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RUNNING HEAD: BARACK OBAMA THE BLACK

FROM NO WIN TO WINNING: PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA THE BLACK
Analytical Track Paper

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Abstract

The first black person ever to be elected President of the United States, Barack Hussein Obama accomplished a feat that most could never imagine in their lifetimes. His campaign worried the people however: the American presidency has typically been a recognizably masculine leader, and Obama appeared to be slightly feminine, detached, and emotionally unavailable. Using his autobiographies to reveal his development as a black man, this paper considers Obama’s campaigned racial and gender performance on what is perhaps the world’s largest stage. His choice to tone down his racial identity and to be selective in his masculine performance ultimately reveals the raced nature of hegemonic masculinity.
FROM NO WIN TO WINNING: PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA THE BLACK

It has been a rarity in modern political life: a wide open race for the nomination of both parties. But whatever happens from here on out, this campaign will always be remembered for the emergence of the first serious woman candidate for president: Barack Obama. (Linsky 2008)

Barack Hussein Obama was elected the 44th President of the United States on November 4, 2008, the first black person ever to be elected to the nation’s highest position although it undoubtedly still battles a legacy of racial injustice. Surely the significance of his election makes journalistic opinions and observations like the quote above seem flippant and immature. But unlike the low-key, casual, and shallow feelings that the public often has toward politics in general, the Presidency is a focus for the most intense and persistent emotions in the American polity (Barber 1992). A symbolic leader, the President is the one figure who draws together the people’s hopes and fears for their future. The President is special.

As such, mainstream opinions that Obama’s temperament during his campaign was “unflappable, perhaps to a fault” (Alter 2008) matter. His “persistent coolness” was worrisome to the people (Wilentz 2008 [insert page number]). While his “cool, cerebral style [was considered] a fine quality in a decision maker,” the people often worried that it lacked passion (Weisberg 2008). While the conservative mainstream was pleased with Obama’s “cool grace,” “self-control” and concealed “steeliness,” (O’Sullivan 2008), describing his outer calm as enviable; they also charged that his presentation hid doubts and anxiety that would be revealed should he ever have to make a truly tough decision (Bames 2009). The people worried that the next potential President’s “composed, unruffled sleekness” left him “emotionally unavailable [and] too cool for school” (Long 2008).

The people were hungry “for a knight with a shiny new lance” (Cose 2008a) in Washington. People wondered whether Obama’s successes in the Illinois and U.S. Senate were
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simply “not enough to play with the big boys” [A Surge in Candidates 2007]. Accusations of his detachment were followed by calls for him to “man-up” (such as Random 2008a), especially to reclaim any ground gained by his Democratic primary contender Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton. One writer described the second debate between Obama and his Republican contender Sen. John McCain as “two tropes of masculinity … battling for dominance”—that the latter “played the confrontational ‘tough guy’” while the former “talked about ‘sacred sexuality,’ and expressed empathy for women and families considering abortion” (Walker 2009). Presidential campaigns understandably put candidates’ whole person under the microscope (Barber 1992), but people were particularly concerned with Obama’s gender performance, branding him with accusations of femininity (Alterman 2008a; Williams 2008b), unisexuality (Cooper 2009) or at least questioning his masculinity.

THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY AND MASCULINITY

Apparently a masculine character is a requisite for the American Presidency. When Butterfield and Powell (1981) asked college students to describe a “good president” using the Bem Sex Role Inventory, the good president was perceived as masculine in 61% of the cases. Hypothetical male presidential candidates were expected to be more effective on presidential tasks that are considered more “masculine,” such as dealing with terrorism or a military crisis (Rosenwasser et al 1987; Rosenwasser & Seale 1988). Fehn (2005) suggested that no single figure in America’s past better demonstrates the influence and power of masculinity than former President Theodore Roosevelt, particularly given his own participation in what he termed the “strenuous life.” For Roosevelt, aggressive manly activities like hiking and big game hunting were key in building a strong country since “virile, rugged men” would be the only ones who could lead the nation toward assuming global leadership (p. 54). At the time when women were
demanding an increasing role in politics, it was Roosevelt who stood as a beacon of hope for men who feared the feminization of American men (Fehn 2005). Dean (1998) argued that John F. Kennedy’s tough masculine persona was also more than just a matter of personal style but was central to his domestic and foreign policy reasoning and decision making. Kennedy encouraged “natural” American male virtues like physical strength and adventurous bravery as solutions to a perceived masculinity crisis that combined fears of a feminized, luxury-loving American manhood with the fears of the waning American hegemony over developing nations. Kennedy’s creation of the Peace Corps symbolically linked this ideological masculinity with the frontier values that made America powerful, thereby identifying the strength of male bodies with the strength of the state (Dean 1998).

