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Narrative

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“I Will Never See a Black American President in My Lifetime”: Crisis in the Black American Masculine Narrative

Anthony Stewart

Abstract: The election of Barack Obama could not help but alter what Charles Johnson calls the “black American narrative.” This paper focuses on the endurance of the black American *masculine* narrative over time, how it may have changed, and what might be at stake for its future in light of Obama’s election. The black American masculine narrative brings with it different implications than those in play for “black America” (however defined) more generally, including the laws of unintended consequences that find some critics looking back nostalgically to the days of segregation. The paper considers whether or not “politician” might be added to the short list of potential career aspirations for African American men and whether or not such an addition would count as progress.

Keywords: Obama, African American, masculinity, stereotype, politics

Résumé : L’élection de Barack Obama n’a pu faire autrement que de changer ce que Charles Johnson appelle le « *black American narrative* » (narratif afro-américain). Le présent article porte sur l’endurance du narratif afro-américain *masculin* depuis un certain temps, de la façon dont il a pu changer, et de ce qu’il pourrait représenter comme enjeu pour son avenir, étant donné l’élection d’Obama. Le narratif afro-américain masculin est porteur de conséquences autres que celles en jeu pour « l’Amérique noire » (quelle qu’en soit la définition) de façon plus générale, y compris les lois des conséquences non intentionnelles qui font que des critiques jettent un regard nostalgique sur les périodes où a régné la ségrégation. L’article évalue si le mot « politicien » devrait être ajouté à la courte liste des aspirations possibles en matière de carrière pour les hommes afro-américains, et si un tel ajout pourrait représenter un progrès.

Mots clés : Obama, afro-américain, masculinité, stéréotype, politique

Either you're slingin crack-rock or you got a wicked jumpshot.

—The Notorious B.I.G., “*Things Done Changed*”

On the night of 4 November 2008, as Barack Obama delivered his acceptance speech after having won the American presidential election, my mind wandered back to something Ralph Ellison wrote some fifty years earlier. In an essay entitled “Some Questions and Some Answers,” Ellison wrote, “I would like to see a qualified Negro as President of the United States” and then added a typically Ellisonian qualifier, “But I suspect that even if this were today possible, the necessities of the office would shape his actions far more than his racial identity” (272). And, of course, as many have commented already, the necessities of the office *have* been much more prominent in shaping the Obama administration’s agenda (the economic collapse, a two-front war, health-care reform, not to mention the daunting task of repairing America’s tarnished international image) than has the fact of Obama’s ethnic heritage. The question of what factors shape any individual’s actions is one of the great human imponderables. When race is factored into this question, the task of arriving at a reasonable answer becomes all the more daunting. What is evident, though, is that it is very difficult not to recognize that things have changed (to cite B.I.G. again) in American society, in general, but also—in a less obvious way, so far, at least—in how race has played itself out in America since the night of the election.

What I want to focus on is the endurance of the “black American narrative,” as Charles Johnson¹ calls it, how it may have changed and what might be at stake for its future in light of Obama’s election. It must be said, first of all, that the stakes of whatever change occurs are different for African American men than even for African American women because of the dire situations many African American men find themselves in, on the one hand, and yet the disproportionate role they play in the exportation of American popular culture, on the other. With one of three college-aged black American men in jail, on probation, or on parole and more black American women in university than men, the intersection of gender and race in the United States has exacted very specific tolls on the two sides of the conventional gender divide as far as its African-descended citizens are concerned.² The prominence of black American men in the worlds of entertainment and especially athletics in the United States has encouraged the illusion that African American

men are doing “better” than other Americans generally, a misperception that has probably contributed to a revival in anti-affirmative action sentiments, for instance. As Ross Douthett of the *New York Times* expresses the sentiment in his 19 July 2009 editorial, “Whither affirmative action in an age of America’s first black president? Will it be gradually phased out, as the Supreme Court’s conservatives seem to prefer? Or will it endure well into this century and beyond?” While it would be naïve to project a straight line from Obama’s election to some African American political and social panacea, the potential silver lining for conservatives may be a groundswell of conversation citing Obama’s election as “proof” that affirmative action has “worked” and is no longer necessary at all. Unstated in this reductive line of thinking is the sacrifice of countless many because of the success of the one.

