Black with ‘white blood’? To advertise, or not advertise, the race of Obama’s mother

Abstract

This chapter sheds new light on attempts to deploy the specter of Barack Obama’s mother, Stanley Ann Dunham, during the 2008 electoral campaign. Although Obama’s *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995) insisted that he ceased to advertise his mother’s race as a child, his public appearances between 2004 and 2008 often involved discussions of ‘white blood’ and provided further evidence about the limited influence of academic work about the social construction of race in the public sphere. As a result, I contextualize the creation of a candidate who can facilitate a race man persona – and the cloak and dagger operations of an ‘off-white’ American hero – by reading Obama’s self-fashioning alongside the performativity of Black icons such as Sidney Poitier, Malcolm X, W.E.B. DuBois, and Will Smith, as well as lesser known African Americans with white mothers, such as Philippa Schuyler, Johnny Spain, Franco Harris and Mario Van Peebles.
I ceased to advertise my mother’s race at the age of 12 or 13, when I began to suspect that by doing so I was ingratiating myself to whites (Obama 1995: xv).

My father was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya ... While studying here my father met my mother. She was born in a town on the other side of the world, in Kansas (Obama 2004).

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas ... I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners (Obama 2008, emphasis added).

Barack Obama’s carefully crafted public persona demands analysis that is attuned to its subtle changes, even if the hoarse voices of journalists and academics full of sound and fury prefer to recycle themes about post-blackness, racial authenticity and liminality. I begin this chapter by briefly alluding to the comparisons made between Obama and Sidney Poitier, an actor raised in the Bahamas who famously illustrated the contradictions in liberal theory and practice regarding interracial relationships in Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner (1967). I end it by riffing on a critique of Obama and Will Smith that resists the pieties of smug, self-congratulatory liberal sentiment. In between comparisons that tie Obama to these two Black actors, I contextualize the creation of a candidate who can facilitate a race man persona – and the cloak and dagger operations of an ‘off-white’ American hero – by reading Obama’s self-fashioning alongside well-known African American activist-intellectuals, such as W.E.B Du Bois and Malcolm X, as well as a cast of lesser known African Americans with white mothers, such as Philippa Schuyler, Johnny Spain, Franco Harris and Mario Van Peebles.

Obama was compared to Sidney Poitier in selected venues across America after he delivered his keynote speech to the Democratic National Convention in 2004. This may have helped some commentators explain how individuals with foreign ties can become the respectable faces of civil rights movements in America (Finnegan; Simba). It certainly adds irony to the scene in Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner that involves Poitier’s Dr. Prentice conversing with Mr. Drayton (Spencer Tracey), his prospective father-in-law, and responding to the question that inevitably emerged when interracial couples were discussed in the American public sphere.
Mr Drayton: Have you given any thought to the problems your children are going to have?
Dr Prentice: Yes, and they’ll have some. And we’ll have the children. Otherwise I don’t know what you’d call it but you couldn’t call it a marriage.
Mr Drayton: Is that the way Joey feels?
Dr Prentice: She feels that every single one of our children will be the President of the United States and they’ll all have colourful administrations.

Re-mixed for a world in which a multiracial President embarkson a colourful administration, a host of memoirs, tracts, blogs and scholarly outputs choke on noxious questions from the 1960s worrying about the (mental) health of mixed-race children. We should not forget that readers are still reminded, ad nauseum, that mixed-race individuals are routinely asked to explain their racial allegiances, or that prominent figures who fought in the civil rights movement like Poitier can be used to ‘explain’ Obama’s rise. However, academics engaging with ‘critical mixed-race studies’ have tended to develop presentist or future-orientated work. This means that they indulge in a somewhat simplistic historical model indebted to the rise of the Tiger Woods brand in the 1990s in which multiracialism – masquerading as multiculturalism – means business. Thus, Jayne Ifekwunigwe’s recent introduction to mixed-race studies positions the field within an era of pathology until prominent professionals in the United States demanded a multiracial identity for people who grew up after Loving vs. Virginia and Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner. In a similar vein, Robin Cohen, Professor of Development Studies and Director of the International Migration Institute at the University of Oxford, assumes that people of mixed-heritage were forced to proclaim their ‘undivided loyalty to the black race or to join the white race by ‘passing’’, until Tiger Woods used the Oprah Winfrey show to document the Cablinasian (Caucasian, Black, Indian, Asian) identity he created in his youth and lead us into a Brave New World (382).

