ORIGINAL ARTICLE

“Hope Is Finally Making a Comeback”: First Lady Reframed

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This article, framed epistemologically and politically by women of color theory, examines Michelle Obama’s response to her racist and sexist treatment in the mainstream U.S. media’s coverage of the 2008 presidential election campaign. I argue that Obama uses the very tools of postidentity, a conservative ideology that promotes the fiction that the country has arrived at an “after” moment of racism and sexism, to argue against postidentity, a safe manner to engage in racism and misogyny in the 21st century. Understanding Michelle Obama’s speaking back to postidentity ideology provides minoritized 21st century subjects with a means to understand how power, privilege, racialized and gendered discrimination, and resistance function in the new millennium United States.

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Imagine that you are the First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama. Along with the virtues of femininity, strength, maternity, humility, and grace, you must perform constant restraint. You must be cognizant that each and every one of your words is being scrutinized, taken out of context, and magnified for the world to dissect. You are in the midst of a constant media circus neither of your own creation nor desire. You must not only grin and bear the media’s obsession with you, but present yourself as happy to be in the midst of such a spectacle. Your pretense is perhaps easy enough when the world loves you, bowing down to your magnificent arms and trend-setting fashion sense. But what do you do when instead of adulation you face open, unbridled hostility? And not just any type of hostility, but a particularly virulent, racist, misogynistic anti-Black woman brand.

This conundrum, of a minoritized subject’s metaphoric straitjacketing in her responses to racist, misogynistic verbal attacks, is what I am concerned with in this essay. This is, of course, not just an issue for the First Lady. Those “of difference,” whether race, gender, sexuality, class, or ability, are given fewer options in the Obama era to respond to the vitriol targeting our bodies: “We” are ostensibly past discrimination and even past identity. The mainstream media presents the ubiquitous cultural
assumption that all Americans have reached a moment “after” or “post” oppression which defaults to “after” or “post” identity categories, including, as I focus on here in this article, after racialized discrimination and difference, or postrace, and after gender discrimination and difference, or postfeminism.\(^1\) Scholarship exposing the danger of these two “posts” has exploded in the past decade, illuminating, as communication scholar Catherine Squires (2010, p. 213) puts it, “the material stakes of so-called identity politics and how the rhetorical shenanigans of the post-create another layer of difficulty in decoding and detecting regressive, oppressive tactics.”

Postrace has been interdisciplinarily deconstructed by sociologists (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Forman & Lewis, 2006), critical race scholars (Guinier & Torres, 2002), critical theorists (Gilroy, 2000), and communication scholars (Ono, 2010; Watts, 2010) alike. Under the rubric of postrace scholarship, while some authors such as geographer Anoop Nayak (2006, p. 427), building on the work of Paul Gilroy, celebrate how “post-race ideas offer an opportunity to experiment, to re-imagine and to think outside the category of race,” others such as sociologist Brett St. Louis (2002, p. 671) warn against “putative post-racial attempts to dismantle the meaningful symbolism and materiality of race.” Similarly, exposing the smokescreen effect of the post, work in postfeminism, primarily conducted in feminist media studies (Brunsdon, 2005; Douglas & Meredith, 2004; McRobbie, 2004, 2008; Tasker & Negra, 2007; Vavrus, 2002), has argued, in the words of Mary Vavrus (2010, p. 223), that postfeminism, in its denials of institutionalized sexism and misogyny, “displaces critical attention from actual sources of patriarchal power and on to feminism.” Into these illuminating yet largely single axis, race, or gender debates in postrace and postfeminism, race/gender media studies scholars (Beltrán, 2010; Hua, 2009; Joseph, 2009; Nishime, 2010; Springer, 2002, 2007) have centered representations of women of color in their conjoined critique of race and gender and postrace and postfeminism. In this article, I push further to theorize popular representations of “postidentity” and women of color.

