

Barack Obama is cool

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He's a new image of Black manhood uniting brains with brawn

Barack Obama is cool. He is athletic enough to be a vibrant symbol of the youth. His wife could be any Black woman attending your community event. His daughters could pass for your neighbors' kids. Basketball, not golf, is his game of choice, and there are many photos and stories of him as a young man in basketball gear striving for dominance on the court.

He is a savvy user of new technology and has dazzled even young people with his digital campaign. His former teenage angst mirrors that of many urban youth. His evolved approach to race relations mirrors the post-civil rights attitudes of many young African Americans and other youth. No wonder young people all over the country have connected with him.

But, his coolness also beckons another kind of integration, the symbolic and psychic reunification of Black mind and body. The ascendancy of the Black athlete to national celebrity and wealth has come to eclipse all other images of Black manhood.

The Black athletic body has become a marketing cliché. Michael, Scotty, Shaq, Kobe — all took Black athleticism and physicality to another level. College became an opportunity to play ball rather than the reverse. Juniors, then sophomores, and now high school graduates have gone straight to the pros; so even college has been losing its relevancy.

The mean streets of urban America are making survival a very physical thing. Homicide is the primary cause of death for Black youth. It only follows that being a formidable physical presence becomes more significant than it ever has been.

In such a threatening environment, it is only natural that the tough guy would be more attractive than the smart guy, or that a girl would be much more attracted to a suitor's capacity to intimidate and protect than to his capacity to reason.

The rise of gangsta rap has codified this phenomenon. Even though its leading exponents are brilliant, articulate men, they spend hours in the gym trying to look like the intimidating persona their words have created.

Their lionizing of physical violence and trivializing of sexual intimacy have secured the body/mind and body/feelings rift within many young Black men.

Then came Obama. His name will now supersede all those who dominate the lists of athletes and entertainers. His position will become the new achievable greatness — that is, president of the United States.

A Black man now controls more than his muscles. He controls his mind and his temperament. He controls the might of the economy of the United States. His posse is the entire Secret Service and the military might of the U.S. Armed Forces. He plays pickup basketball for male camaraderie and to stay in shape as a break from his real job as leader of the free world.

He spent his time on the streets of inner-city Chicago, not draped in bling or flashing a grill or staring down rivals to get respect. He spent time connecting with victims of injustice, empowering them to solve their problems. He was the skinny kid with the muscular mind.

The image of the Black male has undergone a significant makeover with this symbolic reintegration of the body and mind. Aspirations to academic excellence can now occupy the same Black body and the same community as aspirations to excellence in sports, without any compromise of coolness.

Girls might now clearly see masculinity less in the guy with big biceps and more in the boy with big career aspirations, provider intentions and earning potential. They can demand that cool must include an indulgent partner, a responsible father, respectful intimacy, academic rigor, and social clout. The man who has all this can still be mean at hooping and have the slightest trace of an urban strut. Obama is way cool!

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