the black male body as athlete. Matt Dye’s image, *Obama Extended*, that depicts Obama rising from a car with a gun pointed at the audience 007-style will be discussed with a consideration for the difference his race makes as he takes the place of white male icons in American popular culture as well as how this interacts with what Nicole R. Fleetwood refers to as, “hip-hop Americana”.¹³⁴ Lastly, a piece called *Superman Obama*, by “Mr. Brainwash,” will be discussed in relation to the practice of “race-bending” in comic books and the genre of science fiction with a particular focus on the rise of Afrofuturism. While these fields of analysis may seem all over the map, and they are to a certain extent, this reflects the reach of Obama’s symbolic value and the

¹³⁴ Fleetwood. *Troubling Vision*, (2011).

complexity of all that is indexed in his archive in this moment. And while Obama, the artists, and the images do not present any one way of understanding the significance of race, each realm of analysis will be brought together under the umbrella of the term post-black in the hope of illuminating the possibilities and implications of post-black and post-race, distinct ideologies that at times work together, in a moment and nation still very much structured by race.

Post-Blackness

Determining what the term post-black means and the work that the deployment of the term does is contested and debated. Many authors note that the term was first used in an art context by Thelma Golden who used the word to refer to the artists participating in the art exhibition called “Freestyle,” in 2001.¹³⁵ Paul C. Taylor notes, “Post-black artists, she [Golden] says in the exhibition catalogue, are ‘adamant about not being labeled as black artists,’ but they still work at ‘redefining complex notions of blackness’.”¹³⁶ Taylor mentions that Golden does not go into great detail in defining the term but that has not necessarily prevented other artists, writers, etc. from taking up the term and working to fill out what it means to them.

For example, in Touré’s book, *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to be Black Now* (2011), he grapples with just that, how the social parameters and conceptions surrounding black identity are ever-changing, how younger generations of blacks may not relate to or experience their identity in the same ways that their predecessors do, or the notion that black identity must be formulated around a solidarity linked to historical trauma and the

¹³⁵ Taylor. “Post-Black, Old Black,” and Purcell. “Trayvon, Post-Blackness, and the Post-Race Dilemma.”

¹³⁶ Taylor. “Post-Black, Old Black,” 626.

black liberation struggle.¹³⁷ Foundationally then, post-black seems to be challenging the notion that there are only certain ways to be black. In contradistinction to post-race, this does not mean that race and blackness no longer matter and the concept of post-black could be seen as leveling a critique of post-racialism for the naïve and unrealistic notion that race somehow means less.

Taylor explores the meaning of post-black by examining the temporal logics of the “post” in relation to the “black”. The logic behind adding the prefix of “post” implies the ending or shifting of something existing prior that can no longer continue in the same form and Taylor posits a Hegelian mode of understanding what exactly the “post” signifies in relation to blackness. He discusses the “post” as an end of history that results from two possibilities: “when a practice ceases to be historically progressive” and “when a practice becomes self-aware: when its participants come to see that the history of the practice is the product and embodiment of their own reflection on the practice.”¹³⁸ With this logic, Taylor is able to position blackness or race-thinking more generally, as that which has become self-aware and is now being reflected upon creating the “end” of one historical trajectory and the beginning of a new one that is related to, perhaps even relies on, but is different from what came before. This points to post-black as something deeply concerned with history and the meanings of blackness but the parameters of this concern have shifted. The history that once constructed identity becomes the object of critique for the ways in which it has over-determined identity. Michael Eric Dyson, who wrote the forward for Touré’s book explains, “That’s why post-Black is so suggestive a term: It clearly doesn’t signify the end of

¹³⁷ Touré. *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness? What it Means to Be Black Now*. (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, New Delhi: Free Press, 2011.)

¹³⁸ Taylor. “Post-Black, Old Black,” 638.

Blackness; it points, instead, to the end of the reign of a narrow, single notion of Blackness. It doesn't mean we're over Blackness; it means we're over our narrow understanding of what Blackness means. Post-Blackness has little patience for racial patriotism, racial fundamentalism and racial policing."¹³⁹ This perspective echoes the views of Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy that were discussed in the last chapter, and certainly the concept of post-black has a great deal to offer in the move to unfix and destabilize rigid understandings of blackness.

For example, Derek Conrad Murray explains how post-blackness is often posited as a way to formulate and express identities that may not adhere to normative constructions of gender or sexuality within dominant notions of blackness. He provides a particularly nuanced description of the tenets he sees as informing post-black so I quote him at length,

Post-blackness resonates because it articulates the frustrations of young African American artists (the post-civil rights generation) around notions of identity and belonging they perceive to be stifling, reductive, and exclusionary. For many, blackness is a nationalist cultural politics that produced a set of values and visual expressions overly concerned with recovering black male dignity—by advocating for traditionally heterosexual archetypes of patriarchal strength, domination, and virility. Post-blackness can also be understood as issuing from a general attitude of ambivalence toward compulsory solidarity, insularity, and intracommunity demands to maintain a sense of racial pride. There is a broad rejection of both the generational passing down of racial trauma and the expectation that the post-civil rights contingent will carry the torch of survivorship through the uncritical valorization of past anti-racist movements.¹⁴⁰

This excerpt from Murray illuminates the appeal of post-black as something that allows a younger generation of blacks to experience and express their identities in ways that are not necessarily over-determined by a history of racialized violence, struggles against this violence, and a politics of representation that seeks to recoup black masculinity in particular,

¹³⁹ Michael Eric Dyson. "Forward," *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness*, Touré, xv.

¹⁴⁰ Murray. "Mickalene Thomas: Afro-Kitsch and the Queering of Blackness," 9.

at the expense of excluding those who may not be easily incorporated into dominant narratives of blackness. As discussed in chapter one, the focus on black male leadership of the civil rights movement and the ways that certain figures have been imbued with the status of icon helps shape and frame expectations about blackness and masculinity in the present that privilege the heteronormative and exclude women and those occupying other subject positions. Elements of post-blackness then, can be seen as a rebuttal to the previous impossibility of imaging black subjectivity beyond these narrow definitions.

Critical mixed-race scholarship that grapples with the heteronormative and anti-black tenets of the multiracial politics of the 1990s could be positioned within similar logics to those informing post-blackness. For example, scholars such as Michele Elam and Ralina L. Joseph explore the mixed-race experience, particularly what it means to be part black and part white. Both authors argue for an approach to mixed-race studies that moves away from understanding blackness as a singularly experienced identity. Instead, they posit that it is possible to be both black and mixed-race in ways that do not require the mixed-race individual to buy into discourse that posits the multiracial being as progressive in light of their being distanced from blackness and the product of interracial heterosexual romance.¹⁴¹ Joseph writes, “Representations of blackness as something to be transcended fly in the face of the historic embrace of multiracial African Americans in African American communities. Such flat representations of mixed-race African Americans belie the complexity of real-life experiences of such subjects, who live simultaneously as black and mixed-race, in a messy multiplicity that is rarely contained in any racialized nomenclature.”¹⁴² Within this line of thought the complexity of identity is illuminated and it becomes possible for an individual to

¹⁴¹ Elam, *Souls of Mixed Folk* (2011). Joseph, *Transcending Blackness* (2013).

¹⁴² Joseph. *Transcending Blackness*, 3.

express an identity in the multiplicity of ways in which it may be experienced without having to sacrifice or disavow blackness as a significant structuring force.

Habiba Ibrahim examines the way in which prominent male figures of both black and mixed-race heritage tend to have their identities flattened as they are situated within male genealogies as a way of expressing racial belonging as a form of kinship that obscures or ignores the role of women in this genealogy.¹⁴³ She begins her study with an in depth look at the role that blackness and mixedness played in the rise of Tiger Woods as a “racial hero”. The combination of Woods’ athletic success and the African American part of his heritage positioned Woods within a male genealogy of black “firsts” in the sports world, similar to how Obama’s position as the first president of color places him within the genealogy of black male leadership that preceded him. Ibrahim explains how blackness becomes the most prominent feature of Wood’s identity in that, “In a sense, Woods—by virtue of his class status, masculinity, and, once again, his place in an esteemed genealogy—was not only legibly black; he also stood as a sign of our consensual public image. If, implicitly, it is an image that we give our consent to, then as a matter of function, it must render illegible, moot, or strange those identities that do not assimilate.”¹⁴⁴ This point may also be applied to Obama in that she notes a consensus that gathers around these figures as representatives of the black community and their place within a masculine legacy that obscures elements of their identity that don’t necessarily fit the script. Further, she describes how Woods was stripped of the complexity of his identity in a way that allows him to become a “simplified emblem of individuated cultural difference—a multicultural symbol—that ultimately can serve the

¹⁴³ Ibrahim. *Troubling the Family*, viii.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, xii.

marketing ends of multinational corporations.”¹⁴⁵ While there is a different sense of market appeal that circulates around athletes in general and Woods in particular, the notion of simplifying identity in the interest of race-neutral mass appeal and identification is certainly something that applies to Obama and was a dynamic both cultivated by his campaign and applied to him by those captivated by his potential to embody multiculturalism without having to account for its complexities.

