
Introduction

Catherine Squires, Heather Harris, and Kimberly Moffitt

A wise Latina. “Birthers.” A Cambridge cop and a Harvard professor. The Tea Party. These figures interrupted the congratulatory postracial and postfeminist discourses trumpeted in the wake of the historic 2008 victory of Barack Hussein Obama, the forty-fourth president of the United States. The “back-to-the-future” shock of Republican senators grilling (now-Justice) Sonia Sotomayor; the spectacle of angry crowds denying the validity of Obama’s Hawaiian birth certificate; and renewed debates over (and denial of) racial profiling reveal a need to revisit and interrogate the assumptions of imminent change that erupted after election night.

The Obama Effect interrogates multiple sites of discourse and citizen interaction revealed during the campaign to be crucial grounds for rethinking (or reinforcing) social identities and investments. The chapters call upon us to take a fresh look at identity formations of the past and present, to revisit texts and figures that continue to resonate in the Age of Obama (also known as the *postsoul*, *postfeminist*, *post-civil rights* era). The essays here chart discourses that were emergent in the 2008 campaign and continue to structure the contours of discussion as President Obama journeys through his first term, a term marked by historic economic woes at home and continued military entanglements abroad. In this time of great uncertainty, the authors in this book provide important questions and reflections to engage both the problems and promises of the election of Obama.

Race and Gender: *Plus ça Change?*

While many observers have disputed the jubilant claims that the election of the first president of African descent marked the “end of race,” the events of the summer of 2009 exposed that declaration as naïve and self-congratulatory. Likewise, assertions that Hillary Clinton’s run created multiple millions of cracks in the gender “glass ceiling” were exposed as unripe when angry protestors claimed that Obama’s health-care plan would increase abortions, and as Michelle Obama’s wardrobe remains under a high-powered microscope.

Many of the writers in this book anticipated the durability of long-standing rhetorical strategies and investments in dominant identities. Their analyses remind us that, although muted, frameworks for understanding race, gender, and sexuality that dominated the 1980s and 1990s remain readily available. We have already witnessed how easily pundits branded President Obama himself a racist in the wake of his remarks on the disputable arrest of Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his own home. And, in a time of severe economic pressures, the past teaches us and the present reminds us how race and gender are still used to attack policies and publics. Today neo-Nazi Web sites warn members to hoard guns for fear Obama is paving the way for militant Black Power; draconian anti-immigrant and anti-ethnic studies laws have passed in Arizona.

Assessing the Obama Effect: Looking Back to Look Forward

The chapters collected here began as conference papers, many of which predicted that, far from ushering in the end of racism or sexism, the 2008 campaign revealed fissures in our sense of national identity. Dina Gavrilos's examination of popular media responses to Obama's allegedly "postracial" persona reveals how this term disguises and reinforces hegemonic racial frameworks. Enid Logan provides insights into how gender/sexism and race/racism worked in campaign rhetoric and young voters' reactions to Hillary Clinton and Obama. Amy Carrillo-Rowe's exploration of mainstream discourses surrounding Obama's relationships to family, friends, and foes underscores how heteronormativity interacts with race.

Frank R. Cooper illuminates the strategic ways in which Obama's more "feminine" style discourages associations with threatening black male stereotypes. Looking at First Lady Michelle Obama, Kimberly Moffitt recalls the ease with which mainstream media attempted to frame her as an angry black woman, reminding us that the same dynamics that undermined previous black women in national politics (such as Anita Hill and Lani Guinier) continue to inflect twenty-first century discussions of the first African-American woman to occupy the White House as a resident rather than as a domestic servant.

Political Participation and Identity in the "Age of Obama": Changing the Game?

The resilience of conspiracy theories regarding the president's birth is put into perspective by the essays that address how Obama's "exotic" background grates against hegemonic norms of American identity. This presents a challenge and an opportunity: Obama's identity has provoked backlash, but also opens the door for wider discussion and appreciation for alternative ways to imagine individual

and national identities. Heather Harris delineates how Obama's official Web site was launched with a challenge to and reclamation of the idea(l) of the American Dream. This revised ideal was inclusive of groups that have regularly been jettisoned outside the status quo. Likewise, James Petry examines Obama's progressive take on American exceptionalism, inflected with cosmopolitan visions of America's place in the world and Obama's international family ties.

