

CAMPAIGNING FOR OBAMA AND THE POLITICS OF RACE: THE CASE OF CALIFORNIA, TEXAS, AND BEYOND

Nadia Y. Kim

ABSTRACT

Purpose – This chapter is about the author's experience working for Barack Obama's presidential campaign and the racial as well as race-gender dynamics of such work.

Methodology/approach – An autoethnographic analysis was conducted based on participant observation, primarily, door knocking in California and Texas and phone canvassing Americans across the country on a daily or weekly basis.

Findings – The fieldwork revealed the persistence of racially unequal discourse and stratification, not the workings of a post-racial society. While some Americans openly used the word "nig*er" or referenced lynching, more common were the coded forms of racism, such as the notion of "good" (Obama) versus "bad" Blacks. Also, terms like "Muslim" or "not-American" revealed a citizenship-based racism usually reserved for Asian Americans and Latinos now being levied against Black Americans. This more coded racialization hinged on a combination of

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subordinating Muslims as perpetual racial foreigners and fearing the "browning of America" brought on by immigration.

Research limitations/implications – As this study of a campaign assessed one point in time from an autoethnographic perspective, it is not generalizable to the United States. It, however, is an important window into the social processes involving race (and gender) when historic candidates and elections move the country in a direction it has never been to before and perhaps will never be to again.

Originality/value of paper – Although many scholars have done racial analyses of Obama's campaign and of our society's negotiation of race in relation to the man, few have conducted in-depth analyses from the vantage of a full-scale Obama campaign volunteer.

INTRODUCTION

The analysis of race and racism since Senator Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign has flourished among sociologists expert in these areas. Many essays have focused on debunking the fallacious discourse of the "post-racial society" by demonstrating how central racialization and racism were to perceptions of a very reluctantly racial Obama (see Ford, 2009). Few studies, however, have pursued the same questions in-depth from the vantage of a full-scale Obama campaign volunteer. My devotion to the campaign of at least 15 hours per week from January to November 2008 and my travels to Texas for the March Democratic primary are experiences through which I analyzed race and racism as well as race-gender relationality at a historic moment. I do not treat, then, my experiences and analysis as discrete entities but as mutually constitutive. Through an autoethnographic account, both serve as an important window into the persistent and ever-shifting parameters of racial ideology, culture, and stratification.

I conducted an autoethnographic analysis based on participant observation: door knocking on the streets of Los Angeles; phone canvassing Americans across the country on a daily or weekly basis; tabling and marching for Obama at public events (e.g., MLK Day Parade, Gay Pride Parade); traveling to and organizing in Fort Worth, Texas – somewhere I had never been – for the March 4th primary contest; having countless conversations with campaign insiders, staffers, and volunteers; reading the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Nation* magazine, listening to NPR

and *Pacifica* radio, and watching *CNN*, *MSNBC*, and other major networks, all with regularity; and, finally, attending Obama's inauguration ceremony and an official inaugural ball in Washington, D.C. on January 20, 2009. The thrust of the fieldwork period was December 2007 to November 2008.

Autoethnography, according to Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 733), is a form of writing that "make[s] the researcher's own experience a topic of investigation in its own right." Autoethnography is "an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" and in such a way that the reader is an active interpreter of the events (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, pp. 739–745). This chapter is based on my analysis of my experience campaigning for Obama, usually with my partner Dan, with a focus on the relation between macro-level ideology and social structure, on the one hand, and my personal views and development, on the other.

One of my main findings about the "Obama era" was the nature of coded racism and the use of dynamic versions of it to craft a newer formation, one involving the racial politics of citizenship and anti-immigrant sentiment. These were necessary to target a candidate who did not quite fit the race-card-carrying Black male stereotype and thus who was equally skilled for what he said and did about race as for what he did not. His uncanny ability to make America feel nonracist, nonthreatened, yet appropriately multicultural and progressive – as well as his campaign's grassroots foundation of which I was part – indeed got him elected the first United States President of African parentage.

BACKGROUND: HOW I GOT INVOLVED IN OBAMA'S 2008 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

I have long been averse to spending a lot of the precious capital we academics call "time" on campaigning for a mainstream politician to become U.S. President, the high office that mostly hurt the progressive, grassroots social change agenda to which I had devoted much of my adult life. As a busy college student working on the ground for people of color, women, immigrants, and third world nations, I merely cast a vote for Bill Clinton without spending a second or a dime on the campaign. In 2000 I was consumed by dissertation fieldwork in South Korea and never fathomed that George W. Bush could beat Al Gore; I was satisfied just to vote absentee. Yet, my resolve to cross the political "picket line" to a *presidential*

campaign grew that year when Ralph Nader garnered a sizable constituency and especially when “W.” beat Gore and did so through a dubious decision by a conservative Supreme Court. By 2004 I was so sickened by George W. Bush that my partner Dan and I devoted one weekend to driving outside of blue Massachusetts into purplish New Hampshire to canvass for John Kerry.

