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# Grown folks radio:

## U.S. election politics and a “hidden” black counterpublic

### ABSTRACT

President Obama’s 2008 electoral triumph garnered enormous journalistic and scholarly attention, but analysts have shown very little interest in African American media coverage of the campaign. In this piece, I focus on one major, nearly ignored, black media outlet: a syndicated radio show with a huge audience, commercial success, and progressive politics. I analyze the show’s construction of a powerful mediatised black counterpublic, consider its rise parallel to the neoliberal deregulation of U.S. media, and narrate its coverage of the 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns. I also consider the political effects of a new cross-media platform synergy among black and progressive outlets. [African American, politics, radio, neoliberalism, public sphere, counterpublic]

It is impossible to exaggerate the national and international attention paid to the 2008 U.S. presidential election. Not only did the United States have its first viable nonwhite contender for the presidency but also eventually its first president of color. News media blanketed the entire race and Barack Obama’s electoral triumph, and journalists, scholars, and even filmmakers weighed in en masse with post hoc interpretations (see, e.g., Ifill 2009; Remnick 2010; Rice and Sams 2009; Wolffe 2009). Ironically, though, both at the time and in subsequent years, very little attention was paid—aside from early queries about whether black Americans would support Obama—to Obama’s black voting base and to African American media coverage of the 2008 campaigns.<sup>1</sup>

I was in a position to note these national public-sphere race-relations ironies because, by 2007, at the point the presidential campaigns began to coalesce, I was already in my fourth year of formal research into the politics and political coverage of the most popular nationally syndicated black U.S. radio show, the 18-year-old *Tom Joyner Morning Show (TJMS)*, which plays on more than 100 black stations around the country and has a weekday drive-time audience of more than eight million.<sup>2</sup> I listen to the show five days a week, documenting its political content and the relationships among the crew, their guests, and their audience via call-ins, texts, and blog posts. I have also discussed *TJMS* with black American listeners and non-listeners across the country, especially in the Chicago, Illinois, area, where I live, and in New Haven, Connecticut, where I have been doing fieldwork since the late 1980s. I have immersed myself in the scholarship on the historical political economy of U.S. media and on radio (especially, black radio) history, and I follow media journalism.

This form of “media ethnography” (see Askew and Wilk 2002; Ginsburg et al. 2002) captures both production and reception—the latter in terms of callers and texters and conversations with listeners—but lacks the fine-grained detail of “full-immersion” ethnographies, in which the researcher directly experiences film, television, radio, and so on, in the company of people with whom she or he is working (see, e.g., Abu-Lughod 2005; Shankar 2008). Regularly sitting with listeners in kitchens, cars, and worksites would certainly offer a fuller vision of audience reception of the show and of listener interactions with one another, what Jo Tacchi (2002) labels “radio texture.” In this case, though, the length and

the national scope of my research allow the analytic breadth and historical contextualization needed to answer my particular research questions.<sup>3</sup>

## U.S. politics from the blackside

### *TJMS and campaign 2008*

April 4, 2007:

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

Crew: [Wild laughter, various sardonic remarks]

Sybil Wilkes [crew member]: Does he know!?

Crew: [Assumes she means Obama, again sardonic remarks]

Sybil: I mean the white guy!

Crew: [Various fantasies about people putting Obama stickers on white people's cars to drive them crazy]

### *The election*

November 4, 2008, presidential election day, *TJMS* broadcasting from Obama headquarters in Chicago; on-air, Roland Martin, black CNN newscaster, greets longtime Democratic insider Donna Brazile, who had worked for Hillary Clinton's campaign:

Donna Brazile: My boo! [dated black slang meaning "my lover"] . . . I voted for Obama in DC . . . 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.

Sybil Wilkes: That's community organizing at its finest! [sardonically referring to Sarah Palin's repeated attacks on Obama's community organizing background]

Later, same morning:

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

Tom Joyner: [slyly] You know a little something about being 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: [referring to *TJMS* presence in his campaign headquarters] 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. . .

Sybil: [departs gushingly from her 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.

### *The triumphal aftermath*

November 5, 2008, morning following the presidential election:

Tom Joyner: [beside himself] Think of all the votes they stole, and he won Florida anyway! . . . So when you go to work today . . .

Roland Martin: Oh, people not *goin* to work today!

Crew: [Lost in laughter]

Tom: This just in, this just in! *Fox* still won't call it! [loses it]

Later that morning, Michael Cottman (Blackamericaweb.com staff writer) is in the studio:

Tom: What's up, man? Oooh yesterday, we were in the Obama campaign headquarters . . .

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

Tom: 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, they were really enjoyin sayin [terrible Arab accent] "Blackamericaweb! Blackamericaweb!"

January 16, 2009, four days before the presidential inauguration; George Clinton, the funk musician, is on the show, reporting that he will be performing at the inauguration:

Tom: George Clinton! You're a prophet!

