



**BLACK APPREHENSION AND WHITE HOPE:
OBAMA, ROMNEY AND JACK JOHNSON**

Los Angeles Sentinel, 10-11-12, p.A-6

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In the midst of the thick fog and fantasy of this imaginary post-racial era, it might seem racially outrageous and socially scandalous to see and hear post-debate shades and hints of Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries in the house with coded calls for a new White hope. But (to paraphrase the ancestors with all due respect) up above my head, I hear strange music and mumblings in the air and I really do believe there's revived White racial hope rising somewhere. These racially coded calls and discourse are for a new White hero and hope to defeat the current Black occupant of the formerly exclusively White space, who has the audacity to be President.

But clearly, the analogy is limited and one-sided, because if Mitt Romney has become "the great white hope", President Barack Obama is reluctant to become the awesome and lesson-teaching Jack Johnson in any way. And it's not just about his accommodation to his advisors' and White America's insistence that he not be "too Black", too angry or assertive, or seem too confident or expressive of his superior intellect, education and experience as President. It is also that his own personal inclination is to be non-confrontational, compromising, common-ground seeking. In other words, he tends to prefer to be Jackie Robinson rather than Jack Johnson and to absorb the racial blows rather than respond in ways that would seem to be race-conscious and reinforce or prove stereotypes. Thus, he tends to be racially self-effacing and personally self-suppressive. And it is not because he wants to be the President of all America; *he's already that* and need not state it or have his advocates advance it as a reason he is not

openly or adequately responsive to Black social justice concerns. After all, no one uses the same rationale when gays, Jews, Gentiles, labor, Latinos and others come calling.

It's clear, however, that the Republicans, Tea Party types and others so inclined, will not let him be accommodating, no matter how much he tries. Indeed, they are determined to slap every cheek he turns and demand he offer other surfaces they can abuse. Thus, the struggle continues even as Obama tries his best to avoid it. Therefore, in the debate, he looks away and down, doing his Obama best not to look angry, over-engaged or threatening. But Romney, seeing the opening and opportunity, rears up, roars, stakes out his territory and claims alpha wolf status in this arctic arena called political debate and campaign.

As we watched the debate, we slowly became, even if we don't want to admit it, somewhat apprehensive about the outcome. Many of us had come to the debate expecting a quick and clear Jack Johnson knockout; midpoint we decided we could settle for a draw; and by the end we were hoping Obama would not lose it altogether. We could not understand why he would not look up, assert himself, put that pencil down, expose the lies, reaffirm his record, and stop rattling off statistics and observations better for banking and corporate meetings than for TV and a political debate. But we knew that, unlike Jack Johnson who delighted in fighting and defeating his White opponents and thus, the White supremacist assumptions and illusions they held, Obama does not feel comfortable confronting his White opponents, in any arena. And this will be one of

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his greatest challenges in the next debate and remaining campaign.

We had wanted to remind him that, if a person plays the alpha arctic wolf and flashes fangs, we do not lower our heads in submission or concession. On the contrary, we are to raise up and roar back, to speak truth to power and to the people. Nor are we to find ourselves saying we agree with those who send racist signals to receptive and eager ears, distort our record and rewrite history. And certainly, we are not to allow them to walk away without accounting for arrogantly dismissing and vilifying almost half of the American people and having no vision for moving forward beyond the high tech military and economic prisons of exploitation and oppression in which corporations seek to enclose the world.

Our vision is one of a just and good, truly multicultural society; a green, good and sustainable world; a future forged together in mutually respectable and beneficial ways. We were to begin, slowly but surely, to leave behind White supremacy's long winters of ravaging blizzards and blinding snow, its frozen moral conscience and corporate vampire and vulture practices. We were not to concede to them in debate, political practice or life. We were to help build the good world we all want and deserve, not bomb it into corporate compliance or lay waste to it with endless wars. It was to be a new era of peace, partnership, capacity-building and development, not continued policies of invasion, occupation, resource robbery, and brutal suppression, augmented with drone-terrorism, legalized torture and rendition, and open-ended detention.

We are at a crossroads in our history as a people and a country and we must choose the way forward grounded in our history and the lessons it teaches us; be clear about the things currently at stake, and deeply concerned about the future we frame and forge by what we choose to do now. Yes, the election is critical and we must defeat the dismissers and oppressors of the people, whether in corporate, military, government or other forms, that have wrecked and ruined the lives and lands of the peoples of the world.

And yes, we must *get up, get out and go vote*. But we must also know that this struggle we wage is not simply about Obama, but more essentially about ourselves, about the society and world we want for ourselves and future generations. As a key moral and social vanguard in this country and the world, we cannot be inattentive to or silent about the realities of life and death, of suffering, hunger, homelessness, loss, poverty, war and wanton violence at home and abroad.

This means we must know and discuss these critical issues and begin to *rebuild our movement* to address these issues and achieve concrete goals. And we must know these issues and our struggle existed before this era and election and will continue afterwards and that there is more at stake than the election, although it is critical. For again, it is about our history, our current lives and the new world and future we and all those before us have struggled and continue to struggle to bring into being.