

President Obama and the Polymorphous "Other" in U.S. Political Discourse

Claire Jean Kim[†]

At the Asian American Law Journal Symposium at Berkeley Law last spring,¹ I displayed two pictures from two presidential contests twenty years apart. Only a few in the audience, composed mostly of twenty-something-year-old law students, recognized the first picture as a mug shot of Willie Horton, the black convicted felon featured in the Republican television ad that helped sink Democrat Michael Dukakis' presidential bid in 1988.² They did, however, recognize the second picture: the July 2008 cover of the *New Yorker* featuring Barack Obama and Michelle Obama dressed as a Muslim and a militant (Black Panther?) respectively. Barack is giving Michelle what FOX news anchor E.D. Hill called a "terrorist fist jab";³ Osama bin Laden's portrait hangs over the mantel; and the American flag burns in the fireplace.

Both pictures capture historic moments in which race emerged as a potent force in American electoral politics. Both give voice to conservative fears about the kind of threats to which liberals are leaving the nation vulnerable—in the first case, recidivist crime by the incorrigible black felon; in the second case, an inside takeover at the highest level of power by Islamic terrorists posing as the American President and the First Lady. I suggest that juxtaposing these two pictures, these snapshots from presidential contests twenty years apart, tells us something important about shifting notions of race, religion, and the Nation in the new millennium. These changing notions, burnished in the course of partisan political struggle, intimate the seemingly contradictory point that "the Other" in U.S. political discourse is a continuously shifting form even as it stays eerily the same.

[†] Departments of Political Science and Asian American Studies, University of California, Irvine.

¹ Symposium, *Criminalizing Immigrants: Historical and Modern Perspectives*, (Mar. 12, 2010).

² Llehman84, *Willie Horton 1988 Attack Ad*, YouTube (Nov. 3, 2008), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lo9KMSSEZ0Y&feature=related>.

³ *Fox News Changes: "Terrorist Fist Jab" Anchor E.D. Hill Loses Her Show*, Laura Ingraham *In At 5PM*, HUFFINGTON POST, June 18, 2008, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/06/10/fox-news-changes-terroris_n_106306.html.

TWO MOMENTS IN TIME

The picture of Willie Horton takes us back to the 1980s when public arguments about black "pathology" reached a fever pitch.⁴ As ideas from the discredited Moynihan Report of 1965 percolated back into legitimacy, shoring up claims that the problem was black people's choices rather than structural racism of any kind, officials in the Reagan administration sharpened their attacks on so-called "welfare queens" who supposedly led lives of luxurious consumption on the backs of hardworking, taxpaying (read: white) Americans. The publication of William Julius Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* in 1987 did not so much clear new ground as it did sum up the decade's conventional wisdom (fashioned by conservatives and liberals alike) that black social pathology was the proximate cause of black economic marginalization and deepening economic inequalities in the United States. As conservatives had hoped, sustained official rhetoric about black pathology eroded support for affirmative action. In *Richmond v. Croson*, the U.S. Supreme Court applied the "strict scrutiny" standard to a "benign" (remedial as opposed to discriminatory) racial classification for the first time, striking down the City of Richmond's minority set-aside programs—designed to remedy anti-black discrimination—as unconstitutional.⁵ This was only a year after Republicans used the Willie Horton ad to raise the specter of the black male rapist and to fatally tar Governor Michael Dukakis as soft on crime. It was a fitting bookend to the decade when North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms defeated black challenger Harvey Gantt with the "hands ad," which featured a white man's hands crumpling up a job rejection letter in mute fury and helplessness while his plight is attributed to racial quotas set up to benefit blacks.⁶ Looking back, it is clear that the 1980s saw a surge of conservative efforts to reverse the equality-promoting policies of the 1960s and 1970s under the legitimating mantle of colorblindness. In part, this entailed painting Democrats like Dukakis and Gantt as wrong on crime, welfare, and affirmative action—that is, as too soft on blacks, whose pathologies threatened the physical safety, financial health, and personal dignity of real Americans.

