

The Black Masculinities of Barack Obama: Some Implications for African American Men

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Barack Obama's presidency has stimulated thinking about new possibilities for race relations in America.¹ Yet it has also inspired accounts that question whether his election has been overstated as a positive factor for contemporary race relations in this country.² Indeed, a recent conversation I had with Ronald, an African American man who participated in some of my earlier research,³ confirmed the skepticism of the latter perspective. Ronald and I discussed a number of issues concerning Obama's election and the possible fate of the African American community before he finally said, "You know, despite the fact that Obama's election is a change for this country, one thing is the same: everybody who ever held the office of the president was the son of a white woman."

Ronald's remarks did not come from frustration or anger. Instead, in a matter-of-fact tone, he simply conveyed his sentiment that what may have seemed like a radical unfolding to some people felt more like a moderate shift to him (and possibly others). Since that talk with Ronald, I have been pondering the potential shifts in the meanings of race in America around the time of Obama's election. That Obama, like every other president of the United States, is both male and the son of a Caucasian woman has led me to think specifically about how race and masculinity converge in African American men's views of Obama, a self-proclaimed black man who is, yet is not, like many African American men. More specifically, I was

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drawn to the various images of Obama that have been promoted – both through his own volition and by his administrative team – during and since his presidential campaign.

This thinking has been sustained by the fact that as a sociologist primarily focused on studying African American men, I was both pleasantly surprised and intrigued by Obama's election. In the world of social research and in popular commentary, African Americans are often regarded as instigators of danger and anxiety, illustrations of failure, and portraits of malaise. Even many of the more sensitive and sympathetic perspectives cast African Americans as in need of extreme remedial intervention.⁴ Consequently, having a black man assume the most powerful position in the world amidst these portrayals gives rise to new thinking about the prospects and possibilities for other African American men.

Hearing Ronald's comment about Obama's presidency encouraged me to seek out the views of various African American men. I turned to the African American men who have come into my life either as participants in my research projects or as relatives, friends, and colleagues. I wanted to know what kind of black man they think he is, and whether his being black makes any difference in how they think about themselves and their life prospects. Moreover, I wanted to understand how these views relate to the kind of black man Obama *appears to be*, rather than what kind of man he is. After all, as a political figure, his appearance in the public eye may have minimal connection to the kind of black man he actually believes himself to be. I still have much work to do in my quest to better understand how black men make sense of the black masculinity of Obama. However, the first step in doing so, and what I focus on in this paper, is resolving my

own queries about what kind of black man Obama has been made to be in the public domain. My own brief connection to him gives me some insight into how his appearance has been framed vis-à-vis who he may actually be and how other black men make sense of him.

Between 1993 and 1996, while I was in graduate school at the University of Chicago, I shared time on the basketball court with Obama. He could best be described as an inconsistent regular at our campus lunchtime game. I am confident that many of the other regular participants would affirm my claim that he was one of the better players (a notch below the stand-out high school and college players). Aside from his basketball skills, however, he struck some of us as an extraordinarily intelligent and very disciplined person. These traits were most evident in his manner of engaging the few social issues that the men (and this lunchtime gathering consisted almost entirely of men) would raise on the sidelines while waiting to play. I never had the opportunity for an extensive one-on-one discussion with Obama, but I listened intently when he spoke in group settings at courtside.

Some months after first seeing him on the court, I was told by a fellow graduate student that Obama was a clinical professor in the law school. I began to wonder why, given his acumen, he was not on the tenure track. I certainly did not know him well enough to consider asking him about the matter, but I recall deciding that perhaps he was not disposed to this degree of ambition. Given what Obama has become today compared with my reading of him fifteen years ago, it is fortunate for me that I chose an academic discipline that usually does not invest in intimate study of the individual as the unit of analysis! Still, revisiting that experience, from

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the perspective of a sociologist and an African American man, reinforces my curiosity about Obama's election and the significance it has had for African American men.