The ostensible benefits of progress cannot help but carry with them costs we never planned to pay. We need only remember the unintended consequences of integration that many scholars have documented to find an example of these complex results. Harry Edwards, for instance, points out one of the unintended consequences of the desegregation of American college athletics in the 1960s, which enabled black athletes to begin attending, for the first time, schools that had historically been white. “Parenthetically, but understandably,” Edwards writes, “given the sub-par educational status of the Negro colleges, this integration was unidirectional, with many black athletes going to white schools but with few white athletes entering Negro schools” (7). The net effect of such a migration pattern, obviously, is a dilution of the talent pool in schools that have historically been black, as the best white players will continue to go where the best-funded facilities are and the best black players will do the same—once they are allowed—leaving the black schools to choose principally from those who cannot attend white schools.

I will concentrate my attention, here, on the implications for the black American *masculine* narrative, a qualification implied in the call for variety in Johnson’s formulation, although not stated explicitly. In this context, it is worth recognizing the enduring nature of the conventions inherent in the black American masculine narrative, then—most notably the equation of African American masculine athleticism with African American masculine success and how this narrative might be affected (positively or negatively) as a result of

such a radical and unforeseen result as a black American president's being elected in our lifetimes. Using Johnson's essay, "The End of the Black American Narrative," published in the *American Scholar* in August 2008, as a starting point, I will argue that the persistent image of the politician as compromiser and schemer beholden to the agendas of others, set against the image of the athlete's assured masculinity and freedom, militates directly against a substantial shift in the aspirations of African American young men from sports to politics; but I will also suggest that it need not take a wholesale conversion of young African American men out of athletics and into public service for the narrative to have been amended in constructive and progressive ways.

* * *

As expressions of the long-standing and disproportionate equation of athletics and black masculine success, there are few, perhaps, that can rival the following excerpt from an editorial titled "A Word to the Black Man," printed in the *Los Angeles Times* on 5 July 1910, the day after Jack Johnson (the first black heavyweight boxing champion of the world) defeated Jim Jeffries, the purported "great white hope" of American boxing, in a highly publicized match in Reno, Nevada:

(A Word to the Black Man): Do not point your nose too high. Do not swell your chest too much. Do not boast too loudly. Do not be puffed up. Let not your ambition be inordinate. Or take a wrong direction. Remember you have done nothing at all. You are just the same member of society you were last week. You are on no higher plane. Deserve no new consideration, and will get none. No man will think a bit higher of you, because your complexion is the same as that of the victor at Reno. (qtd. in *Unforgivable Blackness*)

The menacing insistence that one black man's very public victory over a white man in the athletic arena had better not be taken as an opportunity for any other black men to rejoice signals clearly that the equation of athletics and black masculinity extends back at least one hundred years. The fact that this statement was published in one of the national newspapers of record makes all the more patent just how widely held this view was, not to mention suggesting the myriad ways it continues to the present day.

Johnson reflects upon the general nature of narrative as the opening salvo of his discussion:

A good story always has a meaning (and sometimes layers of meaning); it also has an epistemological mission: namely, to show us something. It is an effort to make the best sense we can of the human experience, and I believe that we base our lives, actions, and judgments as often on the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves (even when they are less than empirically sound or verifiable) as we do on the severe rigor of reason. (33)

It is easy to see from Johnson's general observations that narrative cannot help but be ideological in addition to being epistemological and ontological. We see "ourselves" in certain ways as a result of the stories we tell, in other words, but other people see "us" in certain ways as a result of the stories they tell about *us*. These stories have the potential to be hegemonic or counter-hegemonic, depending on the story's teller. Without the author's even engaging with the specifics of its masculine version, the potential for the various effects of the conventional black American narrative begins to emerge.

Johnson writes, when turning his attention from narrative in general to the African American narrative in particular,

This unique black American narrative, which emphasizes the experience of victimization, is quietly in the background of every conversation we have about black people, even when it is not fully articulated or expressed. It is our starting point, our agreed-upon premise, our most important presupposition for dialogues about black America. We teach it in our classes, and it is the foundation for both our scholarship and our popular entertainment as they relate to black Americans. Frequently it is the way we approach each other as individuals. (33)

Between the effects of how we tell stories about ourselves, in general terms ("to make the best sense we can of the human experience") and in particular ("the way we approach each other as individuals"), the power of narratives, and especially of the black American narrative, appears total. They exert their most clearly hegemonic force, of course, when the empowered tell stories about the powerless.