I also watched the keynote speaker at Kerry’s 2004 Democratic National Convention: a Black American senator named “Obama” whose unique personal story and eloquent delivery made me sit up, yet whose message made me want to send him a sociology text on race and racism. America was indeed divided in fundamental ways into what Obama had decried as White, Black, Latino, and Asian America; his “story” – that of a multiracial kid making it into Harvard and then politics – was indeed “possible” in other countries; and he likely grew up being mocked as a skinny *Black* kid with a funny name, not just a “skinny kid with a funny name!” I was intrigued at the same time that I knew, based on his speech and on the strictures of race in America, that he would never be able to effect true progressive change and would likely be more hampered than a White American politician to do so (Wingfield & Feagin, 2010). In part because I was jaded by the presidential office and consumed by a move to, and a new job in, Los Angeles, I did not follow the Democratic primary in the early months except to glance the occasional news story showing Ms. Clinton trouncing Mr. Obama in poll after poll and pundits declaring her the undisputed Democratic nominee the following year. Closer to the Iowa caucuses, however, I noticed that the mass media and some of my friends were really enamored with this Obama guy. I watched the Iowa returns and, like most others, was shocked that he had delivered a thrashing to Clinton and Edwards! I was compelled by the fact that he won using community-based grassroots mobilization rather than Old Guard electoral politics, and that, unlike most politicians, believed in the youth to hit the ground and turn out. As I was emotionally tugged by his victory speech and the throngs of inspired young voters alongside him, I held fast to my convictions that Obama could never be a politically progressive U.S. President. Yet, I sensed that he was a progressive, or at least had such ideas, underneath the carefully crafted veneer of his deracialized, moderate politicking. My intuition, strengthened by his autobiography *Dreams from my Father*, became conjoined with my belief that much *symbolic power* was to be found in the most powerful person in the world looking like (or more like) the youth and adults of color who had never had the privilege. To be sure, a President Hillary Clinton would also mean enormous symbolic power for girls and women of all racialized groups. Yet, I did not sense the same

progressive or change-making impulses in her campaign and agenda except on a small number of issues (e.g., health care). Even if I knew full well that symbolism did not translate to racial equality, I was his convert. I would spend the next year of my coveted time trying to get the first mainstream candidate, who had truly inspired me as a voter, in part because he “didn’t look [or live] like the rest of the Presidents on the dollar bills,” into the Oval Office.

BEING ASIAN AMERICAN IN A BLACK-AND-WHITE (POLITICAL) WORLD

The first public event in which Dan and I took part was the Martin Luther King, Jr., Day parade in South Los Angeles. There, in campaign gear, we marched for Obama with signs and chants. Although our marching Obama contingent was truly multiracial, we were among a handful of Asian Americans amidst a mostly Black American crowd: actors Alfre Woodard and Hill Harper led our contingent in the Obama car and we passed mostly Black spectators. This racial demography reminded me of an unrelated but important reality at the onset of our devotion to Obama’s campaign: that Asian Americans would continue to be omitted from the mainstream racial discourse on this historic election. The mass media and mainstream opinion-makers would talk primarily about White-Black America and supplement with a thin discussion of Latinos, but Asian-descent (as well as native tribal) peoples would be rendered *invisible*; if represented at all, we would likely be cast in a stereotypic, essentialist, and divisive light.

Unfortunately proven right about the construction of Asian Americans as invisible (Kim, 2008), I saw the mainstream ignore, for instance, the fact that most Asian Americans voted Democratic and helped sweep Obama to victory over McCain (62–35% according to *ABC News* exit polls). Four years earlier, mass media outlets had also ignored the fact that Asian Americans were the only non-White group to have *decreased* its support for Bush in 2004 as compared to 2000. If Asian Americans were represented at all, their initial support for Ms. Clinton – who, incidentally, had campaigned harder for their vote in California than Mr. Obama had – was divisively cast as motivated by racial tensions with, and prejudice toward, Black Americans (Wingfield & Feagin, 2010). *Time* magazine published an article, “Does Obama Have an Asian Problem?” (note the omitted “American” moniker) and a February 2008 episode of “Anderson Cooper 360” entitled “Asian

Americans to Vote for Hillary Clinton across the Nation” implied that namely racialized fears of Black Americans motivated their decision to do so. For this reason, and the fact that *CNN* mostly featured people with heavy accents, Asian Americans protested the segment in outrage (Wingfield & Feagin, 2010). I also noticed in the *CNN* piece the bluntly essentialist stereotype that mostly East Asian Americans are averse to “change,” hence their lack of support for Obama [immigration itself is not dramatic change?]. Also noticeable was the fact that few or no South Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders were interviewed. Given these persisting gaps, representing my racial group at that MLK Day parade was not only important but a necessity, in stark contrast to my desire to hide my racial identity as a phone banker, a point to which I return. It was significant that Dan and I, alongside the other Asian Americans present, marched in vociferous and impassioned support of Dr. King’s legacy and of Obama, even as a noticeable number in the Black American crowd, mostly middle-aged or older, did not reciprocate given their lack of Obama conversion at the time (of course, many Obama converts, too, cheered us along). We had to show that Asian Americans, too, cared about racial justice and were not against a candidate because of his African ancestry. The experience was further breathtaking as this was the first time we had surrounded ourselves with Obama field staffers and supporters, a multiracial group from Hollywood glitterati to UCLA students, and their positive energy and helpfulness were infectious.