George Clinton: [naming titles of his own songs from the 1970s and 1990s] Chocolate City! Paint the White House Black!<sup>4</sup>

### **Under the radar: Black and Latino radio**

Listening daily to *TJMS* over many years, I was thus able to document the show's ongoing take on the 2008 presidential campaign—with its very distinct "politics from the blackside." We can see a progression in the above radio transcripts—in the back-and-forth among the on-air crew and callers: first, the early widespread black American disbelief that Obama's campaign could possibly garner

significant white support; then, nearly hysterical bated-breath conversations on the eve of the election, shared with former vice president Al Gore and Obama himself; and, finally, triumphal antirightist (references to Fox News and Republican voter-suppression dirty tricks) and globally oriented (Al Jazeera) celebration. In this last segment, we see as well a self-aggrandizing reminder of *TJMS*'s key access to the Obama campaign and a historical eye cocked to the recent past, in which the notion of a black president was once only a funk musician's clever dreamsong.

I have also gauged the show's simultaneous extraordinary importance to Democratic politicians and to major national corporate sponsors—among them, at different points, Allstate, Ford, Toyota, McDonald's, Home Depot, WalMart, Wells Fargo, Southwest Airlines, Proctor & Gamble, TBS, and Starbucks—and its near-complete invisibility to mainstream media, beyond business-page pieces on its advertising heft. The *New York Times*, for example, has barely acknowledged this progressive radio giant—feminist, progay, often anti-imperialist, social democratic, and pro-labor (as long as union organizing is not against its own sponsors) as well as pro-civil rights for all U.S. minorities during its nearly two-decade, wildly successful existence—while obsessively chronicling right-wing talk-show jocks with often far smaller audiences.<sup>5</sup> And even the progressive press seems hardly aware of the show's existence—the *Nation*, for example, has published only one short substantive piece (Alexander 2008) on it, noting its voter registration and poll-location project toward the end of the 2008 presidential campaign. Why is this “black elephant in the American living room,” as I have labeled the show, so profoundly unnoted in the mainstream U.S. public sphere—and, indeed, in both media studies and Afro-American scholarship?

The anthropology of radio, with its careful ethnographic and discursive accounting of both the production and consumption of the medium, is now a field of clear standing (see, e.g., O'Connor 2002; Schultz 1999; Spitulnik 1997; Urla 2001)—but with little focus on the United States, where that arena has been almost entirely ceded to media scholars and journalists.<sup>6</sup> A significant interdisciplinary literature has developed on U.S. minority radio—for example, Spanish-language radio shows. Both mainstream journalists and media scholars have focused on radio DJs' key role in organizing large-scale pro-immigrant-rights marches—especially the massive national demonstrations in March 2006—and on helping undocumented migrant listeners to evaluate their legal options and strategies in pursuing regularizing their status (Baker-Cristales 2009; Baum 2006; Casillas 2011a, 2011b; Stelter 2010; Watanabe and Becerra 2006).

Both scholars and journalists discussing Spanish-language radio in the United States frame its operations as under the radar, seeing it as an “on-air organizer” (Casillas 2010:57) functioning in a language and for an au-

dience unknown to and stigmatized by high percentages of Americans. But ironically, and even into the Obama presidency era, *black* American radio also continues to operate under the radar and to function as a key public-sphere on-air organizer. Like U.S. Latinos, black Americans listen to radio in extraordinarily high numbers and have access to hundreds of their own population-identified radio stations across the United States, with regional representation mirroring black population distributions.<sup>7</sup> And black radio billboards, bus ads, and bumper stickers visually “mark” African American neighborhoods, just as Dolores Inés Casillas (2010:49) notes that Spanish-language radio ads do U.S. Latino neighborhoods.

Indeed, while an interesting historical scholarly literature has accumulated on black American radio—see, for example, Barlow 1999, Burroughs 2001, Williams 1998—and a pair of recent films focus on the life of famous 1960s–80s Washington, DC, DJ Petey Greene, that accounting thins out as we approach the 1990s and into the present.<sup>8</sup> This attenuation of interest is no coincidence: It occurred during the period in which rap and hip-hop arose and institutionalized themselves in U.S.—and global—popular musical culture, the same period in which media and scholarly attention became intensely focused on this (originally) black-diasporic American youth phenomenon.

In a number of pieces (di Leonardo 2007, 2008b, 2009, 2010), I have narrated in extenso this obsessional shift and its obverse—a nearly complete journalistic and scholarly blackout in terms of representing the politics and media-musical choices of “invisible” black Americans, those who are neither wealthy celebrities nor the inner-city impoverished or criminal—the clericals, sales staff, bus drivers, teachers, nurses, and postal workers who are the working-class majority of the black population. Media scholars Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki label this bipolar U.S. media representation—focusing solely on blacks “representing spectacular achievement” or those at the very bottom of the class ladder—the “saints or sinners syndrome” (2001:207). And the largely ignored majority working- and middle-class population is even less of interest when we focus on those who are also middle-aged—“grown folks,” in the black locution. A decidedly unsexy demographic from the perspective of mainstream media and hip-hop-obsessed cultural studies scholars. And this African American majority is precisely *TJMS*'s audience base. (It fits into Arbitron's “Urban Adult Contemporary” listening audience, the majority of whom are working-class and adult to middle-aged [Arbitron 2011a].) *TJMS* further serves this “respectable working middle class”—my term—in banning “cussing”—their term—on the air, thus further underlining its distance from the (majority of the) rap world's celebration of profanity, misogynist sexuality, and ill-gotten wealth.

