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Let's Talk About Race - or Maybe Not Coverage of Obama and Ethnicity Says More About Media By Janine Jackson

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There were early indications that corporate media coverage of Barack Obama's candidacy would be squirm-inducing, putting on display the elite (mainly white) press corps' murky ideas about race much more than any straightforward reckoning of black Americans' situation or what an Obama presidency might mean for their concerns.

Journalists were sometimes embarrassingly frank about how they interpreted Obama's blackness and what they hoped his success might mean. "No history of Jim Crow, no history of anger, no history of slavery," declared NBC's Chris Matthews (1/21/07). "All the bad stuff in our history ain't there with this guy." "For many white Americans, it's a twofer," opined the New Republic (2/5/07). "Elect Obama, and you not only dethrone George W. Bush, you dethrone [Al] Sharpton, too." ([See Extra!, 3-4/07.](#))

Looking to find parallels for the "stuff" they did like, journalists turned to fiction, as when Jonathan Alter (Newsweek, 10/27/08) alleged that voters "decided they liked Obama when he reminded them more of Will Smith than Jesse Jackson," or when CNN (6/22/08) told viewers that Michelle Obama "wants to appear to be Claire Huxtable and not Angela Davis."

The fondest hope seemed to be that an Obama victory (if not his strong candidacy alone) would absolve us of any need to talk about racism any more. Newsweek's Howard Fineman (5/14/08) wrote that, in announcing his run for office, Obama was making a statement: that his candidacy would be the exclamation point at the end of our four-century-long argument over the role of African-Americans in our society. By electing a mixed-race man of evident brilliance, moderate mien and welcoming smile, we would finally cease seeing each other through color-coded eyes.

It's not clear if Fineman meant Obama said that exactly, or if it was just implied by the way he "radiat[ed] uplift and glorious possibility." Alas, he continued: "Well, that argument did not end. He and we were naive to think it would."

Of course, "we" didn't all imagine that a nonwhite man running for president would mean an end to racism; that belief seems endemic only in a press corps with a myopic understanding of how racial inequality works.

Thus Fineman lamented, "far from eliminating racial thinking from politics," Obama's campaign actually drew attention to the subject - in part because Obama let the Finemans of the world down by having a "message" that was "race-aware, if not race-based."

Fineman, like many pundits, seemed to think that acknowledging the distinct experiences faced by people of color is tantamount to claiming these differences trump all other factors in life. Talking about race equals harping about race, and, well, that's being racist, isn't it? The goal is to be "post-racial," which seems to mean maintaining that racial differences have no impact, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding.

For some, last November 4 saw the disappearance of racial inequity in America ("Promised Land: Obama's Rise Fulfills King's Dream" - Oklahoman headline, 1/19/09), and with it the need for any countervailing measures.

Conservative columnist Jonah Goldberg (Chicago Tribune, 1/22/09) suggested that "opponents of racial quotas and other champions of colorblindness on the right should be popping champagne," not to mention "rubbing Barack Obama in [the] faces" of all those foreign "finger-waggers eager to lecture...America about race and tolerance."

For those who don't see racial inequity playing out every day in disparate joblessness, incarceration or mortality rates, the presence of a brown-skinned man in the White House means there's no more structural work to be done; those struggling from now on have no excuse.

At the very least, the black guy winning proved that there are no more voting rights concerns. USA Today (1/9/09) wondered whether the whole Voting Rights Act should be junked "now that a black man has won the presidency." And for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution's Jim Wooten (1/20/09), the Obama victory "plainly" meant that "the political system that discriminated and the people who designed it are dead and gone."

The Obama victory was credited with the existence of a demographic of "successful" blacks, as illustrated by a magazine (Uptown) that launched in 2004 ("Magazine for Age of Obama," New York Daily News, 1/19/09). And the hiring of an African-American to coach the Yale football team was "particularly significant in light of both the election of Obama as the nation's first black president and in the consistently meager numbers of black head coaches at the top level of college football," according to the New York Times (1/8/09) - though the particular relevance of the former is kind of hard to figure.

If being "post-racial" involves pretending race/ethnicity doesn't affect opportunity, acting "post-racial" means renouncing any measure aimed at ensuring that. Post-election, Obama was called upon to follow through on his "promise" in this regard in early decisions on appointments and policy.

The New York Times (1/15/09) gave the New Republic's Jeffrey Rosen space to put some questions to new attorney general Eric Holder, including: "Do you agree with Mr. Obama's implication that the Supreme Court needs someone who will side with the

powerless rather than the powerful? What if the best nominee happens to be a white male?"

The L.A. Times editorial page (12/28/08) lauded Obama's cabinet picks, in so doing matter-of-factly contrasting the hiring goals of "quality" and "identity politics" - in this context meaning the hiring of anyone who is not a white man; Obama, it declared, "has succeeded on both levels."

Obama could also prove himself to be the right sort of black leader - the kind who places responsibility for black people's problems largely with black people themselves - with an embrace of the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind law. USA Today (1/6/09) draped the case in appropriately patronizing tones with the cringe-worthy "How to Turn Obama's Success Into Gains for Black Boys":

You can see the message on brick wall murals in inner cities: Yes we can. You can hear it in the music of Black Eyed Peas' frontman will.i.am: Yes we can.

You can imagine hearing it pass the lips of thousands of black mothers, perhaps after awakening their sons early to complete homework before they head off to school, just as President-elect Barack Obama's mother did: Yes you can.

Black mothers encouraging their children? Just imagine!

The idea that, in the Age of Obama, a little early morning encouragement is all that separates black Americans from socio-economic success was abetted even by less unctuous reporting; in the midst of a fairly thoughtful, 8,000-word piece (New York Times, 8/10/08) on complexities in black political leadership, for instance, one is jarred to read that, now that "legal barriers no longer exist," the "inequities in the society are subtler - inferior schools, an absence of employers, a dearth of affordable housing - and the remedies more elusive."

If discriminatory treatment in education, employment and housing are deemed "subtle," little wonder that calls for institutional change are heard as strident and outmoded.

Some journalists' desire to "not see" racism as an obstacle led them to downplay the historical significance of Obama's election. Finding "all the hoopla" unseemly, press critic Howard Kurtz scoffed (Washington Post, 1/20/09), "It is hard to envision this level of intensity if John McCain were taking the oath of office."

It is indeed unlikely that McCain would have been heralded as the first black president in United States history; that's true. Nor would he have been greeted with the overwhelming relief of those who wanted above all to see the back of a Republican White House that has brought endless war and economic havoc.

There are probably a number of multi-layered reasons many people - including, yes, some in the media - greeted the Obama victory with some measure of satisfaction. But when rich white pundits start suggesting that "there's a lot of advantages to being black. Black is in" (Larry King, 1/21/09), all you can do is laugh.

As the Obama presidency moves forward, we should expect continued awkwardness: chin-stroking on how his "loping stride" and "fondness for pickup basketball" make for "a new White House iconography" (Washington Post, 1/19/09), and contentless verbiage a la Joe Klein (Time, 2/2/09): "He came to us as the ultimate outsider in a nation of outsiders - the son of an African visitor and a white woman from Kansas - and he has turned us inside out."

Also unlikely to abate is elite media's recourse to a litmus, usefully vague and changeable, as to whether Obama is performing like the approved sort of black politician, who is, in Howard Fineman's words (Newsweek, 1/24/09), "shaped but not limited by [his] heritage."

That line between being "shaped" and being "limited," of course, will continue to be defined, and vigorously policed, by the elite white press corps.

[This commentary originally appeared in [Fair.org](#)]

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