OBAMA AND AMERICA SPEAK IN CODE

Now You See Race, Now You Don't

Prior to the Iowa caucuses, Dan and I had done research on Obama’s background and policy positions. Although we had wished that he would politically tackle race and racism in particular and that he were less of a centrist in general, we joined Barack Obama’s neighbor-to-neighbor and volunteer online network after his surprising losses in the New Hampshire and Nevada primaries. It was a difficult decision for us, as we were displeased with, and saw through, the deracialization tactics of Obama and his campaign. Such a campaign strategy had, and still has, costs. In an incisive and searing indictment of Obama’s racial campaign strategy, one that lined up with my own observations, Richard Thompson Ford (2009) writes how Obama downplayed race in such a way that he, intentionally or

not, capitalized on the “nig*er” versus the “good Black” phenomenon. The ability to do so, Ford (2009) writes, also hinged on the lack of self-consciousness and effort by well-educated, higher-class Black Americans to check their “talented 10th” mentalities at the door. Like mainstream society, they demonstrated too much readiness to blame the “nig*ers” – the unsuccessful Blacks living in urban poverty – for their betrayal of the race (Ford, 2009). Certainly, some pro-Obama White Americans with whom I spoke on the phone or on doorsteps did not allude to the good-bad distinction in their reasons for supporting him (they liked his policy stances). Yet, the self- and societal-construction of the calm, cool, smart Obama – antithetical to the race-gender ideology of the “angry Black man” – was often conveyed through indirect and direct contrast to the fiery, race-focused likes of Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton. Perhaps *MSNBC* political commentator Chris Matthews best summed up the implication that a “too black” politician like Jackson or Sharpton was still not capable of leading the country or taking it to a “post-racial” place when he said after Obama’s 2010 State of the Union address, “I forgot he was Black tonight for an hour.”

Just by virtue of running a campaign that submerged much of the racial rhetoric and issues and that focused instead on his impressive credentials and nonconfrontational ethos, Obama was, even if indirectly, reifying the notion of the “good Black” (male) versus the “bad Black” (male). His perpetual focus on his White mother, his White grandparents (Grandpa Dunham fought in Patton’s army in World War II), and his White great-uncle (who in the same war liberated a subcamp of Buchenwald) could be interpreted as Obama’s way of saying he was not fully Black like most “bad Blacks.” Parallel to American society’s more coded racism since the post-Civil Rights era (e.g., Bobo, Kluegel & Smith 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Kim, 1999; Kinder & Sears, 1981; Sears, 1988; Wingfield & Feagin, 2010), Obama and his carefully engineered campaign usually spoke of race only in code. As Ford (2009) writes, “Obama has kept his own views on racial politics close to his belt; even his famous speech on race, delivered in response to the Jeremiah Wright scandal, was remarkable for its lack of specifics and ideological ambiguity.” Similarly, when Obama officially accepted the Democratic nomination in Denver, he never mentioned Dr. King by name despite the victory falling on the same day as the 45th anniversary of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Obama chose to speak in more coded fashion of the “young preacher from Georgia.”

Even with all of Dan’s and my problems with Obama’s problematic racial rhetoric and actions, we chose to commit to his campaign because we sensed

that part of the reason he lost New Hampshire and Nevada was pushback in response to his Iowa win, some of which was likely motivated by prejudice. Therefore, we chose our "inaugural" Obama volunteer events as phone banking to local Californians for Super Tuesday (February 5th) and to South Carolinians before their January 26th primary. Working for an impassioned Obama precinct captain named Madge in Mar Vista, California, a group of us called 760 registered and off-voting Democrats to identify who among them supported Obama over Clinton and the rest of the field. Although phone banking can be an uncomfortable and anxiety-producing endeavor – I would often hear my heart race as I dialed the first few numbers¹ – these Democrats were admittedly not the most frightening to call. In the lead-up to Super Tuesday, however, the battle between Clinton and Obama had grown intensely heated, in part because the mass media had often couched the contest in terms of siding with women or with people of color.