I have also located the show inside the history of black American radio and within the shifting political economy of

U.S. media. Its politics–music–humor mix has a long black entertainment pedigree, and its musical-genre slant dates from both the Reagan-era inception of black “Quiet Storm” (mixed jazz and slow ballads) programming and the black youth–adult to elderly musical-taste divide with the rise of rap and hip-hop—the older audience rejecting what it perceived as arrhythmic, offensive kids’ music and cleaving instead onto soul and neosoul, R & B, gospel, and black pop. This generational radio-show split mirrored and joined the larger, wild proliferation of U.S. media outlets during the Reagan-era neoliberal deregulation of the industry, giving rise to now-common niche programming by race and ethnicity, national origins, gender, religion, political persuasion, generation, and lifestyle across radio, television, print media, and the Internet (di Leonardo 1998:269–272, 2007).<sup>9</sup>

Political-economic media scholars, like Robert McChesney (2004) and Susan Douglas (1999), articulate a “decline and fall” U.S. radio narrative for this period, with no room in the deregulated present for material beyond right-wing talk shows and “stale, derivative” popular music (McChesney 2004:197; see also C. Riley Snorton’s 2009 critique of the absence of race analysis in the media reform movement). For black studies and cultural studies scholars, the same period indexes the rise of rap and hip-hop, to be celebrated as heralds of the progressive political potential of a “hip-hop nation” (see di Leonardo 2007). Thus, neither school attends to the substance of the musical–media choices of the bulk of the black American population.

### Fear of a black planet: A progressive black counterpublic

Growing within this widely ignored black working-class, middle-class adult media niche, *TJMS*, in dialogue with its audience, has built a powerful political-linguistic mediated counterpublic (see Urla 2001). As Nancy Fraser (1992) and Michael Warner originally expanded Jürgen Habermas’s “public sphere” concept, a counterpublic is (in Warner’s words) constituted “through a conflictual relation to the dominant public,” and it “maintains at some level . . . an awareness of its subordinate status” (2002:118–119).<sup>10</sup> The deep horizontal comradeship (Anderson 1983) across *TJMS* crew and audience is constructed through shared racial–class identity (the crew are, of course, now well-off, but they identify with and perform working to middle classness) and awareness of ongoing racial discrimination, social-democratic politics, and linguistic stylization (Coupland 2001). Re the latter, the crew individually represent, and play with, a range of class and regional black audience “voices,” from Sybil Wilkes’s urban “schoolmarm” performance (Wilkes is from Chicago and is a Northwestern University alumna) to Tom Joyner’s code-switching across

“correct” and working-class black English and J. Anthony Brown’s “country” working-class black English (Brown is from South Carolina).

This linguistic stylization, with its attendant African American humor and constant *entre nous* black musical, sports, celebrity, and political references, draws in a huge audience and aids in sedimenting *TJMS*’s overarching activist progressive politics—including its explicit dissent from the neoconservative “family values” frame that became hegemonic in the U.S. public sphere over the 1990s.<sup>11</sup> Crew members and audience participants here normalize the representation of black single mothers as hard-working, pragmatic, intelligent, morally upright, and appropriately sexually active citizens:

Sometime in the early 2000s:<sup>12</sup>

Myra J [former crew member who played a sassy, responsible, working-class single mother, answers caller’s question, When should grown children leave your house?]: When yo kids is gettin mo diggity [sex] than you are!

And *TJMS* has long explicitly approved gay rights, as in this discussion of their upcoming Family Reunion extravaganza:

April 21, 2006:

Tom Joyner: We’ve got lots of single people comin, and boyfriend and girlfriend . . .

Melvin [former crew member, played older, very queeny southerner]: And boyfriend and boyfriend, and girlfriend and girlfriend!

Tom: That’s right, it’s all good, family is *family*.

But this progressive political slant and the sheer overwhelming blackness of the crew and its audience—there are nonblack audience members and occasional guests, but they are a small minority—along with their Afro-American working-class stylization, also overdetermine the mainstream media *TJMS* blackout. While black individuals are now represented broadly across mainstream U.S. media news and entertainment, all-black media—BET and TVOne television stations; *Ebony*, *Essence*, and other black print and web outlets; and black radio and Internet sites—do not attract most white Americans. We might here see an analogy to well-studied neighborhood “tipping points”—that white Americans in general will live with some black neighbors, up to a certain percentage, but will engage in white flight above that figure (see, e.g., Card et al. 2008). The rap group Public Enemy (1990) summed it up: “Fear of a Black Planet.” In addition, until Obama’s successful presidential run, mainstream news sources tended to showcase “man bites dog” black political coverage—to ignore black Americans’ aggregate progressive political profile and to

overrepresent black conservative politicians and homophobic preachers, for example.

*TJMS* also engages and maintains this progressive black counterpublic through extensive on-show interactive philanthropy. They award funds, for example to every Tuesday's Real Fathers, Real Men; every Wednesday's "Christmas Wish"; and every Thursday's Thursday Morning Mom, in response to letters from listeners detailing their relatives', friends', or coworkers' exemplary behavior or extreme need (awardees are not necessarily biological mothers or fathers). The show also stages events for listeners to "party with a purpose"—periodically broadcasting from different HBCUs (historically black colleges and universities) and sponsoring an annual cruise and "Family Reunion," profits from both going to HBCUs. This long-term educational engagement is also clearly part of *TJMS*'s effort not to "age out" with its audience—to gain and maintain younger listeners over time.