Scroll forward to 2008. Obama's campaign, benefiting from Bill Clinton and the Democratic Leadership Council's strategy of neutralizing race-inflected issues such as crime, welfare, and affirmative action, found

4. See ADOLPH REED, JR., STIRRINGS IN THE JUG: BLACK POLITICS IN THE POST-SEGREGATION ERA 205 (1999).

5. *Richmond v. J.A. Croson Co.*, 488 U.S. 469, 472 (1989); see KIMBERLE CRENSHAW & GARY PELLER, *Reel Time/Real Justice*, in *READING RODNEY KING/READING URBAN UPRISING* 56-70 (Robert Gooding-Williams ed., 1993).

6. SnakesOnABlog, *Jesse Helms "Hands" Ad*, YouTube (Oct. 16, 2006), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIyewCdXMzk>.

itself negotiating an altered political terrain where these issues, which had bedeviled Democratic candidates for decades, were barely raised. War, terrorism, and the economy dominated the campaign season. Indeed, efforts by Obama's opponents to racialize him in conventional ways seemed to fall flat, perhaps due to Obama's obvious intelligence and Ivy League education. When Hillary Clinton's campaign insinuated that Obama might have been a cocaine dealer in the past and Geraldine Ferraro suggested that Obama only got to where he was because of affirmative action, there was no apparent payoff for the Clinton campaign.⁷ Questions about Obama's own racial identification arose early on, partially with regard to his distant relationship with much of the black political establishment that had initially lined up behind Clinton: Was he too black? Was he black enough?⁸ These murmurings about Obama's racial proclivities crescendoed to a climax with the Reverend Wright scandal, but subsided after his speech on race in Philadelphia on March 18.⁹ Ironically, the Reverend Wright scandal may have worked to Obama's advantage in that the question of what role his race played—Would he favor blacks over whites? Would he, once in office, throw off his mild demeanor and reveal himself as the avenging angel of black supremacy?—was to some extent aired and dealt with in the primary season, neutralizing it as a potential weapon for John McCain in the general election.

If the old race-inflected strategies found no traction against candidate Obama, a new and powerful one did. This manifested in the construction of Obama as a foreign-born, radical Muslim militant bent on the Nation's destruction. In a post-9/11 racial climate marked by collective anxiety about terrorist attacks, color-coded warnings issued by the Department of Homeland Security that did little to dispel this anxiety, and debates about the permissibility of torture and waterboarding, Obama was sketched, indirectly by Clinton and aggressively by Republican opponents, as an agent of that nebulous enemy, "radical Islam." It is interesting that while Democratic U.S. Senator John Kerry was "swiftboated" during his 2004 presidential run—that is, his military record and patriotism were impugned—he was not painted as a foreign agent or Communist

7. Jonathan Stein, *Clinton Supporter Raises Idea of Young Obama Dealing Drugs*, MOTHER JONES, Dec. 12, 2007, <http://motherjones.com/mojo/2007/12/clinton-supporter-raises-idea-young-obama-dealing-drugs>; see *Obama Ferraro Race Flap Roils Race*, HUFFINGTON POST, Mar. 11, 2008, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/11/obama-ferraro-race-flap-r_n_91047.html.

8. See Ta-Nehisi Paul Coates, *Is Obama Black Enough?*, TIME, Feb. 1 2007, available at <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1584736,00.html>.

9. Barack Obama, U.S. Senator, Speech on Race in Philadelphia (Mar. 18, 2008), in N.Y. TIMES (Mar. 18, 2008), available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/18/us/politics/18text-obama.html>; see Democracy Now!, http://www.democracynow.org/2008/4/30/the_politics_of_the_rev_wright (discussing the Reverend Wright controversy).

sympathizer, let alone an Islamic warrior.¹⁰ Obama's opponents, on the other hand, questioned why he did not place his hand on his heart during the playing of the national anthem at Tom Harkin's Iowa steak fry in 2007.¹¹ They challenged him for not wearing a flag pin on his lapel.¹² They wondered aloud whether he took his U.S. Senate oath of office on the Koran rather than the Bible.¹³ They accused him of forging his birth certificate and faking his U.S. citizenship.¹⁴ Hillary Clinton declined to counter the swirl of rumors. Asked by an interviewer from *60 Minutes* whether she thought Obama was a Muslim, she ambiguously responded, "No, as far as I know."¹⁵ Conservatives were less delicate about the matter. FOX News commentators pretended to misspeak, saying "Osama" instead of "Obama." Speakers at McCain rallies lingered contemptuously over Obama's middle name, "Hussein," as if the very word connoted treachery. Palin accused Obama of "palling around with terrorists," and although her proximate reference was to William Ayers of the Weather Underground, her comments ricocheted loudly and in all likelihood deliberately against the described backdrop.¹⁶ This was the Islamophobic (and nativist) frenzy satirized by the *New Yorker* cover. Michael Dukakis was soft on crime, but Obama was an agent of America's arch-nemesis, an outsider seeking to worm his way into the highest office in the land.