The political arena itself might even be seen as a “masculine testing ground” (Kimmel 1997, as cited by Cooper 2009:649), with presidential campaigns especially standing out as “ritualized performances of masculinity” (Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 1996). Each candidate’s efforts to present himself as the toughest and most stalwart defender of the U.S. Homeland (Ducat 2004) may very well boil down to the people’s perception of his gender. Goldstein (2004) says that the aura surrounding a candidate’s gender presentation is a big part of that “intangible quality called charisma” (p. 13). Accordingly, candidates hire political strategists to make sure that they appear appropriately masculine and aggressive both in rhetoric and imagery (Cooper 2009; Ducat 2004; Goldstein 2004). Candidates campaign their masculinity in campaign films by highlighting their affiliation with institutions like the military, athletics, and the family (with women portrayed within familiar, supportive roles obviously) (Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 1996). Candidates might construct feminized, weak, and impotent images of their components like conservatives did against Democratic candidate John Kerry—never having to say anything
overtly about his gender, they associated him with an image of a prancing, flamboyant, French poodle with a feminine hairdo and capitalized on the powerful meanings that had been already constructed in people’s minds about the undesirability of a president with feminine tendencies (Fahey 2007). So powerful are socio-demographic factors like race and gender in predicting voting behavior (Stockley 1998), the media often provide coverage regarding candidates’ race, religion, campaign tactics, personality, and gender sometimes instead of their stances on substantive campaign issues (Barber 1992; Bourdieu 1998; Eargle, Esmail & Sullivan 2008; Fahey 2007; Slaughter 2009).

MASCUlINITY ATTEMPTED

It is certainly difficult to imagine exactly what would satisfy the people’s expectation of presidential candidates’ masculinity because our definitions of masculinity are inconsistent at best (Clatterbaugh 1998). Connell (1995) suggests that masculinity is often explained in both essentialist and positivist manners, that is, by compiling arbitrary qualities or by describing the way men are. In these ways, people think men possess such character traits as “young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports” (Goffman 1963:128).

Masculinity is sometimes defined in normative ways that offer a standard for what men ought to be (Connell 1995). He should have an aggressive, competitive, super-rational and achievement oriented personality and he should be characterized as productive, breadwinner, husband, and father (Pleck 1981; Kokopeli and Lakey 2004). In a semiotic way, men who are not these things might simply be considered feminine (Connell 1995). Men who are these things stand to reap the most societal awards like money, status, and privilege (Kilmartin 2000)—and maybe the presidency.
While the *essentialist* traits that encompass masculinity vary historically and culturally, an ideal masculinity typically exists at any given time. Certainly all men are not going to be the same type of man nor are men going to be the same type of man in every context (Spector-Mersel 2006), but there is an American ideal who represents these popular traits—and he typically is middle-class, middle-aged, heterosexual and white (Kimmel and Messner 1995). As the dominant masculinity, this ideal masculinity remains the standard against which most men are measured, regardless of the interpersonal or socio-demographic characteristics that would otherwise inform an individual’s masculine development. This ideal masculinity is necessarily demonstrated by notable political leaders; its embodiment by the American President, the people’s symbolic leader, is indeed one of the primary mechanisms through which the ideal is defined, constructed and perpetuated (Fahey 2007).

Given his political and social power, the masculinity demonstrated by the president not only stands as the most socially endorsed masculinity, but arguably legitimates the hierarchy of gender relations between men (as dominant) and women (as subordinate), between the people’s concepts of masculinity and femininity, and among groups of men (Connell 1987; Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messerschmidt 2011). The president is the embodiment of the American hegemonic masculinity. And herein lies the special challenge for 2008 presidential candidate Barack Hussein Obama: as a member of a subjugated racial group, Barack Obama possesses a marginalized masculinity that developed in response to the whims of the dominant group (Connell 1995). The question of how might a black man become president is akin to the question of how might a black man don a masculinity exclusively reserved for and possessed by powerful white men?