*TJMS* expanded this activist presence into health care in 2002, when the show launched its "Take a Loved One to the Doctor Day" in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, engaging its audience to raise health awareness and offering multiple free health fairs all over the country. The "Day" soon expanded to longer periods—now a medical professional visits and answers texted questions on "Get Well Wednesday" each week, and Dr. Oz (Oprah Winfrey's favorite public-sphere doctor) makes frequent appearances. By 2007, though, *TJMS* had moved leftward, beyond consumer awareness and racial uplift, into a critique of the U.S. health care system and a call for national health insurance, in conjunction with Michael Moore's appearance on the show just after the release of his documentary *Sicko*. By 2008, Joyner sounded like a classic *Nation*-reading single-payer social democrat on the issue:

February 27, 2008, a woman caller explains that her son has very crooked teeth and is ashamed of his appearance but she can't afford to pay for braces for him; Tom Joyner fulminates anathemas against the U.S. medical system:

Tom Joyner: We need universal health care!

Sybil Wilkes: I'm just playing devil's advocate, but what would Tom say when people say universal health care would be socialized medicine?

Tom: Then let it *be* socialized medicine, because what we've got now is no good!

I should also note that, as the show is mixed genre, I am abstracting strictly political material from musical interludes, black-celebrity interviews, health news, local-station news feeds, and masses of purely humorous and even insanely silly exchanges, such as the 2008 April Fools' joke that the whole crew successfully played on their audience:

They told listeners that they had just discovered that illegally downloaded music would "blow up" (wreck) their iPods and computers and thus caused nationwide panic. One woman caller scolded them afterward for the joke, saying they should be more responsible, "cause I listen to y'all for the news!" We might imagine that this variety-show mix is yet another reason for the scholarly and media black-out on *TJMS* and its politics—if it were not the case that Jon Stewart's and Stephen Colbert's satirical fake-news cable television shows have long garnered obsessive academic and journalistic attention.

In what follows, I extend these thick-ethnographic analytic threads to the specific political roles that *TJMS* played in 2008 and is now playing in the run-up to the 2012 U.S. presidential election. In so doing, I attend to the show's ironic black political presence in the increasingly neoliberalized, heavily commercialized U.S. public sphere, to its political shifts during Obama's first term, and to very recent cross-racial and cross-medium synergies in the progressive public sphere that may prove crucial to the course of the campaigns for the November election and to progressive politics thereafter.

### The run-up to 2008: Playing Negro spirituals

Like black Americans in the aggregate, *TJMS* has a long history of favoring Democratic politicians—they gave access and support to President Clinton and to 2000 and 2004 presidential candidates Al Gore and John Kerry. The crew, unlike U.S. mainstream media, which tended to attribute the Kerry loss to "values voters," were particularly scabrous and direct about the 2004 election disaster and subsequent poor political prospects for progressive change—with a creatively black optic:

November 3, 2004:

Tom Joyner: We all of us are sittin here lookin like John Kerry. We all got long faces. I'm playing Negro spirituals . . . The forecast for the next four years for black people is pretty grim. Social services, gone. Medical care, gone. We've got to step up and do for ourselves . . . Meanwhile, how does the rest of the world look at us? All I've seen is Tony Blair. But the rest of the world: they hate us. All you have to do is go out of the country . . . that's some scary stuff.

J. Anthony Brown: There's a letter for each year: H-E-L-L.

Caller: I just wonder if George W. Bush really won, or if some trickery can be suspected?

J.: Hmm, let's see, is the government involved in trickery?

Note the crew's and audience's open acknowledgment of the theft of the 2000 election and of ongoing Republican

electoral fraud, their clear association of the GOP with antiblack legislation and general social-service cutbacks, and their recognition that the United States, through its prosecution of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, had broadly lost international respect.

Over the course of President Bush's two terms, the *TJMS* crew, like black Americans in general, articulated an increasingly angry, oppositional, antiwar, social-democratic welfare-state politics. Despite their ongoing dependence on corporate advertising, their political profile moved beyond antineoconservatism to include antineoliberalism—as we have seen with reference to health care. They supported public teachers, U.S. Postal Service workers, and other public employees in their unionization efforts against cutbacks and privatization moves. They even encouraged black Americans not to enlist in the military—while continuing to support those in active service. They repeatedly called out the Bush administration's racism—even imperialism—and the show was active both in angrily covering the 2005 Katrina Gulf Coast disaster and in organizing extensive aid, with its own and listener-donated money—around \$4 million—for New Orleans victims and New Orleans HBCU students (see di Leonardo 2007).

### Election 2008 and Obama's black card

As we have seen, *TJMS* was interested early on in candidate Obama but doubtful about his national viability. Different crew members also articulated different takes on his early Democratic rivals. Sybil Wilkes, for feminist reasons, was interested in Hillary Clinton—until Clinton's embarrassing “under sniper fire in Bosnia” claim and Obama's Super Tuesday triumphs, in which he won 13 of 23 contests and gained 847 delegates to Clinton's 834. Tavis Smiley kept the pressure on Obama vis-à-vis the question of whether he adhered to a “black agenda” and ultimately left the show in response to withering audience criticism.