Despite my aching feet, hoarse voice, and mounting cell phone bills, my work for the 23 state Super Tuesday contest was intriguing for what I learned about the way people spoke about racial matters. All without my prompting, they did so usually in code, ironically by attempting to prove race did not matter by bringing it up! It is important to note that the person on the other end did not know my race/ethnicity, which often helped elicit these coded comments. I would block caller ID, use Skype, or use headquarters' phones – hence, my name would not appear – and I spoke, as I always do, with no discernible ethnic accent (except maybe a hint of "California-ese"). As such, people often seemed to assume I was White or Black American; of course, if they assumed the former, some would openly tell me things that could be interpreted as overtly prejudiced rather than coded. For instance, one elderly White American woman, a Democrat, who clearly did not want non-Whites running the country and the world, told me, "Not only will I not vote for him, but I wouldn't help him if he was dying at my feet!" Yet others, fully aware of social desirability norms on issues involving race, or perhaps wondering if I was Black, would more politely say, "I'm a Hillary supporter because I think she's the more experienced and capable candidate; it has nothing to do with race." In part because of such responses, my anxiety about phone banking remained persistent, but I felt it imperative to keep dialing.²

Precinct walking was another experience that had us sweating, both because of the endeavor itself and because we were working for a non-White candidate. Regarding neighborhood canvassing, knocking on strangers' doors unaware of who or what will "greet" you on the other side naturally

incites fear, even in Obama-friendly areas like West Los Angeles. While I often felt compelled to make a run for it when obscenities-prone people threatened to have me arrested if I did not step off their doorstep, I was also intrigued by how Obama had captured the minds and hearts of so many White Americans in ways that other Black politicians had not, largely by his downplaying of "race." He successfully made America feel nonracist, accepting, and progressive, constructing himself as a smart and calm Black man and "every man" in the process.

The deliberate "erace-ing" by the candidate reflected his awareness of the racial pulse of the country. He and his campaign knew that the ongoing state of racial inequalities in our country were still manifest in the average American's prejudices, fears, sense of threat, doubts, and anger. When I apprehensively traveled to politically red and mostly Anglo Tarrant County,³ Texas, to help Obama best Clinton in a still-heated primary battle (despite Obama's sweep of the mid-February primaries), race was a face-to-face, tactile, and visceral phenomenon for all parties involved. This is not to argue that Texans are necessarily "more racist" than Californians or other state residents. For example, my partner Dan traveled to typically blue Las Vegas in red Nevada to hear three people say some version of, "I know you're not going to like what I have to say, but so you don't waste your time, you should know that I'm not going to vote for him because he's Black." Dan was instructed by the Obama campaign not to waste a single second responding to such prejudice and to move onto the next home as quickly as possible, but just before leaving, he would always throw in: "Well, I really wish you didn't feel that way, what does his appearance have to do with anything, anyway? I really hope that you'll reconsider." In my experience, however, the mostly conservative voting populace in Tarrant County and the weaker social desirability norms there meant even worse statements than what Dan had heard in Las Vegas.

Tarrant County, Texas, was unique for what I discovered there: roughly equal parts covert and overt racism revealed through my phone banking and precinct walking. As part of my work, I called local residents of Fort Worth to gauge who among them were "leaning Obama" or supporting him. While, as in other states, I found some gushing supporters, I also found some who were much more open about their racist (and sexist) sentiments. One elderly gentleman, who I believe was White American based on his name, the demographics of his location, and – characteristic of a White standpoint (Frankenberg, 1993) – his omission of his race, said that he had always voted Democratic, but now he would likely not. He was immensely dissatisfied with his only stated choices: a "nig*er" or a "b*tch!" In another

instance, my volunteer friends came back from a day of precinct walking to report that a White American man had slowed his car to challenge their pro-Obama stance. "Name one good thing a Black man has done for this country!" he demanded defiantly. When the group was able to name all the Black Americans who had participated in overturning the enslavement system to inventing new agricultural systems to transforming our civil rights laws, the man, exasperated that he had not stumped the group, deliberately peeled off in his car so that they were covered in road dust, screaming, "I still ain't voting for the nig*er!" Another volunteer approached me for consolation after a difficult phone call in which a man had advised, "String him from a tree!"

There was some evidence of structural yet coded racism, as well. While we were working at our Fort Worth headquarters a middle-aged African American gentleman rushed into say that he believed White poll workers were deliberately giving his hundreds of Black church members incorrect information about what the Obama campaign called the "Texas two-step": a daytime primary and a nighttime caucus. He claimed they were all told at the polling station that if they voted in the primary they would not have to vote in the nighttime caucus, which was a lie given that both contests were delegate-earning. Following the norms of coding, he and his churchgoers were not told, "You Black people can't vote," but rather a lie to prevent them from doing so. A small group of us were then sent to this polling station by the Obama campaign field leader. Once there, we immediately asked to speak to the head staff person, explaining that we were poll watchers who had come to inquire about what we were told back at headquarters. The White American female head was immediately confrontational, demanded to see our credentials, and refused to question her poll workers, all of whom were White American. We walked away and proceeded to ask the workers ourselves: "Had you lied to African American voters about the caucus, and did you do so to skew the election towards Clinton?" These men and women either ignored us with downcast eyes or yelled at us to get out of there. One man angrily stood up, demanded to see our credentials (we did not know what to show him), and darted off to call the police. Scared, we left the polling station and stood in the parking lot. We decided that if the police were to come, we would explain that we were Obama volunteers there to ensure a legal and fair election process – how could they arrest us for that? It turns out that the police did not immediately show up, though we did see that same threatening gentleman peel off in his car as he glared at us with hateful disdain. "Uh-oh," we thought, he is going to the police station himself. We chose to stand our ground. At the legal