The important contribution that Johnson's essay makes to the idea of an African American narrative is to draw attention to the oft-overlooked multiplicity within the black American population, a multiplicity rhetorically papered over by the verbal shorthand of expressions like "the African American community" or "the African

American experience,” with their implications of a monolith that does not and, in fact, never has existed. So Johnson writes,

Black Americans have been CEOs at AOL, Time Warner, American Express, and Merrill Lynch; we have served as secretary of state and White House national security adviser. Well over 10,000 black Americans have been elected to offices around the country, and at this moment Senator Barack Obama holds us in suspense with the possibility that he may be selected as the Democratic Party’s first biracial, black American candidate for president. We have been mayors, police chiefs, best-selling authors, MacArthur fellows, Nobel laureates, Ivy League professors, billionaires, scientists, stockbrokers, engineers, theoretical physicists, toy makers, inventors, astronauts, chess grandmasters, dot-com millionaires, actors, Hollywood film directors, and talk show hosts we are Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists (as I am). (37)

My purpose in citing Johnson’s paragraph at some length (this is not all of it, either) is to highlight the lengths to which he feels he must go to make what should be a completely obvious point—that black Americans are not all the same. Put another way, if the above paragraph were written in reference to Americans who trace their lineage back to Western Europe, it would rightly be dismissed as unnecessary, even redundant. The constricting effect of the black American narrative is evident in Johnson’s paragraph itself, as he is capable of imagining only Obama’s candidacy for the Democratic Party, not the possibility (that would be realized only three months after the article was published) that Obama might actually win the election. Johnson’s own considerable imaginative gifts appear constricted here, even as he makes an argument about the constricting nature of the narrative he so skilfully dissects.

The insistent tone of the manifesto that Johnson deploys in this part of his argument announces the contentious nature of what should be a basic, unarguable point: “No matter which angle we use to view black people in America today, we find them to be a complex and multifaceted people who defy easy categorization. We challenge, culturally and politically, an old group narrative that fails at the beginning of this new century to capture even a fraction of our rich diversity and heterogeneity” (37). This need to assert what should be a self-evident truism (i.e., we are not all the same) stresses the character, but also the effects, of the narrative Johnson discusses. Johnson is calling for a rethinking of this narrative so that it might more accurately reflect the complexities inherent in the

lives of its subject: African Americans, as opposed to “the African American.” The related point, of course, is that a more complex narrative can only provide a wider variety of aspirations for younger generations. The narrative Johnson deplores has had a particularly insidious effect on the imaginative horizons of African American men, who have relentlessly been told the story that their “only way out” is either athletics, entertainment, or—the contribution of certain types of hip-hop music—crime.

In 1968, Melvin Rogers made the following statement about the aspirations of the young men he had encountered during his career as a high-school basketball coach in the town of Rayville, Louisiana. Rogers’s statement sums up the hegemonic effect of the dominant American narrative, at least as it pertains to young African American men: “A white kid tries to become president of the United States . . . and all the skills and knowledge he picks up on the way can be used in a thousand different jobs. A black kid tries to become Willie Mays, and all the tools he picks up on the way are useless to him if he doesn’t become Willie Mays” (qtd. in Olson 17).³ Before Obama, the dominant American narrative declared that anyone could grow up to be president, but the truth behind this idealistic assertion is borne out by the history of who has held office. “Anyone” has meant anyone white, male, publicly heterosexual, and more than likely possessed of considerable financial resources. In other words, “anyone” has not ever meant just anyone.

