

**Jackson, Lincoln, FDR, Obama: the Presidency, the Body Politic,  
and the Contest over American National Identity**

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Prompted by the racially-charged comments of his former pastor Jeremiah Wright, in March 2008 candidate Barack Obama gave a speech to address the issue of race in his presidential campaign. “It’s a story that hasn’t made me the most conventional candidate,” Obama said in reference to his bi-racial origins. “But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts – that out of many, we are truly one.” Obama’s racial pluralism writ small made mixed ancestry a signifier for American ideals – ideals that could, *through him*, connect resentful whites and historically aggrieved blacks in a redemptive politics that would finally move past the wars of race and culture rooted in the 1960s. While Obama has drawn on his biology and biography to assert the nation’s promises of inclusion, his opponents have used these same elements to portray him as fundamentally *unrepresentative*. Indeed, in his term in office his presidency has challenged on birthright grounds, he has been visually portrayed as a figure of urban menace, and a major oppositional movement to his presidency that is at least partially motivated by race. Obama’s body has become a site of much political contest. But is this phenomenon distinct to Obama by virtue of his being the first African American president? Or does the presidency itself invite contest over the bodies of incumbents in relation to national identity?

Beyond the formal powers and duties laid down in the Constitution, the president acts as a cultural representation of the American people. Presidential authority depends on the degree to which incumbents can credibly claim to embody national identity in ways that go beyond stated political objectives. I mean the term “embody” quite literally. Presidents emblemize what their supporters hold sacred about the nation as their own bodies come to signify in different ways for the polity. Presidential bodies, I contend, become particularly salient when a new or counter-interpretation of national identity challenges the prevailing order. These are often

moments of inclusion – at least symbolically – of previously excluded groups. This, I argue, is because in order for a substantive shift in national identity to occur, members of the electorate must be able to see – or reinterpret themselves and therefore the nation itself – in the figure of the president, either in his life story or in his physical bearing. Conversely, opponents of change must project onto presidents or presidential candidates the negative aspects of the change they wish to halt.

What follows is primarily a study about the political body of Barack Obama, but historical antecedents demonstrate the ways that emergent notions of national identity are often contested through presidential bodies. Thus I have chosen earlier presidents that were politically associated with moments of broad change in American politics: Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt. These presidents confronted different challenges and each offered distinct, historically specific reinterpretations of the national body. Historical comparison always carries risk. In this case, the objective power and subjective meanings of the presidency have changed dramatically over time, as have the media through which their projections of self are conducted and contested. Stephen Skowronek has demonstrated how the presidency has developed over time from a patrician era where leadership was based on reputation among a small group of national elites, to a partisan era characterized by patronage to party factions and local machines, to a pluralist period distinguished by the rise of bureaucracy and bargaining between competing interests, and finally plebiscitary era characterized by a greater emphasis on direct political relationships with the public.<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Tulis traces the development of the presidency from an office whose inhabitants rarely engaged in public

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<sup>1</sup> Skowronek, Stephen. *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to George Bush*. Cambridge, Bellknap Press, 1993

speaking to one where rhetoric became a fundamental aspect of leadership.<sup>2</sup> And Sidney Milkis and Michael Nelson demonstrate the great change in presidential power from a relatively weak institution to a powerful modern presidency that was first fully realized in the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.<sup>3</sup>

Because my historical examples traverse a broad span of U.S. political development, it is important to identify the elements that have held constant in this office. For all the ways that presidential power has expanded and changed in terms of its relation to other institutions, it has always been linked to the president's role as signifier for a specific vision of national identity. The office was understood by its first occupant as having ceremonial functions critical to national unity, and Tocqueville observed his symbolic purpose for parties in the 1830s.<sup>4</sup> Presidents do not merely act as signifiers through their policies, philosophies, or partisan alignments, however. Presidential authority is lodged in – and articulated through - bodies. The American head of state was modeled in part on the British monarchy, a form of sovereignty given political clarity and coherence through the medieval political theological concept of “the King's Two Bodies,” through which the distinction between rulers and realm was made. As English crown jurist Edmund Plowden wrote, “the King has in him two Bodies, viz., a Body natural, and a Body politic. His Body natural...is a Body mortal...But his Body politic is a Body that cannot be seen or handled . . . constituted for the Direction of the People, and the

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<sup>2</sup> Tulis, Jeffrey. *The Rhetorical Presidency*. Princeton. Princeton University Press, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Milkis and Nelson, *The Origins and Development of the US Presidency*

<sup>4</sup> “In the United States as elsewhere parties feel the need to rally around one man in order more easily to make themselves understood by the crowd. Generally, therefore, they use the Presidential candidate's name as a symbol; in him they personify their theories. Hence the parties have a great interests in winning the election, not so much to make their doctrines triumph by the president-elect's help as to show, by his election, that their doctrines have gained a majority.” Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence (New York, Doubleday, 1969), p. 135. Quoted in Anne Norton, *Republic of Signs: Liberal Theory and American Popular Culture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 87.

Management of the public weal.”<sup>5</sup> While the language of the king’s two bodies has dropped out of modern political discourse, the distinction it forged has become a commonsense way of understanding the difference between governing executives and a polity based on the rule of law.

Political theorist Michael Rogin argued that the notion of the king’s two bodies also blurs the distinction between rulers and ruled – at least in the case of the American presidency. He wrote: “...the image of the king’s two bodies could take the chief executive in the opposite direction, not separating physical person from office, but absorbing the office into the officeholder’s personal identity. . . It transformed rational, independent citizens into limbs of the body politic, governed by the head. . . From this perspective, the doctrine of the king’s two bodies offers us a language in which confusion between person, power, office, and state become accessible.”<sup>6</sup> Rogin’s insight on the inverted meaning of the king’s two bodies can help us understand how and why presidential identities have been the site of a struggle over national identity, and more specifically to navigate the complex intersection of race and the presidency that animates much of contemporary politics over issues as diverse as health care, immigration, and bailouts. In what follows I analyze the interconnected meanings of the president’s two bodies in moments of change.

## **Andrew Jackson**

Andrew Jackson is largely responsible for this idea of president as personification of the nation by his claim to be the first president of all the people, and his assertion that the executive

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<sup>5</sup> Kantorowicz, Ernst. *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Mythology*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985. p. 7

<sup>6</sup> Rogin, Michael. *Ronald Reagan the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology*, Berkeley, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 82

was the only office that legitimately expressed the national will.<sup>7</sup> As the first president to be elected by white, male, unpropertied voters in most of the states, Jackson embodied a politics of white democratic inclusion. His campaigners emphasized his mean origins in the Carolina hinterland in contrast to the corrupt patricians he promised to vanquish from the executive office. This outsider identity was transvalued as the most representative identity by the assertion of democracy as a distinctly American attribute. Indeed, his contemporary and critic Ralph Waldo Emerson referred to him simply as a “representative man.”<sup>8</sup> His presidency also marked the rise of democratic nationalism, a political imperative that elevated and strengthened the national body against growing sectional conflicts and the assertion of states’ rights.<sup>9</sup> Thus did the rise of the president as a unifying “tribune” of the people coincide with the political efforts to unify the national body.

