

Race, pigskin, and politics: A semiotic analysis of racial images in political advertising

CHARLTON D. MCILWAIN

Abstract

This paper analyzes a televised political advertisement run by David Perryman against former Congressman J. C. Watts in the 1994 Fourth District Congressional race in Oklahoma. Relying on Roland Barthes' conception of the rhetoric of the image — what I refer to as critical semiotics — the paper investigates the four sign systems at work in the ad: photographs, written language, spoken language (narration), and moving images. The analysis demonstrates: how the sponsor of the ad uses the trope of the 'Afro' as the primary signifying image; that the ad argues against Watts' candidacy by implicitly appealing to audience members' (voters') negative associations of blackness with inferiority, criminality, and perceptions of black militancy associated with the black power movement.

Keywords: political advertising; rhetoric of the image afro; African; Americans; black militancy.

1. Introduction

The intersections of race, media, and electoral politics in the United States are sites of principal concern for communication and critical cultural studies scholarship. They are ideal terrains for the study of those dimensions most significant to a field focused on issues of power, representation, and equality, consistent with democratic ideals. Additionally, the context of the American electoral system is one with a long cultural history of racial discrimination, expressed in a variety of tangible contexts. One prominent expression of this legacy of prejudice and discrimination persists, despite what some have referred to as a dominant 'culture of equality' (Mendelberg 2001): negative perceptions of black politicians (Gibbons 1993; Terkildsen 1993; and Williams 1990), the use of

race-based appeals by political candidates in various forms of campaign-related communication and the propensity for the news media to racialize the campaigns of black candidates (Caliendo and McIlwain 2006).

Broader issues regarding race, representation, and the electoral system have been approached from a number of disciplines and perspectives that necessarily foreground certain dimensions and background others. Proponents of Critical Race Theory (primarily in legal studies) have, for example, largely addressed issues of equal representation by focusing on the legal and political circumstances (the structural barriers to achieving equal representation) surrounding the equitable construction of electoral districts. Such theorists generally advance arguments that support racial gerrymandering to ensure that blacks and other racial minorities are equally represented in elected bodies at the state and federal level. In a similar vein, many political scientists, also interested in the broad issue of racial representation, have largely focused on voting behavior and public opinion, addressing the willingness and potential for whites to vote for African-American and other racial minorities (another key dimension of the debate surrounding racial gerrymandering) (Voss and Lublin 2001).

Research in political psychology in particular has focused on the persistent use of racial appeals in political campaign communication, producing strong evidence establishing a number of claims about the nature and effect of racial appeals. Such appeals, used by white political candidates in the United States, appeal to white voters' stereotypes, negative predispositions and resentment towards African-Americans as a way of gaining strategic advantage. Considering the efficacy and psychological processing of such appeals, these researchers demonstrate that: implicit racial appeals (as opposed to explicit) can prime negative attitudes white voters have about African-Americans; and that such appeals rely greatly on the use of racial 'code words' in conjunction with racial imagery to produce subtle appeals. They work primarily because they do not seem to explicitly offend whites' sensibilities and cultural norm of racial equality (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino et al. 2002). What is significantly less clear, however, is precisely how the dynamics of language and imagery work to construct an implicit racial appeal. This is to say, there is little understanding of the semiotic dimension of such appeals — how race 'gets into' the code-words (and how code-words themselves become coded) and images.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a semiotic understanding of the nature and interaction of various symbols in language and imagery used to produce messages that appeal to negative racial stereotypes, resentments and fears — a 'critical' semiotics, if you will, that aims to describe

the way that concomitant racial ideologies of black inferiority, criminality, etc., get constructed through the use of a variety of visual images, language, and audible speech. Relying on Roland Barthes' conception of the 'rhetoric of the image,' this paper focuses on an ad produced by David Perryman, a white candidate for the U.S. Congress in the Fourth District of Oklahoma in 1994 against his black opponent, former Congressman J. C. Watts.

The semiotic analysis herein focuses on one primary signifier — the Afro hairstyle that Watts is shown wearing in the ad, its relationship to the temporal dimension being manipulated by the ad (the use of a past image to solidify one's present image), and the effect of agency — one candidate's ability to control the perceptions and image of the opposing candidate. Ultimately, I argue that the primary imagery, language, and their arrangement in this ad connotes the historical image of black militancy as a way of appealing to white's fears about black criminality. The implications of such an analysis is relevant to the terrain of communication and critical cultural studies scholarship in several ways. First, it 'unmasks' the persistent need and efficacy of appealing to racist ideology, expressed in whites' stereotypes, fears, and resentments regarding African-Americans, in a culture that purports to uphold principles of racial equality and eschew outward expressions of racial prejudice. Second, the persistent strategic import of such appeals demonstrates the possibility of their detrimental influence in upholding principles of equal representation in elected office. This is to say, because such appeals continue to resonate with particular audiences, they may likely influence the possibility that fewer African-American candidates are elected to office. This possibility, along with a likely decline in the ability to draw electoral district boundaries to secure some semblance of descriptive representation among African-Americans and other minorities, threatens to weaken their political agency. Ultimately, the issues addressed in this paper have direct bearing on the manner in which the United States is able to preserve and promote the ideals of equality and democracy.