Senator Obama himself displayed a relaxed and playful side in his post-Super Tuesday, March 3, 2008, call to the show. He and Tom Joyner joked about revoking Sybil's “black card” (as Sybil “performs” higher status than other show staffers) because she had never had her phone cut off. Obama smoothly negotiated his own class status for the radio audience: “I have actually never had my phone cut off, but I *have* gotten that red notice!” Even guest comic Cheryl Underwood, temporarily converted from her Republicanism, got in the mix, celebrating Obama's vote-getting abilities: “*And* he got white women sweatin and fallin out [fainting], and he ain't even sing or play basketball!”

From spring 2008 until election day, *TJMS* was increasingly dedicated not simply to Obama's candidacy but to efforts to register black Americans to vote and to safeguard their franchise, given long-standing Republican

voter-suppression efforts. The show teamed up with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—the Teamsters Union providing financing—establishing hotlines to enable registration and report voting irregularities to teams of attorneys. The NAACP's hotline director, Ken Smukler, who is white but “performs” black, called in frequently, particularly around state primary election dates, and increasingly as November 4 loomed, commenting with high wit on both deliberate voter fraud and state-level bureaucratic incompetence. Note the way in which he wraps rather policy-wonky voting information in ripped-from-the-headlines political and celebrity humor:

May 6, 2008:

Ken Smukler: Well, it's the fine line between trickery and shiggedy [crew bowdlerization of “shit”]! [Smukler explains multiple voting problems in North Carolina and Indiana primaries] 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!

Crew: [Wild laughter]

October 22, 2008:

Smukler: [reporting that on the first day of early voting, the NAACP responded to 11,000 calls from frustrated voters] It's easier to find Michael Vick signing autographs at the Westminster Dog Show than it is to find your poll location in America!

*TJMS* and the NAACP hotline project received more than 300,000 phone calls in 2008, registered nearly 100,000 voters, and protected black voter access in primaries and on November 4 in dozens of states, providing enormous benefit to Obama's and other Democrats' candidacies, efforts that were rewarded by multiple Barack and Michelle Obama and other Democratic appearances on the show. And yet U.S. mainstream media—despite their obsession with the Obama campaign's “ground game”—never covered the story. Not even Keith Olbermann's then-newish or Rachel Maddow's brand-new MSNBC evening news program saw fit to mention the project, despite these shows' progressive, pro-Obama slants.

### Obama's first term: Big Chief and white folks gone wild

As we have seen, the *TJMS* crew covered the run-up to the presidential inauguration with near-hysterical effervescence. And a certain amount of political vengeance. The morning after George W. Bush's January 15, 2009, farewell address, DJ Mike Stark put together a mix of excerpts from the speech, followed by news clips disproving Bush's claimed achievements, and he satirically connected

musical interludes underlining Bush's racism at home and imperial warmongering abroad. A small section: Stark embedded Bush's "Tonight I'm filled with gratitude to Vice President Cheney" in Junior Walker's 1965 Grammy-winning song, "Shotgun," and followed Bush's infamous Katrina crisis exclamation, "Brownie, you're doing a heck-fofa job," with the haunting Allen Watty "Hurricane Song" (obysray112 2006): "Get me off this rooftop, Can somebody rescue me? . . . Then it hit me, ain't nobody coming to get me . . . Once again, the color of my skin reminds me things ain't changed." The mix finished up with the refrain from girl-group En Vogue's angry 1990 anthem "Lies": "Lies, lies, using lies as alibis." Joyner summed up: "Aren't you glad you missed the speech last night? We did it *right* for you!"

The show's happy triumphalist bubble was soon punctured by the ongoing recession, Obama's difficulties with Congress, and the not-unconnected resurgent racism associated with Tea Party protests against the Democratic health care initiative. While *TJMS* did articulate criticisms of President Obama—particularly dissenting from his ramp-up of troops in Afghanistan and failure to wind down the Iraq war faster—those criticisms were soon overborne by their (and their audience's) incredulous, defensive outrage against early racist attacks on the White House. Note the crew and audience, below, weaving together a witty put-down of Tea Partiers as foolish, spoiled children whose racist unfamiliarity with black Americans would terrify them into silence when personally confronted with them.

August 12, 2009:

Male caller: What's up with these hearings?! It's white folks gone wild! It's like McCain rallies on steroids! [Caller goes on to say that it's] . . . old folks behaving like spoiled kids! They need graham crackers, chocolate milk, and a nap.

Sybil Wilkes: [Suggests Benadryl]

Later:

Tom 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!

J. Anthony Brown: [with sardonic emphasis] Waaay, WAY down!

It is impossible to gauge the relative causality of "defense of a black president" versus "political retreat under economic duress" in *TJMS*'s post-2008 election political shift. Like most U.S. businesses, the show had a recessionary revenue fall-off—and perhaps crew members clipped their political wings in fear of losing sponsors and syndication—indeed, Clear Channel, the notoriously rightist media corporation, suddenly threw the Chicago show off the air in March 2009, replacing it with the politically anodyne Steve Harvey Show.<sup>13</sup> *TJMS* certainly shifted in this period in

terms of losing a number of the more politically engaged crew members (Melvin, Ms. Dupree, Myra J) and adding a number of celebrity watchers (Kevin Frazier, Jacqui Reid, Wendy Williams). But it also added a number of political commentators.