In the end however, Ibrahim notes a distinction between Woods and Obama that evolves around how Woods was taken up by those heading the multiracial movement of the 1990s and how Obama’s mixed-race heritage in the 2000s is positioned as a form of progress for the black community. Ibrahim examines the celebratory narratives circulating around Obama and she concludes that, “We celebrated the seeming realization of a long-standing dream: to have the idiosyncrasies of our personhood—in all of their racial, gendered, and sexual inappropriateness—overcome the normative epistemologies that still determine which sort of individuality can appear in public.”¹⁴⁶ While Ibrahim critiques the culture of celebration surrounding Obama with its masculinist legacies and troubled relationship to femininity, the way she describes that initial moment, as though Obama was a long-awaited figure capable of representing the “idiosyncrasies” of identity while doing so under the banner of blackness echoes the tenants informing post-blackness. In this way, she notes that Obama as a post-racial icon was able to join a race-neutral ideology with that of black identitarian politics and while these two seem to contradict each other she notes that Obama “used the two to support one another.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., xii-xiii.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 169.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 162.

Post-black is often conflated with the term post-race and while, in regard to Obama, the two terms work closely with each other, it is important to recognize that they reflect distinct identitarian politics. Post-race, as discussed in chapter one, is a fiction that dangerously traffics in the idea that the significance of race or the weight of racial categorization is somehow over. It works to detach race from historical legacies of violence that continue to inform the present, instead positing figures, such as Obama, as symbols of a turning point where race no longer needs to be politicized. In distinction, post-black resists the normative and regulatory modes of blackness, the way one “must” identify with blackness or solidarity etc., but it retains, a commitment to blackness as a signifier of identity which is not the same as moving beyond race as a structuring force. The ideas informing post-black have the potential to be politically oppositional and resist the ways in which fixed notions of blackness are incorporated into dominant national narratives that privilege the black male icon as evidence of a nation’s triumph over a violent racist past. Post-blackness as a concept can also provide a wealth of opportunity to challenge dominant gender and sexual norms as well as the exclusion of alternative subject positions.

Post-black can offer a deliberation on what blackness means now, however, as Richard Purcell points out, much of the language that is used to describe a post-black position works within neoliberal logics that celebrate individualism in an attempt to defend against the essentialism that comes with limiting definitions of blackness. Purcell locates this as an issue that arises with particular clarity as the term post-black circulates around Obama as a post-racial icon, which, “further suggests that the contemporary idealism that equates freedom from race categorization as emblematic of human freedom is determined by the

logic of the market.”¹⁴⁸ Obama is one place where the concepts of post-black and post-race collide and rub off on each other making both suitable ideologies for recruiting individuals into the global capitalist market of commodified difference, distanced from persisting racial inequality through narratives of capitalism’s colorblindness and the market’s inherent “fairness.” Or as Purcell puts it, “Postblackness in the Age of Obama edges perilously close to what Jodi Melamed calls ‘neoliberal multiculturalism,’ a term she uses to describe the way antiracism increasingly incorporates segments of Western-style governmentality and economic arrangements.”¹⁴⁹

The concepts of post-black and post-race, as they work alongside each other in the “Age of Obama”, create a climate that is a crucial consideration for the images that will be discussed in this chapter. Like many elements of black cultural production in the United States, I want to first posit that the ideas informing post-blackness and the aesthetic products of this line of thought are not contained within the community of people who may identify as black or post-black, meaning that changing ideas about what black popular culture is or what blackness means now are taken up by non-black audiences and cultural producers. As Nelson George notes in his book, “One of the safe assumptions of *Post-Soul Nation* is that the inventions, phenomena, and fads evolving out of the black community eventually shape the lives of nonblack Americans.”¹⁵⁰ Second, the circulation of the idea of post-race that implies that race and racism are over and therefore, so is the need for the “compulsory solidarity” that Murray highlights as a frustration informing post-blackness, positions both terms as

¹⁴⁸ Purcell. “Trayvon, Post-Blackness, and the Post-Race Dilemma,” 154.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 154.

¹⁵⁰ Nelson George. *Post-Soul Nation: The Explosive, Contradictory, Triumphant, and Tragic 1980s as Experiences by African Americans (Previously Known as Blacks and Before that Negroes)*. New York: Penguin Group, 2004, x.

capable of obscuring how race continues to structure the present.¹⁵¹ For example, Dyson writes, “It made sense for Blacks to unify against oppressive forces as a strategy of racial combat, but it made less sense to adopt that strategy as a means to define the race.”¹⁵² While Dyson’s point is well-taken, his use of the past tense to describe the need for unity in the face of oppression forwards the underlying idea that it made sense and was necessary in the past but it no longer makes sense or is necessary in the present, implying that to a certain extent, post-blackness needs to locate racial oppression as a thing of the past, a notion that post-raciality also offers, in order to posit a black identity free from the constraints and requirements of racial unity and solidarity now. This line of thought and the notion of a freedom from racial categorization works well with Obama’s mixed-race heritage to frame racial identity as the product of choice. An artist may choose to represent Obama as African American but ultimately he is treated as capable of symbolically embodying both blackness and whiteness, as well as the overlap between the two.

The convergence of these points: that post-black ideas and aesthetics may be taken up by non-blacks; that post-black and post-race, while grappling with the meaning of race and history differently, both work to secure racial violence and oppression in the past; and that mixed-race, in a sense, provides an identity buffet, creates a climate that is expressed in some of the artwork from the 2008 election. In this artwork, Obama is depicted as racially malleable and distanced from dominant signifiers of blackness. Further, I argue that Obama’s positioning within discourses of post-raciality and post-blackness as well as the tendency of these terms to be conflated, provide nonblack artists the space to unself-consciously create images of the black body and visually rework the meaning of blackness in relation to

¹⁵¹ Murray. “Mickalene Thomas: Afro-Kitsch and the Queering of Blackness,” 9.

¹⁵² Michael Eric Dyson. “Forward,” *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness?* Touré, xiv.

whiteness. While Obama's visible racial difference is still key to constructing meaning within these images—a point that destabilizes the logic of post-raciality and marks a distinguishing factor of post-blackness—the visual genealogies that are called upon are distanced from the legacy of the black liberation struggle that would otherwise require the recognition of a violent racial past. Importantly, while these images may be informed by a post-black aesthetic in regard to dominant meanings of race, unlike the tenets informing post-blackness that Murray outlines, they do not participate in disrupting normative constructions of gender. Rather, masculinity remains a key site of establishing Obama as representative of American culture.

B-Ball Obama

Ray Noland is credited as one of the first artists to take to the streets in the middle of the night and seize public spaces for his artistic renderings of Obama.¹⁵³ Noland infiltrated his hometown leaving behind compelling images with only the signature “CRO” to identify the artist. Curiosity was piqued by Noland's tactics as this did not seem like a tactic the official campaign would pursue and people began wondering who the mysterious CRO really was. In the introduction to *Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints*, Hal Elliot Wert notes, “CRO's admirers, and there were many, did extensive computer searches, and he was eventually outed. CRO (which stands for Creative Rescue Organization) was Ray Noland, a slim and intense African-American designer, printmaker, and native Chicagoan. This is where it all started; this was the pebble that presaged the avalanche of Obama campaign posters that would flood America.”¹⁵⁴ In addition to being a key initial figure inspiring others to take over public spaces in their cities with images demonstrating support for Obama,

¹⁵³ Wert. *Hope*, 11.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

Noland also was the creator of “Go Tell Mama!” a grassroots art organization developed to produce and circulate pro-Obama artwork around the nation. Go Tell Mama’s website explains, “Its mission was to parallel the official race, to inspire the public, and to heighten awareness of Barack Obama using non-traditional tactics such as a national street art and viral video campaign.”¹⁵⁵ The independent organization also put together an exhibition called the “Officially Unofficial Art Show” that toured almost ten cities in the U.S. during the two years leading up to the 2008 election.¹⁵⁶ Clearly, Noland was an active participant in the celebratory visual climate inspired by Obama and he created a series of images advocating for his election in 2008, many of which are housed within Wert’s personal collection.¹⁵⁷

I want to examine an image that shares an affinity with a number of images created by Noland that make sports, in particular, basketball references. I explore this image for the way it positions Obama as part of a racialized visual legacy of black masculine athleticism while avoiding making a connection between Obama’s identity and the black liberation struggle. The image is read in conjunction with a *New York Times* article that Noland cites as the inspiration for the image and I explore scholarship on black masculinity and athleticism for the ways that this image aligns with and deviates from typical depictions of the black male athlete.