Journalists au fait with a so-called ‘multiracial movement’ have also juxtaposed Obama’s electoral success with Woods’ golfing and corporate triumphs in order to claim that
he ushers in a ‘post-civil rights’ or ‘post-racial’ era (Oziewicz). For one of the contributing editors of *The Washington Monthly*,

> Obama . . . couldn’t have been more different than that of the veteran black politicians that have come before him. Unlike the Ivy League-educated Obama, most of that older generation of black politicians came to elected office in the wake of the civil rights movement in the only way that was open to them, as mayors or congressmen representing constituencies that are mostly black (Wallace-Wells).

In addition, Siddhartha Mitter heralds the political star because he seems to represent the ‘new’ voice of Black politics.

> Free of the hang-ups and hangovers of the 1960s . . . He can sidestep the debates about whether he’s sufficiently black (for the militants) or too black (for the assimilationists) . . . Obama’s rise to prominence has put a public face on a new generation ascending to power, among whom racial mixing (black, white, other) is increasingly common; a generation of shades of brown and more boxes to choose from on the census form.

*Pace* Mitter, Obama has been forced to address questions about his ‘blackness’. In 2000, he lost a congressional race—by a two-to-one margin—to Bobby Rush, a former Black Panther who labelled Obama an ‘elitist’ out of touch with the African American community in Chicago’s South Side. Anticipating this form of attack, Obama made sure that his memoir (first published in 1995) defined his role as a crusading race man against the romantic racism of his white mother and the post-racial talk of naïve youngsters.

> While fondly remembering his mother’s insistence that the family celebrated Black role models such as Sidney Poitier and Lena Horne (50-51), Obama also emphasised his unease with her gleeful consumption of Afro-Brazilian colour.

> The depiction of childlike blacks [in *Black Orpheus* (1959)] . . . was what my mother had carried with her to Hawaii all those years before, a reflection of the simple fantasies that had been forgiven to a white middle class girl from Kansas, the promise of another life: warm, sensual, exotic, different (114).

It is useful to compare such intriguing comments to Philippa Schuyler (the daughter of George Schuyler, an iconoclastic African American writer, and Josephine Cogdell Schuyler,
a white artist from Texas), who detested the ways *Black Orpheus* portrayed ‘the Negro’ as ‘a simple child of nature.’ Obama’s comments also seem to challenge Bill Cosby, who exoticised the Negro folk depicted in *Black Orpheus* when he caddishly recalled a brown-skinned Brazilian beauty from the film in an episode of *The Cosby Show*. However, Obama used his memoir to tie his identity to race men like Cosby he grew up watching on TV, and ridicules ‘brown girls’ like Joyce who chose a biracial identity.

‘It’s not white people who are making me choose. Maybe it used to be that way, but now they’re willing to treat me like a person. No—it’s black people who always have to make everything racial. They’re the ones who are telling me that I can’t be what I am . . .’

They, they, they. That was the problem with people like Joyce. They talked about the richness of their multicultural heritage and it sounded real good, until you noticed that they avoided black people. It wasn’t a matter of conscious choice, necessarily, just a matter of gravitational pull, the way integration always worked, a one-way street. The minority assimilated into the dominant culture, not the other way around. Only white culture could be neutral and objective. Only white culture could be nonracial, willing to adopt the occasional exotic into its ranks. Only white culture had individuals. And we, the half-breeds and the college-degreed, take a survey of the situation and think to ourselves, why should we get lumped in with the losers if we don’t have to?

We become only so grateful to lose ourselves in the crowd, America’s happy, faceless marketplace and we’re never so outraged as when a cabbie drives past us or the woman in the elevator clutches her purse, not so much because we’re bothered by the fact that such indignities are what less fortunate coloreds have to put up with every single day of their lives—although that’s what we tell ourselves—but because we’re wearing a Brooks Brothers suit and speak impeccable English and yet have somehow been mistaken for an ordinary nigger.

Don’t you know who I am? I’m an individual (92)!

This lengthy extract relies on white/black, winner/loser binaries, and fails to conceptualise how people who deny a singular Black identity might, for example, spend time learning about Chinese culture rather than trying to assimilate into ‘white culture’. Pointedly, it also reveals how he quickly moved from denouncing ‘people like Joyce’ to confronting the all-embracing ‘we’ of his own guilty thoughts. Obama not only defined his adult self against a feminized mixed-race identity — he ended up critiquing the young man in the Brooks Brothers suit who thinks he can integrate (or ingratiate himself) into a ‘multicultural marketplace.’