Rogers was in a particularly strong position to make his observation about the difference between the relative aspirations of young black and white men, having been the high-school basketball coach of Elvin Hayes, who went on to star at the University of Houston and then to a hall-of-fame career in the National Basketball Association. As William Oscar Johnson writes (in a 1991 article that was part of *Sports Illustrated*’s reprise of its landmark 1968 series, *The Black Athlete—A Shameful Story*), “More significant to Rogers than Hayes’s success were the failures suffered by the hundreds of less talented young black athletes who committed themselves to following Hayes” (41). Rogers’s statement also sets out the dichotomy that has implicitly underlain the persistent difference, for much of the twentieth century, between what are acceptable aspirations for black men in the United States and what are acceptable for white men. For a young black man, to be educated has conventionally carried with it the stigma of “trying to be white,” and this evaluation is sometimes articulated by other blacks, who thus, ironically, contribute to a narrative of limitation for young black

men usually ascribed to the dominant American culture exclusively. The stigma works as a latter-day addition to the effects of slavery, institutionalized segregation, and their residue.

* * *

A long-standing mistrust of institutional systems within the United States is, of course, completely understandable when we consider the official sanction given practices like slavery and segregation; and yet, at some point, the question must be asked: does this anti-institutional suspicion express political resistance, or is it now a practice that liberates the powerful within the United States from the exertion necessary to oppress a people because of the ways their own narrative oppresses them? Since it is statistically far more likely that someone will become a university English professor, for instance, than an NBA, NFL, or Major League Baseball player, one cannot help but recognize that a stigma against formal education—against trying to become president, in other words—can result in generation after generation of young black men trying and (with very few exceptions) failing to become their generation's equivalent of Willie Mays or Elvin Hayes. The result, then, is the perpetual manufacture of a black underclass, who—in Harry Edwards's phrasing—"join the ranks of has-beens, who never really were" (19).

All of this should not be misread as an attempt to blame the victims of America's "master" narrative. But there are very interesting and telling consequences to be drawn from what is at stake in committing all of one's time and energy to becoming Willie Mays, or Michael Jordan, or LeBron James, instead of trying to become Barack Obama. After all, there are an awful lot more of the former than of the latter, and president of the United States has historically been a pretty difficult job to get. But if generations of young black men are indoctrinated in the belief that the ball field or the basketball court is their "only way out" (and here "only" does a great deal of hegemonic work), then what encouragement do they receive to investigate some of the prospects their white counterparts have thrust into their field of vision as a matter of course?

It must be said that politics—or public service more generally—does not carry with it the sanction of masculine achievement that athletics does. A population relentlessly made aware from childhood of the emasculating effects of institutionalized oppression (not to mention the literal emasculations often a feature of lynchings) can hardly be blamed for desiring to reclaim and display its

masculinity in the sanctioned arena of sport rather than to accumulate the completely different set of skills necessary for a career in politics. But the preference of sports over politics comes at a cost, as Gamal Abdel-Shehid makes clear in his book, *Who Da Man*. Abdel-Shehid notes the common, if naïve, view that some still hold, situating sport outside the realm of politics. He then adds,

[A]nother result of this thinking is that it confines sports to the *physical* realm, separate from the presumably *mental* world of politics and culture. This conception of sport makes it difficult to discuss 'social problems' in sports except as external or aberrant, and not in an ongoing or systematic fashion. (47)

But this physical/mental binary brings with it another essentializing binary, and it is here that narrative again shows itself as instrumental in the dominant ideology. Abdel-Shehid writes,

[A]s much as the state of nature connotes a presumably equal terrain or level playing field, it also has a doubled resonance: it narrates the intellectual sphere as "white" and the physical sphere as "black." In sport, this dichotomy is mapped on to white and black bodies such that black bodies are seen as athletically superior *and* therefore less rational. (48)

Once a group of people is told what they can and cannot do, or become, or aspire to, it is hardly surprising that these limitations are accompanied by essentializations through which they inscribe their own inferiority into the narrative. In other words, the perception of the young black American man's ostensible athletic superiority comes at the cost of accepting his own intellectual inferiority as part of the narrative bargain.

So if we can agree—and, here, there can be little doubt—that any group of young people benefits from having as wide a horizon for hopes and dreams as possible, we must consider why the narrative for young black American men continues to be so restricted. Shouldn't more of the individuals from this group also want to grow up to be president? Of course, it must be acknowledged that one of the most obvious attractions to becoming a star athlete—apart from the money, clearly—is the perception of freedom, autonomy, and assured masculinity presumed to accompany being Shaquille O'Neal, to choose yet another example. Professional athletes, the impression would have it, travel, enjoy life, and get paid lavishly to do what they love to do. They appear to answer

to few authority figures (coaches, general managers, and team owners, principally) and are models for others rather than seeking out models to emulate. This, in its simplest form, has become the thoroughgoing version of the masculine African American Dream.