distance outside of a polling station, we held up Obama signs, spoke to Black American and any other interested voters so they knew of the correct process, and passed out pamphlets on the "Texas two-step." Luckily, we were there for hours and no police officer or anyone else approached us. We were very proud that we did not scurry off like scared cockroaches. We felt that we had informed hundreds of Black American and other voters of color of their full franchise rights and that we had decreased racist voter fraud at the polling stations that day. Although we worried about similar funny business throughout the huge state of Texas, at least Obama's chances at winning were not jeopardized by racial discrimination in this little corner of Tarrant County where we stood. At primary's end, and much to our delight, Obama bested Clinton in Tarrant County 54% to 45% (<http://www.tarrantcounty.com>). At general election's end, however, Obama would lose the county to McCain 43.8% to 55.6%.

Coded Encounters of the Foreign-Muslim Kind

Many across the country and in Texas began telling me that they did not like Obama because he was a "Muslim." It was apparent that these more covert forms of bigotry – in contrast to older, explicit versions of it – were the new norm of the day (e.g., Bobo et al., 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Kim, 1999; Kinder & Sears, 1981; Sears, 1988; Wingfield & Feagin, 2010). Needless to say, when I heard the word Muslim, I knew I was in for a difficult conversation. First, I had to convey that there was nothing wrong with being Muslim and that all religions should be equal in our minds and laws. Most would scoff if they had not already hung up. Then I had to say that Obama was in fact a practicing Christian and had been so for many years. Most would scoff some more. I would then try to launch into his years of community organizing work on the ground, his public service to Americans, and his policy positions, to no avail. What I knew by their closed-mindedness was that they were averse to Obama's race/Blackness but were merely couching it in indirect religious terms. Of course, Islam is still racialized as full of brown-skinned terrorists, but "Muslim" is still less *explicit* than "ni*ger." In a phone conversation, one elderly, ornery man (I believe, White American, for the same reasons noted above), kept repeating that he was not going to vote for Obama because he was a Muslim who did not care about Americans' health care and would likely do something sinister with it. My claims to the contrary would incite his anger and interruptions to the point that I was speaking loudly, though not

angrily, so he would listen; by then, the entire call room in Fort Worth was looking at me with supportive yet tragic looks on their faces. Indeed, they were having similar phone conversations.

In another example of the Muslim racialization, a Black American volunteer named Tesha and I were tabling for Obama outside a polling station. Unlike his supporters, detractors would walk by with disdainful looks, with their heads shaking, or sometimes by challenging our right to be there. One middle-aged White American man walked by us and declared out loud, "I would never vote for Obama!" When we queried why, he said, "Because he's not for America!" (read: he was a Muslim, a "foreign" immigrant). These sentiments were echoed in the widely circulating rumors that Obama's Hawaiian birth certificate was invalid and that he was born abroad, thus nullifying his eligibility for the U.S. Presidency.

Against this racially foreignizing rhetoric, I began realizing through my phone calls and face-to-face experiences in California and Texas that the perpetual foreigner racialization usually exacted against Asian Americans, Latinos, and, increasingly, Middle Eastern Americans was being derived to attack a Black American. Asian Americans, for instance, have suffered under the perpetual foreigner banner throughout U.S. history. Most Americans do not know this, however, because of the hegemonic rhetoric of the "model minority": that is, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, South Asian-descent, and other groups "whitening" because they have "made it" socioeconomically. One need only look at "their" suburban homes, college educations, white-collar professional jobs, and other successes to know that they did not suffer from any racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Gans, 1999; Lee & Bean, 2004; Warren & Twine, 1997; Yancey, 2003). Social class, however, is just one index of social inequality. If many Asian American groups have "made it" and thus reinforce the American Dream narrative, why is their Americanness questioned? In other words, the racialization of Asian-descent peoples as perpetually foreign (Kim, 2008; Lowe, 1996; Okihiro, 1994; Tuan, 1998), in part by associating them with Asia, does not spare the group racism simply because they are middle or higher class. To be certain, socioeconomic success has prompted elites and public opinion-makers to valorize the mostly East and South Asian Americans over the presumable Black "underclass." White Americans are more willing to live beside and marry Asian Americans (see Kim, 2000), thereby positioning Blacks socially below their non-White counterparts. Yet, the fact that model minority praise is not sufficient to confer authentic Americanness onto Asian ethnics shares a parallel with the limits of social class for Black Americans. Just as a high-class profile has not spared Black Americans from everyday and