**BARACK OBAMA, BECOMING A BLACK MAN**
America does not love black men; at least not historically so (hooks 2004). Despite black men’s consistent success at measuring up to and even being complicit in the perpetuation of masculine hegemony, powerful images of black men as overly masculine, overly aggressive, overly sexual, violent, wild, buffoon, failure, criminal, drug dealer, substance abuser, street hustler, bad father, lazy, endangered, and morally deprived remain ready for summoning (e.g., Blake and Darling 1994; Ferguson 2000; hooks 2004; Palmer-Mehta and Haliliuc 2008; Powell 2008; Ross 1998; Whiting and Lewis 2008). Many of these images, though stereotypically exaggerated, do carry some truth of the expressive, emotional, assertive, animated and sometimes violent behaviors of black men attempting to offset the effect of being rendered invisible by racial oppression (Majors and Mancini Billson 1992). These are the images that typically prevail in the public mind (Cooper 2009), the same public asked to consider Obama’s campaign for the presidency.

The son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas, Barack Obama’s story of growing up without his father, with his maternal grandparents in Hawaii, and with this mother and stepfather in Indonesia is well known. An inability to speak of a direct lineage from enslaved Africans and his enrollment at good, private schools as a young man definitely had the people wondering about his black authenticity (Cose 2008b; Nordlinger 2008; Prince 2007; Prince 2008c;). Obama clearly identifies as a black man and importantly frames his worldview as not dissimilar from one descending from enslaved Africans with more direct experiences of racial oppression:

I am a prisoner of my own biography: I can’t help but view the American experience through the lens of a black man of mixed heritage, forever mindful of how generations of people who looked like me were subjugated and stigmatized, and the subtle and not so subtle ways that race and class continue to shape our lives (2006:10).
Obama (1995) wrote about the development of his marginalized masculinity in his autobiography, describing a lonely, “fitful interior struggle” as he tried to raise himself to be a black man in America (p. 76) and realizing (and maybe mistrusting) his white mother and grandparents’ ability to help him. Obama relied on “color-coded” pop images in order to “cop a walk, a talk, a step, a style” (p. 78) and mocked the fearless and emotionless attitudes that Shaft and Superfly demonstrated, concluding that “respect came from what you did” and that he could not “let anyone sneak up behind you to see emotions—like hurt and fear—you didn’t want them to see” (Obama 1995:79). On the basketball court, his black male peers taught him that they metaphorically played on “the white man’s court” (1995:85). Thus, while he honestly tried as an adolescent to understand and merge the “language and customs and structures of meaning” of his black and white worlds (1995:82), he instead developed a chameleon-like sense of knowing how to alter his performance to differing expectations from those two worlds and how his black masculinity was necessarily bound by the expectations of the dominant group (Majors and Mancini Billson 1992). Instead of withdrawing into a “coil of rage” or lashing out at whites—which would earn him labels like “Paranoid. Militant. Violent. Nigger” (1995:85)—Obama accepted that

People were satisfied so long as you were courteous and smiled and made no sudden moves. They were more than satisfied; they were relieved—such a pleasant surprise to find a well-mannered young black man who didn’t seem angry all the time (Obama 1995:95-96).

Obama went on to graduate from Columbia University and Harvard University Law School and certainly gained models more assorted than Shaft and Superfly. Well-educated, well-traveled and privileged in ways that many have only dreamed, surely Obama had a repertoire of performances to ensure that his black manhood was visible, acceptable and not always
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completely framed in response to the dominant, white group. However, Obama carried with him the warning of his black mentor upon his departure for college that he would eventually be a “well-trained, well-paid nigger, but … a nigger just the same (1995:97). Connor (1994) suggested that the pose of such a black masculinity—being careful of how to act in a black context versus a white context, for instance—never completely goes away, only that it shifts in accordance with the shifting needs for it. Obama wrote that his personal identity “didn’t, couldn’t, end [with the simple fact of his blackness]” (Obama 1995:111), but his difficulty as a community organizer trying to gauge whether his tone was “too angry? [or] not angry enough?” suggests that a black man pose is always in the wings (2006:247). Always “on” and never completely relaxed, this type of impression management is survival-based and provides a “conditioned strength” that keeps a black man’s guard up regardless of the circumstances (Majors and Mancini Billson 1992). The development of a “third eye” (Majors and Mancini Billson 1992) or maybe even a “double consciousness” (DuBois [1903] 1994) often leads to a choice for a contained masculinity that maintains a cool exterior. It necessarily attempts to remain emotionless, stoic, unflinching, and detached at the appropriate times because the price paid by black men for letting emotions like anger, love, happiness, and hatred slip has been extraordinarily high (Connor 1994; hooks 2004; Majors and Mancini Billson 1992).