1.1. *'Critical semiotics' as ideological and cultural criticism*

Semiotics is a general label given to the study of signs and sign systems. While some scholars restrict their focus on such systems to the ways in which different signs are imbued with meaning and significance, others are characterized by what can be referred to as a 'critical' semiotics. Critical semiotics seeks not only to describe the construction and significance of symbolic life; it views semiotics as a way of performing a critical

project that seeks to understand the specific ways in which cultural actors shape symbolic meaning in ways that assert, sustain, or challenge the relations of power, subordination, and domination in a given society. Critical semiotics views signs and sign systems not only as the essential way in which human beings produce their social worlds, but also as particular objects with use-value — semiotic productions that can be constructed and molded to promote and achieve cultural and ideological goals that influence the way in which individuals and groups see themselves and others. Critical semiotics is thus a way of engaging semiotics with politics.

The notion of ideological criticism, as put forth in the semiotic theory and approach of Roland Barthes, is the particular framework relied on in this paper. Barthes' perspective and method of semiotics can be described by five characteristics most germane to this paper. First, Barthes views signs (particularly images) as either primarily aesthetic or ideological. In both cases — though more in the second than the first — the image serves as a culturally-specific referent that necessarily bears both a denotative and connotative meaning. Second, images, especially those that receive some second-order treatment (technical manipulation or placement within a broader message), are highly connotative. As Barthes puts it, its implied meaning is

not necessarily immediately graspable at the level of the message itself (it is, one could say, at once invisible and active, clear, and implicit) but it can already be inferred from certain phenomena at the levels of the production and reception of the message. (Barthes 1977: 19)

In other words, the connotative aspect of images are active enough to clearly communicate a particular message, though the full sense of what is implied is not immediately and fully perceptible.

Third, the connotative message of images is primarily ideological; they are 'read' by audiences as analogous to specific ideological frameworks they identify with, adhere to, or at least recognize. Fourth, this ideological reading of the image is the product of induced associations. An image does not tell a reader or viewer explicitly how to interpret the message; the ideological production of the image stimulates a particular set of associations that the reader/viewer will, because of their cultural and ideological knowledge, likely understand. Finally, Barthes notes that ideological messages are generally conveyed through the use of both images and language. In this situation, it is the image that maintains communicative primacy. 'The image no longer [in historical terms] illustrates the words; it is now the words which, structurally, are parasitic on the image.'

Barthes says (Barthes 1977: 19). In this way, any linguistic text that accompanies an image or images are not to be read in their own right. They derive their meaning from the image itself, such that they necessarily must be interpreted *vis-à-vis* the image(s).

Given this, Barthes' semiotics, as a form of cultural and ideological criticism, sees symbolic production largely as a way of accomplishing a dual task: communicating an effective, culturally-bound message by invoking known associations among its readers/viewers; and doing so in a manner that masks the underlying ideological content or ethos of the message. This masking is necessary in order to reach one's audience while not raising individuals' cultural filters that might eschew certain ideological beliefs or attitudes. In the case of racial ideology specifically, such a filter might be the presumed American norm of racial equality (Mendelberg 2001). Messages that clearly violate this norm are filtered out, reducing the efficacy of the message. However, the ideological masking through the parasitical relationship and production of images and language allows the ideological message to pass through this filter without being immediately perceptible. In such instances, the message (the associations invoked) nevertheless 'resonates'¹ with those who identify with, or accept the ideology of racism in some way — whether they willingly admit to this or not.

Given the largely hidden and implicit nature of ideological messages, Barthes sees the work of semiotics as one that reveals the masked ideological components in a produced collection of signs. In order to do this, Barthes demonstrates particular areas that the critic must focus on: the denotative/connotative aspects of the image; the connotative aspect of linguistic text in their relationship to their concomitant image(s); the way in which the signs have been coded with ideological content; and the way in which viewers are, because of their cultural knowledge, likely to read or interpret the message — that is, the associative world of the viewer.²

Utilizing Barthes' approach, I demonstrate in this paper that the benign nature of the advertising image considered here works to naturalize itself, to mask an argument premised on racist ideology; it makes the case that it is race-neutral. However, by providing a close analysis of the four sign systems at work in the ad — photographs, written language, spoken language (narration), and moving images, I argue that the sponsor of the ad uses the trope of the 'Afro' as the primary signifying image, constructing the argument against Watts' candidacy by appealing to audience's (voters) negative associations of blackness with inferiority, criminality, and black militancy. Before getting into each of these areas of analysis, a brief description of the campaign in which this ad was aired, helps to contextualize the arguments that substantiate the thesis stated above.

1.2. *The 1994 campaign scene*

Two candidates emerged to fill the open seat vacated in 1994 by Oklahoma's Fourth District Congressman David McCurdy, who ran for the U.S. Senate. David Perryman, a white Democrat, was a little-known attorney and political novice from a small rural community in Oklahoma. J. C. Watts, a heroic quarterback during the glory days of University of Oklahoma football, was seeking to become a political hero as well. Months after having backed Michael Dukakis' presidential bid in 1988, Watts changed his political party affiliation from Democrat to Republican. Soon thereafter, in 1989, Watts became the first African-American to be elected to statewide office in Oklahoma, where he was elected to sit on the state's Corporation Commission.