To read Obama’s resistance to the ideology of postidentity by utilizing the tropes of postidentity in this essay, I investigate two of Obama’s speaking events that were heavily hyped by the media. In the first, Michelle Obama was verbally attacked after a February 2008 campaign rally for her excerpted, out-of-context line, “for the first time in my adult lifetime, I’m really proud of my country.” In the second event, 4 months later on the daytime talk show The View, Obama addressed criticism over these comments (The View, 2008). To make sense of the landscape of talk about and talk by Michelle Obama, I did an initial Lexis-Nexis search of the major U.S. newspapers using the terms “Michelle Obama” and “race,” from January 1, 2008, when Michelle Obama began to occupy the national consciousness after Barack Obama became a viable candidate after his January 2008 win at the Iowa caucus, and ended September 24, 2009, the date of my first search. This search produced a total of 959 articles, of which I found 84 to be particularly relevant because they showed sustained engagement with issues of Obama and racialization. From these 84 articles, I found that the “pride” event (in February 2008) and its reframe (in June 2008) was
the most comprehensive “media spectacle,” to borrow media studies scholar Douglas Kellner’s (2009) phrase, because it encapsulated a number of the newspaper articles’ themes. These included Michelle Obama’s providing “Black authenticity” to Barack (negatively spun in this event as Blackness equated to bitterness); the obsession with her body (through the constant refrain of her height, described as “5’11” or “just shy of 6 feet,” and descriptions of her “fit” and “athletic” body); and most importantly for my purposes, talk of Ms. Obama and Americanness, patriotism, and the American Dream. Choosing an event with clear beginning and ending dates also helped me avoid, in the words of Gilbert Rodman (2006, p. 117), “one of the occupational hazards of studying contemporary culture . . . . It’s a constantly moving target.” Michelle Obama affords minoritized subjects with a model of how to resist the effects of postidentity culture, or how, to tweak Audre Lorde’s famous phrase, to dismantle the master’s house with his tools in our new era of sanctioned racialized misogyny.

As an umbrella term that encapsulates many types of postoppression, including race and gender, postidentity, functions as a controlling ideology, cultural norm, and value. Postidentity, intended to mean postbias, is largely presented in the mainstream media somewhere along the spectrum from fact to aspiration. In reality, the discourse and concomitant ideology of postidentity dictate a contemporary, media-fueled moment in which “different” racialized and gendered identities (those of color and those female) are somehow magically granted equal status and are therefore given the mandate to set aside historic, structural, interpersonal, and institutional discrimination, which are imagined to exist exclusively in the past or paranoia. In postidentity ideology manifested in the popular media, merely referencing race or gender, much less racialized or gendered discrimination or racialized or gendered “pride,” is dismissed or attacked as outmoded, irrelevant, or even “racist” and “sexist.” Racialized and gendered disparities that still abound and still dictate life chances are simply not allowed to enter into the ideological space of postidentity. Scholarship that deploys the term “postidentity” has a tendency to quickly breeze past both identity categories and structures of discrimination, to think through the “possibilities” inherent in leaving behind identity, as opposed to think through the possibilities inherent in leaving behind minoritized people. I argue here that postidentity is a fabricated realm where race- and gender-blind fiction supplants racialized and gendered fact. As differential outcomes and structural inequalities are silenced in postidentity ideology, they are, in effect, allowed to continue, unfettered. Interestingly, the body does not disappear in the ideology of postidentity. Instead, in postfeminism, the hyperfeminized body is valued as a tool to illustrate the “after” moment of second-wave feminism; the postfeminist body is marked apart from assumptions of second-wave feminism’s antimakeup, antifashion, anti-“looks” bias. In postrace, the body of color is similarly symbolically important as its freedoms and successes, despite its markers of racialized difference, are used to measure progress from the civil rights era.

Postidentity ideologies, while present for decades, emerged in a large-scale manner when Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton surfaced as the top two Democratic Party contenders for U.S. president and reached a crescendo after Obama’s election. These
two “firsts” were offered up in the popular media as evidence of the United States emerging as a truly meritocratic state. This new millennium moment of postidentity, in which the fiction of meritocracy has become hegemonic, defines the incredibly restrictive landscape in which Michelle Obama, an African American female icon and First Lady, is allowed to speak. Obama’s speaking, in the words of Black feminist scholar Daphne Brooks (2008, p. 183), illuminates not the invisible but rather, in our contemporary moment, “the politics of Black female hypervisibility in the American cultural imaginary.” In the midst of a climate in which frank discussions of difference are verboten, hypervisible Obama must couch her words as she carefully fights her verbal attacks. With help from her media team, Michelle Obama skillfully uses the very tools of postidentity to argue against the tenets of postidentity. In using postidentity tools, Obama is creating a counternarrative to controlling images of Black women. Ideologies, such as Stuart Hall’s formulation of identities, are never complete but always in formation; counterhegemonic narratives speak back (Hall, 1985).

