

Christopher McAuley
Dept of Black Studies
University of California, Santa Barbara

As I think back to how some print and television news media (namely, the *LA Times*, the BBC and ABC's World News, and KCET's, The News Hour) treated race in the recent presidential campaigns and election, three instances come to mind: the disproportionate attention to black reaction to Obama's candidacy; the oft-repeated questioning of Obama's ability to appeal to white male working-class voters; and the unwillingness to editorialize on the degree to which Obama's candidacy was only made possible by the dire circumstances of the country's political-economy. I'll say a few words about each.

Despite Obama's best effort not to be a black candidate, once he took the South Carolina primary, media outlets (perhaps taking their cue from former President Clinton) began to focus on Obama's appeal to black voters. One of the casualties of this new racial focus was his win in Iowa and what that foreshadowed in those states with miniscule or, virtually non-existent, black electorates. Lost, as well, was the sense that black support for Obama was based on anything more than identity politics. The primary means by which a number of print and television news sources achieved this was by asking almost exclusively black respondents what the prospect of a black president meant to them. Given the predictability of black sentiment and answers, it would have been far more interesting and revealing to have put those questions to white respondents.

To the degree that the news media refashioned Obama into the black voter's candidate, they (once again, with the help or at the behest of the Clintons) raised the question of whether he could appeal to working-class white male voters, the constituency that has eluded Democratic presidential candidates since the party supported civil rights legislation in the mid-1960s. However, the very question overlooked Obama's showing in states like Montana and the Pacific Northwest in the primary. Implicit in this either unconscious or deliberate oversight is an *idée fixe* of which regions house the United States "real" working-class: Pennsylvania, Ohio, and the former confederate states. Ultimately, Obama made an impressive showing in many of these states in the election.

Those results beg another, hypothetical question which the news media and their commentators have been at pains to avoid: would Obama's candidacy have been possible if the Bush presidency had ended positively? In many respects we can understand why the question was avoided; in this "feel good," supposedly post-racial moment, if not era, who wants to chill the euphoria with the cold breath of cynicism? But the question is important if we are to distinguish the episodic from the lasting, the aberration from the pattern. Most important, this question-in-progress will shed light on just how far we have truly come in the last 40 years.