Paint the White House Black: 
Black Media in the Obama Era

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DRAFT
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Abstract

Over the past few decades, U.S. mainstream media have focused heavily on conservative white talk radio, while ignoring minority radio outlets—and media in general—that often have much larger audiences. The most successful and most politically interesting black radio show in the United States today is the 16-year-old syndicated, drive-time, music-comedy-politics show, the Tom Joyner Morning Show (TJMS), which has an estimated listening audience of 8 million—significantly larger than many media-hyped white talk radio shows. In this paper, di Leonardo follows TJMS’s coverage of Barack Obama’s presidential candidacy, electoral triumph, and early governance. Her analysis highlights the show’s extraordinary access to Obama’s campaign, its deep immersion in organized get-out-the-vote activities, and its specifically black and working-class perspective on the news.
On April 4, 2007, less than two months after Barack Obama’s February 11 announcement of his candidacy for President of the United States, a caller is on the Tom Joyner Morning Show (TJMS), a nationally syndicated, black, weekday drive-time radio show.

Woman caller: The world is comin’ to an end! I just drove by a white guy with an Obama sticker on his car! In Jackson, Mississippi!

*Crew breaks into wild laughter, various sardonic remarks.*

Sybil Wilkes [anchor, “crew member”]: Does he know!?

*Crew assumes she means Obama, again sardonic remarks.*

Wilkes: I mean the white guy!

*Crew members recount various fantasies about people putting Obama stickers on white people’s cars to drive them crazy.*

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Exactly eighteen months later, November 4, 2008, *Election Day. TJMS is broadcasting from Obama headquarters in Chicago. On air, Roland Martin, a black TV One and CNN reporter, greets longtime Democratic insider Donna Brazile, who had worked for Hillary Clinton’s campaign.*

Brazile: My boo! [dated black slang meaning “my lover”] … I voted for Obama in D.C. …

Martin: Even Ed Rollins says he’s never seen anything like this campaign. He said he was stunned!
Brazile: I credit Senator Obama with this because he understood the political process and used it. … As of this moment more than 70 million people will have received a door knock or a phone call.

Wilkes [with both enthusiasm and a sarcastic reference to Sarah Palin’s attacks on Obama]: That’s community organizing at its finest!

*Later - Former Democratic Vice President and presidential candidate Al Gore is on the phone.*

Gore: This is a day the Lord has made! [quoting from Psalm 118]

Joyner [sardonic]: And you know a little something about bein’ robbed of an election!

Gore: Well, it’s time to turn the page. … We’ve been breaking records with early voting. I’m on pins and needles, Tom. It’s not already done, it’s still to do!

*Later - Barack Obama is on the phone and refers to TJMS presence in his campaign headquarters.*

Obama: I want to make sure, now, that everybody’s behaving around Tom Joyner! We’re seeing long lines around the country, in some cases rain, and the key thing is who wants it MORE. … I wish that my grandmother had been here to see this, and I wish that my mother… But having my daughters with me…

Wilkes [departs from her ordinary rather reserved, tart persona]: But how cool was it that your grandmother was able to vote for her grandson Barry?
Obama: She was able to vote absentee, and she told me that she was very proud.

November 5, 2008
Joyner [beside himself, goes falsetto]: Think of all the votes they stole, and he won Florida anyway! … So when you go to work today…

Martin: Oh, people not goin’ to work today!

*Crew lost in laughter.*

Later
Joyner: This just in, this just in! Fox still won’t call it! [Hysterical laughter.]

Joyner: Text me! Whose house would you most like to be in today—Sean Hannity or Rush Limbaugh?

*Crew goes wild, catcalls.*

Later - Michael Cottman, a Blackamericaweb.com [affiliated with TJMS] staff writer, is on.

Joyner: What’s up, man? Ooooh, yesterday, we were in the Obama campaign headquarters…

Cottman: First of all, I have never heard so many Hallelujah, Praise the Lord, so many times in my life! When they saw our press passes, their faces lit up!

Joyner: We were right next to photographers from all over the world! And we knew the world was watching! [reference to Vietnam-era demonstration
chant, “the whole world is watching”] And Al Jazeera wanted to know what was different from John Kerry—they wanted to know about this massive mobilization of black people behind this black man.

Wilkes: Not the war?

Cottman: Not the war!

Joyner: And Al Jazeera, they were really enjoyin’ sayin’ [terrible Arab accent] ‘Blackamericaweb! Blackamericaweb!’

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January 16, 2009

Four days before the Presidential Inauguration, George Clinton, the funk musician, is on, reporting that he will be performing at the Inauguration.

Joyner: George Clinton! You’re a prophet!

Clinton [naming titles of his own songs from the 1970s and 1990s]:
Chocolate City! Paint the White House Black!

Introduction: U.S. Politics From the Blackside

There is no dearth of scholarly and journalistic analysis of Barack Obama’s historic 2008 presidential election victory. In fact, we could say that the narrative of that particular campaign—its personnel, politics, key turns in the road, public relations—has been done to death (Ifill 2009, Wolffe 2009, Remnick 2010, Rice and Sams 2009). But while Obama’s racial identity was and is a central focus of mainstream press and public attention, we have seen very little concern with the actual public deliberations among the
working-class minority Americans whose heightened activism and voter participation played a major role in putting Obama in the White House. Instead, commentators have heaped well-deserved praise on Obama’s campaign team, on the tightness of its organization and secure command of the ground game. Much has also been made of the youth vote for Obama—ironically, though, reporters Chuck Todd and Sheldon Gawiser of NBC News, running the numbers, have concluded that “it’s important not to overstate the youth vote in Obama’s victory,” as “the youth share of the vote was 18% of the electorate [in 2008], just one percentage point more than in 2004” (2009: 31). They ram home the statistical reality: “[I]f no one under the age of 30 had voted, Obama would have won every state he carried with the exception of two: Indiana and North Carolina” (2009: 31).