The odds against Watts' election seemed tremendous. He was black, Republican, running for a congressional seat in a district in which only seven percent of the voters were African-American, and where the majority of voters were Democrats. Of the white voters, a sizeable portion were older — old enough to vividly remember Jim Crow, segregation, fights over forced bussing, civil rights, and similar racially-charged social and political issues. It was clear from the outset that race would play a significant role in how people viewed the election. Everyone from national and local Republican-party leaders to members of the press focused their attention on Watts' possible novelty if he were elected — that since Reconstruction he would be the first black Republican elected to Congress south of the Mason-Dixon line. Watts, for the most part, tried to deflect attention from his race in his own campaign rhetoric, and for good reason. Despite his football heroism, it would be risky to flaunt his race in a district where whites — both Republican and Democrat (many of the old Dixiecrat mold) — had mixed, if not strong feelings against being represented by a black man. It is within this context that the controversial ad, depicted in figure 1, was aired late in the campaign season by David McCurdy, and is the basis of the remaining analysis.

1.3. *The photographic message: Watts, afros, and black militancy*

The photo in the first frame of the ad is a 1970s photograph taken from Watts' high school yearbook. As a photograph, it is a stock image with only denotative meaning. That is, the image presents itself to us as a natural reality. The photograph was captured mechanically, not manipulated by human intervention. The photograph establishes the allusion of having 'been there' at the particular time and place of the photograph's creation.





 <p>JULIUS CEASAR WATTS, JR. PHOTO BY DAVID PERRYMAN FOR CONGRESS & AMERICA</p>	<p>[long bass tone plays in background]</p> <p>Ann: This is J.C. Watts. In his younger days he played football.</p>
 <p>DAVID PERRYMAN PHOTO BY DAVID PERRYMAN FOR CONGRESS & AMERICA</p>	<p>[lighter tone plays in background]</p> <p>Ann: This is David Perryman. As a young farm boy, this is the pigskin he knew.</p>
 <p>ON JULY 7, 1994, J.C. WATTS ADMITTED TO... PHOTO BY DAVID PERRYMAN FOR CONGRESS & AMERICA</p>	<p>Ann: Both are running for Congress, but J.C. is running at the taxpayer's expense while serving on the corporation commission...</p>
 <p>...where he's paid \$52,000 a year and admits to working only twelve hours a week. That's roughing the taxpayer. PHOTO BY DAVID PERRYMAN FOR CONGRESS & AMERICA</p>	

Figure 1. Storyboard of David Perryman ad against J. C. Watts

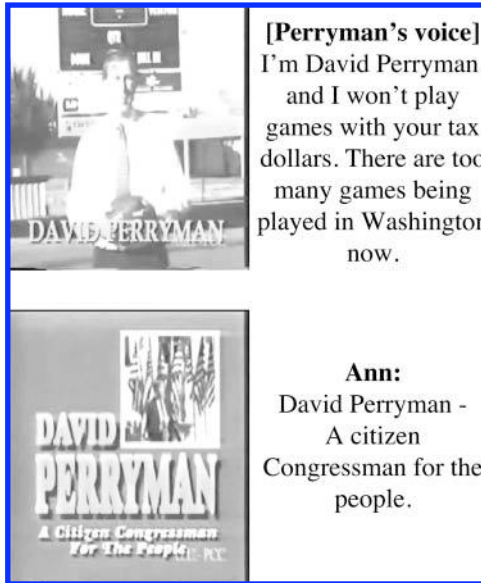


Figure 1 (Continued)

However, it does not function to create a magical experience of identification of the audience with that spatio-temporal reality, nor does it (in itself) provide a sense of presence. There is no realization of the photograph as existing in the here-and-now. Rather, the photograph offers us the understanding that, in reality, *this is how it was*. It draws viewers back to a different historical moment in the U.S., a point that becomes more significant later in the analysis.

The attempt to fix this reality in time and space is further understood when we go from considering the photograph in its entirety to dealing with the most explicit signifying aspect of the photograph — the afro. As we move from looking at the photograph as a denoted object to the signifying aspects of what is presented to us, it is clear that the afro, here, has meaning. First, although the use of the photograph elicits a naturalizing objectivity, we know that this photograph was chosen. In fact, it was chosen from among a myriad of other photographs that could have been chosen of Watts from over a twenty-five year period.³ In order to make a claim about what the afro means, and its ideological appeal to voters (primarily white), we must demonstrate that the viewing audience had the cultural knowledge that provides the repertoire of possible signifieds for this particular sign. This entails demonstrating the possible and

likely associations that would be stimulated by the ad among primarily white viewers.

The afro signified both a particular type of person as well as a particular time in which such a person existed. Further, each of these were something that audience members, particularly white (and especially older voters who would have lived during the time and been the most likely to vote), were keenly aware of. Specifically, I argue that the afro signified the turbulent time in U.S. history in the late 1960s and 1970s coinciding with the rise of the black power movement. The people signifying this movement were African-Americans who, more often than not, wore afros, and evoked a sense of fear and loathing among whites.

What follows is dedicated to substantiating this claim by showing that hair, particularly the afro, was the internal code used within the black power movement to demonstrate a new conception of black identity; that the image of this new conception was the stereotypical 'black buck' presented in the blaxploitation films of the 1960s and early 1970s; and that the sentiments of both of these were carried over into the political reality of the times with the emergence of the Black Panthers and other associated organizations. The point of this set of arguments is to show that whites had the cultural knowledge about the significance of the afro and that this knowledge shaped their perceptions about those who wore them. It demonstrates the manner in which the image of the afro and that of Watts is visually coded in the ad.