Jackson’s first inaugural is an event now woven into the fabric of American myth for the raucous behavior of the throngs of celebrants who arrived uninvited. The mythic status the event enjoys is due to its political importance as a symbol of fundamental change in national identity. Its dual interpretations as chaotic upheaval and democratic rejuvenation were captured by contemporary observers. One witness commented that in the chaos of broken punch bowls, overturned barrels, shattered windows, “*The Majesty of the People* had disappeared, and a rabble of boys, negroes, women, children, fighting, romping. What a pity what a pity.” And yet, she went on “It was the People’s day, and the People’s President and the People would rule.” Less ambivalently, the *Argus of Western America* reported, “It was a proud day for the people. General Jackson is *their own* President. Plain in his dress, venerable in his appearance,

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<sup>7</sup> Milkis, Sidney and Michael Nelson, *The American Presidency: Origins and Development, 1776-2007*, Fifth Edition, Washington DC, CQ Press, 2008, pp122-123.

<sup>8</sup> Wilentz, Sean, *Andrew Jackson*. New York. Times Books. 2005. p. 7

<sup>9</sup> Milkis and Nelson, p123

unaffected and familiar in his manners, he was greeted by them with an enthusiasm which bespoke him the Hero of a popular triumph.”<sup>10</sup> Jackson was theirs not simply as a matter of political or even partisan affiliation, but as an ideal rendered in flesh. Indeed, the crowd was so intent on touching the president himself that he was, a witness reported, “Literally nearly pressed to death and almost suffocated and torn to pieces in their eagerness to shake hands with Old Hickory.”<sup>11</sup>

Both the meting out and absorption of physical violence were critical to Jackson’s embodied persona. An oft-told (and oft-depicted) story of Jackson’s childhood was of his capture and escape from British troops during the Revolution, and the deep saber scar he bore across his skull for refusing to scrape his captor’s boot.<sup>12</sup> As a military leader, he successfully put down the Muscogee Red Stick Rebellion (Creek War) and defeated the British at the Battle of New Orleans at the close of the War of 1812. He also famously lived with pistol-shot in his body throughout his adult life. To supporters, this violence represented the regenerative force of an expanding national frontier, and of an uncorruptable manliness against which they contrasted an effeminate culture of deception in national politics. In the 1828 campaign Sam Houston swore on behalf of Jackson supporters that Adams and Clay would “meet retributive justice...from the hands of an indignant and manly community.”<sup>13</sup>

His nickname “Old Hickory,” given to him as a military leader, signified American indigeneity, toughness, and frontier identity on the campaign trail: hickory being a native species, a very dense hardwood, and common in deciduous forests east of the Mississippi. Supporters erected tall hickory poles in town squares and on street corners throughout the

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<sup>10</sup> Remini, *The Life of Andrew Jackson*, Volume 1, New York, Harper and Row. pp180-181.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid,

<sup>12</sup> Ibid 166

<sup>13</sup> Burstein, Andrew, *The Passions of Andrew Jackson*. New York, Knopf. 2003. p166

republic during the election season, and affixed hickory canes to housetops and steeples of churches to show support. These visual and tactile symbols of Jackson conveyed, without the unnecessary addition of text, the tall, hard, not to say phallic strength of their candidate.<sup>14</sup>

Just as Jackson's biography was meant to convey an affective experience of national identity, so was his very visage a celebrated symbol of the politics of the era. He was an enormously appealing subject for portraitists, and is perhaps the most painted of all U.S. presidents.<sup>15</sup> A painter-in-residence at the White House in the Jackson administration, Ralph E. W. Earl, painted more than thirty portraits of the president himself [Figure 1].<sup>16</sup>

Presidential paintings were reproduced widely in the form of lithographs, engravings, and other media of antebellum reproduction. There was an enormous market in Jackson images during his campaigns and presidency, and his likeness was reproduced on campaign trinkets, cups and saucers, teapots, etc. Jackson's tall frame, white mane, gaunt face, and masculine physical bearing were commented on extensively as a living embodiment of the rough, democratic, anti-patrician, and militarily expansionist spirit of the age. As one Mississippi newspaper effused, "What a wonderful man in his physical conformation is Andrew Jackson!...the iron man of his age - the incarnation of American courage."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Remini 166

<sup>15</sup> Barber, James G. *Andrew Jackson, A Portrait Study*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1991. P. 6

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*

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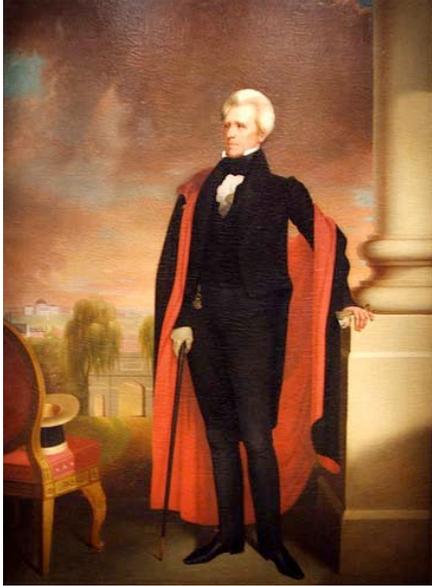


Figure 1: Jackson, Ralph E. W. Earl. 1836-1837

Jackson's opponents contested his claims to national representativeness through recourse to his biography and visage as well. Adversaries in the 1828 election opposed him politically through continual reference to his life history. To his detractors, Jackson was an embodiment of all the horrors wrought on civilized society by democratic rule: crudeness, demagoguery, violence, and sexual immorality. In the 1828 election, supporters of John Quincy Adams circulated what became known as the "coffin handbills," so called because of a stark woodcut row of coffins across the top border on the first of them. That pamphlet portrayed Jackson as a morbid figure executing deserting militiamen, Indians, and others during the Creek War in 1813. [Figure 2]The pamphlet's text is an index of these and other atrocities attributed to Jackson. His representative status as a white man was also challenged by his opponents in 1828. The pro-Adams *National Journal* proclaimed that, "General Jackson's mother was a COMMON PROSTITUTE, brought to this country by the British soldiers! She afterward married a MULATTO MAN, with whom she had several children of which number General JACKSON IS ONE!!!" Jackson, the patriotic captive of British soldiers has in this rendering become a product of their licentious practices.

The republican virtue of his humble frontier origins becomes the vice of poverty and sin. And the enemy of abolitionists becomes himself the product of miscegenation.<sup>18</sup>

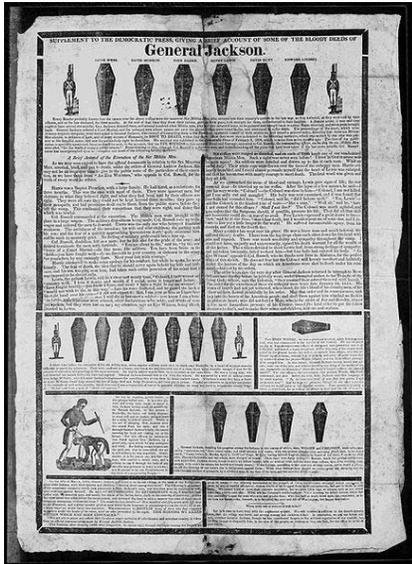


Figure 2: Coffin Handbill, 1828

The most sustained campaign assault on Jackson though centered on his unlawful cohabitation with Rachel Donelson, whom it was discovered had not legally divorced her first husband when she took vows with Jackson. Asked one handbill, "Ought a convicted adulteress and her paramour husband be placed in the highest offices of this free and Christian land?" The issue of sexual impropriety continued into Jackson's first administration, transferred to a scandal over the relationship between his close friend and War Secretary John Eaton and a Peggy O'Neale Timberlake, a woman accused of loose sexual morals and adultery. So acute was the scandal it resulted in Jackson's dismissal of his entire cabinet.