Todd and Gawiser, The Pew Research Center, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, and others have also come to other heterodox conclusions about the relative importance of various sections of the American electorate to Obama’s win. Despite much journalistic ink having been spilled on a vision of white male racist animus against Obama, he nevertheless received 46% of all white male votes, even though “not since Carter has any Democratic nominee earned more than 38% of the white male vote” (Todd and Gawiser 2009: 32). As David Bositis of the Joint Center points out, “[i]n all states outside of the South, Obama received significantly more of the white vote — more than any Democratic nominee since Lyndon Johnson” (Bositis 2008). As well, many commentators noted the increasing importance of the Latino vote, but most focused on Latinos’ roles in the Southwestern and Western states. Post-NAFTA migration patterns, however, have spread Latino populations across the United States:
“If no Latinos had voted, McCain would have carried Indiana” (Todd and Gawiser 2009: 30).

Thus, despite overwhelming press and scholarly attention to Obama’s racial identity—and, during the campaign, to whether black Americans would judge him to be “not black enough” or “too black,” etc.—very little attention has been paid to actual black American apprehensions of the campaign and election. In fact, there was almost no mainstream media coverage of black American media or organizing efforts. Ironically, in reviewing both journalistic and scholarly analyses of the 2008 vote, I found a serious quantitative study of the role white racism may have played in denying Obama the landslide he might otherwise have gotten, given President Bush’s overwhelming unpopularity and the autumn 2008 financial crash (Lewis-Beck, et al. 2010)—but not a single explicit consideration of the actual electoral college effects of the increased black vote. (Bositis of the Joint Center comes closest in his statement that “black voters were key” to Obama’s wins in Florida, North Carolina, Ohio, and Virginia [Bositis 2008: 15].)

The Pew Research Center reports that 2 million more black Americans voted in the 2008 than in the 2004 election—nearly matching, for the first time in history, the turnout rate of white Americans—and 95% of them supported Obama. (Bositis estimates a higher number—3.16 million [2008:13].) Black women had the highest turnout rate of any population of voters, and black youth turnout was higher than that of “young eligible voters of any other racial or ethnic group in 2008”—another historic first (Lopez and Taylor
2009: 1-2). Even though, as seems likely, black voting alone did not secure Obama’s victory, it would be nice to know exactly what role it played.

This phenomenon—mainstream media and scholarly neglect of aggregate black American apprehensions and political behavior in this particular election cycle—was already familiar to me, writ large. The transcriptions from the beginning of this piece illustrate typical political badinage—in this case, concerning the Obama campaign—on the Tom Joyner Morning Show, a now 16-year-old, black, FM drive-time, weekday radio show offering music, humor, and news as well as political commentary through 105 black radio stations, as well as streaming online to a national audience of 8 million.ii

I have been listening to the show since its 1994 inception but only began doing active research on it and transcribing its political content in 2004. TJMS could be described as a black elephant in the national living room—well established, wildly popular, commercially successful, an automatic phone-in site for Democratic politicians of all colors—yet its existence is barely acknowledged in both mainstream media and scholarship.

In earlier pieces (2007, 2008, 2009), I have laid out the show’s history, process, and politics and considered the reasons for the extraordinary lack of media attention to it vis-à-vis other [white] radio shows with far smaller audiences—for example, Don Imus before he was fired, Howard Stern, pre-televised Rush Limbaugh. For example, the New York Times, whose in-depth coverage of each of these other radio personalities runs into the hundreds of stories, has only mentioned the Tom Joyner Morning Show 17
times in the show’s 16 years—and all but one of those mentions was *en passant*. It is the race, yes—but also the modal age, the respectable working-class orientation, and progressive politics of the show and its audience that deny them mainstream press attention. Let me explain in brief.

Northwestern University political scientist Benjamin Page (1996) has written about the under-representation of black American viewpoints in mainstream media, and certainly that phenomenon has continued into the Obama era. But the history of representation of Afro-Americans also breaks down by *class status*. From the Reagan era forward, and before Obama’s campaign and victory, “the popular and scholarly avalanche of ‘underclass’ rhetoric…fuses with essentializing visions of race literally to deny the statistical reality that the majority of black America is neither impoverished nor well off—the key representations allowed onto the American stage—but precariously working-class” (di Leonardo1998:12, see also di Leonardo 2007:3). TJMS’s huge working- and middle-class national audience represents the broad majority of black America. (The show fits into Arbitron’s “Urban Adult Contemporary” listening audience, the majority of whom are working-class and adult to middle-aged.) iii Not only, then, is radio less sexy than other media, as has long been noted: the TJMS show and its audience represent as well the triply unsexy older, politically progressive, working-class-oriented black American norm, while mainstream media have for decades been focusing instead on either exciting ghetto criminality or spectacularly wealthy entertainers or sports stars.