Perhaps the two most important underlying causes of the *TJMS* political shift are that, first, like many other progressive outlets, the show found far less to criticize in a Democratic White House than it had in a Republican. And, second, mainstream media have certainly underreported the extent of racist vituperation against the president and the First Lady, including Nazi and monkey imagery—vituperation that black Americans in the aggregate, quite reasonably, take personally and feel compelled to answer. As Sybil Wilkes noted more than once, memorably and bitterly: "Hate doesn't take a holiday."

The show was also caught up—as were all U.S. news media—with the relief at President Obama's successful May 1, 2011, attack against Osama bin Laden in Pakistan. The response, however, uniquely read the event through a black pride lens:

May 2, 2011, 5 a.m.:

Tom Joyner: Oh! Mission accomplished for real!

Sybil Wilkes: God bless America!

J. Anthony Brown: Whatchuknow! Tom Joyner, he's dead! He left the building . . . And Sybil, Wasn't that gangsta? Just when *The Apprentice* was gettin good! . . . What a great day! He took out Bin Laden and Donald Trump! . . . And Trump had to be hospitalized!

Tom: Huh?

J.: He had to have Obama's foot removed from up his ass.

Later:

J.: [after Obama's speech] And the only thing that was missin was cowboy boots and swingin doors!

Later, the crew comments on U.S. public reaction:

Tom: And they celebrated!

Sybil: From sea to shining sea.

Tom: Good. Good! It's a *good* day. [deeply emotional] Big Chief! [referring not only to Commander in Chief but to black New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians' "Big Chief"] That's *my* Chief.

End of show:

Tom: Oh, it's a good Monday morning!

J.: It's good if you're black!

Audience member texts: He shoulda walked off and pumped his fist!

[They play a segment of Obama's White House Correspondents' Dinner speech (in which he jokes about birther—and Donald Trump's in particular—fantasies about his non-American origins), interspersed with Justin Timberlake's 2007 hit "What Goes Around Comes Around."]

Crew: [adjures their audience] Now don't give white people shiggedy today at work—just *roll* your eyes. [all laugh]

While here the *TJMS* crew's celebratory and Old West macho wit can be read as rightist and militarist, they were far outpaced in the wake of the killing by large public crowds of young Americans—and by, for example, Comedy Central's Jon Stewart, who in his reportage that evening actually pointed to a cartoon depiction of a U.S. map in which Florida-as-penis suddenly became erect and grew large hanging testicles (see *Daily Show with John Stewart* 2011). And the *TJMS* crew at least linked U.S. triumph over a terrorist enemy to a critique of the false warmongering claims of the previous president—"Oh! Mission accomplished for real!"—and the nation's first black president's verbal jujitsu in besting an absurdly racist and foolish and yet simultaneously powerful enemy.

*TJMS*'s muted criticism of the White House, its defensive circle-the-wagons posture—including failure to criticize Obama's drone assassination program and neoliberal education policy and ambivalent coverage of Occupy Wall Street protests (Sybil Wilkes was all for them, Tom Joyner puzzled and worried) and even of Obama's declaration of support for gay marriage, for fear of harm to his reelection prospects—continued into the run-up to the 2012 elections, in the context of ongoing racist calumny and the under-reported Republican state legislatures' swathe of voter-suppression legislation. (Until spring 2012, only progressive outlets like the *Nation* and MSNBC seemed aware of this American Legislative Exchange Council–organized conspiracy to strip the franchise from minorities, youth, and the elderly, all heavily Democratic constituencies.) *TJMS*, hyperaware of this phenomenon, consistently reported on it and reanimated, with the NAACP, the 1-866-MYVOTE-1 hotline, with promos from a range of celebrities—NAACP Chair Ben Jealous, cable talk-show host Wendy Williams, actor Samuel L. Jackson, singers Mary J. Blige and Eric Benet. They focused at the same time on Justice Department remedies available at least to former Jim Crow southern states and twitted Tavis Smiley's and Cornel West's rather self-involved early criticisms of the President.<sup>14</sup>

November 8, 2011:

Ken Smukler reviews voter-suppression laws state by state—but he points out that "the last defense against voting-restrictive acts in Voting Rights Act [VRA] states is Eric Holder and Barack Obama. Do you hear that,

Cornel West?" [repeats query pointedly and angrily] Smukler explains that multiple states are asking the Justice Department to allow them to avoid Section 5 of the VRA.

The second key track of *TJMS* 2012 election coverage, at least through midyear, was, of course, the Republican primaries. Here the crew and audience shared the broader media's and public's fascinated astonishment with the array of bizarre contenders and statements. But from a specifically black progressive perspective—and unlike some other black media outlets—they were outraged by Herman Cain's rightist thuggery and clownish stupidity and beyond mirthful at his comedown over sexual harassment charges. On November 8, 2011, young comic and recent addition to the show Chris Paul brilliantly "murdered a hit"—sang new lyrics karaoke-style, in this case to Prince and the Revolution's "Purple Rain" (1984)—to mark the occasion:

[Women's victim testimony from news reports]

A GOP candidate is in trouble  
A GOP candidate is in shame  
Drowning in a cesspool of allegations  
All these women claim they were harassed by Herman Cain!