From the time he launched his presidential campaign, Obama has navigated a public identity that carefully balances contrasting images of black masculinity. That effort rests on the fact that his life has involved a wide range of circumstances, events, episodes, and patterns, each of which can be identified with African American men at different points along the socioeconomic spectrum. Said more simply, Obama's life-story depicts each of two highly durable, but also dichotomous, representations of black masculinity. The first, best conveyed by the colloquialism "keeping it real," promotes images of blackness that stand in contrast to the images and tropes commonly associated with mainstream, middle-class America (of course, whether those images truly exist in regard to that segment of the African American community is another matter altogether). The second style of representation, "keeping it proper," refers to the social practices of African Americans (and most often to those of upper-income or professional status) that promote the most sanitized and, therefore, most acceptable public faces to both white and black America. Doing so serves as a means of affirming the dignity and humanity of a people who have often been viewed as incapable of exhibiting these traits. Both "keeping it real" and "keeping it proper" reflect distinct and often contrasting class-based dimensions of black masculinity (and black American cultural expression more generally). A remarkable aspect of the public black masculinity of Obama is found in his incorporation of these two styles in ways that, like his being biracial, make him appear

at once different from many black American men yet also seemingly just like one of them.

The practices and dispositions associated with "keeping it real" and "keeping it proper" have been thoroughly documented and interpreted in the tradition of urban ethnographic studies of African Americans. The notion of "keeping it proper" turns up in W.E.B. Du Bois's quandaries about what he saw as the distinctive cultural traits of lower-income black Americans living in the seventh ward of Philadelphia in the last decade of the nineteenth century.⁵ In *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois expressed his disdain for what to him was an excessive display of public improprieties by lower-income African Americans, including, but not restricted to, street corner associating, public gambling, and gregariousness in social interaction. Looking at the presumed industriousness and discipline of the middle and upper classes of African Americans, Du Bois found much more to affirm about proper social conduct and comportment.

Such a class-specific framing of social conduct and mores was reinforced in 1945, when social scientists St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton completed the next seminal community study of black Americans, *Black Metropolis*.⁶ That work offered a more systematic documentation of cultural and economic distinction in the African American community. In doing so, it also conveyed more directly than did Du Bois's work just how each class sector of the African American community embraced its own package of representations and mannerisms as legitimate (or better yet, as legitimately black American).

More recently, in introducing a dichotomy that is similar in effect to "keeping it real" versus "keeping it proper," soci-

ologist Elijah Anderson has introduced the terms *street* and *decent* as tropes to depict different segments of the African American community.⁷ He implicates class as a critical factor for how and why certain black Americans are identified as belonging to one category or the other. In short, street people are those who constitute the threatening and profligate portion of the African American community that is often referred to as the underclass.⁸ However, while the street is a common reference point in derogatory assessments of certain aspects of the African American community, it is also part of what is taken to be most authentic or genuine about black Americans, as the street conjures images of the intense sociability and publicity often identified as valued social traits in the black American community.

The extreme depictions exemplified by *street* and *decent* have been captured in the works of other contemporary scholars. Anthropologist John L. Jackson, Jr., has explored how black American residents of Harlem engage in the social politics of racial authenticity across class lines (and in doing so, define each other as real and proper, or insincere and improper, depending on which side of the class spectrum they stand on and how they view those standing on the other).⁹ Sociologist Mary Pattillo-McCoy, in her book *Black Picket Fences*, discusses how some younger African Americans' efforts "to keep it real" are reflected in their succumbing to a "ghetto trance," a preoccupation with the cultural artifacts (such as music and clothing) and public interactive styles presumably embraced by lower-income African Americans (the often overdetermined media proliferation of such images notwithstanding).¹⁰ She asserts that the allure of the street by some of the so-called decent African Americans keeps this historical divide

in the African American community in play.

Street and *decent* can be inflammatory terms (both inside and beyond academic circles), yet they remain pivotal constructs in all kinds of considerations of African American public conduct (whether within academia or outside of it). They also appear somewhat less inflammatory when transformed into the notions of *real* and *proper* and, subsequently, into the nomenclature of "keeping it real" and "keeping it proper." Obama's balance between keeping it real and keeping it proper relies upon a careful interplay of street and decent in his past and present public behavior.

Obama's various efforts to keep it real are made evident in his autobiographical writings and in the various publications about his life.¹¹ This body of work provides ample testimony to his somewhat wayward youth: by his own admission, he consumed illegal substances and was aimless and misguided throughout a good portion of his adolescence. His inconsistent performance in school and his use of illegal substances reflect a common (but by no means universal) portrait of urban-based African American males. Yet Obama's youthful behavior has not firmly positioned him on the prototypical *street* side of African American masculinity. This outcome is in part because he had to learn much about African American urban communities while already entering adulthood; his community of rearing was in Hawaii, a place that, despite having pockets of deep poverty, escapes the imagination of many as the kind of place where black Americans come from, especially those who appear to be "from the streets." Still, Obama's youthful indiscretions have allowed him to draw selectively from his past to situate himself as having not always been the tradi-

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tionally decent political figure. He can then, perhaps, appear more “real” than other contemporary political figures such as George Bush or Bill Clinton. If not true street credibility, Obama’s past has given him social credibility of another sort – enough for him at least to appear to have been keeping it real.