2. The signifying afro

Barthes (1990) explores fashion as a sign system. This is certainly true with hairstyles, in which meaning is embodied by the wearer of the particular style. Thus, I argue that the afro functions in a specific manner in U.S. society. That is, it is coded differently for black wearers of the style than it is for whites exposed to their image. Because of this, a different set of associations are evoked among white viewers than black. The afro was popular in the 1960s and 1970s. However, it was more than a popular style; it was a symbol, one of the most preeminent symbols of blackness. Blacks, who were for a time obsessed with 'straight hair' that resembled whites', began to eschew straight or 'processed' hair as a symptom of internalized notions of racial inferiority. As black leaders such as Malcolm X asserted,

The black man in America has been colonized mentally, his mind has been destroyed. And today, even though he goes to college, he comes out and still doesn't

even know he is a Black Man; he is ashamed of what he is because his culture has been destroyed; he has been made to hate his skin; *he has been made to hate the texture of his hair*; he has been made to hate the features that God gave him. (X and Farmer 1971 [1962])

Blacks, who in the 1960s and 1970s sought to exert a sense of ‘black pride,’ did so by returning to ‘natural’ hair, often in the afro style. The new identity of these African-Americans with their new symbol of pride became intertwined with the stereotypical image of the ‘Black Buck’ in subsequent years, furthering their coded characteristics as an image.

The figure of the ‘Brutal Black Buck,’ first introduced in the film *Birth of a Nation* (Means-Coleman 2000), was depicted as one who sought to carry out the fullness of ‘black rage’ by means of physical violence. The character was also one who, in his violent rage, sought sexual release, especially by sexually dominating white women. Donald Bogle gives his description of the archetype: ‘Bucks are always big, baadddd niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh’ (Bogle 1989: 13). This figure signified, among whites, the fear of black, bestial (inhu)men who might take revenge on their former white slave masters, including fulfilling white fears of miscegenation. The visual presentation of this figure has been depicted in countless films, but has found its most prominent outlet in the blaxploitation films popularized in the 1970s. In such films, blacks presented the stereotypical figure of the ‘black buck’ as a symbol of pride and power over the existing white power structure. As such, the newly spawned black power movement in the 1960s, revealed in the embodiment of a new hairstyle, was expressed in the blaxploitation films — one of the strongest mass communicative forms of the time for blacks. Although whites did not in large numbers see these films, the sentiments of the films and their images were expressed in other popular media forms accessible to whites.

2.2. *The afro in blaxploitation films*

The commonly called ‘blaxploitation’ film genre was an outgrowth of the new consciousness of black identity and power. Prior to the 1960s when most blacks in Hollywood films were stereotypically depicted as docile and unassuming caricatures, the blaxploitation film was made by black people, for black people — a vehicle for blacks to maintain control over their own images. This film genre is best illustrated by three of its most popular examples: *Sweet Sweetback’s Badasssss Song* (directed by Melvin Van Peebles, 1969), *Shaft* (directed by Gordon Parks, 1971), and *Superfly*

(directed by Gordon Parks Jr., 1972). *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song* was, undeniably, the most provocative film, featuring a young black man who was raised in a brothel, training to be a sex slave. When he is framed as a patsy by white cops, Sweetback escapes and a manhunt ensues. After raping both black and white women alike, Sweetback finally gets away. The statement, 'A BAADASSSSS NIGGER IS COMING BACK TO COLLECT SOME DUES,' flashes across the screen as Sweetback triumphs at the close of the movie. Cripps explains the film's popularity saying,

Van Peeble's movie appeared on the crest of a wave of black neo-nationalism, and therefore served, despite horrendous weaknesses and ambiguities, as an iconic expression of deep-seated black resentments that flared briefly in the form of a nascent proto-national feeling. Only months earlier, other, better-focused black movies appeared but found no black national mood with which to touch fire. (Cripps 1977: 32)

This new revolutionary flare continued to be expressed, in a more subdued, but nevertheless apparent way in *Shaft*. Here, the hero detective John Shaft was hired to track down Bumpy Jonas' kidnapped daughter, Marcie. Eventually Shaft finds out that the daughter has been kidnapped by the mob and subsequently attacks mafia members in a Greenwich Village hotel and frees Marcie. Shaft was a macho, proud black man, aggressive and sexual in his exploits with both black and white women. Although the film features much violence and scenes of a black revolutionary army, it was less overt in its revolutionary theme destroying a white power structure. As Gordon Parks, the movie's producer explains, '[Shaft was] a Saturday night fun picture which people go to see because they want to see the black guy winning' (Lev 2000).

The film *Superfly* features a character similar to *Shaft*. However, Superfly is a drug dealer who gets involved with crooked, white, New York City cops. Acting as a middleman for the cops, he devises a plot to pick up a half million dollars and then retire from the profession. The cops threaten him with his life if he leaves the cartel, but Superfly puts a hit out on one of the cops' families as insurance. In *Superfly*, as in *Shaft*, the hero is a proud, aggressive black man who sleeps with black and white women and makes a tacit connection with black militants in the course of his exploits. Superfly excuses his drug dealing by blaming it on 'The Man' — the white power structure — about which Superfly says, 'I know it's a rotten game. It's the only one the Man left us to play.'

Again, although relatively few whites watched these films, they, nevertheless, were aware of what these films were about. Reviews by both

black and white critics were popularly featured in most major newspapers and magazine outlets at the time, giving wider audiences a sense of the racial animus of these films. Daniel Leab notes that the film *Sweet Sweet-back* was condemned by almost all white critics. Even positive reviews of the film nevertheless captured what whites likely would see as negative assertions of blacks and blackness. For instance, Leab quotes one *Chicago Sun-Times* writer as concluding that the film was ‘a grotesque, violent, and beautifully honest film that takes no crap from Whitey,’ and that, ‘for the first time in cinematic history in America, a movie speaks out of an undeniable black consciousness’ (Leab 1975: 248).