Herman Cain, Herman Cain, Herman Cain, Herman Cain, Herman Cain, Herman Cain

[Further victim testimony]

All these women claim they were harassed by Herman Cain!

Herman, I know I know I know you called it a lynching  
But first you said racism wasn't true, I guess unless it involves you

You say you want to be a leader, but you can't stop chasin white behinds

Your wife is gonna whup you, and she might knife you, and cut off Herman's Cain

Herman Cain Herman Cain, Herman Cain Herman Cain, Herman Cain Herman Cain

[All my Tea Party people wave your hands!]

[Further victim testimony]

ALL these women harassed

All these women harassed, by freaky Herman Cain!

[chrispaulskinmix 2011]

### Envoi: A new counterpublic synergy?

But the most meaningful and unnoted developing public-sphere phenomenon of the election season may be the very new synergy across black radio and cable television, particularly MSNBC's progressive news shows. Pioneering black figures like Gwen Ifill and Tavis Smiley have long had a presence on public television and radio, as have Bernard Shaw and then Roland Martin on CNN, and local station news anchors have been racially integrating for some decades. But not until Obama's campaign and election did we start

seeing greater numbers of minority news *analysts*, like Eugene Robinson (*Washington Post*), Charles Blow (*New York Times*), Clarence Page (*Chicago Tribune*), Al Sharpton, and Melissa Harris-Perry on MSNBC news programs. And then both Sharpton in 2011 and Harris-Perry in 2012 were given their own MSNBC shows.

For some years I had been noticing the black radio–MSNBC connection: *TJMS* callers mentioning Keith Olbermann's *Countdown*; Michael Baisden, on his syndicated weekday afternoon show, repeatedly playing Olbermann's angry progressive "Special Comments"; and Tom Joyner himself and MSNBC host Chris Matthews joining to hold a January 18, 2010, televised town hall meeting on race at Texas Southern University, an HBCU. But we now have an extremely strong set of black radio–cable television ties, with Roland Martin appearing daily and Al Sharpton weekly to give political commentary on *TJMS* while hosting their own shows on CNN and MSNBC, respectively. Online publications like *Politico* have reported *TJMS* interviews and events, if mostly in blog posts. Simultaneously, we have seen writers for the *Nation*, such as Melissa Harris-Perry and Chris Hayes, move up from guest hosting to presiding over their own MSNBC shows. These connections have "bled into" MSNBC (I cannot speak to CNN) politics now, in the sense that nearly all its news shows cover both racial civil rights news (as in the recent Trayvon Martin murder case) and "increasing U.S. income inequality" stories with the same angry political commitment we would have seen heretofore only in black (and other minority) and left media.

We could say, then, that the U.S. niche news mediascape is shifting in pure market-choice neoliberal fashion, responding to growing aggregate consumer demand, over the eight long George W. Bush years and into the Obama era, for progressive–antiracist news coverage (and for parallel international coverage, evident, e.g., in Al Jazeera's increased popularity and visibility). With far larger and faster-growing audiences than nonprofit progressive outlets like *Democracy Now*, this entirely commercial, heavily advertising-dependent sector is synergistically connecting progressive print, television, and radio in the fashion that Rush Limbaugh and Rupert Murdoch's NewsCorp pioneered decades ago, extremely successfully, for the Right. And these cross-medium ties and influences, with their enhanced capacity to shore up the franchise and mobilize the progressive–minority base to vote, may yet prove key to the results of the upcoming 2012 U.S. elections. They act as a progressive public-sphere echo chamber, ensuring that their audience takes in daily outrages, triumphs, and talking points.

But the ongoing irony here is the one-way mirror effect of this synergy: *TJMS* (and its website and some other minority radio shows and websites) has influenced these shifts, even served as an incubator of personnel (Al Sharp-

ton) and key issues (very early coverage of the Trayvon Martin case). But unless you are a member of its audience, you would have no way of knowing this. *TJMS*'s respectable adult black working-class stylization and its primary use of radio rather than the "sexy" media of television and Internet have overdetermined its ongoing mainstream U.S. public-sphere invisibility. No matter how many political issues it covers first or best, no matter how many black news analysts it trains and gives a leg up into radio's major leagues, mainstream media and nonblack Americans continue to ignore the existence of this on-air organizer of a progressive black working-class counterpublic, just as the majority of black Americans remain publicly underrepresented in Entman and Rojecki's ongoing "saints or sinners" media syndrome. While *TJMS* is likely to play a major role in the 2012 elections, even a second Obama term may not change this fundamental public-sphere segregation of our media landscape.

And these representations reflect material realities. Despite many commentators' imaginings, Randall Kennedy (2012) points out that Obama's 2008 election did not signal that Americans have arrived at a "postracial" state. As Michelle Alexander documents in *The New Jim Crow*, her study of the interlinked effects of mass incarceration and disfranchisement of high percentages of black Americans today, "Although this new system of racialized social control purports to be colorblind, it creates and maintains racial hierarchy much as earlier systems of control did" (2012:13). It is precisely that ongoing process of class–race sorting that *TJMS*, in its working-class black—and broadly minority—orientation, daily recognizes, comments on, and protests and that most nonminority media outlets ignore:

March 21, 2005, the crew discusses the case of a high school student who massacred teachers and classmates in Red Lake, Minnesota:

Tom Joyner: Do you think they're gonna get the same kind of attention as Columbine?