Michelle Obama deploys the language of postidentity through the strategy of reframing and redefining ideologies such as “American” and “patriotism” and speaking of race, class, and gender in code. In resisting, reframing, redefining, and coding, Obama utilizes the strategies of women of color theory, also known as the U.S. third-world feminism. Woman of color cultural studies scholar Michelle Habell-Pallán (2009) illustrates that for more than 30 years “women of color [have been] initiating and advancing a politics of difference . . . in response to liberal essentialist notions embedded in the women’s movement and scholarship as well as to ethnic nationalism.” Women of color theory does not refer to the scholarship produced by a demographic group but to a particular way of reading or of what Black feminist scholar Valerie Smith (1998, pp. xix, xv) calls a “strategy of reading simultaneity.” Smith builds on critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1995, p. xiii) ideas of intersectionality, where “ideologies of race, gender . . . class, and sexuality . . . are reciprocally constitutive categories of experience and analysis.” Reading Obama through women of color theorizing provides scholars with the instruments to cut through her marking both as a Black bestial body and as an exemplar of Black achievement.

Woman of color theorist Chela Sandoval speaks back to the delimiting of women of color through her analysis of what she calls the “posttraditional era,” a time she explains has also been called “‘postindustrial,’ ‘consumer,’ ‘high-tech,’ ‘multinational,’ ‘transnational,’ ‘postcolonial,’ ‘postmodern,’ and/or ‘global.’” Although Sandoval (2000, p. 9) does not use the specific terms “postrace,” “postfeminism,” or “postidentity,” the three posts- with which I engage in this article, she describes what is a similar rationale and function: “a new cultural dominant has overtaken the rationality of the old.” In the case of postrace and postfeminism, the “new” cultural dominant of colorblindness and gender-blindness presides where the “old” cultural dominant of racism and sexism, and even racialized and gendered identity, are assumed to be defunct. Furthermore, if, as sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2005, p. 4) writes, “in the post-civil rights era, the power relations that administer the theater of race in America are now far more hidden,” minoritized postcivil rights
subjects need new ways to become powerful actors. Michelle Obama’s negotiation of postidentity provides us with this new model. Although the intentions behind her scripting are impossible to determine, I do believe that, as communication scholar Mary Kahl argues, Michelle Obama’s public statements exhibit an “awareness of the persona she is fashioning for herself” (Kahl, 2009, p. 319). Through use of her reframes, redefinitions, and coded language, Obama demonstrates her refusal to accept when anti-Black, antiwoman controlling images are superimposed by hateful conservative and fetishizing liberal media culture onto her body.

Situating postidentity
To make sense of Michelle Obama’s strategic refutation of postidentity, I contextualize postidentity by briefly historicizing some of the metatheoretical moves that have enabled 21st century postidentity ideologies. The idea of being past identity is not new, although in this historical moment, the popular media often presents it as such. Postidentity ideology, reflecting both neoconservative and neoliberal leanings, can be traced not only to reactionary political thought but also to what were largely understood to be liberatory political and academic movements, at least in their time. I read central tenets of postidentity against three landmark movements of thought and activism: postmodernism, civil rights and feminism, and women of color theory’s interrogations of identity. To answer how Michelle Obama resists postidentity, I investigate how we have arrived at a moment in which postidentity conscribes the landscape of talk by and around Obama.