Obama also (and quite conscientiously) maintains a public image of proper professional and personal conduct that is consistent with the social desirability engendered by “keeping it proper.” Evidence of this image is found in a number of his pre- and post-election speeches to African American organizations, in which he emphasizes a personal responsibility thesis. Perhaps the most notable of such talks are the address delivered to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) during its annual convention in 2009 and his 2008 Father’s Day address delivered at the Apostolic Church of God in Chicago on June 15, 2008. In both cases, Obama seemed consciously to de-emphasize or ignore structural factors such as high unemployment in discussing the outcomes associated with African Americans men’s underachievement in various societal arenas as well as their consistent failures in the family. The accentuation of personal responsibility and agency appears as well in his talks about education and the African American community. Here, he has stressed the so-called acting white thesis as a durable factor in the underperformance of African American students, especially males.

This pattern of assessing the African American social condition, in general, and the state of African American males, in particular, reflects more than what some may regard as mild social conservatism. Rather, it serves as a clear example that those who aim to keep it proper campaign for respectability (to borrow a

term from Elijah Anderson) as much as street people do. Obama’s efforts to campaign in this way, however, do not come across as socially conservative rhetoric to serve practical political ends. He avoids this charge largely because he addresses these topics from the perspective of having been directly victimized by the kinds of problematic men he talks about (Obama’s father was a minimal part of his early life) or as having been the kind of individual (an underachiever, for one) who he is challenging to be better. He strives to keep it real, then, at the same time he aims to keep it proper.

The keep-it-proper dimensions of his public persona are supported by what Stanford University law professor Richard Thompson Ford explains as Obama’s ability to reflect none of the rage, alienation, and self-doubt that were strongly identified with the previous generation of African Americans (particularly African American men).¹² Obama appears to reject a prototypical African American ultra-masculinity in favor of what Ford and others have referred to as a post-civil rights era public style.

Interestingly, Obama’s capacity to break with the more traditional imagery of African American masculinity arises, at least in part, by the public role his wife, Michelle Obama, has performed, first on the campaign trail and now as first lady. In recent scholarly assessments of her public style, Michelle Obama has been viewed as upholding some traditional notions of the African American woman vis-à-vis depictions of her as the “angry black woman.”¹³ Accordingly, literary scholar Elizabeth Alexander attributed part of Michelle Obama’s role in the campaign to be the voice of the angry African American man in lieu of her husband, who could not afford to be portrayed in such a way while campaigning for the

White House.¹⁴ Moreover, political scientists Valeria Sinclair-Chapman and Melanye Price discuss Michelle Obama's appropriation of what historian and political scientist Manning Marable has called the black messianic leadership style often attributed to black men, thus making it safe for Obama not to have to do so.¹⁵ Hence, at least some of Obama's capacity to keep it proper in the public domain is contingent on his wife's efforts to keep it real in her own public engagements.

While it is far too early to tell, the public black masculinities of Barack Obama may amount to much more than an opportunity for public consideration of the extent to which his public identity mirrors his private sense of self. For black Americans, there are more practical political stakes involved. This is in no small way due to the fact that many African Americans became increasingly attentive to the electoral process at some point after Obama declared his candidacy. I am careful here to say attentive to the *electoral process*, rather than simply *politics*, because whether or not they vote, black Americans have consistently been politically aware.¹⁶ Political expression for many black Americans emerges in the barbershop, beauty salon, bar, and other spaces that constitute the public sphere for black America. As scholars have documented, that expression is rooted in sarcasm, irony, and cynicism, fueled by a consistently held sentiment that the American political arena has never fully embraced African Americans as citizens, nor has it made the issues and concerns most important to them a central part of American politics (as indicated by reference to such matters as *special interest politics*). Hence, African Americans have a long-standing history of being political. What is different

about the present moment is that African Americans are now attentive to electoral politics and curious about, if not convinced of, the possible goods it may deliver, whether tangible or symbolic. The mere presence of an African American man in the White House validates many black Americans' dreams and hopes for American society; and it is in this sense that Obama functions most effectively as a symbol.