FROM NO WIN TO WINNING CHOICE

Running for the presidential office was a no-win situation for Barack Obama: the presidential dais would not allow for his blackness and his masculinity at the same time. Indeed, Obama not only had to convince voters that he was the right candidate for the job, he also had to be the right Black Man for the job. Like Jackie Robinson, Obama can’t be too defiant, too cocky, too flashy or even too good. He has to tone himself down a bit, and maybe not be so Black all the time (Ransom 2008b).
To avoid summoning the persistent “angry black man” images that have put black men and
danger and have regularly substituted any desire to truly understand authentic black
masculinities, Obama’s campaign goal was mostly to downplay race and avoid racial issues
altogether (Cooper 2009). If he made any attempt to “use skin color as a political tool” (Thomas
2008a) like other race men before him, he was certain to conjure those images. If he made any
attempt to utilize the more expressive, emotional, and assertive cultural style of black men, he
was certain to conjure those images. Choosing both a toned-down racial performance and a
toned-down gender performance was his only true option.

To that end, Obama left “bold and boisterous,” “merry mischief-making,” and a “love for
action” to his opponent Sen. McCain (Meacham and Thomas 2008; Thomas 2008b). Would it be
acceptable for Obama to be “feisty” (Author Unknown 2008) or “passionate, sometimes
impulsive and unpredictable” like McCain (Meacham and Thomas 2008)? Could he be
“pugnacious” like his running mate Sen. Joe Biden (Meacham 2008a)? Not likely. Instead, he
chose a “methodical,” “cool and cerebral,” “first-rate temperament” (Author Unknown 2008;
Meacham 2008b; Walters 2008a). He chose to appear deeply reflective (Meacham 2008b;
Walters 2008a). In the meantime, he earned descriptors like Obambi, feminine, pretty, aloof and
too nice (Cockburn 2008; Meacham and Thomas 2008; Williams 2008a). To many, he was not a
“real fighter” (Cockburn 2008) and he was “more comfortable with the language of diplomacy
and negotiation than with the words of war” (Emery 2008).

Obama’s apparent success in embracing the instrumental, leadership traits of the ideal
cultural masculinity at the expense of expressive traits is revealing. First, Obama’s choice to
avoid expressive masculine traits associated with stereotypical black cultural styles ironically
rendered his black masculinity invisible on the main stage. As a marginalized masculine style, an
expressive black masculinity partially serves the purpose to validate black manhood in the face of racial oppression and the lack of sanction by the dominant group. And while the assumption is safe that he would not have chosen to be perform violent traits, otherwise aggressive and animated performances are valid but still unacceptable from a black candidate since the legacy of the destructive black man images are too prevalent.

Second, it was precisely the legacy of racism, and even his earliest experiences of it (Barber 1992), that forced Obama to make a calculated campaign effort to choose an instrumental hegemonic masculine performance over an expressive hegemonic masculine performance. Although virtually impossible for any man to attain every one of the individual and varied characteristics associated with the ideal masculinity, the assumption has been that a man who models these characteristics would then don a socially approved and celebrated masculine identity. For Barack Obama, however, each of the characteristics associated with the hegemonic cultural ideal were not even available to him—to choose an expressive performance would have negatively confirmed his blackness and barred him from the presidency, the embodiment of the hegemonic ideal. Instead of modeling characteristics that men should have, it was necessary to filter out the characteristics that black men should not have. For a man of a different race, the legacy of racism insists that the hegemonic masculinity is not even suitable for every man. The raced nature of hegemonic masculinity is therefore revealed.

Still without a method for determining which type of masculinity ascends to become the hegemonic pattern (Messerschmidt 2011), this method must be ridiculously complex in that the qualities of hegemonic masculinity are not uniform for all groups and do not necessarily reinforce one another. How many versions of hegemonic masculinity are acceptable? Which combinations of performances—which switches are to be turned on and which to be turned off—
are to be expected from the various racial groups in this diverse nation? Surely something of these mechanisms stands to be revealed when the possessor of a marginalized masculinity successfully becomes the embodied symbol of the most powerful hegemonic masculinity. A black man did, in fact, become elected and this was not followed by an immediate collapse of the gender social order. Maybe there is something to come that signals a weakening of the continued imagination of a hegemonic masculinity at all and the shifting of its relationship with women and other subordinate identities. At the very least, maybe the “angry black man” images will be foreshadowed so that they lose their weight.
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