TJMS and its audience have surprisingly progressive, anti-neoliberal politics—including antiwar, pro-feminist and pro-gay commentary—
significantly different from the mainstream media focus (until the Obama election) on man-bites-dog narratives of widespread black social conservatism. The irony of the show’s existence and neglect by mainstream media becomes even clearer when we note that TJMS, unabashedly commercial (with Wal-Mart, Ford, McDonald’s, Coca-Cola, and Southwest Airlines among its many major sponsors), has seemed free to articulate politics considerably to the left of most “independent” media, including National Public Radio. Yet it has been almost entirely ignored as well by self-consciously progressive media.

As we saw at the beginning of this piece, the TJMS crew was deeply engaged in covering Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign and election. The show’s anchors also had extraordinary access—not only multiple on-air interviews with Barack and Michelle Obama, Joe Biden and Democratic Party heavyweights but also physical access to the Obama headquarters on Election Day. This access was given because the show is partly Chicago-based and represents one of Obama’s key national electoral bases. But it was also, and more importantly, the result of the show’s extraordinary engagement with the Obama presidential campaign, and before it, with many other Democratic Party candidates and office-holders, back to President Clinton’s two terms. TJMS involvement with the 2008 campaign, however, was unprecedented in its intensity and collaborations, as I will show.

In this piece, I report on the show’s coverage of and participation in the 2008 election, and touch briefly on its post-election tone. I begin, as we saw, in the early campaign period—when the crew and their audience could reasonably joke about the clear absurdity of any white Americans supporting
the Obama campaign—and follow coverage as Obama’s chances improve over the months. I document TJMS’s partnership with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Teamsters Union to promote black voter registration and to prevent election fraud—yet another story untouched by mainstream media. In so doing, I narrate the story of an untold media/political phenomenon and, more importantly, provide an optic on both the political evolution of many black Americans—how the show and its audience altered over time in their assessment of the 2008 presidential candidates and their politics—and on the relationship between that broad political base and black media. This paper is part of a larger project in which I am documenting and analyzing TJMS in the contexts of both shifting black media as a whole and changes in American culture and political economy.

**TJMS: Personnel and Process**

The show runs four hours each morning, from 5:00 to 9:00 a.m. Central Standard Time. The original “crew” of comics included the three central characters: Tom Joyner himself, who owns the show and often plays straight man; Sybil Wilkes, a Northwestern University graduate, who often also plays straight woman and whose on-air persona is “the schoolmarm,” [my term, not theirs] she is both the most clearly educated and the most consistently politically progressive; and Jay Anthony Brown, who plays an aging working-class comic with a taste for white women (some readers may have noticed him playing the unsympathetic Morris Brown College bandleader character in the 2002 film “Drumline”). Brown also “murders another hit” each Friday, taking a contemporary or classic soul/R&B song and gives it new, topical lyrics.
Up until the late 2000s, this core group also included Melvin, who played an extremely queeny, older gay man who gave advice on relationships during “Melvin’s Loveline;” Mizz Dupree, who played an older, New Orleans-born, deeply working-class psychic, who would announce “your lucky numbers” with witty and topical twists; and Myra J., who played a saucy and opinionated but also hard-working and respectable heterosexual single mother. As these characters disappeared, the show kept its three central crew members and added others who would visit only once or twice a week: Sheryl Underwood, who, although she is not only a college graduate but the holder of two master’s degrees and is the president of her black college sorority, plays an extremely coarse, loud, working-class but Republican woman; Huggy Lowdown, the Celebrity Snitch, who also plays a deeply working-class denizen of strip bars, etc.; and Jacque Reid, a lifestyle and celebrity reporter, who twice a week hosts an “Inside Her Story” segment on TJMS.

During the show’s early years, Tavis Smiley, a current host on National Public Radio (NPR) who was extremely close to Joyner, was frequently on air, providing most of the outside political commentary from his trending-progressive but frequently nationalist perspective. Smiley left the show during the Obama campaign and because of it (he maintained a somewhat critical stance on Obama and was swamped by listener anger). The crew ran an on-air contest to replace him and did so with two political commentators: Stephanie Robinson and Jeff Johnson. As we saw, above, Roland Martin, a TV One and CNN contributor, also visits the show regularly, as does the
well-known comic D. L. Hughley, whose weekly phone-ins to TJMS are more biting political than his ordinary stand-up acts.

As this radio show is mixed-genre, I am abstracting strictly political material from frequent musical interludes, black celebrity interviews, health news, local news reports from each station, and masses of purely humorous, and even insanely silly, exchanges—such as Huggy Lowdown’s April 8, 2008, report that Paris Hilton was so skinny that she wore a belt and suspenders to hold up her thong, or the April Fool’s 2008 joke that the whole crew successfully played on its audience, saying they’d just discovered that illegally downloaded music would “blow up” [wreck] their iPods and computers, thus causing nationwide panic. One woman caller scolded them afterwards for the joke, saying they should be more responsible, “cause I listen to y’all for the news!” The reader will have noted as well that TJMS’s political commentary is most often clothed in distinctively Afro-American humor and linguistic turns, as when Joyner told Al Gore that he knew “a little something” about being robbed of an election.

