… But apparently this is not the stuff of Hollywood entertainment. It doesn’t titillate. It doesn’t shock. It can’t offer the same mechanisms for exotic escape that mainstream white audiences crave in their consumption of blackness.

—Henry Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation*¹

A whip of fear broke through the heart chambers as soon as you saw a Negro’s face in a paper, since the face was not there because the person had a healthy baby, or outran a street mob. Nor was it there because the person had been killed, or maimed or caught or burned or jailed or whipped or evicted or stomped or raped or cheated, since that could hardly qualify as news in a newspaper. It would have to be something out of the ordinary—something white people would find interesting, truly different, worth a few minutes of teeth sucking if not gasps.

—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*²

Black people have always made for titillating coverage. It’s a bet with very good chances; ratings bonanza, even. Show a Black Man (!) brandishing a shotgun and blasting his way into a gas station, and viewers would likely tune in. Show a Black mother treating her child unfavorably, and the eyes of the world would surely turn your direction. Show Black kids acting unpleasantly, and it’s likely to generate high traffic. The visual expectations of the average White viewer must be appeased somehow, and strong likelihood prevails, history bearing witness, that the Black body would be employed accordingly.

Using Black people as cannon fodder to further insidious ideals strikes of nothing new, as Ralph Ellison understood, who wrote a half-century ago:

> [T]hese negative images constitute justifications for all those acts, legal, emotional, economic and political, which we labeled Jim Crow. The anti-Negro image is thus a ritual object of which Hollywood is not the creator, but the manipulator. Its role has been that of justifying the widely held myth of Negro inhumanness and inferiority by offering entertaining rituals through which that myth could be reaffirmed.³

Each way the eyes turn, Black people feature deplorably—from the inarticulate (ubiquitous) crime witness; to the politician caught stuffing cold-cash into his refrigerator; to the reality show female contestant dropping expletives unguardedly; to the teenager fleeing athletic cops. These have marked the reality for decades;
and the Age of Obama isn’t likely to alter much in significance. In truth, having a Black Man (!) for President stands strong chance of triggering even more unflattering representations of Blackness—more so as TV advertising agencies try to better reflect the times, unaware presenting White Values through Black Bodies hardly screams Progress.

Soon as Senator Barack Obama announced his run for the United States presidency in February 2007, he was crowned a “post-racial,” “race-transcending,” “multi-racial” candidate—by White pundits. One political show even enlisted an all-White panel to discuss “Obama’s Blackness.” Questions of his racial merits weren’t “offensive,” an analyst noted, just “unanswerable.” That this society has by no means crossed post-racial signposts—or any such Utopia—received little attention from the political bloviators who like to hear themselves talk more than listen—to voices much different and more enlightened (than theirs).

But the news coverage of Barack Obama’s candidacy itself indicated overt consciousness of Race, in spite of self-satisfying assurances to the contrary. Even while Hillary Clinton led the Democrat race in polls, greater attention pursued Obama’s run—as though to catch him doing something (anything!) wrong. The conservative cable channel FOX News flew ahead of all competitors.

To one host, he was a “Black candidate surrounding himself with a lot of White advisors.” Another asked: “What do we really know about Barack Obama?” Leading up to the All-Mighty Investigative Task of outing him as a smoker: “His team works overtime trying to hide his dirty, little secret. He is, get this, a cigarette smoker.” “Do we want somebody like that in the White House?” inquired a FOX News commentator.

Host after host took turns driving into the same hoop. “There’s kind of been a drip, drip, drip of stuff: His middle name—Hussein. Now the news that he was raised a Moslem,” alley-ooped an anchor. And then the slam-dunk: he “went to a Madrassa for four years.” Madrassa, to the geniuses at FOX, meant breeding ground for future terrorists, not Arabic word for school.

In a 2007 episode of the Comedy Central series The Daily Show, host Jon Stewart sought to quell raging reports that Obama was a Muslim who, it almost seemed certain, participated frequently in phone conferences with Al-Qaeda henchmen. Stewart explained to a show correspondent that “what they’re [Right-wing numbskulls] doing is … linking him with a loaded image. It’s unfair to do such a thing.” Correspondent concurred, admitting “it’s patently unfair,” but then, in ironic twist, suggested: “Obama has been laden with a name that causes all kinds problems.”

Far from a comic skit, this “smear” soon spread wide enough that 43% of voters in June 2008 failed to confirm correctly Obama’s faith—never mind repeated claims that he was “not a Muslim and I never have been. I never studied at a Madrassa and I have never sworn on the Koran. I am committed to Christianity.” And with greater confusion came fiercer denial from the Obama camp which inevitably took flesh in forms of xenophobia and religious intolerance.

The circus built around Barack Obama and former Trinity United Church of Christ senior pastor Reverend Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. betrayed further a Race-obsessed media unwilling to mature or evolve. Refusing to consider the contexts