On a more local level, Sarah McCaffrey analyzes responses to Obama's "race speech" in Philadelphia. Her essay uncovers how admirers and critics of the speech agreed on Obama's willingness to emphasize elements of the painful racial past, but differ on whether his vision of a "racial stalemate" provides sufficient impetus for change. In contrast, Bertram Ashe provides a rubric for understanding and contextualizing complex racial identity formations in the postsoul era, and instructs us to move beyond the simple analyses of Obama's sense of racial self to see how the president's narration of his life story exemplifies how many of his generation experience and (re)define race.

The Obama campaign has been declared a "game-changer" due to its unprecedented and successful merging of Web 2.0 technologies and old-school organizing. Bringing young voters of all colors, genders, and sexual identities into the voting booth, the victory left many observers in awe, predicting that the Obama "machine" would provide powerful coattails to future Democratic candidates. Michael Cheney and Crystal Olsen provide readers with important insights into how this operation transformed itself over the course of the campaign. Beyond the mechanics, Qingwen Dong, Kenneth D. Day, and Raman Deol provide a close analysis of how and why the messages conveyed through Obama's Web site resonated with voters looking for a more personal connection and sense of purpose.

Grace Yoo and colleagues explore how the Obama campaign inspired some women to call themselves "Obama Mamas." Their chosen identity and community defies simplistic renderings of the "gender divide" and "soccer moms" in mainstream media. Finally, Konrad Ng's detailed look at Asian Americans' creative use of the Internet reveals the investment of a social group almost totally ignored in dominant media discussions of the election. These chapters point to the need for continued investigation of how Web 2.0 has various applications and consequences for media, identity, and political participation.

An Obama-nation, or an Abomination?

Since the inauguration, reverence for Obama seems to have faded. As his administration tries to make promised changes, some observers posit that Obama's Web-based machine is not up to the task. Supporters have lamented the seeming inability of the President to employ his personal charisma to win legislative battles, fights that require more than just donations or bumper-sticker

displays. In an era of instant communication and celebrity politicians, can the president unleash his “star power” to generate legislative victories? Are Obama voters too disconnected from the world of *realpolitik* to bring the change?

Rebecca Kuehl and Robert Spicer provide some insights into these questions. Kuehl provides a structure for thinking about the power of celebrity in politics, using Oprah Winfrey’s relationship to Obama as a starting point for interrogating the utility of celebrity ties for politicians. Spicer explains how media images and discourses framed Obama as a charismatic leader, and illustrates how both supporters and detractors used this image to buttress or undermine Obama’s legitimacy. This dynamic is clearly still operating; some observers claim he needs to use his charisma more, others argue he is a charismatic fraud.

These chapters illustrate the seriousness and political utility of identities, and guide us to look beyond the confines of mainstream media (expertly taken to task in Desiree Cooper’s preface) that are all too often guided by rigid black/white frameworks. Clearly, the activities of Asian Americans, Latina/os, and “Obama Mamas” are not suited to the black/white paradigm to which dominant media cling.¹ However, the black/white dichotomy continues to vex our discourse and behaviors in the United States. How we might deal with this sticky problem is the question. M. Cooper Harriss considers Obama’s approach to race and nation through the lens of comparison to author Ralph Ellison. His essay reveals the similarities in their approaches, and how each complicate and reject simple notions of racial authenticity. Likewise, Suzanne Jones’s exploration of *Dreams from My Father* reminds us of Obama’s consistent refusal to accept or promote simple understandings of racial identity. To close, the president’s brother-in-law, Konrad Ng, provides a focused reminiscence of the campaign and the inaugural in his epilogue, recalling the energies that may yet be harnessed for public policy and social transformation.

This collection helps situate current debates and “whisper campaigns” that surround Obama. Rightfully, many of the chapters maintain that the Obama campaign provided a glimpse of how we could rethink the politics of identity and reinvigorate practices of citizenship. One could argue that this book presents these possibilities as much as it reflects the continued strength of demands for Americans to assimilate to an assumed white norm. Of course, which possibilities we pursue depends in large part on how we imagine our future, a process in which discourses play a large role. One contribution of this volume is providing scaffolding for those visions and discussions, as well as cautions to be vigilant of the ways our past continues to shape our present and future.

¹Readers will note that the chapters here address white, black, and Asian-American identities directly, but Latina/o identities are not thematized. This absence is due to the fact that none of the participants in the original conference presented work on Latina/os and Obama, although as conference organizers, we endeavored to solicit work from a wide range of disciplines and approaches to be as inclusive as possible.