Coast to Coast (Figure 5), by Ray Noland, features a red sky in the background with a distant rendition of the White House surrounded by dark shadowy vegetation just at the horizon. Emanating from the foreground and rising up into the sky is a black silhouette of a basketball hoop. The figure of Obama is quite small and situated in the lower right of image.

¹⁵⁵ www.gotellmama.org

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Wert. *Hope*, 14.

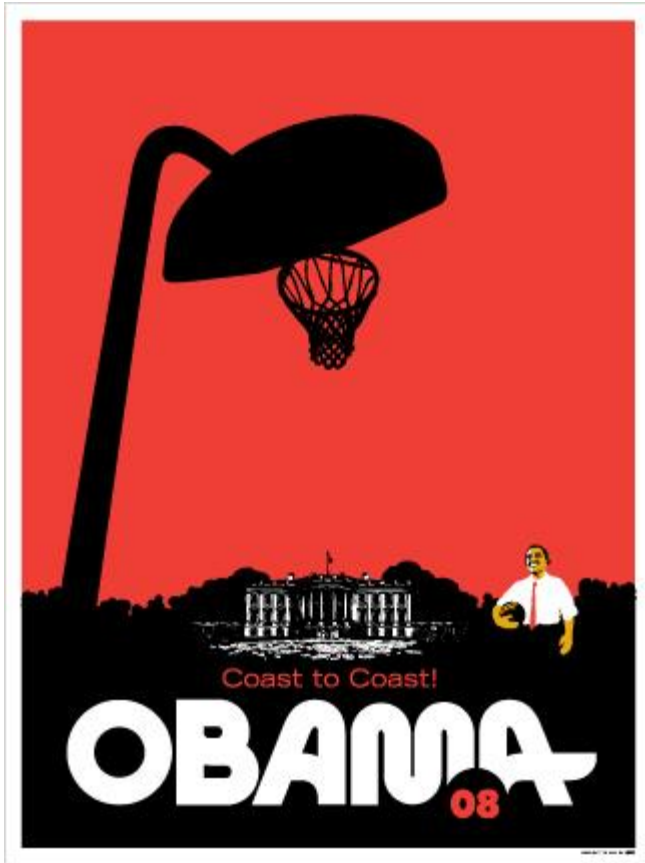


Figure 5: *Coast to Coast* by Ray Noland in Wert's *Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints* (2009), pgs. 116 & 180. This image taken from: <http://www.gotellmama.org/>

The detail of his face is a bit obscured but it is possible to make out a smile and upward gaze. Obama wears a white collared shirt and red tie. His sleeves are rolled up at the elbows and he grasps a basketball in one arm as he stands beneath the hoop. Underneath the image of the White House it reads “Coast to Coast!” in red letters and below that in large white letters, the image reads “OBAMA 08”. Importantly, while the design of this image is compelling and the smile on Obama’s face cues the viewer into reading the image in a positive light, the colors alone might otherwise inspire questions as to the intended message of this image. Generally speaking, a deep red sky and the White House being shrouded in shadow would not promote the most light-hearted of associations. Of course, this is just one interpretation because

despite the ominous sky the image could also be read as depicting the sun setting behind the White House, casting the basketball hoop in shadow, as Obama steps out into the yard after a hard day's work to relieve a little stress by shooting some hoops.

Noland briefly discusses this image on the Go Tell Mama website and notes that he decided to create this image after a friend of his sent him a *New York Times* article by Jodi Kantor from 2007 that gives some insight into Obama's sporting habits. Noland provides a link to this article which features an image of a young Obama in what appears to be a basketball team photo and Kantor explains that Obama is not the first to have his sporting habits "used as a personality decoder for presidents and presidential aspirants."¹⁵⁸ The article goes on to describe Obama as a "wily player of pickup basketball, the version of the game with unspoken rules, no referee and lots of elbows."¹⁵⁹ Additionally, the article makes the connection between Obama's identity and the sport saying, "At first, it was a tutorial in race, a way for a kid with a white mother, a Kenyan father and a peripatetic childhood to establish the African-American identity that he longed for."¹⁶⁰ This article imbues Obama with a youthful, street resonance, an element expressed in much of the visual culture surrounding him, but it also makes assumptions about the association of blackness with basketball and that for Obama, his African American identity, was not inherent but rather longed for and something that had to be learned. The way to do that, apparently, was through basketball.

To attach Obama's identity to athleticism, calls upon a complex relationship between blackness and sports culture in the United States. In particular, sports culture is one of the

¹⁵⁸ Jodi Kantor. "One Place Where Obama Goes Elbow to Elbow," *New York Times* (June 1, 2007). http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/01/us/politics/01hoops.html?_r=0 (last date accessed 2/13/15)

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ It is worthy of note that Kantor cites *Dreams From My Father* (2004), by Barack Obama, later in the article so she may not be making these connections between race, basketball, and Obama on her own.

areas where black masculinity is on heightened display and as bell hooks explains, “Professional sports have constituted an alternative work arena for many black men. In that world the black male body once used and abused in a world of labor based on brute force could be transformed; elegance and grace could become the identifying signifiers of one’s labor.”¹⁶¹ Athletics are, on the one hand, a beloved aspect of American culture and an avenue for individual success and fame. On the other hand, this has the potential to obscure the violence of racial history while also being an arena that traffics in the labor and commodification of the black male body in ways that may both intentionally and inadvertently feed stereotypes in the interest of marketing racial difference alongside sports culture. This dynamic is described by Ibrahim as she discusses how Tiger Woods’ identity and athletic skill posited him within a genealogy of black athletes like Michael Jordan, and “firsts” like Jackie Robinson that create a masculine legacy of racial kinship and market “racial heroes” with flattened and simplified racial and ethnic identities.¹⁶² While Obama does not play basketball professionally, in other arenas he is posited as a “racial hero” that, in Noland’s image, incorporates and perhaps even substitutes the symbolism and male legacies of these sports figures for the gendered legacies of the black liberation struggle already in Obama’s archive. The article that inspired Noland’s production of these images locates basketball as key to establishing an African American identity. Obama’s mixed-race heritage is mentioned in a way that implies that Obama’s blackness is not a given, he had to choose it and cultivate it. African American identity is what he ‘longed’ for, basketball was his tutor, so he plays basketball and is therefore one basket closer to being black.

¹⁶¹ bell hooks. *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 21

¹⁶² Ibrahim. *Troubling the Family*, x.

The reduction of black identity to a sport participates in and draws from long legacies of stereotypical reductions of black masculinity to the physicality of the body. Even in a climate where black male athletes reach celebrity status and are held up as icons of race, gender, and nation, this obsession with the black male body's performance persists as the reduction of the black male to "biology" and the power of the body to perform, distanced from the mind.¹⁶³ Paul Gilroy acknowledges the heightened appreciation of blackness as beautiful and strong and locates this as part of a moment of changing meanings behind the signifier of blackness that do not necessarily mean a disruption of racial hierarchies. He explains, "We are witnessing a series of struggles over the meaning of that body, which intermittently emerges as a signifier of prestige, autonomy, transgression, and power in a supranational economy of signs that is not reducible to the old-style logics of white supremacy."¹⁶⁴ Importantly, despite what a post-racial era may posit, the fluctuating descriptors for or associations with blackness do not mean that it no longer is the target for processes of racialization but rather that the potential meanings of blackness are changing and expanding, incorporating both positive and negative associations that are not always the product of an easily identifiable white supremacy and in some cases may even be intended as a challenge to it.