Jackson's visual image also became a battleground during his presidency. His war against the Second bank of the United States, his unprecedented use of the veto, and his rebuke of the Supreme Court over the removal of the Cherokee allowed his claim to be the sole national representative of the people to be interpreted as demagogic, even monarchical. One popular

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<sup>18</sup> Johnson, Paul. *The Birth of the Modern*. New York, Harper Perennial, 1992. p931.

lithograph from 1834, *King Andrew the First, Born to Command*, depicted the president crowned, draped in an ermine-lined cape, and holding a scepter. Underfoot are the Constitution, Internal Improvements, and the US Bank [Figure 3]. A more macabre rendering an engraving by David Claypoole Johnston depicting Jackson as Shakespeare's Richard III. Jackson's face, beneath an army tent for a hat, is composed of twisted corpses, from his epaulettes dangle more dead bodies, his collar is a cannon, and the vest beneath it a prison [Figure 4].



Figure 3: King Andrew the First, 1834. Artist unknown



Figure 4: "Richard III" David Claypoole Johnston

## Abraham Lincoln

Like Jackson, Lincoln represented another major challenge to American national identity. And like Jackson, his presidential campaigns and administration were saturated in myth. The Lincoln stories were meant to convey honesty, humility, and rough dignity of frontier origins. To biography, Lincoln and his supporters quite self-consciously added visual representation. Lincoln was acutely aware of the power of visual imagery to memorialize, glorify, and

crystallize national identity.<sup>19</sup> He made himself available for 120 photographs during the last eighteen years of his life, mindful of the potential power of the new medium. He patiently sat for painters and sculptors, and twice suffered through the making of life masks, which involved the uncomfortable process of having plaster applied to one's face, and removed when dry [Figure 5]. Beyond Lincoln's participation in his own reproduction, lithographs and engravings taken from existing portraits and photographs were reproduced and often altered by lithographers, engravers, and printmakers seeking profit.

Lincoln's face was first circulated in print at the Republican convention in May of 1860. During the final balloting when Lincoln won the decisive tally, supporters showered the convention hall with little engravings of the new nominee. Once nominated, Lincoln was also the likely winner of the presidential election due to the regional split among Democrats. As was custom, Lincoln did no active campaigning in the intervening months, but his image was distributed widely throughout the country. One particularly popular photograph was one taken at the studio of Matthew Brady when Lincoln was in New York City in February 1860 to give his famous Cooper Union address. The "Cooper Union portrait" was the first image most Americans saw of Lincoln. [Figure 6] Indeed, Lincoln later claimed that the speech and the portrait made him President.<sup>20</sup> As historian Harold Holzer has observed. "Selling Lincoln pictorially proved to be politically necessary for the Republicans and commercially rewarding for the printmakers."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This lover of plainspoken humor enjoyed telling a story about an American living in England who, tired of hearing George Washington being derided, hung a crude likeness of the hero in his host's privy. This was, to Lincoln, "very appropriate...for their [sic] is Nothing that Will Make an Englishman Shit So quick as the Sight of Genl Washington." Holzer, Harold. "How the Printmakers Saw Lincoln: Not-so-Honest Portraits of Honest Abe" Winterthur Portfolio, Vol 14, No. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Mitgang, Herbert, The Art of Lincoln. "American Art Journal, Vol 2, No. 1 (Spring 1970) p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> Holzer, p. 148.

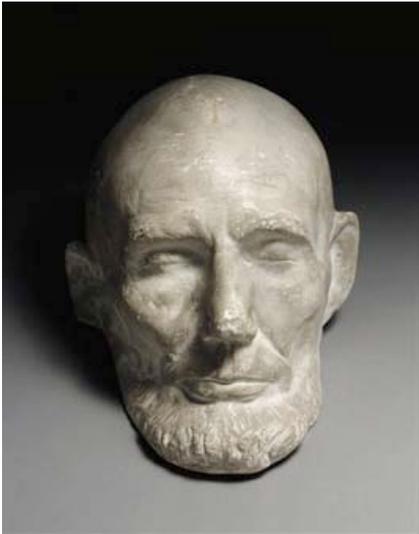


Figure 5: Plaster life mask of Lincoln, Clark Mills. 1865

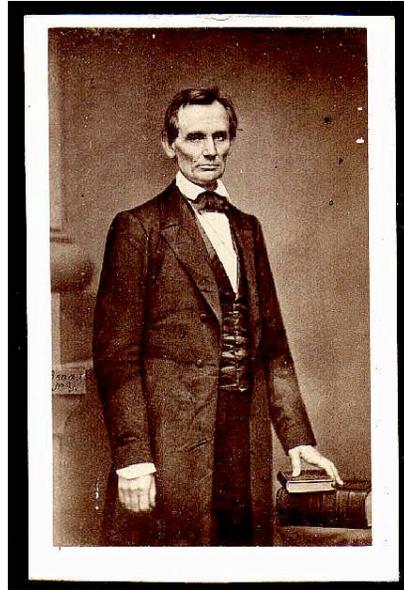


Figure 6: Cooper Union Portrait, Matthew Brady. 1860

Republican party leaders were convinced of the power of Lincoln's image to continue his political popularity during the war. In 1864 House Speaker Schulyer Colfax and Congressman Owen Lovejoy convinced Lincoln to let the artist Francis Bicknell Carpenter live at the White House and make sketches of the President for a painting. The result, after living at the White House among Lincoln's family, cabinet, and aides, was "The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln to His Cabinet." [Figure 7] The painting was placed in the East Room of the White House for two days in July, 1864 and was viewed by thousands. Met with great acclaim by the press, and sold popularly as an engraved print (with an accompanying two-hundred-page book on its meaning and history), the painting depicted not a scene of Lincoln with generals, giving oration, nor posed in solitary form. Rather it portrayed one of the most controversial of Lincoln's acts as president – one which itself recast the purpose of both the war and of the union. The painting encourages the viewer to celebrate the Proclamation by witnessing its subject read aloud his intentions to his cabinet. (The legitimacy of the

Proclamation is further underscored by a book on the table in the painting: *War Powers of the President*, by Solicitor William Whiting of the War Department).



Figure 7: “The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln to His Cabinet.” Francis Bicknell Carpenter. 1864

Yet while Lincoln’s claim to represent American national identity moved increasingly toward a version that empathized with black freedom, he never understood the national body to be both white and black. Lincoln deeply believed that racial differences were fundamental, and that colonization – the excision of blacks from the body politic – was the only solution to make the nation whole. As he told a group of black leaders in 1864, “You and we are different races. We have between us a broader difference than exists between almost any other two races. Whether it is right or wrong I need not discuss, but this physical difference is a great disadvantage to us both, as I think your race suffer very greatly, many of them by living among

us, while ours suffer from your presence.”<sup>22</sup> Later that year he claimed that he had met many blacks who favored emigration, and in a message to Congress in December he asked that it fund a gunboat to protect the free blacks of Liberia.<sup>23</sup> Gary Wills has argued that Lincoln re-defined American national identity through his elevation of the Declaration of Independence over the Constitution as the guiding national document, authorizing black emancipation as the fulfillment of its promise.<sup>24</sup> This was a radical shift, and one that was secured through immense loss of life. However, Lincoln did not understand this national identity to be racially integrated.<sup>25</sup> Lincoln understood the body politic, like his body mortal, to be fundamentally white.