The Obama Campaign: Early Coverage

The Joyner crew and commentators have tended in general, from the show’s inception, to support Democratic Party and specifically black Democratic politicians. But that stance by no means translated into automatic support of Obama’s candidacy, despite Joyner’s own fervent early support:

On February 23, 2007, Cathy Hughes, President and CEO of the black media company Radio One, is on air complaining that Obama is too inexperienced and does not necessarily have a pro-black agenda. Brown and
Joyner demur. (Joyner: “I want a black president!!”) On February 28, Joyner comments that “a lot of black people with money are supporting Hillary Clinton because, let’s face it, after eight years of Clinton in the White House, a lot of black people made money!” He goes on to state that nevertheless he is giving money to the Obama campaign instead.

Meanwhile, the show served as an early warning system for racist calumnies against Obama.

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April 5, 2007

Woman caller: My supervisor had the audacity to call Obama ‘Osama bin Laden’!

[Callers tell her not to lose her job over her reaction.]

Joyner: Just give him ‘the eye.’ And go on.

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But the show’s sensitivity to racial slurs against the candidate did not translate into full-on support for some time. On July 3, 2007, for example, in an exchange mirroring divisions among black Americans, given long-term support of the Clintons, Joyner asserted that black Americans had the best chance ever to put a black man in the White House. Wilkes riposted, ironically, making the point of Hillary Clinton’s generally progressive political stances but also slyly referencing widespread rumors of lesbianism: “I don’t know, Tom, Hillary comes pretty close to being a black man!”
On January 22, 2008, Tavis Smiley, still a regular on the show, took Obama to task for his positive statements about Ronald Reagan in his recent interview with the editorial board of the Reno, Nevada, *Journal-Gazette*. Hillary Clinton’s campaign and many other politicians and bloggers had already criticized Obama (Bosman 2008), but Smiley’s point was specifically with reference to Reagan and civil rights history: “What wasn’t said? That Reagan started his presidential campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi!” Smiley went on to remind listeners that Philadelphia, Mississippi, was notorious as the site of the 1964 lynching of civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, and that Reagan had been using that historical resonance to woo white racist Southerners.

Apprehensions of Clinton’s candidacy were also quite mixed, up until the Bosnian “sniper fire” snafu. On February 4, 2008, a Chicago woman caller articulated a version of the “Hillary-means-Bill” line quite common then in mainstream media, but with a new black interpretation: “Black people don’t realize that if we put Hillary in the White House, she’ll bring Clinton back, and he didn’t do nothing for black people!” Brown instantly capitalized on this statement to improvise to the tune of Justin Timberlake’s “I’m Bringin’ Sexy Back” (I'm bringin’ sexy back/ Yeah! Them other boys don't know how to act!):

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Brown: She’s bringin’ Clinton back…

Yeah!
He get all naked, don’t know how to act!

*Crew lost in hysterics.*

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And yet only one day later, Super Tuesday, Hillary Clinton was on the show, commending TJMS’s partnership with the NAACP’s hotline for voting problems.

The Super Tuesday elections and caucuses—through which Obama won 13 of 23 contests and gained 847 delegates to Clinton’s 834—ended Clinton’s definitive Democratic lead. Like mainstream media in general, TJMS significantly shifted its coverage of the Democratic race after Super Tuesday. But while the mainstream media covered Obama’s new lead as a “story,” TJMS covered its specific meanings for black Americans. Brown, for example, revisited his murdered hit two days later, re-orienting the Justin Timberlake spoof with commentary on the elections while interpolating a joke bearing on his own notorious predilection for white women:

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*I think I’m voting black*

*Yeah!*

*I like white women, can’t deny that*

*But he will get us out of Iraq*

*He’s in the lead, there’s no denying that*
A week later on February 18, 2008, Hughley was on air, commenting on the effervescent air among black Americans, given Obama’s multiple Super Tuesday triumphs: “I remember when everyone was sayin’ they wanted a President they could have a beer with—who knew it’d be a 40 ounce?!” But three days later on February 21, Hughley was on air again, narrating his college-age son’s recent horrific experience: Hughley had sent his son to a neighborhood jewelry store to pick up a check the store had waiting for him. The store’s security guard immediately assumed that the young man was a robber and pulled a gun on him. The boy came home shaken. Hughley said, “As much as things have changed, our black children are still goin’ through some of the things we had to. …While I believe that Barack Obama will be President next year, we will still be black in America.”

Obama himself displayed a more relaxed and playful side in his March 3 call to the show, riffing on the Clinton’s camp’s post-Super Tuesday complaints: “Clinton’s people tend to complain a lot. … I played a lot of basketball—and you can’t complain to the refs!” Obama and Joyner joked about taking Wilkes’s “black card” [Wilkes “performs” higher status than the rest] because she’d never had her phone cut off. Obama smoothly negotiated his own class status for the largely working-class radio audience: “I have actually never had my phone cut off, but I have gotten that red notice!” Even Sheryl Underwood—entirely converted from Republicanism, at least for this election—got in the mix, celebrating Obama’s vote-getting abilities: “And he
got white women sweatin’ and fallin’ out, and he ain’t even sing or play basketball!”

**Black Sniper Fire**

It was, however, Hillary Clinton’s “misspeaking” on the campaign trail about having come under sniper fire in Bosnia in 1995 that was the turning point into negative Clinton coverage for TJMS, as it was for many other media outlets (see for example Healy and Seelye 2008). But again, the Joyner show crew and their guests articulated a particularly black-sensitive perspective on the imbroglio. Major American media mentioned *en passant* that the black comedian Sinbad (as well as the rock star Sheryl Crow) had been on that particular flight with Hillary Clinton and had denied the sniper fire story. But TJMS rode the story for eight days, both drawing out its racial subtext and using it to bury Clinton, symbolically, as a credible presidential candidate.