By contrast, the world of the politician has long been perceived as cloaked in compromise, deception, and double-dealing, requiring the ability “to scratch a back; to give away this in exchange for that; to promise something down the road; to provide political cover” (Ibbitson A9). What’s most remarkable about this succinct description of the perception of the politician is that it is meant as a compliment, John Ibbitson of the *Globe and Mail* having written it as part of his eulogy to Senator Edward Kennedy. While the Real-politik of the elected official necessitates the sort of deal-making abilities needed to secure political survival that Ibbitson describes (and praises) in Kennedy, it is easy to imagine that such bloodless pragmatism might not be a terribly attractive future prospect for a group of young people who already see their world as requiring any number of compromises (with “white America,” principally, in all of its perceived manifestations) just to maintain, sometimes, the most basic existence. Given this comparison, the ostensible masculine autonomy of the sports world cannot help but continue to appear attractive.

But—as with most elements of the black American narrative, in general, and the masculine narrative, in particular—the bargain of athletics also comes with many unintended consequences that have not featured prominently when the story is told. William Rhoden, in his book *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, writes, “In the antebellum South, the slave and the plantation described tangible circumstances: today the slave and the plantation describe a state of mind and the conditioning of the mind. In an era of multimillion-dollar salaries, slavery remains the model for the power relationship between athletes and their owners” (237). He elaborates on this still-controversial assertion by quoting one of his own earlier columns from the *New York Times*:

Major intercollegiate sports functions like a plantation. The athletes perform in an economic atmosphere where everyone except them makes money off their labor . . . In the revenue-producing sports of football and basketball, athletes are the gold, the oil, the natural resource that makes the NCAA engine run and its cash register ring. (240)

What's clear from these statements is that Rhoden is not making the naïve (and dishonest) point that big-money present-day athletics *is* a plantation, but rather that it functions *like* one. Once we filter out this bit of background noise from the working of the metaphor, its sense and persuasiveness become obvious. The dearth of black owners, general managers, and coaches (not to mention journalists and critics influencing how athletes are covered and interpreted in the United States) supports the black labour / white money dichotomy that Rhoden points out. One cannot help but wonder how the aspirations of the next generations of young black male athletes might be affected if some reading of this historically recognizable labour relationship were as much a part of their narrative as is the story of sports as the "only way out" of poverty. At the same time, we must ask ourselves if the move from an actual plantation to a mechanism that works *like* one is sufficient and why there has not been more of a change in the narrative at this late date.

The point here is that sports is as compromised as politics is, but the intellectual striving for a career in politics offers many more fall-back careers than does the hope of a career in sports. This simple point needs to become a featured part of a new narrative.

* * *

None of this to say, of course, that *all* young black American men should set their sights on careers in political life or that anything short of this amounts to more of the same. Nor am I arguing that such a shift—were it to occur—would solve all of America's racial ills, leading to the "post-racial" utopia many started touting the night of 4 November 2008. Perhaps this utopian dream was put into its most illuminating perspective on the evening before Obama's inauguration, when Gwen Ifill—one of the correspondents for PBS's *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer*—hosted a panel discussion about the significance of the day to come (Panel Discussion). Joining her were Rev. Joseph Lowery, who would deliver the benediction at the inauguration and who worked with Martin Luther King on the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; Charlayne Hunter-Gault, the first African American woman to attend the University of Georgia; Rael Nelson James, a development associate for KIPP DC, a network of charter schools in the Washington, DC, area; and Ta-Nehisi Coates, a contributing editor for the *Atlantic* and a fellow at the Nation Institute.