Lincoln’s opponents also used his image in attempts to discredit him, particularly through political cartoons. His greatest pictorial antagonist was Sir John Tenniel, staff cartoonist for the British *Punch* magazine, most famous for his lithographs for Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. These depictions, reproduced in numerous southern newspapers, often placed Lincoln with black characters as a demonic presence. [Figure 8] Tenniel’s most famous lithograph, though, showed Lincoln as a “Federal Phoenix,” a creature with Lincoln’s face, a grotesquely long neck, and wings, rising above burning logs that bear the words, “US Constitution,” “States’ Rights,” “Habeas Corpus,” and “Credit.” [Figure 9] Here the sacred nation has been torched, and out of its ashes rises a federal dictatorship. (More here)

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<sup>22</sup> James Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics* (Norton, 2007), and John Stauffer, *Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln* (Twelve, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> *Lincoln Speeches and Writings*, edited by Don E. Fehrenbacher (Library of America, 1989), Vol. 2, p. 641.

<sup>24</sup> Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America*. New York, Simon and Schuster, 2006

<sup>25</sup> Frederick Douglass said about Lincoln in an oration in his honor at the dedication of the Freedman’s Monument to Lincoln in 1876, “He was preëminently the white man’s President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men.... He came into the Presidential chair upon one principle alone, namely, opposition to the extension of slavery. His arguments in furtherance of this policy had their motive and mainspring in his patriotic devotion to the interests of his own race.” Frederick Douglass, “Oration at the Dedication of the Freedmen’s Monument,” in *Autobiographies*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. New York, Library of America, 1994, pp. 921–922.



Figure 8: "Lincoln's Last Card" John Tenniel, 1862



Figure 9: "Federal Phoenix" John Tenniel, 1864

## Franklin Delano Roosevelt

The conventional story told of FDR's polio and resulting paraplegic state is that it was a well-kept secret by reporters, photographers, and most of all the Roosevelt administration itself. Yet while it is true that the press colluded with the White House to mask the extent of FDR's polio, as Anne Norton has pointed out his disability was in fact widely known to the public. Indeed, as in the case of the other presidents discussed here, his body was mobilized politically by supporters and opponents alike, each seeing in his condition their own interpretation of both Roosevelt as president, and of the emergent Democratic order. For many of FDR's supporters, his polio was not weakness or emasculation, but rather a manly victory over the enormous obstacles of pain and immobility. His famous long, slow walk up to the stage at the 1924 Democratic convention to give the "happy warrior" nominating speech for Al Smith, and the triumphant smile he gave delegates upon reaching the podium, was met with wild ovation,

lasting over an hour.<sup>26</sup> It was held to be the climax of the event. Roosevelt provoked a similar response when he gave another nominating speech for Smith at the Democratic Convention four years later. As Will Durant described him effusively in *The New York World* as, . . . A figure tall and proud even in suffering; a face of classic profile; pale with years of struggle against paralysis . . . A man softened and cleansed and illuminated with pain . . . This is a civilized man.”<sup>27</sup> After this speech he received a letter from a Jeremiah Tingle of Brooklyn who wrote that “I have always admired you, though not your politics.” Yet “when I listened to your scholarly measured words at Madison Square Garden, your character took on a new glory, the glory that can only come through the soul[']s conquest of pain and mental suffering, and I said, His very crutches have helped him to the stature of the gods.”<sup>28</sup>

Pain’s ability to illuminate and civilize became a more pronounced facet of FDR’s persona after the onset of the Depression. As his adviser Frances Perkins said about his disability, “It made it possible for the common people to trust him and understand what it is to be handicapped by poverty and ignorance, as well as by physical misfortunes.”<sup>29</sup> A flyer prepared by the Roosevelt campaign for women voters in 1932 stated that “Roosevelt has known pain and hardship. He has fought a courageous and winning battle to health. He can understand the man and woman who is today struggling against terrific odds and he can be trusted to put heart as well as mind into the battle.”<sup>30</sup> This identification with vulnerability associated his body not just with the bodies of those laid low by the Depression, but with the nation itself, a victim of national catastrophe.

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<sup>26</sup> Gallagher, Hugh Gregory. *FDR’s Splendid Deception*. St. Petersburg, Vandamere Press, 1999. Pp 61-62.

<sup>27</sup> Gallagher, p. 67

<sup>28</sup> Houck, Davis W. and Amos Kiewe. *FDR’s Body Politics: The Rhetoric of Disability*. College Station, Texas A&M Press, 2003. p32.

<sup>29</sup> Gallagher, p. 74

<sup>30</sup> Houke and Kiewe, p. 95

FDR's polio did not simply make him an identificatory figure of misfortune, however. His disability also made him a figure of self-overcoming. Indeed, he depicted himself not just as someone who prevailed over his own ailment, but as someone who could cure that national body as well. He liked to refer to himself as Dr. Roosevelt in reference to his presidency, or Dr. New Deal, and later, Dr. Win-the-War. Such metaphors associatively linked his disability with his own recovery and that of the nation. Meanwhile, he depicted his opponents as "sickly."<sup>31</sup>

Just as FDR's disabled body was a source of identification and inspiration, it was also a source of source of contempt, fear, and abjection for opponents who claimed that FDR was either physically or mentally incompetent to be president. FDR's Republican opponents in the 1932 campaign rarely raised the issue directly, but it was a continual issue, and one that subject to constant rumors. Early on, when Newton Baker was a potential contender for the Democratic nomination, the Hoover White House assumed he would be the more formidable candidate. Presidential press secretary Tedd Joslin wrote in his diary that he would "prefer Roosevelt to almost any other leading Democrat for the for the President's opponent" since "the people would come to understand that he has not the ability nor the mentality to be President. As an unfortunate fact, too, he is a paralytic, depriving him of the strength to properly handle the duties of the President."<sup>32</sup> The Republicans did not make FDR's disability an open issue, presumably because they believed that would look untoward, and would perhaps be better pursued as an unstated issue. However, rumors persistently circulated about the extent and nature of FDR's incapacity. This "whispering campaign," as FDR's people called it, generated stories that the

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<sup>31</sup> Houke and Kiewe

<sup>32</sup> Ritchie, Donald. *Electing FDR: The New Deal Campaign of 1932*. Lawrence, University of Kansas Press. P. 92.

polio had wasted both his body and mind, or was actually syphilis, a stroke, cancer, or mental illness.<sup>33</sup>