The juxtaposition of these two historical moments prompts me to offer three observations: (1) the new racialized category of "suspected terrorists," (2) the recuperation of blackness in association with foreignness, and (3) the synergistic tropes of political denunciation.

"SUSPECTED TERRORISTS" AS THE NEW BLACKS

First, it seems clear that what the white Americans imagined as the pre-eminent racialized threat is no longer seen as black in color or as a purely domestic problem. Through the 1980s, the black violent criminal and the black welfare queen who haunted the white American imagination were never conceived of as agents of foreign powers. Indeed, as I have

10. BattleCryOfFreedom, *Swiftboat Veterans Ad on John Kerry—Sellout* (2004), YouTube (Nov. 8, 2006), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phqOuEhg9yE>.

11. David Emery, *Urban Legends: Barack Obama Refuses to Salute Flag, Anthem?*, ABOUT.COM, <http://urbanlegends.about.com/b/2007/10/30/barack-obama-no-hand-over-heart-during-national-anthem.htm>.

12. Jay Newton-Small, *Obama's Flag Pin Flip-Flop?*, TIME, May 14, 2008, available at <http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1779544,00.html>.

13. Angie Drobnic Holan, *Obama Used a Koran? No, He Didn't*, POLITIFACT, Dec. 20, 2007, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2007/dec/20/chain-email-gets-obama-religion-wrong/>.

14. See discussion of "birthers" below.

15. KarmicSpirit, *Hillary Clinton: "As Far As I Know"*, YouTube (Mar. 2, 2008), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7eAnx6Vxrs>.

16. Associated Press, *Palin: Obama 'Palling Around' With Terrorists*, YouTube (Oct. 5, 2008), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbgsW04uqbU>.

argued elsewhere, blacks have been constructed historically in the United States as an almost entirely domestic menace, in sharp contradistinction to Latinos and Asian Americans who have been imagined as agents plotting the ascendancy of their (or their ancestors') homelands from within U.S. borders.¹⁷

Since 9/11, a watershed moment in American racial dynamics, a master threat narrative that is centered upon Arabs, Muslims, and those who look like they might belong to either or both of these groups has emerged. Although Arabs are technically white by the U.S. classification system and Muslim denotes a religious rather than racial categorization, there is an undeniable racial cast to this threat: all Arabs and/or Muslims have become suspect, as has anyone with brown skin (including Latinos, South Asians, Native Americans, etc.).¹⁸ The most egregious stories about racial profiling by U.S. officials are no longer those about "driving while black" but about "flying while brown."¹⁹ Unmoored from ethnic, linguistic, and religious referents, the racial category of "suspected terrorist" has emerged in force in American life under the protective aegis of the Patriot Act.

Conservatives still wax on about government spending on minorities, but they have a new bogeyman now: the Al Qaeda-trained terrorist residing in disguise among Americans and plotting the total destruction of Western civilization.²⁰ Consider the following examples: the revision of Oklahoma's constitution forbidding courts from considering Islamic or Sharia law; Pastor Terry Jones' plan to burn copies of the Koran in Gainesville, Florida on the anniversary of 9/11; rumors that the Islamic community center being built in lower Manhattan was a "victory mosque" for the 9/11 hijackers—all of these developments suggest the emergence of a new racialized nemesis in American political discourse, a trend *Time* magazine made note of by asking on its August 30, 2010 cover, "Is America Islamophobic?"²¹ The American public's acceptance of the curtailment of civil liberties, the practices of waterboarding and the like, and the deadly and costly wars in

17. See Claire Jean Kim, *The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans*, 27 *POLITICS & SOC'Y* 105, 105-38 (1999).