Postidentity illustrates a narrative of progress from a past notion of identity categories as biased, discriminated against, and particular, to a current notion of identity categories as unbiased, discrimination-free, and universal. Postidentity has clear resonance in postmodern scholarship, particularly that which is associated with fragmentation, pastiche, and a play of identity. Postmodernism denies any fixity of meaning. When thinking about the legacy of postmodernism for postidentity, what does it mean for race and gender to have open meanings? Do open meanings equate to the elimination of racialized and gendered stereotypes? Or does theorizing race and gender through a postmodern framework mean that racialized and gendered identity remains unhistoricized and thus not recognized as the effect of historic processes of racialization or gendering? Through postmodern notions of identity play, race and gender can become, in effect, elements of style; this can be seen in the media’s focus on Michelle Obama and fashion. Thus, in her media representations, Michelle Obama’s image signifies elements of postfeminism as she is portrayed as a “strong woman” who can be interested in ostensible frivolities (as a penchant for fashion is understood to be un-, anti-, or postfeminist) and yet not be dismissed as frivolous. At the same time, postmodernism cannot only be spotted in talk about Michelle Obama: Postmodernism guides talk and action by Obama and her media team. For example, during the election campaign, Obama often wore oversized pearls and her hair in a flip reminiscent of Jacqueline Kennedy, a playful nod to what Vogue
editor-at-large André Leon Talley called “a black Camelot moment” (Trebay, 2008). Obama’s image, playing to a mediatized embrace of her fashion choices, dictates that audiences should not pay attention to her inside (as in second-wave feminism) but that we should indeed embrace her outside (as in postfeminism).

In postmodernism, and 21st century postidentity ideology, identity is presented as ambiguous, unstable, changing, open, fragmented, and, perhaps most importantly, the result of choice. Mainstream media representations play on many of these tropes in their coverage on Michelle Obama just as Obama utilizes open, changing, playful signifiers of race and gender. However, postmodernism does not complete the circuit of talk about and by postidentity and Michelle Obama. Postmodern challenges to conventional iterations of identity must also be seen alongside 1960s and 1970s era civil rights and feminist activists’ articulation of identity. Both movements held explicit goals of exposing and challenging material, social inequality. Michelle Obama’s public statements and actions illustrate that she indeed embraces such goals, even though she must often speak of materiality and inequality in code, particularly when racialized or gendered. In addition to similar goals of striving for equality, scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995) have illustrated how in the service of political efficacy, civil rights and feminist movements scripted “authentic” Black and female subjects. The mainstream of both movements aligned themselves with the most empowered members of their respective communities: middle-class, straight White women in the feminist movement and middle-class, straight Black men in the civil rights movement. Thus, the leadership of the civil rights and the second-wave feminist movements was often reliant on singular, essential, bodily instantiations of identity. Forgotten were those with multiple marginalized or intersectional identities who crossed and fell out of categories, such as women of color. Identity was not at all “post” in such activist movements—unambiguous, stable, unchanging, authentic bodily status–regulated inclusion.

Postidentity ideology relies on the narratives of the civil rights and second-wave feminist movements as the moments in which inequality was conquered: Cementing firmly in the past the problems the movements addressed helps prove that the 21st century is about the unequivocal success of the movements. We have now arrived at the “after” moment where inequality is over. In this vein, for example, there was a popular newspaper piece that investigated Michelle Obama’s family tree all the way back to her last slave relative (Swarns, 2009). The way in which this story circulated was not to illustrate the legacy of slavery’s contemporary effects on structural and institutional racism but rather to note that a dehumanizing system has been so profoundly overcome that it produced an individual with an enslaved relative who ascended to the White House. Postidentity as an ideology thus ignores structural inequities as those too are assumed to be relics of the past. Importantly, Michelle Obama is frequently represented in the media as the beneficiary of the civil rights and second-wave feminist movements. The press and Obama’s own media team have focused on her “American Dream” story whereby, as the narrative goes, her working class African American family produced two children who overcame the barriers
of their neighborhood, their race, and their socioeconomic background to attend Princeton University and “make it.” This narrative is one of moving from lack of economic opportunity and racialized specificity to wealth and postracial universalism.

Women of color theory, along with scholarship by and about other minoritized and historically forgotten people, is yet another influence on postidentity. Women of color theory was born out of a moment in which the identity fluidity and play inspired by postmodernism met the materialist, racialized, gendered, and most certainly identity-based concerns of liberation movements. This scholarly moment is characterized by some scholars, such as cultural studies scholar Michael Millner (2005, p. 541), as “a rich and sophisticated reconceptualization of identity—as performative, mobile, strategically essential, intersectional, incomplete, in-process, provisional, hybrid, partial, fragmentary, fluid, transitional, transnational, cosmopolitan, counterpublic, and, above all, cultural.”