White moviegoers and critics alike were able to give white America a sense of the ‘new Negro,’ one who sought violent retribution, self-efficacy, and style, and an aggressive challenge to the white power structure. Again quoting from Leab, one black woman had this to say about *Sweet Sweet-back*: ‘How many blacks would not like to work over a few racist cops or outwit scores of white pursuers,’ and a white newspaperman observed that ‘euphoric black audiences’ responded with ‘wholehearted emotion and enthusiasm’ to the beating and killing of white police officers in the film (Leab 1975: 249). Such sentiments popularized in the U.S. press of the almost 200 movies in which ‘a string of witless, brutal black heroes smashed the empires and fortunes of a succession of grotesque, boorish white villains and their sexually unsatisfied white women,’ concerned psychiatrists who thought black youth might act out such fantasies (Cripps 1977: 130). It was precisely this threat that contributed to the atmosphere of fear among white Americans of the new revolutionary movement that blacks increasingly espoused. Although these films presented mediated images that evoked white fear of black, afro-wearing bodies, the black power movement, spearheaded by the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP) brought such representations into the streets, neighborhoods, and living rooms of many Americans, both black and white.

2.3. *The afro and ‘black power’*

The BPP, gaining strength following the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, fully embraced the new self-identity of black power. It is reasonable to argue that white America was fully aware of this group of people, that their views of them were largely negative, and that the symbols associated with the group and movement were its most popular spokespersons, all of whom wore the afro style hair cut. The news media gave the country their first picture of the Black Panthers on April fourth, 1968 following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

As the Panther movement intensified, so did their coverage in national news media, yet the attention became extremely negative. While the BPP was perceived by blacks as an organization that protected them from what they saw as a racist and unjust system, 'to the average white American the Black Panther Party conjures up the picture of an anarchistic band of gun-toting, white-hating thugs' (Foner 1970: x). The mass media, with the aid of government propaganda, worked to create and sustain this image, despite the actions or claims of BPP members.

One startling set of revelations reported in the press were that many black Americans, even those with no connections with the BPP, supported BPP causes and methods of resistance. In a poll conducted by Lou Harris, published in the March 30, 1970 issue of *Time* (which devoted a full issue to the BPP),⁴ it was shown that nine percent of black respondents (two million citizens) said they agreed with the statement that only a 'readiness to use violence will ever get them equality.' As well, the number of blacks who believed they would have to resort to violence had risen from twenty-one percent in 1966 to thirty-one percent in 1970. The negative image whites had of the BPP, translated into negative perceptions of the larger group of African-Americans. This anxiety was fueled by prominent government spokesmen of the day. Men from J. Edgar Hoover to Daniel Patrick Moynihan described the Black Panthers as 'black extremists,' 'hoodlum-type revolutionaries,' and as people who 'threaten white society.' In their arsenal of propaganda, such government figures would use the BPP's own constitution to stir up fear about the group and those associated with its causes. In a vehemently anti-communist environment, The BPP was labeled 'Communist' and 'un-American' (Foner 1970).

An interaction of BPP spokesmen with individuals from one white community demonstrates such feelings. Writing for the *New York Times Magazine* on March 8, 1970,⁵ reporter Gerald Stearn noted that the white crowd gathered for the interview with the Panthers was 'nervous and surprisingly quiet.' He described BPP member, Joe, as 'tall, heavy-set, fat but muscle-toned, wearing his hair in a thick, undisciplined Afro style.' Listening intently to the Panther's explanation of their agenda, Stearn described their language and manner of speech as 'frightening,' and their conduct and ideology as a 'prison state of mind.' He described their rhetoric as anti-semitic and concluded that, 'The Panthers are primitive and frightening.'

If whites had somehow managed to avoid such descriptions of the Black Panthers expressed in the mass news media, it would have been hard for them to avoid two of the most publicized events of the early seventies — the trial of BPP leaders Huey Newton and Angela Davis.

Their faces and bodies, complete with the afro-style hair (Davis's was significantly larger than Newton's), were depicted almost daily throughout the months of the trial. In Newton's case, the two-month long trial ended in his conviction for 'voluntary manslaughter' in the shooting death of a police officer. Although his conviction was overturned by an appellate court, Newton would remain imprisoned for two years while that appeal was reviewed by the higher court.

Davis, a former college philosophy instructor, was suspected of kidnapping and murder in a Marin County shootout on August 7, 1970. The shootout left four people dead, including a judge. Davis, an admitted communist and associate of the Black Panthers, went on the run, but was finally caught and arrested on August 13, 1970, in New York. A *New York Times* report the following day noted that, 'Since Miss Davis became the third woman to be placed on the FBI's list of ten most-wanted fugitives, her face has become a familiar one. Both photographs on the FBI poster show her with a high, rounded Afro hairstyle.'⁶ Davis, however, was later acquitted of all charges after more than a year-long, extremely public trial.