18. See generally AMANEY JAMAL & NADINE NABER, *RACE AND ARAB AMERICANS BEFORE AND AFTER 9/11: FROM INVISIBLE CITIZENS TO VISIBLE SUBJECTS* (2008).

19. Danios, *Is Flying While Brown the New Driving While Black?*, LOONWATCH, Jan. 3, 2010, <http://www.loonwatch.com/2010/01/flying-while-brown/>.

20. See Conclusion.

21. Nolan Clay & Carla Hilton, *Federal Judge Keeps Sharia Law Restriction Out of Oklahoma Constitution*, NEWSOK, Nov. 30, 2010, <http://newsok.com/federal-judge-keeps-sharia-law-restriction-out-of-oklahoma-constitution/article/3519080>; Russel Goldman, *Who is Terry Jone? Pastor Behind 'Burn a Koran Day'*, ABCNEWS, Sept. 7, 2010, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/terry-jones-pastor-burn-koran-day/story?id=11575665>; Jeremy P. Jacobs, *Republican Calls Ground Zero Mosque a "Victory Mosque" for Terrorists*, NATIONALJOURNAL, Sept. 22, 2010, http://hotlineoncall.nationaljournal.com/archives/2010/09/republican_call.php.

Iraq and Afghanistan (based on vague claims about tackling this nemesis, keeping it over there, or striking it at its roots)²² is a measure of how keenly the threat is felt.

THE RECUPERATION OF BLACKNESS IN ASSOCIATION WITH FOREIGNNESS

What was it about candidate Barack Obama that rendered constructions of him as a radical Islamic warrior credible? There were biographical details that lent a touch of foreignness, including the Kenyan immigrant father, the childhood in Hawai'i and Indonesia, and the middle name. It is hard not to believe, too, that race made him susceptible in a way that John Kerry or John Edwards never could be. In conjunction with his exoticized background, his blackness or racial otherness rendered him already suspect so that the racialized category of Arab/Muslim/suspected terrorist could be grafted onto him with ease. Even when mostly emptied of conventionally denigrating meanings, the black body, like other "different" bodies, carries a trace of unremitting otherness that permits the attachment of new denigrating meanings upon it. What this juxtaposition of moments points out, then, is a historic shift whereby blackness appears to recede in the face of a new racialized nemesis even as it is simultaneously recharged with lethality by being linked to that nemesis. Blackness has not disappeared as a sign of otherness in recent times but has been recuperated and made foreign, un-American, and un-Christian in a new regime of racial signification emerging in the United States. The widely-publicized arrests of two African men in recent Christmas-season bombing attempts—Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a Nigerian, in 2009 and Mohamed Osman Mohamud, a naturalized U.S. citizen of Somalian origins, in 2010—helps to cement this association.²³

Even a brief look at the Tea Party movement and the "birther" movement, two right-wing projects that emerged in response to Obama's candidacy and presidency, is instructive here. As revealed in a recent report commissioned by the NAACP entitled *Tea Party Nationalism*, there is a good deal of overlap among two collectives: Tea Party factions and the birthers, on the one hand; and other longstanding white supremacist organizations, nativist groups, and white militia groups, on the other.²⁴ The

22. Taking the Fight to the Terrorists, http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Taking_the_fight_to_the_terrorists (last visited Oct. 17, 2011).

23. Report: Failures in Christmas Attack Mirror 9/11, CBSNEWS, May 18, 2010, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/05/18/national/main6496428.shtml?tag=cbsnews>MainColumnArea>.

24. See generally DEVIN BURGHART & LEONARD ZESKIND, INST. FOR RESEARCH & EDUC. ON HUMAN RIGHTS, *TEA PARTY NATIONALISM: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE TEA PARTY MOVEMENT AND THE SIZE, SCOPE, AND FOCUS OF ITS NATIONAL FACTIONS* (2010).

birthers claim that Obama is not a "natural born citizen" as Article II of the U.S. Constitution requires the President to be, and that his presidency is therefore illegitimate and unlawful. Some birthers, arguing that "natural born" means native-born, say that Obama was born in Kenya or Indonesia rather than Hawai'i and that his birth certificate has been forged or altered to conceal this fact. Others, in arguing against U.S. Supreme Court precedent that "natural born" means born of two citizen parents, say that Obama is a British subject because his Kenyan-born father was a British subject at the time of Obama's birth. The birthers lobbied electors in the electoral college not to confirm Obama as president, use talk radio and conservative websites to maintain a steady drumbeat of accusations about his citizenship status and legitimacy as president, write letters to local papers across the country, organized a letter-writing campaign to the U.S. Supreme Court, run billboards that say "Where's the birth certificate?" in various locales, and have initiated over a dozen lawsuits in more than eight states seeking to disqualify Obama from office or compel him to release more birth-certifying documents.²⁵