But while Millner (2005) describes authors such as Homi Bhabha, Judith Butler, Rey Chow, Paul Gilroy, Jose Esteban Munoz, and Eve Sedgwick as expressing “exhaustion around the whole project of identity,” I think the exhaustion, at least as it pertains to women of color theory, has been centered on the project of essentialism (a limiting litmus test of authenticity) and not the projects of identities (de-essentialized, open, multiple, and hybrid entities). Essentialism and identity are, of course, not one in the same. Nevertheless, in many spheres of discussions of “difference” in arenas as varied as the popular press and communication scholarship, the slippage between identity and essentialism flourishes. Writings on identity, in and of themselves, are not necessarily stultifying. Furthermore, although Millner describes certain critics as writing “past” identity in the 1990s, Black feminist scholar Farah Jasmine Griffin identifies that same decade as “one of the most intellectually exciting and fruitful developments” for Black feminist studies. Griffin (2006, p. 484) points out, “it is quite likely that the latter critique of essentialism was made possible by the very terms and successes of Black feminist literary critics who were among the first to call attention to the constructed nature of racial and gender identity.” Women of color scholars in the 1990s built off of and helped further sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s (1986) classic formulation of race as materially, institutionally, and structurally constrained as well as fluid, performative, and mobile. Reformulating racial formation theory with women of color theorizing illuminates how acknowledging both the constructed and the conscribed results in a denial of the either/or formulation and a celebration of the both/and to borrow the language of Patricia Hill Collins (1991). The body, although not the sole determinant of life chances or life choices, is essential and cannot be disregarded. Identity is, by these meanings, not essentially defined. The identity/essentialism slippage, as it flourishes in popular discourse, has helped produce the post-era. Michelle Obama navigates this slippage by resisting racialized, gendered verbal attacks through a redefinition and reframe of “traditional” ideologies as well as use of coded language. Michelle Obama’s invocation of postidentity to fight against the racist/misogynistic effects of postidentity is enabled by postmodernism, the civil rights and second-wave feminist movements, and women of color theory.
To attend to the material and discursive contexts of these two media moments that I investigate here, I use reading tools of women of color theory. Michelle Obama enters a public sphere in which, as women of color theorist Joy James (2009, p. 2) writes, “commercial and stereotypical portrayals of Black females center on fetishized and animalized sexual imagery; consequently Blacks, females, and politics become effaced or distorted. Racial and sexual caricatures corseting the black female body have a strong historical legacy.” These caricatures are contradictory, ranging from diminished humanity, of which James comments, and superhumanness, which is equally limiting in nature. bell hooks explains,

Racist stereotypes of the strong, superhuman black woman are operative myths in the minds of many White women, allowing them to ignore the extent to which Black women are likely to be victimized in this society and the role White women may play in the maintenance and perpetuation of that victimization (hooks, 1984, p. 24).

Despite the hegemony of postidentity as an ideology in the 21st century, public refutations of postidentity thrive in our media culture even as they enter under the cover of postidentity discourse. The resistance Michelle Obama performs, which, at least in the mainstream media, is not read as resistance, is markedly different from resistance to “traditional” racism or sexism. The game has changed: There is no room for such conventional responses. When “old school” civil rights and second-wave feminist responses erupt, they are often dismissed as irrelevant and even laughable, as in the public parodying of Al Sharpton and Hillary Clinton. Their insistence on seemingly conventional antiracist or feminist politics is portrayed as out of time and out of touch with 21st century America. Of Sharpton, for example, communication scholar Robin Means Coleman (2006, p. 88) notes that he faced a recent “‘race card’ dismissal . . . in favor of the perceived ‘race in moderation’ political discourses of Barack Obama.” Because of the cultural cachet of postidentity, which Coleman assesses Barack Obama as being rewarded for using, Michelle Obama employs the language of postidentity made available to her. She should not be evaluated in the old binaristic framework of either “selling out” (in other words, not acting “appropriately” Black or feminist by failing to prove her race or feminist credentials) or “being real” (in other words, acting “authentically” Black or feminist by proving her race and gender credibility). Instead, to resist the postidentity ideology, Michelle Obama deploys elements of postidentity culture.