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March 25, 2008

Hughley: And when the lie wad’n workin’, what did she do? She went to Jeremiah Wright! ... Sinbad! He was there! And you know that big light-skinned brother knows what bullets sound like! [And what did Clinton say?] Well, he’s a comedian! That’s what people say when they mean that lyin’ jigga!

*Later*

Joyner: You can’t mis-speak about dodging sniper fire! She didn’t mis-speak, she just straight up lied!
March 27, 2008

Brown [still on topic]: I can forget my keys, I can forget my glasses, but I’d remember bein’ shot at! And I have!

Joyner: No, no playa [player, term of affection]—only white people can say they forgot. … Even white people are sayin’—uh hunh! [explicitly black articulation] [All laugh.]

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March 28, 2008

_Huggy Lowdown, the Celebrity Snitch, announces the “ ’Bama of the Week” every Friday. ’Bama is an old black slang term deriving from Alabama, meaning “country” and thus ignorant. Like other deprecating terms, it can be embraced and used against its meaning: There was an extremely popular 1980s Washington, D.C., black-radio DJ who called himself and his blues show ’Bama Man, and the online world today is riddled with self-styled ’Bama Men. But Huggy Lowdown intends extreme disrespect with his phrase._

Lowdown: Hillary Clinton, you are the ’Bama of the Week, Week, Week! Hillary said that bull-shiggedy about bein’ under sniper fire! Tom, she lyin’ like a brother in jail talking about how much money he had on the outside!

_Later - Wilkes plays audiotape of actual pilot’s calm description of landing in Bosnia in 1995._

Wilkes: Not only weren’t there any bullets flying around, there wasn’t a BUMBLEBEE flying!

_Later_

Hughley: Yeah, well, white people always lie about getting shot at!
March 31, 2008

*Sinbad, himself, is on the show.*

Sinbad: Hillary Clinton got stronger and stronger and more adamant about it. … And then these blogs started doggin’ ME.

Joyner: When did you hear [about the controversy]?

Sinbad: I heard the same time as everybody else. … [Describes his internal reactions.] Man, where did *that* come from? Lemme think about this. Were there gunshots? NO. … But think about it—there was a press corps on that plane. There was all that footage. What did the press do? Did they just buy it? … I had no idea it was gonna hit the fan. Wham! [Sinbad is making the point that it made no sense to criticize him when abundantly available video footage would disprove Clinton in any event.].… No, I don’t regret it. You don’t regret the truth.

*Later*

Sinbad [addressing Clinton]: I’m on the plane with you! When did I lose credibility? ‘He’s just a comedian!’ … I lost a lot of respect [for her]. … Know what you’re seeing now? A sense of entitlement! ‘How dare Barack Obama?’ … When he won Iowa the whole campaign freaked out! … [Half-jokingly] If I disappear, ya’ll know what happened! Look for me, people, look for me.

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**Of the Reverend Wright & Others**

As the sniper-fire issue faded in the media, the Jeremiah Wright controversy reignited. To reprise the history: The Obama campaign had begun to
distance itself from Wright—in whose Chicago Trinity United Church of Christ Barack and Michelle Obama had been married and their two daughters had been baptized—as early as Obama’s announcement of candidacy on February 10, 2007. Wright had been slated to give an official benediction at the event and was disinvited when the campaign staff evaluated his record and shied away from his more controversial statements. The first upsurge of press attention and direct attacks on the Obama campaign vis-à-vis Wright’s past sermons took place over March 2008, leading to Obama’s specifically crafted March 18, 2008, speech on race and Wright, “A More Perfect Union.” (It was in this phase that, as we saw, Hughley, like many other commentators, accused Hillary Clinton’s campaign of attacking Wright and his association with Obama in order to deflect attention from her false statements about having been under sniper fire in Bosnia.) After a spate of evaluations of the speech—largely positive in mainstream media—popular attention to the issue faded until Reverend Wright began, in late April 2008, a series of very flamboyant public appearances. A media free-for-all ensued—led by right-wing media—leading to a second, harsher Obama statement in an April 29 press conference.

It was at this point that TJMS intensified its commentary on the issue. On April 29, 2008, Joyner noted with a sneer that Wright was on the front page of the New York Post. Later that morning, Tavis Smiley came on the show for a lengthy commentary: “Jeremiah Wright was minding his own business, heading toward retirement, when he inadvertently became a political football.” Smiley went on to note the unbalanced media coverage of Reverend Wright’s so-called anti-white, anti-American views vs. New
Rightist, former Nixon speechwriter, former presidential candidate, and then MSNBC commentator Patrick Buchanan’s March 21, 2008, blogpost, entitled “A Brief for Whitey.” Buchanan wrote the essay in response to Barack Obama’s March 18, 2008, speech, but it is merely a rehash of the specifically anti-black racist statements for which he became notorious decades ago (see di Leonardo 1998: 40ff). In this publication, Buchanan actually wrote that “America has been the best country on earth for black folks. ... [They were] introduced to Christian salvation, and reached the greatest levels of freedom and prosperity blacks have ever known. … no people anywhere on earth has done more to lift up blacks than white Americans. … Governments, businesses and colleges have engaged in discrimination against white folks” (Buchanan 2008).