Sybil Wilkes and J. Anthony Brown: No, uh uh!

Tom: Because it's an Indian reservation.

J.: And poor.

Tom: I'm just sayin.

What are the implications of the *TJMS* phenomenon, and this analysis of it, for cultural anthropology? Scholars of the U.S. public sphere have been mesmerized for some time by youthful, exotic, and new-technology cultural and political productions. And they are indeed interesting. But as I wrote in *Exotics at Home* (1998), key U.S. social realities are often "hidden in plain sight"—in this case, a wildly popular and politically consequential black adult old-media show and its associated working- to middle-class counterpublic.

Failing to “see” *TJMS*, we also fail to think through ongoing political-economic processes that maintain racial and class segregation in daily lives and in media worlds. A historical “culture and political economy” theoretical framework that thoroughly integrates race and gender analysis—and, in this case, very lengthy media ethnography—helps to unveil powerful political and cultural realities in Americans’ own backyards.

## Notes

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1. See my account of these phenomena in di Leonardo 2010.
2. As of March 2012, *TJMS* was syndicated on about one hundred ten black radio stations nationwide, representing 29 states plus the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The show is most heavily syndicated in the southern “black belt,” on the Eastern Seaboard, and in the industrial Midwest. See Blackamericaweb.com n.d. *TJMS* also streams live—with 1.5 million registered users in 2011—and in 2012 launched an app for smartphones. Compare its reach with that of Michael Baisden’s syndicated afternoon show, on 71 stations total in March 2012; comedian Steve Harvey’s morning drive-time one, on 58 stations; and Doug Banks’s afternoon show, on only 27. *TJMS* not only has a much wider audience than these shows but it is also much older and has far more enduring political and philanthropic commitments to black America. Banks’s and Harvey’s shows, for example, primarily focus on celebrities and relationship issues.
3. All transcriptions are mine, done contemporaneously with broadcasts, and as accurately as possible they reflect actual speech. I monitor 10–15 hours of the show’s 20 hours of weekly programming, more during key events and crises. Ellipses indicate gaps in transcription. *TJMS* temporarily archives a small portion of each show on its website, Blackamericaweb.com, but rarely saves the spontaneous political conversations and back and forth with audience callers and texters that constitute the bulk of the broadcast material in my research.
4. With the group Parliament, Clinton released “Chocolate City” in 1975; “Paint the White House Black” is a 1993 solo release.
5. At the baseline year of 2005, for example, before Howard Stern moved to satellite radio and Don Imus was fired, the *TJMS* audience was more than double Imus’s, in the same range as Stern’s, and more than half Rush Limbaugh’s. At that point, the *New York Times* had published 501 stories about Stern, most of them substantive. But *TJMS* had garnered only 13 mentions in the newspaper, almost all en passant. See di Leonardo 2007.
6. An Anthrosource search of 32 anthropology journals, going back to the founding of each journal, for research on “radio” produces, for example, multiple articles on Athabaskan-language, Australian, Brazilian, Ecuadoran, Israeli, Mexico City, Nepali, Russian, Taiwanese, Turkish, and Zambian radio—but only a single U.S. ethnographic study, on local-level “youth radio” in Oakland, California.
7. Ninety-four percent of black Americans and 95–96 percent of U.S. Latinos listen to black and Spanish-language radio, respectively, every week (Arbitron 2011a, 2011b).

8. Petey Greene is the subject of the documentary *Adjust Your Color: The Truth of Petey Greene* (Mendell 2009) and of a Hollywood film, *Talk To Me* (Lemmons 2007).

9. By *neoliberalism*, I refer to the classic political-economic analysis of the 1970s-on rise of the global ideology and practice of unfettered capitalism—including the deregulation of business, privatization of state-owned industries, and cutbacks in state social-welfare spending. Neoliberal ideology includes the assertion that these economic shifts will bring about economic growth and overall prosperity, related notions of the “personal freedom” entailed, and the exacerbation of the commodification of identity (di Leonardo 2008a, 2008b; Harvey 2005). Whereas David Harvey and some other political-economic analysts fail to incorporate gendered and racial-ethnic processes into their analyses of neoliberal growth, that theme has been emphasized in some quarters (Collins et al. 2008), and in this piece I am assuming that incorporation. I am not here engaging with the extraordinary proliferation of work in anthropology on neoliberalism and governmentality, the body, and so on. See Maskovsky and Kingfisher 2008 and Allison and Piot 2012.

10. There was a flurry of “black public sphere” and black popular culture scholarship in the 1990s, with a heavy emphasis on rap and hip-hop, film, television, and written and graphic arts—but no radio. See Dent 1992 and Black Public Sphere Collective 1995.

11. See Stacey 1997 for a full analysis of this phenomenon.  
12. I was not yet formally transcribing *TJMS* at that point and so do not have the exact date.

13. Joyner solved the problem within a month by buying a smaller black Chicago radio station to ensure ongoing *TJMS* presence in that large media market.

14. West has absurdly mixed his personal grievances—that he was not invited to the inauguration or the White House and so on—with progressive policy disappointments, for example, Obama’s appointment of a Wall Street-oriented economic team. He has called for third-party presidential candidates. See Hedges 2011 and Harris-Perry 2011.

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