With a bit of money, I was free to live like most middle class blacks in Manhattan, free to choose a motif around which to organize my life, free to patch together a collage of styles,
friends, watering holes, political affiliations. I sensed, though, that at some stage—maybe when you had children and decided you could stay in the city only at the cost of a private school, or when you began taking cabs at night to avoid the subways, or when you decided that you needed a doorman in your apartment building—your choice was irrevocable, the divide was now impassable, and you would find yourself on the side of the line that you’d never intended to be on (112).

So, aside from developing his race man persona against his white mother, mixed-race women and his time as a student in chic, cosmopolitan areas of New York, Obama’s memoir mentions that he avoided playing basketball like ‘white boys’ and rejected a white girlfriend who could not live in a ‘black world’ or raise black children (ix, 195). The gentle reader is left with little doubt that Obama is flexing a muscular identity that reflects Malcolm X and W.E.B. Du Bois — sons of Africa who can be sold to Black America with Black wives by their side (203).

Malcolm X’s self-fashioning involved acknowledging his own light-skinned privilege while adopting a strident masculine tone. He created a race man persona that attacked ‘White devils’ who were thought to have raped his (Black) ancestors, and sneered at the children of interracial relationships (‘mongrel-complexioned children’, ‘racial freaks’) who could not accept his vision of an evil white culture and blameless black culture (341, 351). For Obama, only Malcolm X’s autobiography seemed to offer something different. His repeated acts of self-creation spoke to me ... one line in the book stayed me. He spoke of a wish he’d once had, the wish that the white blood that ran through him, there by an act of violence, might somehow be expunged ... I knew that traveling down the road to self-respect my own white blood would never recede in to mere abstraction. I was left to wonder what else I would be severing if and when I left my mother and my grandparents at some uncharted border (33, 86).

The largest section of Obama’s memoir provides more examples of existential angst as he tries to present a decidedly African American image and lists his credentials as an activist in Chicago’s ‘urban’ districts. Writers for The New Yorker can be charmed by a young man sinking some roots into one of the most segregated cities in America, and shedding an identity that seemed ‘too cosmopolitan’ for an (African) American politician (Finnegan). Yet
while he obtained folksy anecdotes that would serve him well on the campaign trail, Obama still recorded his discomfort with some of the rhetoric of Black nationalists. When they seemed sure, ‘it’s about blood . . . looking after your own. Period. Black people are the only ones stupid enough to worry about their enemies’, Obama believed that their creeds contradicted the morality my mother had taught me, a morality of subtle distinctions—between individuals of good will and those who wished me ill, between active malice and ignorance or indifference. I had a personal stake in that moral framework; I’d discovered that I couldn’t escape it if I tried. And yet perhaps it was a framework that blacks in this country could no longer afford; perhaps it weakened black resolve, encouraged confusion within the ranks. If nationalism could create a strong and effective insularity, deliver on its promise of self-respect, then the hurt it might cause well-meaning whites, or the inner turmoil it caused people like me, would be of little consequence (189, 184).

In arguing that most blacks could reasonably reject his mother’s moral framework, Obama actually ends up constructing ‘his people’ as simple(r) blacks, replicating some of X’s demagogic rhetoric and the romantic racism that he had earlier projected onto his mother. Yet one can also observe how the words of Obama, the first African American president of the Harvard Law Review, evoke W.E.B Du Bois, the first African American to obtain a Ph.D. from Harvard. In his pursuit of a Black identity Obama claimed that his ‘inner turmoil’ was irrelevant; Du Bois constructed a self that rejected ‘inner racial distinctions’.

Others pointed out that I was not a ‘Negro,’ but a mulatto; that I was not a Southerner but a Northerner, and my object was to be an American and not a Negro; that race distinctions must go, I agreed with this in part, but I saw it leading to inner racial distinction in the colored group. I resented the defensive mechanism of avoiding too dark companions in order to escape notice and discrimination in public. As a sheer matter of taste I wanted the color of my group to be visible (1971:101-102).

It also bears repetition that Du Bois stigmatized ‘off-white women’ in order to buttress his self-fashioning as a masculine hero to the race. Even though he married a light-skinned woman who could have passed as Spanish, Du Bois told his readers that he refused to court women who were not dark enough to convince strangers that they were black (1986: 628). He deemed such a course of action necessary because Marcus Garvey, someone Du Bois
considered a bête noire, gained support for his Universal Improvement Agency (UNIA) by opposing further ‘dilution.’