If one managed to still shield their eyes from these cases, still another case almost assures some recognition by whites of 'black militants' and their associated Afros. At the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, two black track athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, finished first and third in the 200-meter dash. The traditional ceremony was held, but a very untraditional event occurred when the two boarded their platforms without shoes, wearing black stockings. Smith wore a black scarf around his neck; Carlos wore a string of beads. Both wore buttons that read, 'The Olympic Project for Human Rights.' As the U.S. flag was raised to the sky and the Star Spangled Banner began to play in honor of the United States, both men bowed their heads to the ground and thrust their black-gloved fists in the air (signifying black power). The photographs of this image circulated on the front page of major newspapers and on television sets across the world in the coming days. The two were immediately ejected from the Olympic games and sent back to the United States for acts that were characterized as a public embarrassment of the country. Speaking a few years later about the event, Smith explained their actions by saying,

My raised right hand stood for the power in black America. Carlos' raised left hand stood for the unity of black America. Together they formed an arch of unity and power. The black scarf around my neck stood for black pride. The black socks with no shoes stood for black poverty in racist America. The totality of our effort was the regaining of black dignity. (Matthews and Amdur 1974: 197)

These brief accounts demonstrate with reasonable certainty that the afro image of blacks was associated with members of the BPP and other black 'militants' whose afro-sporting bodies were a significant staple in television and print news coverage from the late sixties to the mid seventies. The Afro was associated with all that was bad about black America — violence, crime and 'un-American' activities that sought to usurp power.

Angela Davis' own reflections on her image, particularly that which centered on her afro, are instructive in understanding my claim about the connection of the hairstyle to images of black criminality and militancy (Davis 1994). In her article, Davis notes that she is 'remembered as a hairdo' (Davis 1994: 37). She elaborates on her wide portrayal in the mass media saying,

On the one hand I was portrayed as a conspiratorial and monstrous Communist (that is, un-American) whose unruly natural hairdo symbolized Black militancy (that is, antiwhiteness) . . . On the other hand, sympathetic portrayals tended to interpret the image . . . as that of a charismatic and raucous revolutionary ready to lead the masses into battle. (Davis 1994: 39)

Later, Davis emphasizes the manner in which her image and the Afro were so closely associated with black criminality and militancy by describing a scene in which she was preparing for a photo shoot with a renowned photographer. She said that the photographer 'assumed, as it turned out, that he was to re-create with his camera a symbolic visual representation of black militancy: leather jacket (uniform of the Black Panther Party), Afro hairdo, and raised fist' (Davis 1994: 41).

The use of Watts' image as it appears in Perryman's ad links the present reality of Watts to these negative images associated with the afro. The effect is a full transposition from the violent and threatening image of black militancy to the image of Watts — a present-day representation of the old-era sentiment represented by and associated with the afro.

3. Signifying whiteness

The photograph of Perryman shares the same function as the Watts photograph in its denotative objectivity and rhetorical attempt to project a 'this is how it was' image. In the Perryman photograph, we see a picture from much the same time as that of Watts. However, there is one notable difference. The photo of Perryman is a color photograph, while the Watts' photo is black and white. Although no 'trick effects' were used per se in that these were chosen photographs rather than photographs taken or staged by the advertiser, there is, nevertheless, an effect. Color

and lighting are used in photography to enhance an image in some way. The choice of the black and white photo of Watts further 'darkens' the image of Watts' black visage, while the skin tone and mood projected in the Perryman photograph produce a much more positive image of Perryman, in contrast.

Be that as it may, the real point of analysis is that, unlike the Watts photograph, the denotative aspect of the Perryman photograph presents the reality of a clean-cut, all-American boy with his prize pig on the farm in rural Oklahoma. Again the question is, among the possible range of signifieds or associations here, which is that which the advertiser would want the audience to choose as the main meaning of the photographic image? As the afro (and skin color) of Watts were the primary signs in the first photograph, the pig, as well as the backdrop of the farm, compose the main signifying features of the Perryman photograph. In defending the ad, Perryman said that his reason for utilizing it was to show what he was doing at that time in his life compared to Watts; Perryman was participating in an organization called the Future Farmers of America (FFA).

If we take him at his word, we gain further insight into what is signified by this photograph — the way in which it became coded with ideological significance — in the FFA creed, which has changed little since the time that Perryman was an active member (National FFA Organization 2007). The photograph signifies rural farm life in Oklahoma, as well as the farmer who is actively engaged with the land. The image of the farmer is that of self-reliance, individual responsibility, and respect for tradition, communal obligation, honesty, and fairness. The connotation comes from the role the farmer has played in both U.S. and Oklahoma state history. They are the hands that produce our daily sustenance. Through times of economic downturn they have faced adversity to provide our daily food. Their reputation in small rural communities rests on fair and square business dealings, on the notion that a good name is a prized treasure. They maintain strong ties to family and community, as well as a sense of connection to those in their families who came before them, worked, and left the land to their care. The farmer's job is invaluable; our very lives are predicated on the work and toil of their hands.

Although this interpretation stands of the photograph itself, its most significant meaning is grasped only in relation to the Watts photograph. The U.S. farmer stands in stark contrast to the image of the Afro that connects Watts to the 'unsavory' elements of the Black Power movement. The 'this is how it was' of the photograph is that of two communities of people; one's loyalty to this country was questionable as they broke the law, were aggressively threatening, and lacked a commitment to the

betterment of the nation, and the other, the patriotic farmer who simply went about his day doing the work he knew needed to be done to take care of his family, community and the nation at large. Many in the former group were looked upon as those who eschewed hard work in favor of breaking the law or causing other forms of disturbances and destruction, while the image of the white, clean-cut farmer signified all the ideals of U.S. society. Thus, reading the two photographs together lays bare its ideological sentiment by suggesting how the images should be read: this is the way things were for these two candidates for Congress, and that these same images of past reality are the same reality that exists for them both in the present situation.