FDR responded to fears that he was too ill to govern by putting his body before voters constantly in 1932. But Roosevelt's strategies of concealment and emphasis on robustness do not contradict his representation as a physically disabled subject. The two were indeed complements. His continual struggle with and triumph over blows delivered by fate allowed supporters to identify with him on the basis of both shared pain and hope, two key ideological elements of the modern liberal project the New Deal represented. Once in a question and answer period following a lecture in Akron, Ohio, Eleanor Roosevelt was asked, "Do you think your husband's illness has affected your husband's mentality?" She answered, "I am glad that question was asked. The answer is Yes. Anyone who has gone through great suffering is bound to have a greater sympathy and understanding of the problems of mankind." The audience reportedly responded with a standing ovation.<sup>34</sup>

## **Barack Obama**

Perhaps more directly than any past president, Obama has made his biography, and even biology, central to his claim of presidential authority. This self-presentation is fraught with danger. In an historically white supremacist nation, the idea of black political leadership, let alone full black civic membership, has run counter to dominant forms of American national identity. Yet at the same time, promises of a colorblind society in the post-civil rights era fuel visions of national identity wherein past racial sins are cleansed. Indeed, the civil rights movement in its most liberal articulations have become settled elements of national self-

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<sup>33</sup> Ritchie, p. 126, Gallagher, p. 95

<sup>34</sup> Gallagher, p. 95

understanding. The mobilization of biography has marked Obama's career from the beginning. His initial foray into politics was accompanied by the publication of his memoir, *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. Originally intended by Obama to be written as a meditation on American race relations, the book instead became an account of his own childhood in Hawaii and Indonesia, and his upbringing by a white mother and grandparents. The book was also, as he puts it in the introduction, "a boy's search for his father, and through that a search for a workable meaning for his life as a black American." The formative elements of his black identity stemmed from his experience in community organizing in Chicago, and his journey to Kenya to meet and come to know members of his family there. By exhibiting and explaining his choice to identify as a black American – a journey to selfhood that passes through his father's Kenyan identity – Obama's political identity is anchored in racial embodiment.

*Dreams* was a compelling work that upon publication drew favorable reviews in the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe* and other major publications. It is also a very literary work, liberally using composite characters, events out of chronological order, and other writerly devices. "The book is so literary," said literature professor Arnold Rampersad told the *New York Times*, "It is so full of clever tricks — inventions for literary effect — that I was taken aback, even astonished."<sup>35</sup> Although Obama wrote *Dreams* prior to his entrance into politics, it became a major bestseller during the 2008 election. And the book evoked strong identification with the candidate. Obama himself said that he would not be surprised if some people had gotten involved in his campaign "because they feel they know me through my books."<sup>36</sup>

Nearly a decade after the publication of *Dreams*, Obama was invited to speak at the 2004 Democratic Convention while running for the US Senate. In that speech, which launched his

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<sup>35</sup> Scott, Janny. "The Long Run: The Story of Obama, Written By Obama," *New York Times*, March 18, 2008

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*

national political career, biography, race, and ancestry again were front and center. Obama began his Democratic Party Convention speech by marking his “unlikely” presence on the stage due to Kenyan-Kansan parentage, and acknowledged his gratitude for the diversity of his heritage. But this story was not simply meant to mark difference and unlikelihood, this difference and unlikelihood was the authorizing ground to claim national reconciliation. Entering from the margins as “a skinny kid with a funny name” Obama’s message was that “there is no liberal America and a conservative America -- there is the United States of America. There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America -- there’s the United States of America.” Black and from a blue state (a set of subject positions he self-consciously claims in *Dreams*) Obama now tells us that color, both phenotypical and electoral, unnecessarily divides us.

Obama continued to revalue the relationship of his race to politics in his famous race speech delivered on March 18, 2008, in which he responded to the controversial sermons of his then pastor Jeremiah Wright Jr. Obama titled the speech “A More Perfect Union” and delivered it in Philadelphia, and in so doing made the Constitution the symbol of the national unity he sought to achieve. In it, Obama mapped his genetic heritage onto the nation to resolve in himself the country’s tensions between black demands for equality and white resentment toward those demands. Obama narrated his origins both in Kenya and Kansas, as he had done many times before. This time however, he portrayed the white grandmother who raised him as having racial attitudes that at times made him “cringe.” This confession allowed him to claim the legacy of resentful whites who presumably opposed affirmative action and antidiscrimination law and policy over the last three decades. Embracing both Wright and his white grandparents, Obama articulated a liberal multiculturalism to redefine American self-identity.

Shortly after the Philadelphia speech Obama once again raised his lineage and his international experiences, this time connecting them to his grandparent's participation in American war efforts to affirm his deep patriotic commitments. He said,

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas.<sup>37</sup>

Here Obama further shaped the meaning of his heritage and its relationship to American national identity by attaching it to the patriotism of war and war production.

War -- and internationalism more generally -- are themes through which Obama has used his own experiences to articulate a vision of national identity. Indeed, Obama narrated his years spent in Indonesia as a child to realign key features of the American political landscape. In a speech given in honor of Independence Day in 2008, Obama recontextualized the Declaration of Independence itself when he recalled how love of country was imparted to him as a child in Indonesia, where his mother read the founding document aloud. "I remember her explaining how this declaration applied to every American, black and white and brown alike; how those words, and words of the United States Constitution, protected us from the injustices that we witnessed other people suffering during those years abroad." The internationalization of the Declaration reinscribes the superiority of American ideals and practices abroad by suggesting that the Declaration and the Constitution shielded him from the political and economic violations suffered by the unfortunates around him. This is a story that resonates in an American culture that has long embraced the immigrant narrative that affirms the redemptive power of American ideals in contrast to the wretchedness of life beyond its shores.

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<sup>37</sup> Obama, "A More Perfect Union," March 18, 2008

Obama has claimed multinational lineage as a redemptive force for America's image, one that can heal the Bush era splits between the US and the rest of the world. Obama's self presentation when addressing the crowd of 200,000 at the Tiergarten in Berlin on July 24, 2008 provides an emblematic example. Obama began the Berlin speech by claiming to speak not as a candidate but as "a proud citizen of the United States, and a fellow citizen of the world," before proceeding to mark the distinctiveness of both his color and his lineage. He said, "I know that I don't look like the Americans who've previously spoken in this great city." He went on to describe his mixed lineage, here tying his destiny and that of the German people to a Cold War narrative about the freedom that only the West could offer.<sup>38</sup> Foregrounding his phenotype and his Kenyan lineage authorizes Obama's claim to be a "citizen of the world," a positioning meant to repudiate Bush's foreign policy at a deeply symbolic level. Obama drew on race to distinguish himself from the arrogance of American power. But in Myrdalian fashion, he depicts the gap between ideals and reality as a virtue of American striving that can act as a universal guide. "What has always united us – what has always driven our people; what drew my father to America's shores" he says, "is a set of ideals that speak to aspirations shared by all people: that we can live free from fear and free from want; that we can speak our minds and assemble with whomever we choose and worship as we please."

Indeed, the fact of his race symbolically confirms his exceptionalist rhetoric. As *The Dallas Morning News* editorialized, "By speaking of America's virtues in terms of universal human aspirations, and making his own personal narrative an emblem of our nation at its best, Mr. Obama probably reminded jaded Europeans why they love our country, or ought to."<sup>39</sup> Upon his return, Obama himself was reported by an aide to have said to a group of Democratic

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<sup>38</sup> Obama, "The World That Stands as One," Berlin, July 24, 2008.