institutionalized racism (e.g., Collins, 1997; Cose, 1993; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Williams, 1991), class status has not spared Asian Americans the same. In fact, their success has often intensified White subordination of, and discrimination against, the group as essentially foreign and un-American. This link between the model minority and the yellow peril/foreigner makes apparent that the two ideologies are not discrete but part of a continuum of racialization. As Gary Okihiro (1994, p. 142) aptly states, "the model minority and the yellow peril are not poles but form a circular relationship that moves in either direction." That is, although Asian Americans' success can incite discrimination (see Anchetta, 1998; Newman, 1993), the (feminized) model minority image can assuage fears of a (masculinized) yellow peril, enabling the representations to exist side by side (Okihiro, 1994; see Espiritu, 1997). What is unique, then, about the racialization of Asian Americans is the essentialism that not just their culture but their race, their "intrinsic difference," makes them fundamentally foreign. In this way, culture and bloodlines are synonymous, as evidenced by how exoticized Asian Americans and their "foreignness" are.

In like fashion, the foreigner racialization that has taken shape against Obama is one part the racial construction of all Middle Eastern Americans as un-American. Obama has been lumped with the "brown peril" enemy, akin to the yellow peril threat posed by Asian groups in the mid-twentieth century and on. Indeed, many Americans chose to ignore Obama's Christian background to focus on Barack, Sr.'s Islamic faith, a father whom the candidate had barely known. Furthermore, a potent example of the convergence of both the anti-Muslim and anti-Asian racializations was the challenge to Obama's Americanness for his years as a child in Indonesia. There, he had purportedly attended a "radical" madrasa like the terrorists do, according to viral internet rumors.⁴ Obama was therefore essentialized as a racial foreigner, and an American enemy at that, for being associated with the Asian and world's most populous Muslim nation, Indonesia. In other words, the "yellow peril" and the "brown peril" were synonymous.

Coded Encounters of the Foreign-Immigrant Kind

The other dimension of the new racial recipe against Obama, which intersects with the Muslim/terrorist racialization, derives from the "brown-ing of America." Unlike most African Americans, Obama's ancestors did not originate in generations of slave ancestors or descendants, but in Kenya, Africa. His father was a first-generation immigrant to the United States,

making Obama's ability to distance himself from "foreign" immigrants a difficult endeavor in a society that racializes "Americans," irrespective of generation, as "Whites." This "brown America" racialization of a native-born Black person reflects both a top-down and bottom-up fear of Latinos in particular (but also other immigrants of color) who "raid" Whites' once pristine shores, white picket fence communities, and places of work. In recent decades, examples include Californians' 1994 passage of Proposition 187 that sought to deny the undocumented social services (later deemed unconstitutional). Another example is the House of Representatives' passage of the 2005 Sensenbrenner Bill that, among other things, called for a new 700-mile fence along the southern border, forced states to deny driver's licenses to the undocumented, and allowed deportation of long-term legal permanent residents for providing humanitarian or financial support to organizations later deemed "terrorist" by the government, even when such support was legal at the time provided. More recently, Arizona signed into law S.B. 1070 that legalizes surveillance of immigrants for deportation. What is perhaps most alarming about these bills is their support from the majority of Americans. Soon after the House passed the Sensenbrenner bill, a February 2006 Pew Hispanic Center poll of 2,000 adults found that 52% of Americans agreed that immigrants are more of a burden than a benefit to the United States and a sizable 27% would deport all undocumented migrants rather than allow them to stay permanently or as temporary guest workers. On October 26, 2006 *CNN* posted the results from a survey by Opinion Research Corp. of 1,013 Americans regarding border control. Seventy-four percent of those polled said that they were in favor of increasing the number of Border Patrol agents along the southern border. On August 18, 2007, Rasmussen Reports published the results of a nationwide survey of 800 Americans on illegal immigration and reported that by a 56% to 31% margin, respondents were in favor of constructing the fence. As for Arizona's S.B. 1070, Rasmussen Reports found that 77% of Republicans and 62% of unaffiliated voters approved of the new law. Democrats were evenly divided. To be sure, 58% of all voters were at least "somewhat concerned" that "efforts to identify and deport illegal immigrants will also end up violating the civil rights of some U.S. citizens," yet that has not seemed to blunt overall support for the bill itself.