There is an additional catalyzing object subtly used in the framing and movement of the photographs that is extremely important to their connotative meaning. The photo of Watts is set on a black background, while Perryman's is set on a white one (this was done by the advertisers). Consistent with other interpretations here, these backgrounds draw attention to color, specifically, the skin color of the two pictured. Thus, an attempt is made to signify the contrasting differences of skin color. Such signification, as part of the lexicon of the culture, is illustrated when we take a further look at the meaning of race, signified by skin pigmentation.

The primary rule of political advertising is to delineate stark contrasts between the candidate and his or her opponent; the more obvious the contrast, the greater the result will be in terms of the audience getting a true picture of the candidates they will choose at the voting booth. Nothing presents a more meaningful and understood contrast than the colors black and white. The terms 'black' and 'white' have been imbued with such meaning so as to effect how we think about all things black and all things white. In the English language, black is associated with all that is evil and of poor quality, and white with all that is good, pure, and godly. This ad uses images to convey such distinctions instead of verbal language, but such connotations in verbal language also translate to our visual images of skin color. Thus, although the ad does not say, 'Watts is black, Perryman is white,' the way their images are framed nevertheless, draw attention to this fact. It does not initiate the contrast, but it does further enhance the contrast and signal to viewers that they should pay attention to the color difference — that it is part of the message. Thus, the way in which the Perryman's image is framed vis-à-vis that of Watts' effects the same kind of transposition spoken of earlier. Viewers are led to see Perryman in his present form as a representation of his youthful image and ethos. In addition, they are given signals that their evaluation of him should follow from the suggested contrast with Watts — primarily a contrast of color.

4. The linguistic messages

4.1. *Anchoring the afro*

While the photographic advertising image serves an attempt to effect a denotative, naturalizing function (masking its ideological suggestions), the linguistic message is more explicitly connotative and anchors, or gives additional clues as to how the viewer should interpret the photographed image. The photographed image can express a number of different signifieds from which an audience can choose as its most appropriate meaning. However, because of the effort of all advertising — political advertising in particular — is to express a single message with as much effect as possible, the producers do not want to leave the images' meaning completely up to the choice of the viewer. The advertiser wants to tell the audience what and how to think about the images it projects. This is difficult to do with a photograph alone, so advertisers anchor such images in verbal language that more explicitly reveals their meaning. In addition to the linguistic text of the ad, the declarations of the voiceover also reveals the connoted message, while trying to appear 'natural.' That is, a narrator is not an actor or participant in the ad. One hears his/her voice as the voice of God.⁷ The absence of a visible actor expresses a distant and disinterested omniscience about the voiceover statement, giving it a veil of objectivity.

When read alongside the photographic messages, the linguistic message belies its racial innocence. We begin in order as the linguistic message unfolds in both narrated and textual form. Immediately following the Watts' photograph we hear the words 'This *is* J. C. Watts. In his younger days he played football' (my emphasis). This statement accomplishes two things. First, contrary to the connotative meaning of the photographic image alone, the first statement seeks to bring the 'this is how it was' into play in the here and now. Thus, it says that as Watts was in this late-1970s photograph, so is he now, twenty-five years later. The language of the narrative fixes the image of Watts. It is one that has never changed. This interpretation is consistent with the fact that an old photograph of Watts was used instead of a current one. As such, the meaning in the photograph brings into the present the same meaning. In terms of what was argued above, the ad says Watts is black and wore an afro. What you know about blacks who wore afros in the 1970s is that they are probably no-good thugs who hated whites, despise the U.S. government, and want to punish you (whites) for what you have done to them. It says that this person is the *same* person today who is trying to be elected to Congress. The 'this is' in the statement provides an objective, definitive reality of

Watts in the here-and-now, and its god-like narration thwarts any disagreement with the defined image.

By establishing this meaning, the second part of the statement allows another message to be coded into the image that is important to the interpretation of the ad as a whole. This second declaration, that, when he was younger, Watts played football, is a sign of Watts' abilities. That is, in being presented as a support to the photograph, what is understood is that 'Watts is black and he plays football.' Although football was an important part of Oklahoma life, and football players were revered for their abilities on the field, to say that 'Watts played football' leads to quite a different meaning than 'Watts is black and played football.'

In the 1970s and 1980s, to play football and to be white was to be a hero. To be a black football star may have made you a hero in some respects, but it did not erase the perception of mental inferiority, violence, and criminality. Watts, soon after this photograph was taken, went on to play football for the University of Oklahoma. It is important to note is that the University, in line with most football programs across the country at the time, did not for a long time allow blacks on its varsity football teams. Although they were superb athletes, white sentiments in the state were that blacks were dumb, overly aggressive, and threatening. In other words, they did not fit the image the football team or the University wanted to portray to the general public. Such sentiments are evidenced in the widespread disapproval of Oklahoma citizens when then coach Barry Switzer began to recruit the first blacks to Oklahoma's football team (Switzer 1991). That those who did play excelled did not erase the stereotype of the black athlete in the minds of Oklahoma citizens. In fact, such stereotypical beliefs were supported in the minds of whites in the mid-to-late Barry Switzer era when many players were cited for drug use, rape, sexual assault and other forms of violence.⁸ Such behaviors reinforced many whites' dissatisfaction with the inclusion of blacks in college football, but were overcome by the overwhelming financial success that resulted as college sports began to be big business. So, the photograph's meaning becomes fairly explicit. Watts was (and is) a black man who played football (and still possesses the characteristics of black football players then).