Smiley began: I’ve been waiting for over 30 days to see what they [media] would say about the Buchanan story! How is it that a former presidential speechwriter and a former presidential candidate can get away with this? ... How come Buchanan’s racist rant never got media lift-off?” He went on to query why “MSNBC hasn’t checked Buchanan. ... How long before Buchanan steps over the line? He’s got chalk all over his shoes!

[And Smiley definitely had a point: The key columns by the Washington Post’s E. J. Dionne and the New York Times’s Frank Rich making these parallels between Republican presidential candidates and their close ties to scarily racist and right-wing ministers did not appear until May 2 and May 4, 2008, respectively.]
The following morning, April 30, 2008, Smiley came on again, warning, “We’ve got to be careful that we are not pushed into some fratricide. … Wright has been subjected to one of the most ruthless scrutinies. …” He pointed out how little had been made of Mitt Romney’s [and John McCain’s] embrace of right-wing televangelist John Hagee, who is violently anti-Catholic (labels the Church “the Great Whore”) and claimed that Hurricane Katrina was God’s wrath on New Orleans for homosexual rights activities. Smiley went on to assert that “They came after Reverend Wright … to try to derail Barack Obama’s candidacy … the white media is having a field day! … No one asked Rudy Giuliani when he was running how he could be a member of the Catholic Church and not support their tenets.”

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May 1, 2008

The next morning, Smiley was again on the air, asking listeners to tell mainstream media to pay attention to Pat Buchanan’s racist screed: “When they say Wright, you say Pat!” He continued in call-and-response tradition:

Tavis: Wright!

Joyner and Wilkes: Pat!

Tavis: Wright!

Tom and Wilkes: Pat!

Tavis: Wright!

Tom and Wilkes: Pat!!
Smiley [continues]: “I can’t begin to tell you of the overwhelming e-mail I’ve received from folk who had never heard of this Buchanan piece! ... Who knows? Senator Obama may be the first black who gets a pass from white people, but we have to remember the distinction between anger and righteous indignation.” ...Smiley continued, expatiating on widespread white terror of angry black men: “We will resist the effort to portray us like we’re stuck on stupid ... HIV is not caused by whites in conspiracy to infect blacks, but we do know about the Tuskegee experiments! ... Remember this, when Reverend Wright lied, no one died. When Bush lied, more than 4,000 died!”

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The following morning, May 2, 2008, Hughley was commenting on Obama’s distancing himself from Wright. He pointed out that Wright has had consistent politics for 20 years and that Obama was being disingenuous to deny knowledge of it: “He [Wright] said something we say in private, in public.”

That Friday, May 2, 2008, Brown tied up the threads of black opinion in a tour-de-force murder of the chorus of the 1972 Luther Ingram hit, “If loving you is wrong, I don’t want to be right”:

Now pastor you ain’t wrong
But that’s enough Reverend Wright!

Now pastor you ain’t wrong,
But that’s enough Reverend Wright
Now you ain’t wrong, pastor, for clearing your name and such
But Obama’s damn near President, it’s time for you to hush!

At the same time, the Joyner crew became even more lively in their suggestions to Hillary Clinton that she drop out of the presidential race. On May 8, Joyner began a picket-line-type chant, which he repeated multiple times with great gusto: “Move Hillary, Get out the way!/ Move Hillary, Get out the way!”

And Wilkes responded by repurposing the most famous song from the musical “Dreamgirls,” made a hit in the 2006 film version by Chicago native Jennifer Hudson, whose lines run, “And I am telling you, I am not going/ You’re the best man I’ll ever know.” Wilkes sang, instantly, in response to Tom, “And I am telling you, I am not going/ This is the best job I want to have!”

Moving Toward November 4
From May until Election Day 2008, TJMS was increasingly dedicated not simply to Obama’s candidacy, but to the efforts to register and safeguard the ballot for black Americans. The show teamed up with the NAACP—with the Teamsters Union providing financing—establishing hotlines to enable registration and to report voting irregularities. The NAACP’s director of the hotline, Ken Smuckler, who is white, appeared frequently on TJMS, particularly around state primary election dates, and increasingly as November 4 loomed, commenting with high wit and on both deliberate voter fraud and state-level bureaucratic incompetence. Note the way in which
Smuckler wraps rather wonky voting information in ripped-from-the-headlines political and celebrity humor.

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May 6, 2008

*Smuckler explains multiple voting problems in North Carolina and Indiana primaries.*

Smuckler: Well, it’s the fine line between trickery and shiggedy! Yesterday it would’ve been easier to find a Cinco de Mayo party in Laredo, Texas, with Pat Buchanan doing the Mexican hat dance than it was to find your poll location in North Carolina!

*Wild laughter from crew.*

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September 19, 2008

Smuckler: Tom, it is easier to find an R. Kelly song on the Tom Joyner playlist this week [TJMS banned Kelly songs because of his alleged abuse of young girls]—it is easier to find Wesley Snipes’ signature on an IRS form [Snipes did prison time for tax evasion]—than it is to find your polling place. …

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October 2, 2008

Smuckler: It is easier to find a Wall Street broker celebrating the third quarter earnings with Cristal and a lap dance than it is to find your poll location!
October 14, 2008
Smuckler: It is easier to find [American Idol winner and then-closeted gay] Clay Aiken judging a wet T-shirt contest in a ‘Girls Gone Wild’ video than it is to find your poll location in America.