Ray Noland wrote the forward for *Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints*, but it is in Wert's introduction to the collection where Noland is identified as African American.¹⁶⁵ One can only speculate on why Wert felt the need to racially identify Noland (he doesn't do this for all of the artists and usually refers to the city or country that they are

¹⁶³ Gilroy. *Against Race*, 22.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 270.

¹⁶⁵ Wert. *Hope*, 11.

from), while Noland did not feel the need to do so himself. I suspect it has something to do with Wert's position as an historian who collects political posters and who likely has an underlying recognition of Obama's significance within these images being largely a product of his identity, despite a discussion of race largely being absent from Wert's commentary in the collection as a whole. Therefore, he may find it important to note that Noland's identity aligns with Obama's. Noland does not go into detail about the thought-process informing his choice to focus on Obama's basketball pastime but the fact that he cites the *New York Times* article as an inspiration, implies that he was at least somewhat comfortable with the association of African American identity with basketball and its framing of the sport as a way for Obama to assert or develop a portion of his identity.

It is notable that Noland's depiction of Obama in relation to sports culture does not place an emphasis on Obama's physicality as a black male athlete. In *Coast to Coast*, Obama's physicality is reduced to a tiny off-center figure holding a basketball in a resting state, not an active one, while the hoop towers like a monument above him. This de-emphasis on Obama's body in relation to the physicality normally foregrounded in images of athletes could imply that Noland is aware of the over-emphasis on physical strength in black male athletes that reduces them to a one-dimensional performance object of a racialized gaze. A further indicator of this awareness could be gleaned through the fact that the sports reference is balanced by a visual marker of Obama's duty to the United States as the White House is the backdrop for Obama's sporting leisure. This image takes care to present Obama as more than an athlete or one with an interest in sports as he is accompanied by a symbol of his dedication to the United States.

In line with a post-black aesthetic then, Noland may have chosen to depict Obama in relation to basketball as an alternative mode of African American identification than that of aligning him with the black liberation struggle. His de-emphasis on Obama's physicality despite being placed in an athletic context may also mark a decided deviation from the typical emphasis on the black male athlete's physique. Noland's reference to the *New York Times* article also implies an underlying acceptance of the idea that Obama's identity is one of choice, which he cultivated through the cultural association with basketball. Additionally, Noland's decision not to identify himself racially in the forward for *Hope* may also be indicative of an awareness of the over-determined meanings associated with those who identify as African American or black. Wert notes that, "When Ray Noland first decided Obama was the right candidate, he maintained that: 'Excluding race, Obama was everything America would love in a political leader. The only thing that could possibly handicap him was the color of his skin. Would this country see beyond that; would it be okay if the answer to America's problems were black?'"¹⁶⁶ In this quote we see Noland actively deliberating over what Obama's race means to the nation. Perhaps his response to this was to depict Obama in relation to something other than a genealogy that forces a recognition of the history of race in the U.S. and he positions Obama as willfully identifying as black through basketball but does not let it obscure his other, perhaps more race-neutral ties to the United States. This image brings sports and politics together and calls upon the element of American culture that loves its sporting events. However, in conjunction with the *New York Times* article that Noland cites as an inspiration for the image, the coming together of sports and politics becomes racialized and while it allows for Obama's archive to incorporate an

¹⁶⁶ Wert. *Hope*, 180.

understanding of blackness beyond the black liberation struggle, it still traffics in a commitment to race and masculinity as identifying characteristics of Obama's relationship to the United States.

Outlaw Obama

The notion that Obama's identity is the product of choice takes on a different formulation in the image called *Obama Extended* by Matt Dye. In this image, the lines of racial identification are blurred and it becomes the artist's prerogative to choose what Obama is able to racially symbolize. The ability for an artist to feel comfortable making the choice to play with racial boundaries in regard to Obama is, I argue, the product of the intersections between post-black, in that blackness may not mean what it did before, and Obama's mixed-race heritage, in that Obama is capable of representing whiteness as much as he is blackness despite whether or not that is how he sees it. This intersection lends Obama's image to a visual racial malleability in which black and non-black artists alike can play with race, gender, and history, all of which Dye does.

This image features a bright red background and utilizes blue, black, and white otherwise. In the foreground of the image is low-to-the-ground convertible car in black and white on a diagonal plane cutting across the lower part of the image. Each of the corners of the vehicle's front hood sport a flag, the most clearly visible one being the flag of the United States and the second is a blue flag with the presidential seal. Rising up behind the car is a larger-than-life Obama in a blue suit focusing an intense gaze directly at the viewer from behind his right hand, which grasps a large black gun that is extended out towards the audience but slightly to the right. The perspective within this image is exaggerated leading to the end of the gun and Obama's right hand being larger than his head, as if the gun is quite

close to the face of the viewer. Obama's body is slightly bent at the waist as though he trying to get just the right angle for his shot and his left arm and hand creep out from behind his torso, tensed as though prepared to grab or make a fist at a moment's notice. Unlike so many images that feature Obama with a light-hearted expression or a pensively focused one, here, Obama's face stares directly and defiantly. His lips are tightly closed around the cigarette clenched between them. Notably, while dark black lines delineate his facial features overall, his skin is white.



Figure 6: *Obama Extended* by Matt Dye in Wert's *Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints* (2009), pgs. 81 & 171. This image taken from:

<http://matt dye.com/store/index.php?act=viewProd&productId=70>

This image is simultaneously enticing and menacing. Obama is depicted as aggressive and violent, larger-than-life, staring down the audience and pointing a gun in our face. However, in a culture that loves glorified masculine violence, as any number of American action films can attest to, this image peaks curiosity because, while over-the-top violence is popular, it is rarely ever used to this extent in the image of a presidential candidate, particularly when the image is intended to *support* the politician. Wert's description of the image is telling of the types of associations this image makes:

One of the best and quintessential examples of this artist shock value is *Obama Extended*, which confronts the fears of an assassination head-on, at least mythically. A 007 Bond-like or Clint Eastwood-like Obama, a Superfly Obama, clinched cigarette in teeth, stands behind the image of a 'pimped out' 1963 Kennedy assassination limousine pointing a huge gun at anyone foolish enough to attempt the evil deed.¹⁶⁷

Whether this is solely Wert's interpretation of the image or if it was influenced by an explanation by Dye is unclear, but in either case this is the text that accompanies the image and therefore anchors and guides its interpretation in the collection.

There are a number of interesting elements of note in this excerpt. The first is that Obama, who is featured with light skin in the image, is being placed in the position of well-known white male icons in American popular culture (yes, Bond is a British character but a staple of American culture nonetheless) who are often featured using excess violence and celebrated for it. However, when race is factored in, the violence takes on different dimensions, preventing this racial substitution from transitioning smoothly. Obama, as a person of color riding in the Kennedy limousine warding off the threat of assassination, metaphorically places him within the realm of potential for another male legacy—one actually very much informing Hampton's piece in chapter one—that of male leaders like

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 171.

Abraham Lincoln, multiple Kennedys, and Martin Luther King Jr., that were all assassinated. The existence of Dye's image and Hampton's image within the same collection places these images in conversation with one-another in ways that inform Obama's archive with the collision of contradictory realizations—that Obama's position as the symbolic culmination of fights for racial equality is always undercut by the potential for violence. This legacy of assassination is a multi-racial one yet, in Dye's image, the association with Kennedy in particular in conjunction with the transformation of Obama into the semblance of popular white male icons illuminates that while Obama's racial difference is certainly not being ignored, indeed it is largely the reason why there is a threat of assassination in the first place, the artist is choosing to call upon Obama's ability to identify with whiteness. Additionally, while the reference to Bond and Eastwood call upon a popular culture of violence, the association of Obama with John F. Kennedy calls upon the reality of that violence as well as the sense of nostalgia, love, and loss for the hope that JFK symbolized during his presidency, a longing likely most keenly felt by the baby boomers generation. Wert also notes this connection between the two presidents in the epilogue and attributes it in part, to both Obama's and JFK's ability to tap into the idealism of youthful voters, that in Obama's case resonated with the boomer generation.¹⁶⁸

Wert makes a similar connection to the memory and legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., yet Dye's focus on Kennedy as well as other white male icons blends and conflates these figures and depicts an interesting racial transformation in regard to Obama. On the one hand, Obama takes on whiteness as his skin tone is lightened and he demonstrates the posture, appearance, and weaponry of a white spy, cowboy, outlaw, or action hero. On the other hand