The types in our race should not be blameable to our generation, but to the abuse and advantage taken of us in the past; but that should not be reason for us to further open ourselves to a continuation of this abuse and thereby wreck our racial pride and self-respect. The UNIA believes that the time has come for us to call a halt, and thus steady ourselves on the basis of race and not be allowed to drift along in the world as the outcasts or lepers of society, to be laughed at by every other race beneath their social breath (56).

Newspapers inspired by Garvey would even announce,

Where a black man marries a mulatto or half breed he strikes a greater blow than white people could ever strike for the degradation, dishonor, and enslavement of the black race...Mulatto women are the greatest saboteurs and fifth-columnists among our race. They corrupt and debauch the moral character of black men (Negro Youth, April 1941).

Nonetheless, Garvey did not specifically attack Du Bois’ other half. Since his own wife was, by his own definition, a ‘racial hybrid’, Garvey would only insinuate that Du Bois emphasised his French and Dutch ancestry because he was ashamed of a Negro identity (Negro World, January 8, 1921). In short, critical race scholars need not reflect Du Bois’s assumptions about the neurotic racial identities of ‘octooons and quadroons’ – as David Levering Lewis does in his Pulitzer-prize winning biography (234). It is also possible to interpret Du Bois’s rhetorical tactics as a strategy to secure his position as a Negro race leader when, after relying on a largely Eurocentric position to attack Garvey as a ‘little, fat, black man; ugly but with intelligent eyes and a big head’, he brought up Walter White’s light skin tone while questioning his ability to lead the NAACP (The Crisis, May 1924).

As much as Obama follows Du Bois and crafts a race man persona against a feminized and infantilized mixed-race identity, Du Bois’s willingness to use non-conciliatory language in the public sphere reveals significant differences between the two men. For while Du Bois promoted Marxist philosophy, Obama chose to embrace an American ideology that put enough distance between himself and ‘those Communists who peddle their newspapers on the fringes of various college towns (ix).’ Unsurprisingly, various intellectuals linked to
America’s labour movement have condemned Obama and his supposedly ‘vacuous declarations of faith in national-narcissist moral and ideological space (Street).’ This critique cannot be ignored when Obama appealed to the schmaltz of the 2004 Democratic National Convention with a keynote speech that dismissed talk of a ‘black America and a white America’ in favour of praising infantile citizens like ‘Shamus’ from East Molina, Illinois.

He was a good-looking kid, six-two or six-three, clear eyed with an easy smile. He told me he’d joined the marines and was heading to Iraq the following week. As I listened to him explain why he’d enlisted, his absolute faith in the country and its leaders, his devotion to duty and service, I thought this young man was all any of us might hope for in a child.

As noted by Lauren Berlant, George M. Pullman Professor in the English Department at the University of Chicago, American politicians and consumers crave ‘infantile citizens’ such as Shamus, Forrest Gump or Lisa Simpson — foetuses, children or immigrants who, ironically, are often unable to vote — because they can enter the public sphere as innocent icons pledging their life to a pet cause.

With that said, Obama was forced to recalibrate his public persona even further after his keynote speech to the Democratic National Convention in 2004. Although the race man in his 1995 memoir emphasised African American citizens of Chicago who ‘contradicted’ his mother’s morality, the viable presidential candidate of the twenty-first century claimed to have kept hearing his mother’s values expressed when he moved to the city (Schmidt). He advertised the race of his mother when he was booked on televised talk shows to promote the revised version of memoir (Tonight Show), just as he was only able to hang his head — and patiently wait for another chance to plug his best-selling book — when American icons such as Barbara Walters gushed over a black representative who seemed ‘eloquent’ and told him that he was ‘black with white blood (View).’ Indeed, after numerous articles credited Obama’s achievements to his mother (Steele; Bamburg), Obama responded to the hysteria surrounding his association with the ‘militant’ Rev. Wright with a speech on ‘A More Perfect
Union’ that not only distanced himself from Black nationalism (limiting it to the frustrated ambitions of older generations), but also chose to advertise his mother’s race and his family’s ‘white blood’. Speaking to *Time* magazine, Obama has even claimed that he kept remembering his mother and her suspicions of ‘the more aggressive or militant approaches to African American politics’ while he constructed the speech (Ripley). As the (younger) Obama well knew, this rhetoric left liberal commentators free to attack the ‘imposition’ of a Black label on Obama that supposedly denied her existence (Alibhai-Brown; Aaronovitch), and encouraged white activists to invoke his mother’s skin tone when they encountered other white people who were unsure about voting for a non-white president. According to ‘SuzeNYC’, she met the wariness of white racists by reminding them, ‘Barack’s mom looked a lot like me. I wish that you would take a closer look at the man and try to see deeper than his skin color.’ Alas, the desire to talk about ‘white blood’ is not confined to journalists and young activists on a tight deadline. Writers such as Lori Andrews, Distinguished Professor of Law at Chicago Kent College of Law, and Stephen Dubner, feature writer at *The New York Times*, have also used the term in best-selling books that emerged shortly after the publication of *Dreams From My Father*. Consequently, it is imperative that we mine their words for insight into the insistent demands that Obama honours his ‘white blood’.