For African American men (and black Americans more generally) who have never before been able to connect with a president along racial lines, their sense of closeness to Obama is not as transparent or simplistic as it may seem. Aside from what is most apparent – that black Americans are experiencing someone like them occupying the White House – Obama's presidency may be most interesting sociologically for the diversity of reactions, particularly across class divisions in black America, that it produces.

Lower-income black American men may simply hope that the Obama presidency will usher in improvements to their life condition. Perhaps, as some such disadvantaged men who I have researched in the past year have said, because Obama knows a little more about the lives they lead he may do more for them than other presidents did. Of course, many others believe that Obama is today so enmeshed in the social world of the privileged that he no longer has to devote significant attention, save for a few speeches, to the plight of the most downtrodden and marginalized.

Another dimension of the Obama phenomenon with substantial bearing on the African American class divide relates to how his public persona encourages renewed thinking about what it means to be "legitimately" black. In recent years, there has been substantive discussion about how blackness has been construed

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as authentic to the extent that it reflects patterns of discourse and public appearance often associated with hip-hop culture or some variation of styles expressing an oppositional or counter-mainstream orientation (keeping it real).¹⁷ Adorned in business suits and well versed in the lexicon of mainstream professional America, Obama represents none of the oppositional or counter-mainstream styles. However, many would argue that there are aspects of his interactive styles that reflect an urban, African American cultural flavor: recall, for example, the celebratory fist-bumps he shared with Michelle following his primary and election-day victories – not the kind of public demeanor usually associated with African American white-collar professionals and politicians. In terms of cultural styles, Obama may appear to stand squarely between the class divides in black America.

Ultimately, the balance between keeping it real and keeping it proper rests somewhere on the continuum between low-income black Americans, who have been unfairly circumscribed by the underclass label and its attendant imagery, and post-civil rights era black American professionals, who have access to social and private places that distinguish them from less-privileged African Americans. Various sociologists and social scientists have examined the chasm between these class-defined cohorts of black Americans.¹⁸ Public reaction to Obama's life experiences, and to his behavior as president, situates him as a potentially pivotal figure in determining the state and significance of that chasm in the future.

Barack Obama has lived a life very different from many Americans. Sales of his books and the positions he has attained in government have made him a wealthy and prominent man. Yet he has encoun-

tered forms and types of disadvantage that have never been a part of the lives of many other wealthy, prominent people. He is a black American, but he has lived in places that do not resemble the social words often associated with black America. His parentage (a white American mother and a Kenyan father) does not immediately conjure up thoughts of the typical black American family.

Although only time will tell the extent to which African Americans ultimately believe in his capacity to do so, Obama appears to be uniquely positioned both to keep it real and to keep it proper. His quest to maintain that balance allows many middle-class African Americans who strive to do the same to feel a sense of connection with him. As a middle-class professional who now lives in a college town, but who has direct roots in the kind of economically disadvantaged milieu where many black Americans live, I, as well, have a vested interest in working to keep it both real and proper. More specifically, my spouse and I aim to raise our two sons to be proper, at least according to our definitions of the term. But we also try to raise them to keep it real. In our case, achieving this balance means that they do not develop a snobbishness or elitism with regard to less-privileged black Americans who do not often share social space with us. It means consistently exposing them to Detroit (where my oldest son commutes from Ann Arbor to go to school), Harlem, Brooklyn, and other places where African Americans who are not as fortunate as we are have carved out lives for themselves, so that these people are not exoticized, vilified, or despised.

Just as important, though, it means strongly encouraging our sons to resist the romanticizing that is all too common today on college campuses (among other places), where middle-class African

American youth assume the posture of many urban, low-income residents in order to foster some crude demonstration of how “real” they happen to be. One of the most potent effects of the Obama presidency may not have much to do with his policies, but with how his image serves to resolve or proliferate class-based tensions in black America: how he negotiates what it means to be

black and how people classified as such should function in social spaces. Class divisions in the African American community will exert a strong influence on how blacks read and react to varied aspects of Obama’s identity and social conduct. In turn, these divisions will shape African Americans’ sense of either closeness or distance to him.