<sup>39</sup> Editorial, *Dallas Morning News* "Obama strikes right notes in Berlin" Friday, July 25, 2008

House leaders "It has become increasingly clear in my travel, the campaign -- that the crowds, the enthusiasm, 200,000 people in Berlin, is not about me at all. It's about America. I have just become a symbol."<sup>40</sup> It is precisely this way that identity works to recon political identifications as potential supporters see their own political aspirations assembled and embodied by the candidate.

From quite early in Obama's campaign, commentators seized on his skin color, Muslim name and Kenyan parentage as something that give the United States foreign policy advantages. Significantly, this appeal crossed ideological lines. The conservative pundit Andrew Sullivan, writing in the *Atlantic*, saw Obama's skin color as a boon for the advancement of American geopolitical interests:

Consider this hypothetical. It's November 2008. A young Pakistani Muslim is watching television and sees that this man—Barack Hussein Obama—is the new face of America. In one simple image, America's soft power has been ratcheted up not a notch, but a logarithm. A brown-skinned man whose father was an African, who grew up in Indonesia and Hawaii, who attended a majority-Muslim school as a boy, is now the alleged enemy. If you wanted the crudest but most effective weapon against the demonization of America that fuels Islamist ideology, Obama's face gets close. It proves them wrong about what America is in ways no words can.<sup>41</sup>

For Sullivan, the facts of Obama's phenotype, name, and personal history become affective tools in a global war of position.

Nevertheless, Obama is a symbol whose interpretive possibilities he himself seeks to constrain. The campaign was quite careful, for instance, to limit his association with American Muslims. When Keith Ellison, a Muslim House member from Minnesota offered to speak for Obama at a rally at a mosque in Cedar Rapids, Michigan, an Obama aide called him and asked him to cancel the trip because it might be controversial to do so. "I will never forget the quote,"

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<sup>40</sup> Weisman, *Washington Post*

<sup>41</sup> Sullivan, 2007

Mr. Ellison recalled. “He said, ‘We have a very tightly wrapped message’”<sup>42</sup> While Obama visited numerous churches and synagogues throughout his campaign, he visited no mosques. And in one publicized incident, two Muslim women in head scarves were asked not to stand behind Obama behind Obama at a rally in Detroit. This kind of image management was driven by the ways in which Obama is racially demonized by his opponents but is at odds with the inclusive, participatory movement discourse that he employs.<sup>43</sup>

Obama’s wariness to embrace American Muslims points to a vulnerability that many of Obama’s opponents have continually sought to exploit. Even prior to the 2008 election, competitors in his own party sought to use his biography and phenotype to discredit him. In an internal memo from March 2007, Hillary Clinton's chief campaign strategist Mark Penn wrote about Obama that “all of these articles about his boyhood in Indonesia and his life in Hawaii are geared toward showing his background is diverse, multicultural and putting that in a new light. Save it for 2050. It also exposes a very strong weakness for him -- his roots to basic American values and culture are at best limited. I cannot imagine America electing a president during a time of war who is not at his center fundamentally American in his thinking and in his values.”<sup>44</sup> For Penn, the contrast between multiculturalism and diversity on the one hand and “basic American values” on the other is so obvious it requires no explanation. This racialization of the candidate is driven home by the sentence “Save it for 2050,” a reference to an population projection by the US Census that became newsworthy for its prediction that by mid-century whites would no longer be in the American majority. Penn’s corresponding advice to Clinton in the memo is that “Every speech you give should contain the line that you were born in the

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<sup>42</sup> Elliot, Andrea. “Muslim Voters Detect a Snub from Obama” New York Times, June 24, 2008

<sup>43</sup><http://www.census.gov/population/www/projections/usinterimproj/>

<sup>44</sup> Mark Penn, “Weekly Strategic Review on Hillary Clinton for President Campaign, March 19, 2007,” <http://www.theatlantic.com/a/green-penn-3-19-07.mhtml>

middle of America into the middle class at the middle of the last century. And talk about ... the deeply American values you grew up with, learned as a child, and that drive you today.”<sup>45</sup> This middleness – and its link to “deeply American values” are meant to place Obama on the geographic, economic, and temporal margins and undercut his claims to representativeness.

Once elected, the first sustained popular opposition Obama faced as president was not directly to his first major actions - the bailout of major banks, or his stimulus package. Rather, it was to his very legal claim to the office. Assertions that Obama had fabricated a US birth certificate had circulated during the election season, and the movement gained intensity in the first months of his administration. Spokespeople for what came to be called the “birther” movement argued that Obama held the office of the presidency illegally because of the Constitutional requirement that presidents are born on US soil. This movement began gaining popular credibility through the tacit and sometimes active consent of major media and political pundits such as CNN’s Lou Dobbs, television and radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh, and GOP figure Liz Cheney.

In a nation self-consciously grounded in political ideals and in immigrant celebration, birthright might appear to be weak discursive ground to oppose a president. Birth on US soil guarantees but is not a requirement for US citizenship, and the birth prerequisite for public office applies only to the president. Key to birthright claims is the credibility of their interpretation. Beyond the fact of his birth in the state of Hawaii, Obama has claimed cultural birthright through maternal forebears in the American heartland, political birthright through national creedal commitments to equality and pluralism. His birther opponents seek to nullify his claims by locating him outside the boundaries of the nation not ideologically, but rather bodily. Liberal commentators such as Rick Perlstein have explained the birther phenomenon as merely the latest

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

iteration of an irrational undercurrent of American politics.<sup>46</sup> This argument about irrationality in the tradition of what historian Richard Hofstadter called “the paranoid style hardly does justice to the logic at work here. Racial nationalism has always competed (or interacted with) with civic nationalism in the United States. However, such open attacks are tricky in an increasingly multicultural nation. Racial claims about Obama's American authenticity cannot stand on their own because they too obviously violate the self-understanding of most Americans as egalitarian and colorblind. On the other hand, a Constitutional challenge to legitimacy couldn't get anywhere without underlying racial appeals. Try to imagine, for instance, an American president of Irish, Italian, or Australian parentage being challenged on birthright grounds.

Many of Obama's opponents who do not identify with the birther movement or its claims nevertheless continually seek to discredit Obama's claims to representativeness on the basis of the same internationalism that Andrew Sullivan champions. One was the rash of conservative responses to Obama's receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize. The *Weekly Standard's* William Kristol put it most succinctly in stating that granting the award to Obama showed that the Nobel committee was “anti-American.”<sup>47</sup> For Rush Limbaugh, an award for Obama was not merely anti-American but an act of national castration. As he put it in an email to Politico.com, "And with this 'award' the elites of the world are urging Obama, THE MAN OF PEACE [upper-case letters his], to not do the surge in Afghanistan, not take action against Iran and its nuclear program and to basically continue his intentions to emasculate the United States." Limbaugh continued: "They love a weakened, neutered U.S. and this is their way of promoting that

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<sup>46</sup> Perlstein, Rick. “Birthers, Health Care Hecklers and the Rise of Right-Wing Rage” *Washington Post*. August 16, 2009.

<sup>47</sup> “Pundits Batter Nobel Committee for Awarding Obama Peace Prize” FOXNews.com, Sunday, October 11, 2009

concept.”<sup>48</sup> International acclaim for this US president is an attack on the masculinity of the national body, destroying its desires for military action.