**Pride attacked**

There were numerous events where Michelle Obama was pilloried by the McCain campaign and the conservative media in the 2007–2008 presidential election campaign season and just as many examples of where she subsequently spoke back by deploying a sophisticated resistance to postidentity. These include the ridicule directed at her because of a “fist bump” with Barack Obama at a St. Paul, Minnesota,
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campaign rally in June 2008, and the parody of her as a Black Panther a month later on the July 21, 2008, issue of the *New Yorker*. But perhaps the most attacked of all of Michelle Obama’s statements was her “pride” comment during a stump speech in early 2008. Carefully and critically examining Obama’s words helps to reclaim her humanity, of which legal scholar Adrienne Davis (2002) writes erupts through language, from the claws of the media.9

Figure 1

Michelle Obama’s “pride” comments occurred during a campaign speech on February 19, 2008, first in Milwaukee and then in Madison, Wisconsin (Figure 1). In the television networks’ coverage of the speech, only Obama’s head and shoulders were visible in the frame; the rest of her body was concealed by a podium. Obama wore a crew-necked light gray sweater, small pearl earrings, and a very thin gold necklace. Complementing this dressed-down look was her minimal makeup. Obama spoke with a self-assured, even-toned voice. She was intent and focused and smiled infrequently during her remarks. In essence, her words, not her outfit, hairstyle, or personality, were the focus of this speech. Michelle Obama stated,

What we’ve learned over this year is that hope is making a comeback. It is making a comeback and let me tell you something, for the first time in my adult lifetime, I’m really proud of my country. And not just because Barack has done well, but because I think people are hungry for change.

Obama’s talk of “hope” is underscored by a vision of collective and not individual success: Her investment is not just in her personal family’s or her husband’s success, but in the usually forgotten folks, the “people hungry for change,” who are now being given hope that they are not going to be forgotten forever. She continued,

And I have been desperate to see our country moving in that direction and just not feeling so alone in my frustration and disappointment. I’ve seen people who are hungry to be unified around some basic common issues, and it’s made me proud. And I feel privileged to be a part of even witnessing this, traveling around
states all over this country and being reminded that there is more that unites us than divides us.

In her insertion of “I” statements, Obama does not isolate herself from the people she rhetorically conjures but instead puts herself in the category of the forgotten, those who have felt alone, frustrated, and disappointed. This functions as code for minoritized people. But, also in code, Obama is clear to illustrate that the dispossessed are not simply racial minorities; class dispossesses people as well. In the final section of her remarks, Obama states that the crowd must keep in mind,

That the struggles of a farmer in Iowa are no different than what’s happening on the South Side of Chicago. That people are feeling the same pain and wanting the same things for their families.10

Hence, working-class Whites, such as the “farmer in Iowa,” are cast out by the then-current Republican regime just as are working-class African Americans, such as those “on the South Side of Chicago.” What her message amounts to is that we, the cast out, need to stand together in cross-racial unity to create change. The major news networks did not cover the last part of Obama’s remarks, and, indeed, I only found Obama’s full speech on a C-SPAN feed.

Although Obama speaks of race and class in code, a clear element of postidentity culture, Obama’s call for collectivity speaks directly against the individualism inherent in postidentity. She is articulating a theory that Michelle Habell-Pallán (2009) credits women of color scholars with: “illuminat[ing] ... the linkages ... of economic exploitation and racialization.” Obama is refusing to be seen as a token or as an exceptional individual who has made it. Indeed, minoritized subjects who attain a degree of success are often portrayed as singularly exceptional and therefore apart from their communities. Black feminist scholar Carol Boyce Davies examines such a case in her article on George W. Bush’s Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, “‘Con-di-fi-cation’: Black Women, Leadership and Political Power.” Davies describes the focus on individual success as the political tactic of “exceptionalism as strategy,” part of the “media construction of Condoleezza ... [which shows] a typical singling out of one member of a subordinated group as many others with similar talents are erased” (Davies, 2007, p. 76). Obama’s use of coded language allows her to argue against such a singling out, an expression of anti-Con-di-fi-cation.