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 149.

however, to present an image of a hyper-masculine man of color displaying excessive aggression and violence walks dangerously close to reifying black male stereotypes. Importantly, this racial transposition takes place through the trope of hyper-masculinity and violence which, according to bell hooks are inseparable within the context of a patriarchal society. She posits, “Showing aggression is the simplest way to assert patriarchal manhood. Men of all classes know this. As a consequence, all men living in a culture of violence must demonstrate at some point in their lives that they are capable of being violent.”¹⁶⁹ Whether or not the attendant violence of this masculinity is threatening or to be celebrated, and perhaps the image’s ability to tread the line between the two, parallels aspects of the United States’ relationship to blackness, masculinity, and hip-hop. In this regard, a second element of interest emerges from Wert’s excerpt in his use of racialized speech such as “superfly” and “pimped out” to describe an image that is otherwise foregrounding a certain level of whiteness. This language works to associate Dye’s image with a hip-hop aesthetic as well. The eclectic hip-hop practice of sampling and re-mixing is reflected in Dye’s image and in Wert’s description as a racially transcendent Obama becomes a mash-up of hyper-masculine cool that knows no racial boundaries, all of which is not particularly surprising given the prominence of Obama support from well-known hip hop celebrities.¹⁷⁰ An exploration of hip hop’s relationship to race, masculinity, and American culture more broadly can potentially illuminate the appeal of Obama as “outlaw” challenging the threat of racialized violence in *Obama Extended*.

¹⁶⁹ hooks. *We Real Cool*, 46.

¹⁷⁰ Travis L. Gosa. “‘The Audacity of Dope’ Rap Music, Race, and the Obama Presidency,” *The Iconic Obama, 2007-2009: Essays on Media Representations of the Candidate and New President*, Nicholas A. Yanes and Derrais Carter (eds). (Jefferson and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2012), 88-89.

Graeme Abernethy situates the rise of hip-hop as a reflection of “cultural fragmentation” in a post-civil rights era where “black nationalist politics can in fact be seen to have migrated to alternative forms such as hip-hop music.”¹⁷¹ By the 1980s, he notes that hip-hop became a cultural expression that signified an urban African American aesthetic on an international level.¹⁷² A number of authors note the 1980s as marking a shift in the hip-hop arena where the musical form and its accompanying style became increasingly commodified and this process of commercialization, as it privileged a flattened and limited view of hip hop as African American in ways that obscured the diasporic histories of countries beyond the United States, also constructed the genre as capable of being incorporated into a global market where racial identity became a commodity marketed to black and non-black audiences alike through normative constructions of gender and sexuality.¹⁷³

Today, hip hop resonates on a global level as a staple and significant export of American culture and while a number of scholars recognize the important cultural contributions of hip hop as a musical and aesthetic genre, others express concern with the prominence of themes such as violence, criminality, and the hyper-sexual focus on heterosexual coupling.¹⁷⁴ For example, Paul Gilroy points out how part of hip hop’s appeal stems from its emergent and oppositional qualities that posit gender and sexuality as both the site of racial particularity and the area that allows the musical genre, the associated fashion, and the general “lifestyle” to be marketed to a wide base of consumers. He notes that

¹⁷¹ Abernethy. *The Iconography of Malcolm X*, 209.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁷³ Gilroy. *Against Race*, 182.

¹⁷⁴ Raquel Z. Rivera. *New York Ricans From the Hip Hop Zone* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Nitasha Tamar Sharma. *Hip Hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010). Joseph G. Schloss. *Foundation: B-boy, B-girls, and Hip-Hop Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

violence and misogyny become key selling points and that “hip-hop’s marginality is now as official and routinized as its over-blown defiance, even if the music and its matching lifestyle are still being presented—marketed—as outlaw forms.”¹⁷⁵ The hyper-masculine outlaw violence that Gilroy refers to as part of the appeal of this trope as an oppositional masculinity is also part of what links it to historically informed stereotypes of black male hyper-aggression and sexuality. However, in a climate where, as Gilroy also notes, the meanings attached to blackness take on celebratory expressions and where hip hop is another key arena that offers the opportunity to accumulate wealth and celebrity status, it becomes difficult to sort out what may be reifying stereotypes and what may be intended to challenge them. Further, the heightened visibility of hip hop and its aesthetics as a largely incorporated and commodified genre with oppositional appeal, reformulate the notion of hip hop as a strictly black cultural expression, instead using blackness to market the “lifestyle” to non-black audiences as part of what Gilroy refers to as “the currency of racial marginality in youth culture’s economy of rebel signs.”¹⁷⁶

In this economy, racial marginality becomes a sort of badge of oppositional cool that can be worn despite one’s racial, ethnic, or cultural background and which blurs racial boundaries and the uneven lines between stereotypes, authenticity, and cultural appropriation. While the appropriation of black culture is wide-spread and black cultural production has a significant influence on other realms of popular culture in the United States, this dynamic comes to life in a profound way through popular hip hop that spends a great deal of time, money, and energy marketing a particular variety of black masculinity that can be sported by men from any racial, ethnic, cultural, or socioeconomic background. Nicole

¹⁷⁵ Gilroy. *Against Race*, 180.

¹⁷⁶ Gilroy. *Against Race*, 215.

Fleetwood explores this dynamic and how a marginal and oppositional art form transitions into a global commodity that is ultimately incorporated into dominant American culture. She writes,

Embedded in representations of the fashioned black male body of hip-hop is the interplay between a highly stylized and reproducible racial alterity, nationalism, and hypermasculinity. By racialized alterity in the context of urban fashion and black masculinity, I mean how the black male body signifies within and outside of black communities a form of coolness through racialized and masculine difference and a diaphanous ‘outlawness’ that maintains an affective quality even as it functions as a highly reproducible and mass-marketed commodity.¹⁷⁷

She further notes how hip hop’s incorporation into the mainstream market both sells and tames hip hop’s past as an oppositional art form and makes the ‘outlaw’ as hyper-masculine icon not only palatable but American.¹⁷⁸ This dynamic that celebrates a racialized yet American “outlaw” is part of what informs Obama’s ability to take the place of white American “outlaw” hero figures. Perhaps Dye’s image reflects an attempt to demonstrate that race no longer matters through Obama’s transposition onto white male icons, yet because of the prominence of racial discourse surrounding Obama and because of the underlying threat of assassination, the image actually seems to draw more attention to race and in the process can’t help but allude to not just the American “outlaw” archetype but also the racialized form this outlaw takes as a marketable and incorporated representative of American popular culture.

According to Travis L. Gosa, in the context of hip-hop, Obama marks a significant moment and as he remarks in his essay, “‘The Audacity of Dope’: Rap Music, Race, and the Obama Presidency,” the meaning of Obama in a post-race and post-black era is contested in the realm of hip-hop. According to Gosa, some rappers see Obama marking a moment that

¹⁷⁷ Fleetwood. *Troubling Vision*, 152.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

will shift the parameters of hip-hop. For example, Gosa cites a CNN interview with Common where the musician expresses that he sees the optimism of the Obama campaign creating a shift toward positivity in the hip-hop arena and that, “Obama will lead to a decline in gangsterism as the dominant expression of blackness in hip hop.”¹⁷⁹ While Gosa highlights many artists who found Obama to represent the celebrated arrival of a moment where racial equality had been attained he also notes that much of the music that references or features Obama works within a discourse that “has involved an interesting tension between celebrating Obama as authentically black and yet transcendent of the old boundaries of black identity.”¹⁸⁰ He also explains that while a mainstream celebration of Obama’s election certainly existed in the hip-hop arena, critical voices expressing weariness over this racial optimism are present as well.¹⁸¹

Of interest, however, is the idea that Obama’s election may usher in a transformative moment in hip hop that will traffic in racial optimism and phase out “gangsterism,” for how this view of Obama illuminates part of what is jarring about Dye’s image. For an icon so frequently associated with optimism, hope, and peace, to see Obama rising from a car pointing a gun and staring down his audience is very gangster-esque and contradicts dominant conceptions of Obama’s persona. Were it not for the mainstream celebration of the hyper-masculine “outlaw” in all his racial forms, the image might have been interpreted differently and Dye may have thought twice about choosing to express his support for the candidate in this way.