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October 22, 2008
_Smuckler reports that on the first day of early voting, the NAACP responded to 11,000 calls from frustrated voters._

Smuckler: It is easier to find Michael Vick signing autographs at the Westminster dog show than it is to find your poll location in America!

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October 27, 2008
_Smuckler reports that the NAACP has now received a total of 96,000 calls reporting voting problems._

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October 28, 2008
Smuckler [singing to the tune of Stevie Wonder and Paul McCartney’s 1982 hit, “Ebony and Ivory”]: Trickery and shiggedy live together in perfect harmony. … It is easier to find Roland Martin acting as a personal shopper for Sarah Palin at Neiman Marcus than it is to find your poll location in America! … In Georgia, it’s déjà vu all over again. They have learned _nothing_ in Gilmer County. We have reports of people waiting six hours in line! … In Palo Pinto County, Texas, the machines kept switching votes from straight Democratic to Republican… In Florida, Hialeah voters had an unusual visitor this week, a guy named Juan who offered to help people fill
out their ballots and take them in! leave the entire transcript as is here. I’ve deleted 3 Ken Smuckler intervals.

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One final Ken Smuckler appearance underlines the inherent connection between civil rights history and the fight for voting rights in the present—and the TJMS’s role as purveying not only “old school” music but also old school civil rights politics. We have seen Tavis Smiley remind listeners of the 1964 Philadelphia, Mississippi lynching of young voting rights activists.

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November 3, 2008

*Smuckler does a radio interview with Teamsters Union President James Hoffa.* Joyner notes that Roland Martin has reported the Teamsters are going door to door “straightening out” their members who are thinking of voting for McCain. Smuckler notes that the Teamsters provided money and supplies to the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Hoffa emotionally—almost choking up—describes a photo in his office of his father and Martin Luther King, Jr., *together at the memorial service for slain civil rights worker Viola Liuzzo* [killed in Alabama in 1965], *who was the wife of a Teamsters’ member.*

Hoffa: “This is a time in history we can all be proud of—getting the country away from the big corporations that have been ripping us off and back to working people.”

*Joyner warmly thanks Hoffa for funding the NAACP Voter Hotline.*

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Envoi: Black Media, Black President

We thus now return to the beginning of this piece, in which the TJMS crew and contributors covering the Obama campaign, election, and inauguration express wonder, triumph, and exhilaration. How has TJMS dealt with the subsequent rigors of Obama’s White House experience—of governing with a Democratic Congressional majority but a furious and absolutely recalcitrant Republican leadership? What about the hard political choices the Obama administration has made, choices that betray a number of progressive campaign promises, choices whose consequences affect minority Americans more heavily than whites?

I can only touch briefly here on my ongoing research on TJMS’ takes on the Obama White House and shifting American politics. The show’s responses fall broadly under three headings:

First, TJMS crew and contributors have repeatedly expressed chagrin that, now that their candidate inhabits the White House, they no longer have the same access to him and his staff. Most amusingly, President Obama had appeared on the show January 19, 2009, and asked what he could do for Joyner, given the show’s monumental efforts for the campaign. Joyner asked to be invited with his granddaughter to the White House Easter Egg Roll. President Obama responded instantly, “Alright, you got the hookup.” But on April 14, 2009, after the event, Joyner relayed his great disappointment that he didn’t even get to talk to the First Family: “I registered 100,000 people, and he gave me one egg!” Noted Wilkes, “Could’ve been worse! You coulda supported McCain and gotten short-armed!” Listeners and crew then
descend into clowning, using black English to deride Joyner for having received only “uh egg.”

But this self-amusement has also periodically morphed into more serious criticism—into the claim that President Obama is not responding to his black American base. For example, on November 4, 2009, Joyner said, “All I’m sayin’ is the President needs to talk to his black base! We are here for you, but you can’t take us for granted!” Brown, in the quavering voice of an old black man, added, “You ain’t called since you left!”

This periodic complaint, however, has been overborne on the show by its second major response to the Obama Presidency: the perceived necessity of defending the White House against the uprush of racist calumny associated at least in part with the rise of the Tea Party. Here are just a few examples from the summer of 2009, noting the wild disruptions of Democratic Congressional town hall meetings:

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August 11, 2009
Wilkes reports on the phenomenon...

Joyner: You know what, playa?

Brown: McCain people!

Joyner: Those are the same people … I haven’t seen people mad like this since McCain was running against Barack Obama!

Brown: And what are they mad about?
Joyner: Have you seen who’s in the White House?

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August 12, 2009

*Wilkes reports on town hall disruptions again.*

*Joyner mentions poster of Obama with a Hitler mustache.*

Brown: Did you see the one where they made him The Joker?

Wilkes: Come on, people!

Male caller: What’s up with these hearings?! It’s white folks gone wild! It’s like McCain rallies on steroids! … old folks behaving like spoiled kids! They need graham crackers, chocolate milk, and a nap.”

*Wilkes suggests Benadryl.*

*Later*

Joyner: We came up with a solution to the town hall meetings—you need to bus in a busload of black folks! That’d cut all that clownin’ down!

Brown: Waaay, WAY down!