The other major sight of bodily contest over Obama was through his visual image. The visual rendering of Obama became important components of his presidential campaign, and of attempts to oppose both the president and his policies. Often, his image has stood in for argument on both sides, demonstrating the rhetorical power his image could have for political contest. This specular version of the king’s two bodies has antecedents in the visual identifications and repudiations of earlier presidents. It is also rooted historically in the commodification of the black male body. The black body, commodified materially in slavery, was also commercialized culturally throughout US history. Blackface minstrelsy was the first form of mass entertainment; and tens of thousands thronged to minstrel stage shows in the nineteenth century. Blackface was a central part of the first major motion picture, *Birth of a Nation*, and the first “talking picture,” *The Jazz Singer*. The black image as a site of culture and commerce has continued in the form of the celebration and objectification of the black body in music and in sports.<sup>49</sup> These two forms of corporeality, racial and presidential, come together in complex ways in the image of Barack Obama.

Generally, the official campaign posters, stickers and yard signs of presidential candidates features the candidate’s name accompanied by an official logo. The Obama campaign, however, employed a highly stylized lithograph of the candidate’s face in 2008, with a caption that merely stated “Hope.” [Figure 9] The image, created by street artist Shepard Fairey, featured Obama’s face in red, beige and blue. Fairey, who first began circulating the image unofficially in early 2008 said that he hoped the image would go viral, which indeed it

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<sup>48</sup> Martin, Jonathan, “Limbaugh: 'Greater embarrassment' than losing Olympics,” Politico, 10/10/09

<sup>49</sup> See Lott, Roediger, Rogin

did. The image was produced and reproduced sans copyright on shirts, posters, flyers, bumper stickers, and yard signs. It was finally picked up and made official by the Obama campaign in the spring of 2008.



Figure 9: "Hope" Shepard Fairey, 2008

The Hope image, which became ubiquitous in the campaign achieved its final iconic certification through its acquisition by the National Portrait Gallery in January 2009. Speaking at the unveiling ceremony, Fairey stated that he made "this illustration with our children's future in mind...I did it for my kids." He went on to say that "mainstream politics are something I had lost faith in...Obama restored my hope."<sup>50</sup> Fairey's words express an innocent belief in the redemptive power of the candidate and as such read like ironic commentary on his oeuvre. Much of Fairey's work, including the Hope lithograph, reworks the techniques of early 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary propagandists like Rodchenko and the Stenberg brothers, as well as American New Deal social realist art. As Fairey himself describes the Hope image, "He is gazing off into the future, saying, 'I can guide you.'"<sup>51</sup> But the use of authoritarian agitprop was also meant to be playful. Indeed, it is the irony or edge that was meant to secure its authenticity

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<sup>50</sup> Venart, [http://dcist.com/2009/01/faireys\\_obama\\_hope\\_portrait\\_unveile.php](http://dcist.com/2009/01/faireys_obama_hope_portrait_unveile.php)

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2008/05/16/ST2008051602005.html>

for voters who felt cynical about electoral politics in general or perhaps the candidate in particular. "I wanted the poster to be recognizable as my work, and to be appealing to a younger, apathetic audience, yet tame enough not to be seen as radical or offensive to the more mainstream political participants," Fairey explained. Yet the potent, iconic imagery is still mined for maximum affect in a way that underscores the romantic, uncritical identification between viewer and candidate. "You want to create the most flattering shapes. Strong in the face of adversity, Fairey explains. "How the light falls beautifully. It's idealized." On the PBS "Charlie Rose Show," Fairey said that he wanted Obama to be framed in red and blue to demonstrate the ways that he has transcended the differences between red and blue culture in America. But that is not the only place that color is deployed. His face appears in off-white, displacing racial identity as he embodies national colors.

The lines blurred between Obama's body physical and his body politic in January 2009 when Paste Magazine set up a website called Obamicon.me. The site was set up to impose the Hope colors and graphic styles onto digital images. Visitors were invited to remake themselves in the image of Obama, and could purchase t-shirts, mugs, stamps, mousepads and other paraphernalia depicting their Obamacon creations. [Figure 10] Within two weeks half a million "Obamacons" had been created, and 32,000 people employed an Obamicon application for the social network site Facebook.<sup>52</sup> This digital conflation of the king's two bodies allowed supporters the pleasures of specularly as they saw themselves reflected in an idealized picture of their national leader, not unlike the frontispiece of Hobbes' *Leviathan*. [Figure 11] For white supporters, this may have had the added transgressive enjoyment of racial cross-dressing without the guilt of minstrelsy.

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<sup>52</sup> <http://www.portfolio.com/views/blogs/daily-brief/2009/01/28/obamicon-me>



Figure 10: “Obamicon me” 2009



Figure 11: Frontispiece for Hobbes' *Leviathan* 1651

But just as Obama’s face has been a source of inspiration, identification, and symbolism for supporters, so has it become a way to project opposition to the president himself and the imperatives he seeks to pursue. During the first few months of 2009 an image began circulating of the Joker, as played by Heath ledger in the Batman film “The Dark Night,” digitally imposed onto a photograph of Obama’s face. The image, created by an undergraduate student at the University of Chicago with apparently benign intentions, took on a viral life much as the Fairey image had for Obama supporters. By summer, tens of thousands of reproductions of the image with the caption “Socialism” were wheat-pasted all over the Los Angeles area. As the Tea Party opposition movement to health care reform developed over the summer of 2009, the Obama/Joker socialism poster was omnipresent. [Figure 10]

Pundits have debated whether the arresting image of Obama in white-face with a broad red gash of a mouth is racist. Those who claim that it is not say that there is nothing identifiably racial in the otherwise demonic image, and that the message, “Socialism” is a clear political statement unconnected to race. Those who assert that the image is racist, however, have rightly pointed to the minstrelsy connotations of his painted face and the symbolism of the Joker as a

figure of uncontrolled urban violence and nihilism. There are, I think, two other elements that have gone unmentioned about the relationship of race to the poster.

First, the image points not merely to race within the context of American racialization, but to Obama's perceived foreignness and the anxiety it produces. The Joker image is not classic blackface. It does, however, suggest threatening elements of perceived African primitivism. In whiteface, Obama's image suggests West African or Caribbean voodoo. Indeed, there are far more crude images of Obama as "witch doctor" circulating, but this image has more power by virtue of both its subtlety and sense of menace. Perhaps the most well-known media portrayal of Haitian voodoo was in the James Bond film "Live and Let Die." That film featured a supernatural villain based on the voodoo loa of the dead, Baron Samedi. [Figure 11] The character in the film, played by Geoffrey Holder, was an immortal figure of menace. Like the Joker, Baron Samedi represents the forces of chaos and savagery.

Second, the "Socialism" caption points not away from race but towards it. The modern conservative movement in the United States from the late 1940s onward linked the advance of black civil rights with the threat of a totalitarian state, and of socialism specifically. The modern Right – particularly in its populist iterations – continually depicted an unholy alliance of liberal state elites above and criminal, parasitic blacks below against a virtuous middle of hardworking white Americans. As a form of political address, there is nothing muddled about the "Socialism" poster. Image and text refer to each other in an already well-developed equivalential chain.