¹⁷⁹ Gosa. “The Audacity of Dope,” 91.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

The mainstream celebration of a multiracial genealogy of “outlaw” cool requires masculinity as its anchoring trope in ways that mirror a focus on Obama’s masculinity to position him within particular racial genealogies. Masculinity creates legibility as both hip hop’s racialized outlaw and white popular icons such as James Bond and Clint Eastwood both posit a hyper-masculinity with the potential for violence as a way of establishing belonging in a patriarchal culture of violence that circulates around masculinity as the dominant trope through which national belonging is asserted. While the racial difference between these icons is an important consideration for, as Dye’s image alludes to, race is a key element informing the types of violence that these icons respond to, it seems as though Obama’s mixed-race identity and post-racial iconicity allow Dye to position Obama as the inheritor of a racially transcendent celebrated masculinity. Masculine genealogies are crucial to upholding an American national identity of strength, power, and leadership which may incorporate blended versions of white and black masculinity into dominant national narratives.

That the racialized masculinity of the hip-hop “outlaw” has been incorporated into dominant conceptions of American popular culture does not necessarily put this icon on level footing with icons such as Bond and Eastwood in regard to appropriate and legitimate displays of violence, yet they all have the power to draw on larger-than-life masculine cool. Dye’s image depicts Obama as being able to tap into both a white and black masculinity—he can challenge the racial threat of assassination in a “pimped out” Kennedy limousine James Bond style. In the context of post-blackness this may be something similar to what Touré describes as “racial ambidexterity,” a term he borrows from Neal Brennan, the white co-creator of Chappelle’s Show, which is used to describe the way in which both Brennan and

Chappelle drew inspiration and influence from across racial lines.¹⁸² Touré adds, “That sort of racial ambidexterity is widespread in this generation and a major source of the sociocultural energy powering post-Blackness. If post-Blackness were a shining light bulb then this generation’s racial ambidexterity would be part of the electrical current making it shine.”¹⁸³ Dye depicts Obama’s racial ambidexterity as inherent, as though his mixed-race identity may not allow him to fully inhabit blackness or whiteness but he’s still capable of navigating both.

If we consider a climate where the discourses of post-blackness and post-raciality are often conflated and the meanings of blackness expand as the weight of race seems to fade into the past, Obama’s blackness can simultaneously be acknowledged—through the threat of racial violence—and disavowed—Obama’s skin is suddenly white, he embodies white masculine icons, and this violence is experienced by white presidents too. Yet, Obama’s inhabitation of whiteness in this image is uneasy as the status of blackness as a target for violence is a haunting presence. Importantly, Wert highlights Dye’s image as an example of “artist shock value” but is not clear about exactly what is intended to be shocking within this image. Certainly, the aggressive quality applied to Obama who is usually described as calm and cool could stir some shock, but it could also be attributed to the motivation behind Obama’s aggression—the threat of assassination. This threat is downplayed and minimized by Wert’s otherwise playful description of the image. The threat of assassination is where Obama’s blackness comes rushing back, illuminating the myth that race no longer matters. Even in an image that plays with racial boundaries and a post-black aesthetic that, to a large degree, desires a distance from blackness as a legacy of trauma and violence, the threat of

¹⁸² Touré. *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness?* 62.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 62.

racial violence and the potential for assassination is perhaps so disturbing within this climate of Obama celebration, that the only response is to downplay the seriousness of this potential through light-hearted language and the containment of this violence to popular cultural and iconic forms where the hero always wins. This image is one example of how a post-black aesthetic may influence attempts to destabilize dominant ways of visualizing black identity. However, when post-blackness and post-raciality meet in the figure of Obama they exist in an uneasy tension as Obama's racial identity always exceeds the bounds of the post-racial myth. Further, I argue that this image also illuminates that attempts to play with racial boundaries may do so at the risk of reifying dominant conceptions of masculinity as that which makes blackness legible in a narrative of progress in the form of national belonging and leadership.¹⁸⁴

Superhero Obama

Another example of Obama being depicted as hyper-masculine and transposed onto a white icon is the image *Superman Obama* by "Mr. Brainwash" or MBW. While masculinity is still a dominant trope within the image, violence is not and instead of representing a version of the "outlaw" Obama takes the place of an equally popular American figure, Superman. However, the discourse and history surrounding science fiction and the comic book genre in the United States has no less of a problematic interaction with race and gender and this is a crucial, even if underlying factor, informing the transposition of a black icon onto a white one in the realm of science fiction.

In this image we see Obama from the waist up in front of a backdrop of the American flag. Obama is dressed in a tight blue shirt, red cape, yellow belt, with a big red and yellow

¹⁸⁴ Ibrahim. *Troubling the Family*.

diamond-shaped “S” sprawled across his chest. If the suit alone didn’t get the message across, the title, *Superman Obama*, clarifies that in this image Obama has taken the place of one of the nation’s most beloved and classic superheroes. The image features mostly bold and bright colors but Obama’s neck and head are mostly gray. The dark shadow cast by his chin imbues Obama with a density that is complimented by the delicate light touching his face. His gaze is directed upward and off into the distance and his lips appear pensively pursed. In line with the general story of an average man who disappears into a phone booth at the hint of danger and reappears larger, tougher, and dressed for action, this image plays with the plethora of images of Obama in suits and implies that Obama can and has emerged, no longer your average politician, but one capable and ready to protect the nation at large. Here, Obama is depicted with broad shoulders, a strong chest, thick arms—the necessary musculature for a hyper-masculine savior of the nation. This image may not register as particularly interesting with just anyone taking Superman’s place and it is Obama’s racial difference, the unexpected element of a person of color as Superman, which draws attention. At least one element informing Obama’s heroic status is that he is a person of color and while the artist has chosen to depict Obama as a white superhero with relatively light skin, the gray tone of his face and neck still allow him to maintain his status as a person of color. Again, it may be Obama’s mixed-race heritage that allows the artist to depict him as able to walk the line between black and white.

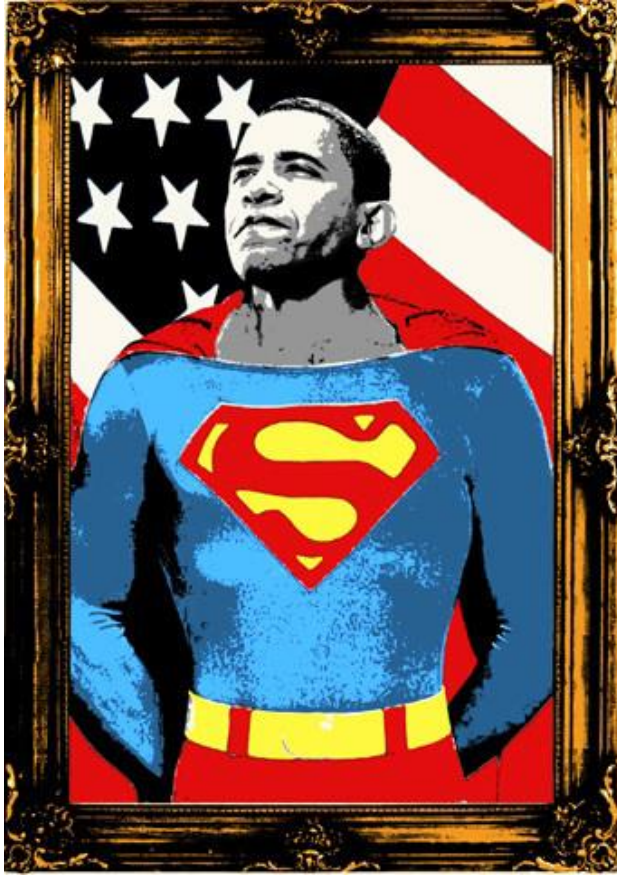


Figure 7: Superman Obama by Mr. Brainwash in *Wert's Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints* (2009), pgs. 62 & 165. This image taken from: <http://www.printed-editions.com/artwork/mr-brainwash-obama-superman-gold-edition-13514>