Signs and slogans at Tea Party rallies across the nation reflect a similar dynamic of simultaneously backgrounding Obama's blackness and recuperating it through association with a lethal foreignness. Consider the following signs: "Impeach the Kenyan"; "Go trash your father's crappy country/Don't trash my father's GREAT COUNTRY/God bless America! Damn Obama!"; or "STAND IDLY BY WHILE SOME KENYAN TRIES TO DESTROY AMERICA? WAP!! I DON'T THINK SO!! HOMEY DON'T PLAY DAT!!! [sic]" Then there is one where Obama is drawn kneeling in front of an Arab sheik and the caption reads: "OBAMA was NOT bowing. He was SUCKING Saudi JEWELS!" Or the one where Obama is pictured waving to a group of weapons-toting Islamic extremists standing in front of the Twin Towers while he says, "Whoa boys! I'll take it from here."²⁶ The last two signs resonate with a comment made by Tea Party affiliate and birther Pamela Geller that Obama is a "Muslim President" whose goal is "appeas[ing] his Islamic overlords."²⁷ Given the nativist tone of these signs, it should come as no surprise that the Tea Party Caucus in Congress strongly supported House Resolution 1868, the

25. The Birthers, <http://www.birthers.org> (last visited Aug. 4, 2011).

26. Anomaly100, *The Tea Party Signs You Won't See On TV*, FREAKOUTNATION, July 18, 2010, <http://freakoutnation.com/2010/07/18/the-tea-pary-signs-you-wont-see-on-tv/>; Mo'KellyReport, <http://mokellyreport.wordpress.com/2010/04/21/tea-party-and-racism-lovers-and-friends-part-ii/> (Apr. 21, 2010, 13:38 EST); Matthew Yglesias, *Racist Signs at Tea Parties*, THINK PROGRESS, Apr. 15, 2009, http://yglesias.thinkprogress.org/2009/04/racist_signs_at_tea_parties/; posting of creat3d to Prison Planet Forum, <http://forum.prisonplanet.com/index.php?topic=99693.0> (Apr. 16, 2009, 12:07 EST); posting of rightwinger to USMessageBoard, <http://www.usmessageboard.com/the-flame-zone/105059-teabaggers-baghurt-by-comic-book-rib-3.html> (Feb. 12, 2010, 18:30 EST).

27. See BURGHART & ZESKIND, *supra* note 24, at 70.

Birthright Citizenship Act of 2009, which would have denied automatic citizenship to those born on U.S. soil.²⁸ The Tea Party's discussions of birthright citizenship; their diatribes against illegals who supposedly drop "anchor babies" in the United States to facilitate family migration; their official and enthusiastic support for SB 1070, Arizona's controversial immigration law—all of these reflect the view that people of color, acting as advance forces for villainous foreign powers, are outgaming the whites and succeeding in their nefarious plot to take what belongs to the whites through stealthy and illegal means. Recuperated as a dangerous foreign figure, Obama gets positioned with shadowy Mexicans and vicious Islamic militants as an arch-enemy of the nation.

Public opinion polls indicate that birther and Tea Party rhetoric about Obama's foreignness and Muslim identity, disseminated online and through conservative talk radio and television programs, have influenced broad segments of the U.S. public. Roughly 18 percent of Americans indicate support for the Tea Party, who went from perceived extremists to bona fide contenders in the period leading up to the midterm elections of 2010.²⁹ A *Daily Kos* poll taken in July 2009, six months after Obama took office, shows that 58 percent of Republicans and 53 percent of Southerners either believed that he was born outside of the United States or were unsure.³⁰ A survey conducted during the following month by Public Policy Polling showed that only 53 percent of Republicans in Virginia thought Obama was native-born.³¹ Moreover, a Pew Research Center poll in July/August 2010 indicates that mistaken beliefs about Obama's religious identity are spreading rather than contracting. Eighteen percent of Americans identified Obama as Muslim, up from 11 percent in March 2009. A full 34 percent of Republicans described Obama as a Muslim. The positive correlation between Obama's perceived Muslim identity and public disapproval regarding his job performance is clear from this poll. The number of respondents who thought Obama was Christian dropped sharply from 48 percent to 34 percent between these two polls. The majority of those who identified him as Muslim cited the media as the source of their information.³²