While racism's axis of social citizenship is usually unleashed upon Asian Americans, it is also used against Latinos, a group that has been racialized in recent decades as foreigners largely on the basis of *legal* status (see Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1997). Although there are undocumented Asian immigrants as well, the hegemonic racialization of the "illegals" involves

attacking mostly Mexicans for allegedly invading our shores like giant swarming ants devouring American jobs, resources, and culture (on culture see Huntington, 2004). Part of this citizenship-based racism against Latinos is also about United States-Latin American relations. In other words, a reason that Americans perpetuate anti-Latino racism and sentiment is because the United States believes that Latinos hail from poor, dirty, uncivilized backward countries and that their darker (and female reproductive) bodies pollute rich White America. By the dint of U.S. superpower status and (neo)imperial power, mainstream Americans are well aware that Mexico, Puerto Rico, and parts of Central and South America are under the U.S. thumb. And the sense of superiority is heightened by the United States' ability to bully these countries and commonwealths to meet its diplomatic-capitalistic demands. Yet, in the debate over immigration there is no mention of the fact that a sizable part of the United States was once Mexican land taken by what we would now consider an illegal and unjust invasion.

The equation of Asian Americans and Asia is similar insofar as mainstream society often treats Asian-descent groups (one typically mistaken for the other) according to U.S. relations with, and/or mainstream ideology concerning, those Asian nations at the time. As with some Latin American nations, the power of the United States to racialize thus derives from its (neo)imperialist relationship to certain Asian countries (Kim, 2008). An important distinction about Latin America, however, is that while richer nations among them exist, most of them tend to have a lower GDP, are less developed, and are less militarily powerful than the United States, fostering the anti-immigrant racism against the group as poor job-stealers, drug dealers, hyper-fertile women, and the like. In contrast, many Asian nations/territories have waged serious political challenges to U.S. capitalism and imperialism (e.g., Vietnam, North Korea) or have become richer and more powerful in recent decades (e.g., Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, China (Taiwan), Singapore, India). Historically, Japan rose as a world power ready to take on the U.S. military and its "imperial" prowess during World War II. This competitive threat from successful nation-states like Japan and the other Asian Tigers has engendered racist state policy and treatment premised on the notion that the "race/nation" is too good at what they do. Unlike Latino immigrants who are branded as lower-class and thus a drain and drag on U.S. society, the racialization of many Asian American groups presumes that they will take over society and should be stopped (e.g., first-wave Chinese and Japanese, the Japanese military, the Viet Cong, Japanese/Korean auto companies, Chinese/Indian markets). To be sure, there are several less developed Asian nations and regions from which

immigrants have come, such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, and here Asian Americans share a parallel with many Latino groups. Yet, the continuum of the “model minority” and the “perpetual foreigner” ideologies is ever pervasive. This ideological continuum overrides the reality that many Asian nations/regions are impoverished and struggle in the third world as they do as immigrants in the United States. In brief, the perpetual foreigner ideology is a denial of social and cultural citizenship, that is, the denial of authentic Americanness and full national belonging. Like most Latino groups today but unlike the Latino experience prior to the 1940s, Asian Americans were racially subordinated and defined as not fit for *legal* citizenship until the 1950s. The two groups have thus often differed in terms of the central axis along which their citizenship has been racialized across the historical epochs. Today, Latinos suffer citizenship-based racism mainly along legal lines while Asian Americans mainly do so along sociocultural—political lines.

THE CONCLUSION TO “HOPE” AND “CHANGE” AND AFTERTHOUGHTS

Campaigning for Senator Barack Obama in Southern California and in Tarrant County, Texas, revealed the persistence of racially unequal discourse and stratification, not the workings of a post-racial society. My research showed that some Americans in regions that are conservative and/or have cultures less circumscribed by social desirability norms simply did not want a Black person above Whites as the most powerful person in the world. They either expressed this by admitting that Obama’s “race” was the sole reason they were not voting for him or by resorting to more traditional forms of racism: the “n” word and references to lynching or to Blacks’ innate inferiority were the explanations of choice here.

More common, however, was the way in which coded forms of racism have become the rule of the day. Speaking to Americans all over the country by phone or face-to-face showed that the notion of “good” versus “bad” Blacks is still pervasive. Indeed, Obama was elected by many Whites (though not a majority; Wingfield & Feagin, 2010) and by many non-Black people of color because he had made clear that he was not on what White America would call the “dark side.” It was also fascinating to discover that the citizenship-based racism usually unleashed against Asian Americans and Latinos was finding a new face in attacking a potential Black American U.S.

President. From my direct fieldwork and read of the mainstream discourse, White America’s racialization of Obama hinged on a combination of subordinating Muslims as perpetual racial foreigners and fearing the “browning of America” brought on by immigration, especially from the global South. Such a racialization of Barack Obama as lacking authentic citizenship (e.g., birth certificate, Indonesian Muslim) — he the child of a White American mother, a native-born citizen with no “foreign” accent who was raised and educated mostly in the States, a husband to a Black woman descended from U.S. slaves, a basketball player — is remarkable, not only because the foreign shoe barely fit but because race and racism, once again, are shown to be as malleable as politicians’ positions on the issues. Race and racism must always adapt to meet hegemonic ends (Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Gans, 1999; Kim, 2008), and the mostly coded racist attacks against Obama threw such processes into relief.