The story of Superman is only one narrative within the genre of science fiction but the genre as a whole has a particularly troubled relationship to communities of color. Science fiction is compelling in that it offers a variety of meditations on the future that usually end up providing a glimpse of the conditions structuring the present or as Adilifu Nama, author of *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (2011), explains about black superheroes in particular, they are “not only fantastic representations of our dreams, desires, and idealized projections of our selves, they are also a symbolic extension of America’s

shifting political ethos and racial landscape.”¹⁸⁵ Historically, the genre, as well as the actual science fields, have been heavily populated by white male producers and consumers.¹⁸⁶ Nama notes a wealth of critiques directed at depictions of black superheroes for reifying stereotypes and science fiction writing more broadly often features white male exploration of the space frontier which usually entails some form of colonially reminiscent encounter with the alien “other.”¹⁸⁷ These tropes that mimic the subjugation and colonization of peoples of color around the globe, traffic in racialized stereotypes, and devalue or dis-include women and people of color from prominent roles in the imagined future, led to a number of rebuttals by people of color. Afrofuturism and the practice of “race-bending” are two forms that these challenges take. Afrofuturism as a genre shares many affinities with discourses of post-blackness and could be positioned as a reflection of this general aesthetic. An exploration of science fiction and the transformations that are taking place as a part of it is important for as De Witt Douglas Kilgore notes, “science fiction is marked by the racial logic of its surrounding society.”¹⁸⁸

Kilgore, in his book *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space* (2003), provides an in depth look at science fiction and astrofuturism as popular literary traditions, noting that while non-whites and women have generally been excluded from participation, race and gender play heavy roles within many of these narratives.¹⁸⁹ Nalo Hopkinson, a well-known science fiction writer and woman of color, similarly notes that science fiction is so aligned with colonization narratives and the historical exclusion of

¹⁸⁵ Adilifu Nama. *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011) 2.

¹⁸⁶ De Witt Douglas Kilgore. *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 10.

¹⁸⁷ Nama. *Super Black*, 4. Kilgore. *Astrofuturism*, 10.

¹⁸⁸ Kilgore. *Astrofuturism*, 13.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

people of color that, “To be a person of colour writing science fiction is to be under suspicion of having internalized one’s colonization.”¹⁹⁰ Despite this, she and others do see potential in re-working, appropriating, and de-stabilizing the common tropes informing the genre for de-colonial, post-colonial, and oppositional ends.

Ytasha L. Womack’s book, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013), details many elements of this move by people of color and blacks in particular to stake a claim in the genre and produce their own visions of the future. Womack defines Afrofuturism in this way, “Whether through literature, visual arts, music, or grassroots organizing, Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future. Both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory, Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs.”¹⁹¹ In this context, colonial narratives, slavery, and racism are re-worked as participants seek to envision a future world that can account for its violent history but also find a way to overcome it or imagine a world that isn’t structured by this historical legacy at all. And as mentioned above, how the future is imagined, tells quite a bit about the present.

Womack also addresses the possibilities afforded by cosplay (shorthand for costume play) in that it allows people of color and children the opportunity to reimagine their favorite comic book characters in ways that better represent who they are. Womack quotes Stanford Carpenter who is the president and co-founder of the Institute for Comics Studies as she discusses cosplay, “...It’s about empowerment. It’s about the possibility of what you can be

¹⁹⁰ Nalo Hopkinson. “Introduction,” in *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan (eds). (Vancouver: Pulp Press, 2011), 7.

¹⁹¹ Ytasha L. Womack. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013), 9.

or what you can do. And when you see people in underrepresented groups, it takes on the empowerment fantasy of not just, say, being Superman, but also the dimension of stepping on the much more narrow roles that we are assigned...”¹⁹² This practice is also often referred to as “race-bending” which takes place in cosplay and may be present elsewhere as well. For example, in an article for npr.org titled, “Who gets to be a Superhero? Race and Identity in Comics,” by Gene Demby, he discusses the widespread use of race-bending as a way to claim space for people of color within the genre and counter the overwhelming presence of whiteness.

However, Demby also notes that this racial substitution is not always as easy as it may seem particularly when trying to use a non-racial form of fantasy discrimination—like the mutants in X-men who are discriminated against for being mutants—as a metaphor for racial discrimination in the real world in that it can end up obscuring how this discrimination functions because it is ultimately detached from history and the particularities of race.¹⁹³ Nama explores the difference between superheroes who are intended to be originally black and superheroes who were originally white transforming into black characters and he identifies additional issues in this regard and explains,

Black superheroes should never be just a colorized version of the original because that would affirm notions that African Americans are at best a passive reflection and at worst a pathological reaction to white America. To the contrary, blacks have simultaneously retained a distinct form of black racial identity and worldview along with absorbing American folkways, mores, and taboos. Black superheroes, like the black folk they symbolize, must express that dynamic, whether they are completely original, an overt imitation of a white figure, or somewhere in between the two.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Ibid., 14.

¹⁹³ Gene Demby. “Who Gets to Be A Superhero? Race and Identity in Comics.” (January 11, 2004). <http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2014/01/11/261449394/who-gets-to-be-a-superhero-race-and-identity-in-comics> (last visited 2/13/15).

¹⁹⁴ Nama. *Super Black*, 125.

It seems then that the main concern with turning white characters black is that it implies either that as black characters they have nothing new to bring to the story and thus require an already established white character's back story or it functions as a way to flatten out what blackness can and does signify as an identity

Despite these limitations, Afrofuturism and race-bending are oppositional practices that challenge the exclusion of women and people of color in the genre of science fiction, and by extension from how the future is imagined. As Womack noted above, Afrofuturism is concerned with correcting this exclusion but also with creating and imagining new ways to be black, free from the narrow definitions of fixed blackness. In this way, elements of Afrofuturism align with the ideas informing post-blackness. While Mr. Brainwash's image of Obama dressed as Superman is not exactly the same as cosplay or a comic book, it does present a sort of visual reimagining of what types of bodies are suitable for super heroes. However, it is important to note that the gendered construction of this heroism remains intact. Strength, leadership, and protection are still being imagined as though they can only exist in the domain of masculinity. Nama illuminates an interesting point in this regard in that, "The superhero archetype is heavily steeped in affirming a division between right and wrong, thus superheroes operate within a moral framework. Moreover, virtually all superheroes are victorious, not because of superior strength or weaponry, but because of moral determination demonstrated by concern for others and notions of justice."¹⁹⁵ While female superheroes certainly do exist, to consider this statement in regard to Superman as a classic heroic icon that Obama is able to stand-in for, illuminates this dynamic as one that moves beyond simply attributing leadership and strength to masculinity, but also associates masculinity, and by

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 4.

extension Obama, with morality and the ability to fight for and protect justice. To figure President Obama as a superhero illuminates the super-human status of Obama's symbolism. As with Dye's image, MBW's choice to situate Obama as superman imbues him with a larger-than-life and mythic ability to right moral wrongs. The fact that Obama is black and taking over the domain of a white hero directly frames the justice that he stands for in racial terms. In Dye's image Obama assumes a hyper-masculine violence to signify racial equality in the face of racial violence and for MBW Obama's hyper-masculinity takes a moral high-road, but in both cases, Obama's race and gender speak volumes about the conditions of this moment particularly because these racial substitutions articulate a desire to transcend race but they can't seem to adequately contain history.

It is unclear the extent to which MBW ruminated on issues of race and gender when creating this image and while his image reflects some elements of Afrofuturism, this does not necessarily mean that his choice to depict Obama as Superman is in line with the overall goals and tenets of the genre. Rather, Wert notes that Mr. Brainwash draws from the legacies of artists such as Andy Warhol, who critiqued iconicity, celebrity, consumerism etc. in his work, so it is possible that MBW was attracted to the figure of Superman for his icon status within American popular culture and not necessarily because of how the genre of science fiction, with all of its possibilities and limitations, interacts with people of color more broadly. In this regard, other images by MBW illustrate that, much like Warhol, he is interested in playing with conventions, norms, and humor. MBW has dressed up a number of well-known figures, including Obama, Michael Jackson, Marilyn Manson, and Jack Nicholson, as Marilyn Monroe. The images are over-the-top and seem to be foregrounding gender-play as a way to poke fun at these icons. The way that, MBW meshes icons in images

that draw their effect from playing with normative constructions of gender and sexuality, provides some insight on *Superman Obama*. *Superman Obama* leaves normative gender intact but MBW may have found the playfulness that informs much of his work through Obama's visible racial difference in the place where whiteness once was. In other words, much like Dye's image, MBW's could be informed by a desire to depict Obama as racially transcendent yet both images end up drawing attention to the ways that blackness cannot simply be substituted for whiteness.