## **socialism**

Figure 12: Obama/Joker, 2009



Figure 13: Geoffrey Holder as Baron Samedi, *Live and Let Die*, 1974

Media figures such as Rush Limbaugh have made the link explicit through assertions that Obama seeks higher taxation as a form of reparations for African Americans, while Fox News television and radio host Glenn Beck explains Obama's domestic policy as a result of a "deep-seated hatred for white people." Tea Party protest leader Mark Williams has gone further, tying Obama's international past and racial present to his political agenda, calling the president "an Indonesian Muslim turned welfare thug." Each of these political claims are projected onto Obama's body – or more specifically they are meant to redefine the body politic through rhetorical attacks on Obama's body physical.

This summer the Drudge Report discovered Obama's image was being used as a target in a carnival game in Allentown, PA. Patrons threw darts at a cut-out of the president holding a "health-care bill." Upon receiving complaints, the carnival's owner removed the Obama figure, claiming he meant nothing political by the game called "Alien Leader." The resulting publicity however prompted a filmmaker in New Jersey to post footage on YouTube of a similar game in Seaside Heights. In this game run by Lucky Leo's arcade, called "Walkin' Charley," a carved

wooden figure, a classic minstrel grotesque, was situated among mannequins of Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, unnamed Red Sox and Mets baseball players, the character Stewie from the animated series *The Family Guy*,” and the Burger King [Figure 14].

With few exceptions, commentators both liberal and conservative have been silent on the issue. However, debate has raged about the game in the form of hundreds of anonymously posted online comments on YouTube (where it was viewed over sixty thousand times in the first week of its posting), the *New Jersey Star-Ledger*, and other news websites that have posted stories on the effigy. Some of those offended by the game argue that it is disrespectful to depict and target the president in such a way. More point to the racial violence evoked by hurling baseballs at a black effigy, particularly one that bears such close resemblance to a blackface character or a lawn jockey. Those opposed to the removal of the Obama figure claim that if images of Bush were used at Seaside Heights games there would be no outcry, and more generally that patrons have the right to hurl balls at whomever they choose. Some express the populist sentiment that it is simply pleasurable to do symbolic violence to the powerful. “He is just a guy with power over us.” posted one commenter to the *New Jersey Real-time News*. “It’s all fun to bring him down to size. Natural.” The possible meanings of Obama’s presence in the Walkin’ Charley game abound. Is it because he is a disliked political figure just as Bush was for many? Does he evoke the fantasies of racial violence that have deep roots in American political culture? Or is he simply a comic popular culture icon like a fast-food mascot or cartoon television figure to be lampooned? The foregoing analysis in this paper suggests that these interpretations are all correct, and yet cannot be understood apart from each other.

In the Suzan-Lori Parks 2001 play *Top Dog/Underdog*, a black character named Lincoln has abandoned a successful although dangerous life as a three-card monte hustler to take a job at

an arcade on Coney Island playing Abraham Lincoln. As Lincoln describes it to his younger brother, Booth, “This is sit down, you know, easy work. I just gotta sit there all day. Folks come in and kill phony Honest Abe with a phony pistol.”<sup>53</sup> [Figure 15] Parks’ tragicomic imagining of arcade patrons paying to shoot a black man dressed as Lincoln in whiteface connects the affective power of presidential bodies to the history of racial violence, as well as the ritualized pleasure taken in symbolic aggression against authority.<sup>54</sup> When Lincoln tells Booth that he is afraid of losing his job, Booth tells him, “Then you gotta jazz up yr act...Maybe, when they shoot you, you know, leap up flail yr arms then fall down and wiggle around and shit so they gotta shoot you more than once. Blam Blam Blam! Blam!”<sup>55</sup> Like shooting a Lincoln impersonator, patrons at Lucky Leo’s arcade pay to enjoy an assault on the president and reenact the violence of the nation’s past in doing so.



Figure 14: “Walkin’ Charley” Game, Seaside Heights, NJ



Figure 15: Mos Def and Jeffrey Wright in *Top Dog/Underdog*. Royal Court Theatre, 2003

After complaints about the Walkin’ Charley game, the arcade proprietors placed a bag over Obama’s head for a few days, thus creating an even more macabre figure. It was finally

<sup>53</sup> Parks, Suzan-Lori, *Top Dog/Under Dog*. New York: Theater Communications Group, 2002. P. 31

<sup>54</sup> As Parks’ said in an interview, “It’s like Lincoln created an opening with that hole in his head. We’ve all passed through it into now, you know, like the eye of a needle. Everything that happens, from 1865 to today, has to pass through that wound.” Joshua Wolf Schenk, “Theater, Beyond a Black-and-White Lincoln.” *New York Times*, Arts and Leisure, April 7, 2002.

<sup>55</sup> Parks, p. 33

removed and is to be replaced with figures of George W. Bush and Hillary Clinton. Replacing Obama with Bush and Clinton places the arcade game in a long history of making effigies of political figures, and directs our attention to the corporeal symbolism of presidents and presidential candidates more generally. Nevertheless the incident strongly suggests both the continued cultural force of blackface in the simulated Obama, and the fact that death threats to the real Obama exceed his predecessor by over 400 percent.<sup>56</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The racial meanings of Obama's candidacy and presidency have been taken up and analyzed by numerous scholars.<sup>57</sup> But these meanings cannot be fully understood without recourse to understandings of the ways in which past presidents have also embodied political meaning. Contests over Obama's body offers insights in the other direction as well, new analytic lenses through which to understand the ways in which the bodies of past presidents became sites of political contest. Examination of embodiment provides analytic tools to understand both presidential authority *and* constraint that are unavailable through traditional analyses of the institution. As recent work on the role of affect in politics demonstrates, strong commitment to political ideals and political agendas requires not simply settled political principles, or even specific discursive frameworks through which to articulate interests.<sup>58</sup> It also requires deep

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<sup>56</sup> Hamden, Tony, "Barack Obama faces 30 death threats a day, stretching US Secret Service" Telegraph.co.uk (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/barackobama/5967942/Barack-Obama-faces-30-death-threats-a-day-stretching-US-Secret-Service.html>) accessed august 18, 2010

<sup>57</sup> See in particular the articles in the *DuBois Review*, Vol. 6, Issue 1, Spring 2009

<sup>58</sup> Berlant, Laura. "Epistemology of State Emotion," in *Dissent in Dangerous Times*; Cvetkovitch, Ann. "Public Feelings" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106:3, Summer 2007; Sedgwick Eve. "Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106:3, Summer 2007

emotional connections. An important way this is achieved is through processes of identification and embodiment.<sup>59</sup>

Presidents, as I have argued, provide unique sites of political identification in the American context, because it is through them that national identity is interpreted. In them supporters experience the politics in which they believe, and opponents experience the abjection of the politics they loathe. This dynamic shapes the very ground of political debate across issues that are identified with incumbents at any given moment. At moments of broad political transformation, these embodied experiences of the presidency become particularly acute as political actors seek either to secure identification or engender opposition through the bodies of incumbents.

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<sup>59</sup> See Berger, H., Jr. "Bodies and Texts." *Representations* 17:144-166. 1987.; Foucault, Michel. *The history of sexuality*. 3 vols. New York: Vintage. 1980-1988; Fuss, Diana. *Identification Papers: Readings on Psychoanalysis, Sexuality, and Culture*. New York, Routledge, 1995; Stravakakis, *Lacan and the Political*;