4.2. *The language of black criminality*

The two interpretations of the photographic images offer the most crucial meanings supported by the remaining narrated and textual messages. Following these statements, the narrator next says, 'Both are running for

Congress, but J. C. is running at the taxpayer's expense.' This statement focuses the ad on the image of Watts, rather than making a contrast to Perryman. The image that accompanies this statement in the ad is a newspaper clipping with the headline which reads, 'Watts wins GOP fight; Perryman takes Demo win.' The graphic here seems inconsistent, or at least unnecessary. It is a headline from a story that appeared on the day following the state's primary election, yet the ad appears more than a month later. The graphic adds little to elaborate the announcer's statement at this point in the ad that 'Both are running for Congress ...' I would argue that, in light of its limited value inasmuch as it is only vaguely connected with the statement, the primary import of this graphic is that it provides the opportunity to place the photograph of Watts alongside Perryman — the one being black, the other white, one (Watts) with a dark, almost sinister visage, the other (Perryman) displaying the lighter contrast. The photographs here, too, consistently support the earlier and primary racial contrast.⁹

The next verbal statement about Watts campaigning on taxpayer dollars clarifies for the audience the advertisement's intended message, that Watts received a government salary for doing practically no work. This is consistent with and solidifies the image of Watts in the connotations of the photograph: he is lawless, his actions show no respect for others around him (particularly taxpayers), and the work he is doing is of no consequence. The highlighted '12 hours a week' in comparison to the relatively high (for Oklahoma) salary, makes the alleged criminal nature of Watts' actions stand out even more — his attempts to cheat the average citizen who pays his salary. The next statement is related to this one and to Watts as a football player. The narrator says, 'That's roughing the taxpayer.' The implied meaning is that what Watts is doing what is seen, in the game of football, as an unnecessary use of aggression or force to cheat or get around the rules of the game.

The kinds of accusations highlighted in the linguistic message here are not dissimilar to the kinds of accusations political candidates typically make about their opponents. However, because of the photographic images, the accusations against Watts are more than accusations. They are accusations that take on a racialized, coded meaning, connecting the accusations with common stereotypes of blacks in general, and the kind of black people suggested by Watts image: they are both lazy and criminal. This is more abundantly clear by the choice to make statements that were, indeed, merely accusations. Watts was never convicted of a crime or formally chastised for how he went about his work. But the ad uses the accusations as a way of suggesting criminal behavior and a lazy disposition when he was indeed not a criminal or lazy. I would argue that

had the ad not included the initial photographs presented as they were, it would be more plausibly seen for what it would be — just another typical political ad. However the racial component of the images, read as they are meant to be in conjunction with the linguistic message, therefore racializes the language of the ad. Thus, another transposition takes place; the language urges viewers to evaluate Watts on the basis of the common racial stereotypes signified by the language and images together.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of my analysis here was to provide a better understanding of how images that seem to be devoid of ideological meaning, become coded as a rhetoric of racial ideology. The ad analyzed in this paper shows how racial appeals can be subtly introduced in political advertisements while simultaneously being able to make a claim of racial neutrality — the combination of which makes such implicit racial advertising potentially damaging to minority opponents. Furthermore, it underscores the assertion that, especially in the Southern U.S., race is often the most salient issue in campaigns involving minority candidates, despite their political party affiliation. The consequences of continued negativity in presenting stereotypical images of black candidates in the news media and in televised political advertisements such as the one addressed here potentially could translate into even greater apathy among black voters and quite possibly could transform the political landscape such that fewer blacks are viable candidates for elected office. This would certainly diminish the already minor representation of blacks, especially in statewide and federal offices.

Notes

1. The idea of resonance is described by the noted advertising figure Tony Schwartz. Schwartz (1974) explains that the most effective advertising messages do not appeal to rationality, but to various forms of audience emotions in a way that they resonate with a particular set of (ideally positive) feelings, images, and circumstances prompted by memory.
2. Unlike empirical research, the question here is one of plausibility rather than causality or direct effect. That is, the criteria for judging interpretive arguments is the likelihood that audience members might have the cultural knowledge necessary to respond in a manner consistent with the ideological message or intent of the producer.
3. During this time, Watts was a fairly prominent public figure in the arena of sports (during his career in the Canadian Football League), business (often financed with public funds), and politics.

4. *Time Magazine*, March 30, 1970.
5. Gerald Emanuel Stearn, 'Rapping with the Panthers in white suburbia,' *New York Times Magazine*, March 8, 1970.
6. *New York Times*, 'FBI seizes Angela Davis in motel here,' August 14, 1970.
7. Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1992) discusses this in more detail, describing the way in which the use of anonymous announcers in political advertisements allows candidates to put some modicum of distance between themselves and the message (usually attacks).
8. 'Switzer goes on defense against rush of problems,' *New York Times*, February 17, 1989.
9. The photographs here are press photographs, chosen by the newspaper outlet, not the sponsor of the ad.

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Charlton D. McIlwain (b. 1971) is an Assistant Professor of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University <Cdml@nyu.edu>. His research interests include race and political communication. His publications include *Death in Black and White: Death, Ritual and Family Ecology* (2003); ‘Time, timing, and being on time: The play of race and ideology in the postmodern political organization’ (2004); *When Death Goes Pop: Death, Media and the Remaking of Community* (2005); and ‘Minority candidates, media framing, and racial cues in the 2004 election’ (with S. M. Caliendo, 2006).