Lori Andrews’s *Black Power, White Blood* attempts to tell the story of Johnny Spain, one of the San Quentin Six accused of murder following an alleged prison break by the Black Power activist George Jackson. It begins by telling the reader about the plight of Spain’s white mother and her decision to give him up for adoption in 1949. However, the vast majority of her book dwells on Spain’s rejection of whiteness in a ‘totally black community’ rather than his mother’s unwillingness to challenge racism within a predominantly white community (38, 192). Andrews’ premise is that mixed-race individuals need to acknowledge — and grow to love — their ‘white blood’ so that they can be promoted as responsible
American citizens. To do so, she cites evidence that blames Spain’s violence on the ‘warring images’ of black and white in his body, and celebrates his attempts to bring black and white inmates together in a football game (76, 235, 265). This is an appealing narrative in American culture (DeMott) and executives at Columbia Pictures were excited about the possibility of re-hashing the cinematic cliché of multiracial fraternity in prison when they bought the rights to film *Black Power, White Blood* in the 1990s. After Spain told journalists that he could be a dark-skinned white man as much as a light-skinned black man, some executives even asked Kevin Costner (fresh from his success as a white soldier who ‘goes Native’ in *Dances with Wolves*) to play the lead role (Cleaver). Last but not least, one can find reviewers of *Black Power, White Blood* at Amazon’s online bookstore hoping that a biography written by a white female law professor can influence ‘mixed race men in the same way that Malcolm X’s autobiography has influenced monoracial black men (though X was one-quarter white) (Mingo).’

The fate of mixed-race role models also arouses Stephen Dubner. In *Confessions of a Hero-Worshipper*, Dubner reveals that he also grew up loving Franco Harris, a former Pittsburgh Steeler best-known for his ‘immaculate reception’ of 1972, one of the most famous plays in American football. With an Italian American mother and an African American father, Harris’s success on the football field offered hope to a racially divided city and became a powerful role model for Stephen Dubner after the death of his father in 1973. *Confessions* begins by recalling a ten-year-old child signing his name Franco Dubner and goes on to describe the author’s quest to reacquaint himself with his childhood idol after seeing his picture on the front cover of *Black Enterprise* magazine. Yet Dubner was unable to tackle the private life of the former running back. Clues about Dubner’s aggressive indifference to Black culture can be found in his first book, *Turbulent Souls: A Catholic Son’s Return to his Jewish Family*, in which he describes his time in a band that used ‘the
word ‘soul’ with abandon’ but could only think of white musical influences (‘Buddy Holly, the Rolling Stones, Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan (151, 168)’). Dubner probes further in his second book and admits his fear of black bodies, recounting a time he shied away from speaking to Harris when he was with a large group of black males (155). Ultimately, Harris becomes a means for Dubner to elucidate his own ‘off-white’ identity, with the author comparing the former pro athlete to a Moorish sheik and a ‘quintessentially Jewish hero’ like an Old Testament prophet or Superman (23, 34) – even though Harris was named an all-American in college, Dubner refuses to label the mixed-race star an all-American because he does not fit the blond, blue-eyed stereotype (174). Such amateur psychology might help readers understand Dubner’s private fantasies and some of the ways in which American social commentators tied people of mixed race to Jewish immigration during the jazz age (especially when the first talking picture depicted Al Jolson in blackface). They omit to mention that Malcolm X and other African American activist-intellectuals have tirelessly rejected attempts to treat blond hair and blue-eyes as synonyms for all-American heroism.