Conclusion

While the discourses of post-blackness or post-raciality may or may not have been conscious influences in the production of these images, I argue that their tendency to be conflated and overlapped, particularly in relation to Obama, inform this moment and create a climate where black and non-black artists alike feel comfortable playing with the meanings and signifiers of racial identity and the role identity plays in relation to the nation. The notion that we as a nation have moved beyond race as a significant factor structuring life and opportunity in the U.S. and the idea that because of this, blackness no longer has to be associated with the trauma of a violent history and therefore need not respond to calls of racial solidarity, are directly tied to the presence of a person of color running for and being elected president. Additionally, Obama's mixed-race identity positions him as a figure capable of expanding racial boundaries and sampling from multiple identities. Normative or heightened masculinity then, becomes all the more important as that which pins down and makes sense of a figure that is otherwise difficult to categorize. These images both reflect and help to construct Obama's archive as that which draws from multiple racial and iconic genealogies and posit masculinity as always present to secure Obama's national belonging

and his ability to lead the nation. While these images play with and re-formulate racial boundaries, this does not mean that race is somehow less important. On the contrary, it is Obama's visible racial difference that allows these images to construct their meaning.

The dialectics of seeing as a push and pull between emergence and incorporation takes on different dimensions in regard to this work but is no less present. The popular culture associations and the ability of the artists to depict Obama as "racially ambidextrous" imbue him with an emergent aura of youthfulness and position him as capable of challenging and breaking down stifling racial categorization. However, he is very much incorporated into dominant understandings of gender in relation to the nation and both post-race and post-blackness lend themselves to de-historicized and de-politicized understanding of the way that race continues to structure our present. Obama's racial difference becomes the site at which he is marked as an exceptional individual capable of representing a multicultural nation. The complexities informing his identity are flattened out, the nation is able to pick and choose what he represents and when, and ultimately this version of racial difference becomes a celebrated commodity in the market for diversity.

Richard Purcell is troubled by the way that post-race and post-black circulate around Obama and he notes that the death of Trayvon Martin, and I would add the number of young black males killed by police since then, should disrupt the notion of post-race for clearly race is still a structuring factor in who is considered valuable and worthy of life and protection, and who is not. Purcell notes that while there is potential in some elements of post-blackness, in this moment it is characterized and driven by normative discourses of individualism and success, detached from the historical genealogies of oppositional politics.¹⁹⁶ This becomes

¹⁹⁶ Purcell. "Trayvon, Postblackness, and the Postrace Dilemma," 160.

the central problem of this moment where post-race and post-black meet in that they essentially allow a nation to pretend that race no longer matters and that blackness can be anything while ignoring the mounting evidence to the contrary. Obama's ability to successfully navigate blackness and whiteness places him on a post-racial pedestal and markets his identity in ways that, according to Purcell, "functions as neoliberal wish fulfillment of openness, radical individualism, and the mass production of difference."¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 161.

Conclusion: The Significance of This Moment and the Importance of Visual Culture

This thesis focused on two recurring thematic influences informing Obama's symbolism and his archive, that of civil rights and post-blackness, yet other images draw from a wealth of references that position Obama's racial identities differently and this artwork has become the inspiration for other cultural production, be it celebratory or critical. The extent to which Obama as a symbolic figure and icon arose as a canvas upon which artists across the world could celebrate and express their hopes and desires of the political climate in the U.S. is profound and indicative of just how strongly the ideas of hope and change, when applied to a figure like Obama, can resonate with people of varying racial, ethnic, cultural, national, sexual, gender, and class backgrounds. Yet these images and their presentation as a collection illuminates the ways in which racial difference is incorporated, institutionalized, and ultimately called upon in the service of discourses that maintain the status quo through divorcing an association of race from persisting violence and systemic inequality. Obama's archive indexes this moment as one that reflects this history of violence and sees its shifting appearance under a national identity of multiculturalism, diversity, and inclusion, bolstered by normative presentations of masculinity and racial difference, rendering all else invisible or illegible.

Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints features well over one-hundred images and this collection is not the only one of its kind despite there being some overlap with other collections like it. As noted in the introduction, this particular collection features an overwhelming number of male artists, and while a key element of this project was locating the importance of masculinity to Obama's archive, images created by women surely offer another rich arena for an analysis of how this masculinity functions. Along this line, there are

also a handful of images within this collection that depict Michelle Obama and an analysis of the ways that she embodies black femininity and motherhood alongside Obama's symbolism would add a great deal to an understanding of the ways that this moment is both historical and unique in regard to the treatment of race, gender, and family in particular.

For now, however, I would like to return to my discussion of the image presented in the introduction, *Hope*, by Amy Martin to explore the possibility of reading this piece as a site with potential to answer Edwards call to “defamiliarize charisma” in order to grapple with the “entanglement of charisma and masculinity.”¹⁹⁸ As noted in the introduction, Martin's piece is one of a handful of images that deliberately avoids depicting Obama and does so by substituting the presence of a woman and child. I attribute Obama's lack of presence to the fact that his image is so over-determined by a focus on masculinity, that to create an image that allows for alternative identifications almost requires that Obama's physical presence be downplayed or removed altogether.

Despite representing a deviation from typical images created in the interest of Obama support, Martin's image could, in many ways, be read as presenting a number of other normative tropes. For example, one reading may suppose that the image depicts a white mother and daughter, reaffirming the privileged position of white motherhood in relation to black motherhood, foregrounding notions of family, and locating heterosexual coupling as the union responsible for creating the child as representative of the future. If one were to read this image according to Ibrahim's formulation of “family time” that she describes as the temporality of the 1990s multiracial movement, then the mother holding the child up to grasp a butterfly that graces the word “hope” in the sky could be seen as symbolic of a normative

¹⁹⁸ Edwards. *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*, xvii.

conception of temporality in regard to subject formation and the association of the child with future potential.¹⁹⁹ Additionally, the woman and child's diverted or distracted gaze could be interpreted as figuring a feminized lack of power and authority, an inability to return the gaze of the viewer. Yet despite this reading, particularly because the image is situated within a collection that is dominated by masculinity and a discursive terrain that understands racial kinship through masculine genealogies, Martin's image does offer some room to contemplate alternatives to the privileging of black male iconicity.²⁰⁰

Notably, the lack of Obama's physical presence casts into strong relief the way in which Obama's masculinity is hyper-present in other images. This refusal to depict Obama and participate in the trafficking of his racialized masculinity could be read as an attempt to defamiliarize charisma through a re-worked relationship to the charismatic figure. Edwards explains that to re-work or break down the commitment to charismatic leadership requires a, "...sustained detour, a movement away from leaders and toward leadership as ideal, as fantasy, as phenomenology, and as hauntology."²⁰¹ In this regard, it is important that the woman depicted in Martin's image is unknown and seems relatively unaware of the audience before her, for as Edwards points out, a detour from the charismatic leadership scenario is not about simply substituting a woman for a man but rather recognizing the role that idealized and iconic leadership plays in foregrounding a masculine ideal, obscuring other subject positions as well as the ways that social and political change happen.²⁰² While Martin's image may register as normative in many ways, it does also represent a shift in the optics used to rally support for a politician, and represents a major shift in the types of knowledge

¹⁹⁹ Ibrahim. *Troubling the Family*, 3.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 163

²⁰¹ Edwards. *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*, xix.

²⁰² Ibid., xix.

that are called upon when referencing Obama. In this image, Obama is alluded to but his masculine physicality as embodiment and representation of the nation at large is destabilized as an unknown woman and child take the stage without even addressing the audience. I ruminate on this here because destabilizing the way we conceive of leaders and leadership offers a great deal of potential to disrupt imbalanced relations of power and authority. The charismatic masculine icon is a figure rooted in both epistemological and material violence and to disrupt our dependency on such a figure in order to imagine change could offer space to reinvigorate antiracist politics and social transformation. In the meantime however, I posit that it is important to continue to examine Obama and figures like him for what they can illuminate about history and the contemporary moment as well as for how they may urge us to pursue alternatives.

Overall, this thesis recognizes and attempts to sort through the complexity of this moment in the United States and the difficulties of attempting to diagnose processes that are still unfolding and incomplete. Since the 2008 election, public opinion of and response to Obama continues to shift and the role that his symbolism plays in the national imagination is in flux as well. However, I argue that the election of the United States' first president of color, and the visualities associated with this historical moment set in motion ways of seeing and thinking that have profound impacts on the ways in which race, gender, sexuality, and national identity are conceived. What I offer in this thesis is one interpretation of many with the hope of understanding at least part of the complexity of this contemporary moment in the United States and the role that visual culture plays in this process.

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