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ENDNOTES

¹ See Jabari Asim, *What Obama Means . . . for Our Culture, Our Politics, and Our Future* (New York: William Morrow, 2009); Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “For Obama, Nuance on Race Invites Questions,” *The New York Times*, February 9, 2010; Kevin Alexander Gray, *The Decline of Black Politics: From Malcolm X to Barack Obama* (London: Verso, 2008); Adia Harvey Wingfield and Joe R. Feagin, *Yes We Can?: White Racial Framing and the 2008 Presidential Campaign* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Manning Marable and Kristen Clarke, eds., *Barack Obama and African American Empowerment: The Rise of Black America’s New Leadership* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and Gwen Ifill, *The Breakthrough: Politics and Race in the Age of Obama* (New York: Doubleday, 2009).

² For example, Manning Marable, “Racializing Obama: The Enigma of Post-Black Politics and Leadership,” *Souls* 11 (1) (2009): 1–15.

³ Ronald is a pseudonym. The research project he participated in, nearly a decade ago, is culminating in a manuscript entitled “Black Men Rising: Navigating Race, Engaging Mobility.” In this work, I explore the views of a small group of African American men in their late-teens and twenties who were born into poverty but engineered paths toward high-skilled blue-collar or white-collar professional careers. I have remained in contact with Ronald over the years since we first worked together.

⁴ See Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Streets* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999); Ronald B. Mincy, ed., *Black Males Left Behind* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 2006); Staff of *The Washington Post*, *Being a Black Man: At the Corner of Progress and Peril* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007); and Alford A. Young, Jr., *The Minds of Marginalized Black Men: Making Sense of Mobility, Opportunity, and Future Life Chances* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); this classic study is replete with documentation and analysis of lower-income African Americans.

⁶ St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

⁷ Elijah Anderson, *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁸ Anderson, *Code of the Streets*; Robert Aponte, “Definitions of the Underclass: A Critical Analysis,” in *Sociology in America*, ed. Herbert Gans (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1990); Herbert Gans, *The War Against the Poor: The Underclass and Anti-Poverty Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

⁹ John L. Jackson, Jr., *Harlemworld: Doing Race and Class in Contemporary Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

- ¹⁰ Mary Pattillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
- ¹¹ See Ifill, *The Breakthrough*; Marable and Clarke, *Barack Obama and African American Empowerment*; Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004); and Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006).
- ¹² Richard Thompson Ford, "Barack is the New Black: Obama and the Promise/Threat of the Post-Civil Rights Era," *Du Bois Review* 6 (1) (2009): 37 – 48.
- ¹³ See Maureen Dowd, "Mincing Up Michelle," *The New York Times*, June 11, 2008; Transcript, *FOX News Watch*, June 14, 2008, FOX News, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,367601,00.html>; Scott Helman, "Reaching Back to Her Chicago Roots, Obama Tells an American Story," *The Boston Globe*, August 26, 2008, http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2008/08/26/reaching_back_to_her_chicago_roots_obama_tells_an_american_story; Jonathan Mann, "A First Lady of a Different Kind," CNN, May 23, 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/05/23/mann.michelleobama>; Adam Nagourney, "Appeals Evoking American Dream Rally Democrats," *The New York Times*, August 26, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/26/us/politics/26dems.html?scp=6&sq=Michelle%20Obama&st=cse>; Brian Naylor, "Interpreting Michelle Obama's Speech," National Public Radio, August 26, 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=93981261>; Abdon M. Pallasch, "Michelle Obama Celebrates Chicago Roots," *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 26, 2008, <http://www.suntimes.com/news/politics/obama/1126753.CST-NWS-dem26.article>; Michael Powell and Jodi Kantor, "After Attacks, Michelle Obama Looks for a New Introduction," *The New York Times*, June 18, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/18/us/politics/18michelle.html?>.
- ¹⁴ Untitled presentation at Duke University as part of a roundtable discussion for the Scholars Network on Masculinity and the Well-Being of African American Men, March 15, 2008.
- ¹⁵ Valeria Sinclair-Chapman and Melanye Price, "Black Politics, the 2008 Election, and the (Im)Possibility of Race Transcendence," *Political Science and Politics* (October 2008): 739 – 745.
- ¹⁶ See Michael Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Michael Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African American Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Melissa Victoria Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).
- ¹⁷ For example, Prudence L. Carter, *Keepin' It Real: School Success Beyond Black and White* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Jackson, *Harlemworld*.
- ¹⁸ See Anderson, *Streetwise*; Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*; Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*; Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Jackson, *Harlemworld*; John L. Jackson, Jr., *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Pattillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences*; and Mary Pattillo, *Black on the Block: The Politics of Race and Class in the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).