28. Birthright Citizenship Act of 2009, H.R. 1868, 111th Cong. (2009).

29. See BURGHART & ZESKIND, *supra* note 24, at 8.

30. Kos, *Birthers Are Mostly Republican and Southern*, DAILY KOS, July 31, 2009, <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2009/07/31/760087/-Birthers-are-mostly-Republican-and-Southern>.

31. Jon Ward, *Poll Finds Doubts on Obama's Birth*, WASH. TIMES, Aug. 6, 2009, available at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/aug/06/poll-finds-doubts-on-obamas-birth/>.

32. PEW RESEARCH CTR., GROWING NUMBER OF AMERICANS SAY OBAMA IS A MUSLIM (2010), available at <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1701/poll-obama-muslim-christian-church-out-of-politics-political-leaders-religious>.

SYNERGISTIC TROPES OF POLITICAL DENUNCIATION

Another interesting aspect of the emergent discursive configuration of race is the synergistic linkage of racial tropes with non-racial tropes on the part of Obama's political detractors. Rather than calling him the n-word, they regularly paint him as a foreign-born, radical Muslim and as a usurper who is advancing a Marxist-Fascist-Islamic conspiracy to destroy the private economy, eviscerate the U.S. Constitution, and create a totalitarian state as part of a New World Order. At first glance, these charges may seem preposterous—not to mention internally contradictory—as if his opponents are throwing everything plus the kitchen sink at him, rhetorically speaking. But these seemingly random, catch-all constructions have found a receptive audience among conservatives and many independents as well. Obama's blackness magnifies and is magnified by these other, non-racial tropes about Islam, Communism, and totalitarianism; it works synergistically with them to create the image of the ultimate "Other" whose very existence is inimical to the interests and health of the Nation, all while allowing Obama's detractors to maintain plausible deniability in the age of colorblindness.

Consider again some Tea Party placards. Some make fairly straightforward comparisons between Obama and figures such as Hitler and Lenin. In one display, a picture of Obama with the caption "Democratic Socialism" is situated between a picture of Hitler ("National Socialism") and one of Lenin ("Marxist Socialism").³³ Some signs feature Obama with a Hitlerian mustache. However, the most memorable ones involve overtly synergistic depictions of the President. One couplet of signs reads, "Obama's Plan: White Slavery" and "Congress=Slaveowner, Taxpayer=Nigger" [sic].³⁴ Ostensibly, the signs suggest that the U.S. government is oppressing taxpayers through overspending, but what makes them so startling and therefore effective is not only the use of the (misspelled) racial slur but the racialized reversal: the black President is the slaveowner here, and white taxpayers are the slaves. Another sign that received quite a bit of play during the health care debate features a picture of Obama as an African witch doctor complete with a bone through his nose, a loincloth, and ceremonial headdress.³⁵ The letter "C" in the caption, "OBAMACARE," is a hammer and sickle. Obama is at once an incorrigibly primitive foreigner unacquainted with the ways of modern

33. Baby Nation XO, <http://babynationxo.blogspot.com/> (July 20 2010, 11:51 EST).

34. Krissah Thompson, *NAACP to Vote on Resolution Condemning 'Tea Party' Supporters*, WASHINGTON POST, July 12, 2010, available at <http://www.antifascistencyclopedia.com/allposts/naacp-to-vote-on-resolution-condemning-tea-party-supporters>; James McPherson's Media & Politics Blog, <http://jmcpherson.wordpress.com/> (July 23, 2010, 9:37 EST).

35. Posting of Jen Doll to *Runnin' Scared: A Voice News Blog*, <http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/> (July 14, 2010).