At one point in the discussion, Rev. Lowery commented on the advent of the term “post-racial” that was already being bandied about in the press as a way of discussing the new moment in American race relations being ushered in by the election of the first African American president. Ifill interrupted Lowery, at this point, to ask the group: “Does anybody at this table think there’s such a thing as post-racial?” All four simply smiled knowingly and shook their heads in the negative. As part of his answer, Lowery remarked, “[I]f you think one election of one man, even if he’s the most powerful on the planet, solves all the racial problems, the median income of black folks in this country still is a little less than two-thirds than the median income of white people.”⁴ Ifill summed up the brief discussion with, “[t]he needs still remain,” and then the panel proceeded with the conversation almost as if the interlude had not taken place at all. The way that Ifill introduced the concept of a post-racial America only to summarily dismiss it was especially telling, since it draws our attention clearly to the fact that the African American narrative, whatever it ends up being, can never be post-racial, by definition, really, and that—like “colour-blindness,” for instance—“post-racial” is not a term intended for the improvement of the lives of African Americans but registers more notably a desire on the part of members of the American ethno-cultural majority to be relieved of the burden of having to continue discussing and thinking about race.

And yet the notion of the “post-racial” has continued to assert itself in popular discourse, if only through its own ironic negation. Hua Hsu, in her article with the somewhat hysterical “The End of White America?”, puts the problem succinctly:

[W]e aspire to be post-racial, but we still live within the structures of privilege, injustice, and racial categorization that we inherited from an older order. We can talk about defining ourselves by lifestyle rather than skin color, but our lifestyle choices are still racially coded. We know race is a fiction that often does more harm than good, and yet it is something we cling to without fully understanding why—as a social and legal fact, a vague sense of belonging and place that we make solid through culture and speech. (55)

So the post-racial is a desire that we know is unavailable to North American society as it is presently constituted but that—like the concept of, say, full employment for economists—may serve as a discursive point of departure, though little else.

Is it not appropriate, then, that the problems inherent in the black American masculine narrative are brought to a point of crisis by the election of a very accomplished, relatively young (by presidential standards, at least, more on that in a moment) black American man? Interestingly, Obama's presentation in the popular press, especially in the early days after his election, has contributed a sort of transitional moment between the athlete/entertainer model and the prospective public servant/president model. For instance, the opening image of Obama in the editorial of *Time* magazine's 'Person of the Year' issue is this: "His shirtsleeves were rolled up, and he flipped me a dog-eared basketball autographed by Lenny Wilkens. Should I pass it back, like it's a give-and-go? Or does one not do that with a President-elect?" (6). This is how we are introduced to the interview by *Time*'s editors of the only black president the United States has ever had. Before mentioning the historical nature of the meeting, before even mentioning "president-elect," Richard Stengel (the author of the article and *Time*'s managing editor) goes straight to basketball. The piece ends with the now-famous anecdote of how Michelle got her brother to vet Obama as a potential mate "in a pickup basketball game nearly 20 years ago" (6), and concludes with her brother's relief "to discover that his future brother-in-law was a team player" (6). The vetting described here serves at least two purposes. The more obvious one is the relationship between Obama's on-court demeanour and presumed domestic attitudes (a tenuous assumption at best, but hardly my point here). The more pressing issue is how it appears that Obama's new and unusual public role must be introduced to *Time*'s readers in terms of a much more familiar one. The black male basketball player is recognizable according to the conventional narrative, so perhaps we need to start there before moving on to something more unconventional. One would be hard pressed to find any preceding American president introduced in these specific terms.

Another element of this presentation of Obama according to the old narrative is the emphasis on his ostensible youth. Christopher Hitchens, in the same 'State of the Union' issue of the *Atlantic*, asks, "[D]oes not the very mien of our new president suggest something lithe and laid-back, agile but rested, cool but not *too* cool?" (106). Hitchens's emphasis on a physical litness and "cool," the default term of sly, youthful rebellion, turns Obama into a hybrid of jazz musician and athlete. This treatment for a man born in 1961, hardly ancient, to be sure, but certainly the equivalent of an

athlete whose best years would be a distant memory. Although repeatedly characterized as post-baby boom—another “post” attributed to his election—Obama is actually part of that unfortunate and often mislabelled demographic, Generation X. This is the tail-end of the baby boom born from 1961 to 1966, according to demographer David K. Foot:

They are the same age as the characters in Douglas Coupland’s novel *Generation X*, which gave the early-1960s group its name. Many of them were still living at home with their parents at their 30th birthday because, faced with horrendous obstacles in the labour market, they had a terrible time getting their careers on track. That is why, while front-end boomers were earning 30% more than their fathers by age 30, back-enders were making 10% less than their fathers at the same age. (27)

So, the press have artificially created a younger president than he actually is. Instead of representing a change from the old demographic order, Obama is more accurately that order’s last gasp.