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Despite its incessant edgy humor, TJMS is also capable of subtlety and restraint in making its political points. The show has a regular feature, “Real Fathers, Real Men,” in which listeners nominate a man—who may not be a biological father—whose behavior exhibits self-sacrifice for others, usually
children. On September 15, 2009, two and a half months after the conservative-dominated Supreme Court had ruled for white firefighters, against the New Haven, Connecticut’s Fire Department’s affirmative action plan, Salvatore Consiglio, a white firefighter, came on to nominate his New Haven Fire Department black co-worker, Kenneth Oliver, Jr., as that day’s “Real Father, Real Man.” Consiglio, an emergency medical technician, testified that Oliver, a paramedic, had saved his life and the lives of many others. “With all the problems in the New Haven Fire Department, race has never been an issue with us.” The crew limited itself to exclaiming “Yeah!” after the testimony, letting it speak for itself.

Third and finally, TJMS has expressed disappointment with and opposition to White House policy—most particularly war policy. The show has a long antiwar record (see di Leonardo 2007), and both Joyner and Wilkes are particularly outspoken in this regard:

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December 2, 2009
Joyner and Wilkes summarize President Obama’s December 1 speech and war plans.

Joyner: So, I don’t like that decision—but what can I do? Here’s what I’m gonna do. Every month I’m givin’ a scholarship to a veteran [of Iraq or Afghanistan] to go to an HBCU [historically black college or university].

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January 27, 2010
Tom Joyner goes on an antiwar rant.
Joyner: War isn’t workin’! So how about this? Let’s take our butts home. … There’s got to be a better way!

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July 22, 2010

Joyner comments on secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s recent meeting with Pakistani leaders.

Joyner: Alright, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton went to Pakistan and said to Pakistani officials, ‘You know where Osama bin Laden is, and he’s in Pakistan,’ right? So why are we in Afghanistan? …

Wilkes tries to explain that there is now Al Qaida in Afghanistan, the rationale for going after “his people.”

Joyner: OK—it’s just me.

Wilkes: No, no, you’re not alone! And that’s why the President is losing a lot of his supporters. …

They discuss the 5,500 American lives to date lost in Afghanistan.

Joyner: And how many died in 9/11?

Wilkes [heartfelt]: A lot fewer!

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Conclusion: The Black Elephant in the American Living Room

As many commentators have pointed out, the historic 2008 election of a black American president by no means ended racism in the United States. But few have noted the ongoing racial segregation of American media, the
powerful role of black media in the election, and their continuing and complex role in reporting on and participating in national and international policy. This project, of which this paper is one facet, documents the political coverage and commentary of one key black media outlet—in the context of minority media as a whole—in an effort to redress that extraordinary failure of representation. But we have here far more than just a question of parity in representation—real attention to minority media, real attention to minority American lives, reveals that there is more on heaven and earth than is dreamt of in mainstream media philosophy.

This small study reveals that first, we can see that TJMS taps into a broadly progressive black working-class audience—an audience and a citizenry about which both politicians and corporate advertisers are aware. The invisibility of this audience to the mainstream public sphere, though, distorts our understanding of the shape of larger American politics. For example, as we have seen, most accountings of the 2008 presidential election entirely missed the role of black media—and scholars have barely considered the role of the black vote—in the outcome. Mainstream media outlets never even covered an election-season phenomenon as large and efficacious as the NAACP/Teamsters registration and voter fraud project.

Then, minority media cover and help to organize opposition to ongoing racist events and commentary—as we saw with Tavis Smiley’s outrage over Pat Buchanan’s “Brief for Whitey” blogpost, and with TJMS’s pointed critique of the overt racism displayed at post-election Tea Party demonstrations. The racist character of these phenomena and many others like them receive, as Smiley so tellingly put it, little media lift-off. Finally,
TJMS coverage of our ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, among other events, illustrates the understudied and undernoticed complexity of minority American politics. In this case, antiwar politics has trumped racial solidarity with the President. But there are multiple other examples of significant intra-race political variation and dissent. And we would be wise, in a nation fast approaching majority-minority status, to attend to the political apprehensions and actions of all of our citizens.
Bibliography


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1 Northwestern University’s library website lists 59 books and films and 7,148 articles on the subject less than two years after the election.
The show’s reach is extended by a number of special events it sponsors: simulcast, celebrity-studded “Sky Shows,” most often held at historically black colleges; an annual “family reunion,” and an annual TJMS Cruise.

This category accounts for 3.6% of the total radio audience, according to Arbitron. It is 8th in popularity—news and country music are first and second. UAC listeners are 91.5% black, two-thirds aged 35 to 64, and are clustered largely in the South, the industrial Midwest and the Eastern Seaboard. 90% have a high school diploma, but only one in five has finished college. 26.5% of these households have an income lower than $25,000/year (Arbitron 2009: 12, 43,45). There are several other syndicated black morning and afternoon radio shows—such as Michael Baisden’s, Doug Banks’s, or Steve Harvey’s. But none of these has the thoroughgoing political coverage of TJMS. They tend to spend most of their talk-time on celebrities, relationships, and sexuality issues.

Sheryl Underwood left the show for Steve Harvey’s morning show in summer 2010; she was replaced by female comic Dominique.

But in fact, Joyner began his career in the Reagan era, and in those early years identified as a conservative. See di Leonardo 2007: 8-10.

All transcriptions are by the author, done contemporaneously with broadcasts. Ellipses indicate gaps in transcription. TJMS does archive a small portion of each show on its website, blackamerica.com, but rarely the spontaneous political conversations that constitute the bulk of the broadcast material in this study.