Western medicine, a charlatan hoping to fool those who seek his help, and a Communist dictator using health care as a vehicle for enhancing his totalitarian powers. Then there is the placard featuring Obama made up as the Joker, Batman's arch-nemesis, with the word "SOCIALIST" underneath.³⁶ The image is jarring: Obama in white makeup with smeared red lipstick on his mouth. Unlike Heath Ledger, the white man who played the Joker in the movie *Dark Knight*, Obama is a black man in white face—he is a racial pretender. This is a good example of how Obama's detractors synergistically interweave racial and non-racial tropes and condense them into explosive and unforgettable images that suggest that the President is a threat to the nation on multiple levels.

As a final example, consider this excerpt from a speech made by Tom Tancredo, a former U.S. Congressman from Colorado and 2008 Republican presidential candidate, at the Tea Party national convention in Nashville, Tennessee, in February of 2010:

The revolution has come. It was led by the cult of multiculturalism, aided by leftist liberals all over, who don't have the same ideas about America as we do Then something really odd happened, mostly because, I think, we do not have a civics literacy test before people can vote in this country. People who could not spell the word 'vote,' or say it in English, put a committed socialist ideologue in the White House. His name is Barack *Hussein* Obama.³⁷

Tancredo weaves together a rich tapestry of tropes in this quote. A bloodless revolution has destroyed the nation that ordinary Americans know and love. A Muslim/socialist pretender has ridden into power, aided and abetted by left-wing culture warriors, illiterate minorities who would have been screened out of the voting process under Jim Crow, and colored "illegals" who do not speak English. Tancredo's words are a call to arms: Tea Partiers, let us rise up and take back our country from the villainous coloreds and their terrorist henchman!

CONCLUSION

In a recent *New Yorker* article, Sean Wilentz points out that the ideas advanced by the Tea Party factions about a domestic Communist conspiracy trace back to the John Birch Society's right-wing extremism of the 1960s. It is helpful to be reminded that the rhetoric of Obama's detractors has a long genealogy. Wilentz is not as convincing, however, when he argues that the Tea Party phenomenon has less to do with race and

36. Posting of Steven Mikulan to The Informer, <http://blogs.laweekly.com/informer/> (Aug. 3, 2009, 9:53 EST).

37. Jonathan Raban, *At the Tea Party*, N.Y. REVIEW OF BOOKS, Mar. 25, 2010, at 6.

"more to do with the inner dynamics of American conservatism in the past half century"—namely, the rise of the extreme right over moderate conservatives within the Republican Party.³⁸ In my view, this is not a case of either/or but of both/and. While the inner dynamics of American conservatism may have created an opening for the emergence and ascendancy of the Tea Party in Republican circles, the Tea Party's rhetoric and program can only be understood fully when it is examined in relation to racial narratives in the United States. What we learn from juxtaposing the presidential elections of 1988 and 2008, and from examining the rhetoric of the Tea Party and related right-wing projects in the latter, is that while the "Other" in American political discourse is dynamically polymorphous, the more racial tropes change, the more they serve the same function of justifying and entrenching existing arrangements of power.

In December 2010, Representative Pete King (R-NY), the incoming chair of the House Homeland Security Committee, announced that he would hold hearings in March 2011 to investigate why Muslim Americans become extremists and why Muslim American community leaders do not cooperate with U.S. law enforcement efforts.³⁹ We know from the historical record that emergent discursive configurations of race, shifting in tandem with notable geopolitical events, can fuel (and be fuelled by) state actions that profoundly violate civil liberties in the name of national security or "military necessity." Will Representative King's hearings ignite existing currents of Islamophobia to the point where the Japanese American internment is reprised in some form? Will protestations by Muslim and Arab Americans and civil rights/liberties groups that history is repeating itself gain any traction and interrupt the historical cycle of racial purging? Will the Egyptian revolution and the tide of democratic longing that is sweeping the Middle East change the image of the Muslim/Arab in the white American imaginary from that of a fanatical, anti-American fascist to a peaceful, freedom-loving populist? Stay tuned.

38. Sean Wilentz, *Confounding Fathers: The Tea Party's Cold War Roots*, NEW YORKER, Oct. 18, 2010, at 37.

39. Peter King: *I'll Hold Hearings On Radical Islam*, HUFFINGTON POST, Dec. 19, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/12/19/peter-king-radical-islam-hearings_n_798873.html.