In this speech, Obama also reframes hegemonic conceptions of patriotism: It is not just the purview of those who are enfranchised but those who have been disenfranchised, who have been victims of racialized, gendered violence propagated by the very political structure of this country. For Obama, patriotism is, in the words of performance studies scholar D. Soyini Madison (2009, p. 321), “the ability to both love and critique, to both honor and re-imagine, to both recognize the noble possibilities of this country while interrogating its wrongs.” This is an open enough text that inside readers can indeed identify an antiracist, feminist message imbedded in it. There is inclusivity at the very core of this message, through Obama’s paralleling
the similar plights of working class Whites and Blacks. I contend that her tone and appearance, which might be described by some viewers as more traditionally “feminist,” enabled the amazingly ferocious media attack that followed her remarks. Why was this the case? As “feminist” Obama is imagined as strong enough to “take” mediatized attacks, while as glam (postfeminist) goddess, she is imagined to need protection from such attacks. Postidentity failed in the first event because, while the message Obama gave utilized major tropes of postidentity, reframing, redefining, and coding, her more “feminist” look didn’t match. Essentially, Michelle Obama stopped being beaten up by the media when she created a postfeminist look.

Conservative commentators, most prominently television news personalities Joe Scarborough and Sean Hannity, and the McCain campaign quickly picked up on a single portion of these comments, taken out of context, “for the first time in my adult lifetime, I’m really proud of my country.” These comments were featured around the clock as further proof that Ms. Obama was bitter and un-American. One cultural commentator summed up the critique of Obama as “emasculating, sarcastic, and bossy” (Kelly, 2008, p. 35). This is a type of “framing by foil,” to use rhetorician Dana Cloud’s (2009, p. 458) phrase, whereby verbally denigrating one’s adversary produces the attacker’s image of him- or herself as all manner of positive attributes that are in direct opposition to the object of hate.

Cindy McCain, the very picture of the First Lady, picked up on Michelle’s line that same day, saying at a campaign rally as she introduced her husband, “I’m proud of my country. I don’t know if you heard those words earlier. I’m very proud of my country” (Hovell, Miller, & Tapper, 2008). Through attack, the Republicans portray Michelle Obama as unpatriotic. The tone and tenor of their attack, “framing by foil,” demonstrates the Republicans’ uber-patriotism. The Republicans’ slogan for the September 2008 Republican National Convention (RNC) was “country first”; their “pride in country” merchandizing followed Michelle Obama’s remark. Although the RNC catchphrase might not have resulted directly from Obama’s remarks, the Republicans’ claim on the flag is legendary. Because of Republican policing of “authentic” patriotism, for example, Democratic candidates and their spouses, including Barack and Michelle Obama, have been and continue to be scrutinized to see if they are performing patriotism appropriately. The signifiers of patriotism include the positioning of hands over hearts for the recitation of the “Pledge of Allegiance,” the prominent featuring of flag pins on jacket lapels, and the positioning of multiple flags in the background during public events and press conferences. Patriotism is not images of the union of Blacks and Whites, as Michelle Obama conjured in her February 2008 speech.

The postfeminist makeover: Postidentity success

Obama’s positioning as “angry” clearly references the “angry Black woman” stereotype, documented by media theorist Kimberly Springer (2002, 2007). Springer points out that, in this controlling image, the question of why she might be angry is unaddressed. Women of color theorizing, however, provides such an explanation. In
the classic essay, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” Audre Lorde explains,

Women of Color in America have grown up with a symphony of anger at being silenced, at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service. Lorde argues that to endure, “We have had to learn to move through [our anger] because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart” (Lorde, 1984, p. 117).

Part of the way in which Obama moved through what undoubtedly was anger at her attacks was by deploying postidentity tactics. In the aftermath of the media attack, Michelle Obama was forced to jump to reframe, explain, and defend. She did so by choosing a certain type of media coverage—“women’s” television programs and magazines—using coded language and by redefining and expanding the limits of who is American. Women, and particularly, White women, were a vital demographic for Barack Obama given the challenge by Hillary Clinton. Obama’s approach is, in fact, the same as in the full text of the attacked comments, so although the tone and venue of her comments, and her physical appearance, are different, the message is not. Obama’s approach of reframing patriotism directly speaks back to Republicans’ utilizing “love of country” to separate “us” (White, conservative Americans) from “them” (people of color, feminists, liberals, and other assorted malcontents). The Michelle Obama media blitz reached its peak on June 18, 2008, when she appeared on the daytime talk show The View, described by Daphne Brooks (2008) as “the kaffeeklatch gossip bowl,” as a “guest co-host” for the day. In accordance with the conventions of The View, as co-host Obama is positioned as an insider member of the “us” of the show and not the “them” of featured guests. The change in venue, from a gender-neutral site of a political speech to a feminized location of women’s TV, enabled Obama’s transformation from “feminist” to “postfeminist.”