This stress on youth synchs up exactly with the need for Obama to make sense according to the old narrative, since athletics and, to a lesser extent (especially for men), entertainment are economies that feed on youth. If we accepted Obama as the tail-end baby boomer he actually is—especially since the term “baby boom” now associates itself with aged hippies and Woodstock retrospectives—we would have a much more difficult time seeing him as just a slightly unconventional iteration of LeBron James. Notably, Obama seems to recognize this narrative dictate as well, having been photographed shirtless and fit on at least one magazine cover, and in shorts and t-shirt practising with the University of North Carolina Tar Heels men’s basketball team in another. The message appears to be, “Yes, I’m president, but don’t worry. I’m still the black man you’ve come to know and love in the abstract, under specific conditions, a role I’ll re-enact now for your continued comfort.”

* * *

The pervasive and restrictive nature of the conventional narrative may be measured in any number of ways. One concluding example will make the point about how disproportionately African American male athletes may be associated with the aspirations of people of African descent more generally because they have long appeared the apotheosis of African American masculine achievement—

"[T]he roster of African-American male athletes whose names ring with historical—not just athletic—significance: Jack Johnson, Jesse Owens, Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, John Carlos, and with time, Tiger Woods, signal crucial political and social moments in twentieth-century American history" (Stewart 384). This is a statement I wrote a little over ten years ago. Now, for a variety of reasons, it strikes me as silly, but more important than my mistakenly including Tiger Woods's name in this list is the importance I was willing to ascribe to the success of African American male athletes in general. My concentration on this lineage is not in itself faulty. Many of the men I listed did have social and political as well as athletic significance. What is telling is my desire that another figure—Woods—continue to fill this bill. My own imaginative prospects, in other words, were being limited without my even recognizing it. Since the morning of 5 November 2008, I have found myself putting the achievements of the men on the above list into a completely different perspective, now that I recognize the prospect of just how different the narrative can look. Once we rethink the implicit limits of the narrative—a rethinking that Obama's election cannot help but initiate, without providing any guarantees of progress—the notion of what is possible is revised radically. This is the kind of revision of the narrative that Charles Johnson's call envisions.

As with technology and language, to take two obvious examples, narratives must also inevitably revise and update themselves over time. It is possible now to conceive of how the black American masculine narrative over the twentieth-, and now into the twenty-first, century may move from world heavyweight boxing champion, to Major League Baseball player, to professional quarterback, to professional golf champion, to president of the United States. The extent to which this narrative might be revised will determine what else we might expect to see in our lifetimes.

Notes

- 1 Except where otherwise specified, "Johnson" in this article refers to Charles Johnson.
- 2 As Houston Baker has written, "The number of inmates in US prisons is increasing. And those numbers are heavily skewed toward the black majority. Nearly one-third of all African American men between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine are under criminal justice supervision on any given day—in jail, detention, prison, or under mandates of probation and parole" (204). While these statistics are dire for the African American masculine narrative, Baker also includes the

sobering fact that the “number of black women in prison rose by a staggering 828 percent from 1986 to 1991” (204), suggesting that future prospects across the gender line for what he calls the “black majority” (“those populations of African, African American, Negro, and colored descent in the United States who inhabit the most wretched states, spaces, and places of our national geography” [7]) look grim.

- 3 I have cited Melvin Rogers’s very useful formulation before. See Stewart. I will make another reference to this article at the end of the present essay.
- 4 Naomi Klein writes on the same subject: “Blacks in the United States consistently have dramatically higher rates of infant mortality, incarceration, unemployment, and HIV infection, as well as lower salaries, life expectancy, and rates of home ownership. The biggest gap, however, is in net worth. By the end of the 1990s, the average black family had a net worth one eighth the national average. Low net worth means less access to traditional credit (and, as we would later learn more subprime mortgages). It also means families have little besides debt to pass on from one generation to the next, preventing the wealth gap from closing on its own” (57).

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