It is precisely because race and racism are alive and well in these coded and adaptable forms that Obama continues to downplay both so as to keep the American public behind him, especially through the 2012 election. Even days after his historic election, he downplayed the racial significance of being the first U.S. President of African parentage, claiming that while people might have been excited for a few days, the economy and all the other troubles imperiling the country trumped any historic racial milestone. Then half a year into his presidency, he retracted his comments about police acting “stupidly” concerning what most scholars considered police racial profiling of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Some have recently predicted that Obama will be “toast” in 2012 precisely because the economy continues to spiral downward despite the stimulus and other bills (Morici, 2010). No one, however, is predicting that it will be because he made race and racism a central part of his administration and rhetoric. As I said at the outset of this chapter, I always knew that his non-Whiteness would be a strait-jacket for him on the race front. This “erasure” does not in any way taint my wonderful and challenging experience campaigning for him, a historic candidate in a historic election at a historic time. I have proudly kept all of my Obama paraphernalia, newspaper stories as well as my inauguration ceremony ticket, official Eastern Inaugural Ball ticket, and all the photos so that I can show my future child (or children) one day. I will tell her or him that while I had to watch the President and his game face on JumboTrons at the inauguration ceremony, I was about fifteen feet away from “Barack and Michelle” at the ball. I will say that he was really well-spoken and charismatic but still came off as a politician (to be fair, it was the ninth time he had repeated the same mini-speech), and

that the tall, statuesque, and handsome couple danced closely for all of us to see. But, based on these and other noted experiences and the autoethnographic analysis that sprang forth, I have decided that when my child is old enough to understand, I will also tell him or her that Obama's "erasure" of race has made me question my initial certainty that the symbolism of a non-White leader for people of color and a majority non-White world was a sufficient end in itself. True, young children of color will see themselves in the history books and may believe that they are more than just "ballers," rappers, or even more than just accountants and lawyers. Indeed, some researchers have documented an "Obama effect" for Black test-takers whereby the performance gap between them and White students prior to Obama's nomination "all but disappeared when the exam was administered after his acceptance speech and again after the presidential election"; it is not yet clear, however, if such a result is transitory (Dillon, 2009). At the same time, however, will the youth's Obama-inspired aspirations or test results be the only factors that free the larger group from prisons; ensure fair treatment by police and the courts; place them in safe neighborhoods where they have good jobs, own homes, and attend good schools; stop the state from racially profiling and deporting them; and stop racism based on U.S. relations with their ancestral countries? And will Obama-inspired aspirations live on if the President is considered, in 2012 and in the history books, not only a failure but a *Black* failure? As his overall approval rating, including his job numbers, hits record lows; as unemployment swells and the stimulus fails to stimulate; as the wars increasingly lose popular support; and as our ocean becomes an oil pit and a graveyard for jobs, turtles, and dolphins, Obama himself likely sits in the Oval Office wondering the same thing. Yet, as he has always said about our nation's and the globe's problems, he is not the only agent who can change the discourse and social structures of race and racism; what happens to Obama and to our race-based society also depends on what we do from the bottom up.

NOTES

1. Although phone banking to perfect strangers remained an unnerving experience, the countless calls to Americans with whom I normally would never speak were some of the most interesting and enjoyable. One elderly woman with whom I chatted for 1.5 hours hungered for knowledge on every single issue, exorciated America's historical treatment of groups of color like the Native Americans (she was not indigenous herself), and then ended by giving me extensive tips on how to look young "forever."

2. Thankfully, the calls to South Carolina were easy, in large part because the online <http://www.barackobama.com> calling tool had us target predominantly African American areas which, by that point, were moving to Obama after initial trepidation due to their lack of familiarity with him, their doubts about his chances, and fear that he would be killed (see Thomas 2009). On a practical level, the calls were generally easy to make because the campaign-generated calling tool was an impressively accurate voter phone list that could be accessed from one's personal computer. Journalist Evan Thomas (2009) found that this tool was key to the success of Obama's campaign.

3. In 2005 the county was 57% Anglo, 24% Latino, 14% Black, and 4.2% Asian American (<http://www.tarrantcountry.com/egov/cwp/view.asp?a=703&q=425078>).

4. I am indebted to the reviewers for reminding me of these incidents and of their anti-Asian nature.

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RACE THREADS AND RACE THREATS: HOW OBAMA/RACE-DISCOMFORT AMONG CONSERVATIVES CHANGED THROUGH PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

Adam Murphree and Deirdre A.

ABSTRACT

This chapter uses critical race theories to interpret and changing discourse patterns on discussing a pro-gun, overwhelmingly white, male, community. Beginning during the 2008 presidential campaign through Barack Obama's election focused on the proliferation of negative 'nicknames' that were posted in race-oriented discussion. We identified three types of frequently used language indicating general dislike, political disdain, or analyzed usage patterns – which types of Obama which times. Our results revealed a changing standard of extreme anger – among posters whose sense

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