Mario van Peebles has provided one of the most recent depictions of X (in Ali (2001)), and his personal odyssey offers another interesting guide to Obama’s relationship to race men and ‘white blood’. In his writings, Van Peebles acknowledges that he likes to travel with his white mother to exotic locations as much as embark on a project of work with his father (the director of Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song (1971), the first ‘Black Power movie’), and savours racial clichés about a hippie mother who turned him on to ‘the arts, ecology, peaceful protest … Bob Dylan … and the zen of mat surfing (2004: 54).’ Nonetheless, he has not been willing to provide any descriptions of politically informed white women in his films. Like his father, Van Peebles depicts a Third World Movement sticking it to the (White) ‘Man’ that had room for some white male hipsters and gay men, but he finds it extremely difficult to show white women as anything other than sexual objects for black
studis. In fact, when he bought the rights to his father’s story of *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, Mario simply depicted his father’s interracial orgies and showed a white woman quitting his father’s film crew because he demanded ‘Third World’ representation (i.e. a crew in which 50% of the people could define themselves as Black, Asian or Latino). Despite the fact that his father obtained at least one sexually transmitted disease while shooting *Sweetback* (Ibid. 105), Van Peebles is unable to consider the possibility that a woman might have quit the set of *Sweetback* because of his father’s promiscuity or a lack of female crewmembers.

Melvin and Mario Van Peebles have also found it difficult to empathise with ‘mulattas’ that they link to an ‘off-white’ identity. In the lead up to the only extended silence in their commentary to *Baadasssss* (2003), Melvin Van Peebles remarks that black women were not allowed to be objects of desire in American film before *Sweetback* when his son interjects and reminds him that Dorothy Dandridge was allowed to be a sexy black woman. After blurting out, ‘Yes, but she was …’, Van Peebles père is unable, or unwilling, to say anymore. While he had previously described Dorothy Dandridge’s beauty in his books (1990: 87), he cannot articulate his belief that she is marked as one of those blacks – like Helga Crane and his own son – who seem ‘a little different’ because of a skin tone that signifies membership in a ‘mulatto elite’ rather than ‘authentic blackness’. Thus, it should come as no surprise that Van Peebles fils distances himself from his ‘naïve’ younger self and ‘high-yellow’ women in *No Identity Crisis: a Father and Son’s Own Story of Working Together* (26-27). To be more precise, he employs the same metaphors Obama would later use, renouncing ‘the token Ivy League, Brooks Brothers me’, who he equates to ‘almost White’ models ‘like Vanessa Williams or Lena Horne (14, 68).’

Armond White, chief cultural critic at *The New York Press*, has little time for the tired cliché of the tragic mulatto (2003). This does not mean that his writing always avoids some
stale stereotypes – he invokes the soul-destroying white mother popular in the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and 70s when he pithily dismisses Van Peebles Jr. as an epigone unable to capture the revolutionary sentiment of his father because ‘Oedipus wrecks’ (2004). Nonetheless, his elliptical articles deserve critical engagement because of his ‘principled, spirited, and tenacious engagement’ with the public sphere (Lott 1995: 65). Moreover, his critique of Will Smith in the ‘age of Obama’ helps us analyse the President’s performativity without invoking a peer who has a white mother. The son of two parents racialized as black, Smith shares Obama’s pursuit of racial identifications that do not polarize and, according to White, ‘their black, white and in-between appeal has a beige complexion’ (2008). White’s metaphor is apt since a beige identity surely connotes comfort and consumerism like a couch from IKEA and both men cultivate an inoffensive persona ‘associated with non-threatening ideology.’ Whether they draw currency from a popular Anglo surname or an exotic one, a slick electoral campaign or a superficial sci-fi spectacle, White is left seething at the personas that turn the social responsibility of earlier Black activists into advertisements for personal advancement.

Whether it involves media moguls hoping to prove Obama’s worth to a New World Order, or cultural critics lamenting his failure to uphold the ideals of Black Power, the discussion of Obama’s post-blackness, racial authenticity and liminality only tends to scratch the surface of race in the twenty-first century. We now need more sustained discussions of Obama’s strategic employment of race men and ‘white blood’ in a public sphere that often sacrifices rational-critical discussion in favour of charismatic celebrities who can sell change without dismantling society’s deep attachment to racial myths. Even if President Obama is comfortable espousing essentialist notions about ‘white blood’, his self-fashioning as a writer who performs a vision of Black masculintity and a non-threatening, off-white candidate who
relies on the rhetoric of corporate multiculturalism, is a colourful example of the social construction of race that cannot be left to the conventions of Hollywood.
For more on Walters’ long-standing fears regarding a militant Black identity – and desire for a peaceful solution to America’s race problem that doesn’t harm herself, or any other ‘agents of capitalism’ – see Wolfe 87-88.