![Figure 2](https://example.com/image2.jpg)

**Figure 2** Michelle Obama on *The View*.

Obama entered *The View* stage to thunderous applause and a standing ovation from the audience. The hosts ranged from friendly (conservative personality Elisabeth
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Hasselback) to giddy (panel moderator Whoopi Goldberg). Obama’s appearance was drastically different from her February remarks. She wore a sleeveless black-and-white floral dress accented with a floral pin on one shoulder, an off-the-rack number that sold out immediately after the show (Piazza, 2008). Her jewelry consisted of pearl earrings and her bronzer-enhanced skin was shown off to dramatic effect. Her makeup was vivid and sparkling. Her physical image, of a vibrant postfeminist fashionista, was clearly marked as important here, in stark opposition to her more muted affect and dressed-down appearance during her February “pride” remarks (Figure 2).

After quoting the famous line, co-host Barbara Walters asks Obama, “What is your answer to all of these attacks?” to which Obama responds,

Well you know, I take them in stride. It’s a part of this process. We’re not new to politics. But just let me tell you of course I’m proud of my country. Nowhere but in America could my story be possible.

As opposed to Obama’s February remarks where she deploys some signifiers of postidentity, on The View her transformation to postidentity subject appears complete. She utilizes the tropes of postfeminism when, as opposed to her Wisconsin speech, on The View her sentences are shorter and her tone is more intimate, friendlier, and conversational. Smiles punctuate her statements. This is not a seriously delivered speech, but a perky monologue peppered with interjections from the co-hosts. This is the mandate of the postrace/postfeminist image makeover. Although Hortense Spillers (2009, p. 308) writes with “dismay” how Obama “had to be re-choreographed into a more palatable routine; . . . ‘handled,’ ‘softened’ in tone and image,” I respectfully disagree that her makeover is cause for alarm. Indeed, Obama’s resistance remains constant even while she performs as a postfeminist, postracial subject. A White woman telling this story (such as Hillary Clinton or Sarah Palin) iterates a normative American rags-to-riches narrative; the intersectionality of a Black woman telling presents a critique of racist assumptions of African American success.

Obama continues, calling herself “a girl” twice in quick succession: “I’m a girl that grew up [Barbara Walters: Give people a little bit] I’m a girl that grew up on the South Side of Chicago.” In this media appearance, Obama speaks, for the most part, on personal, individual matters and not collective ones. In utilizing the tropes of postrace, Obama speaks of her Blackness through the code “the South Side of Chicago,” which, like in the first speech, is meant to connote both Black and working class. But here it is not used alongside a conjuring of an “Iowa farmer” to foster interracial, working class unity, a possible allusion to cultural miscegenation, but to signify the point from which she departed, the place she moved beyond. The South Side of Chicago becomes the place Obama made it out of and not a place in which people currently reside. Obama also brings together her intersectional identity here by describing herself on The View as “Black girl from the South Side of Chicago.”
She continues,

My father was a working class guy who worked a shift all his life. And because of his hard work he sent not just me but my brother to Princeton [BW: he’s now the coach]. He’s now the coach of Oregon State. Go Beavers! I tell people just imagine the pride that my parents, who didn’t go to college, felt. That they could through their own hard work and sacrifice have us achieve things that they could never imagine. And so I am proud of my country without a doubt. I think when I talked about it in my speech I think what I was talking about was having pride in the political process.

Obama employs the language of postraciality using no racialized descriptor, in code or otherwise, for her father, as he was a “working class guy.” She uses the language of meritocracy, another element of postrace, where “hard work and sacrifice” trump structural, institutional, and historic discrimination and provide entrance to the elite, of which the Ivy League and Princeton University is the ultimate signifier. Utilization of postidentity tropes is necessary for her voice to be heard by the mainstream of the country.

However, focusing on Black success is far from just a pander to postrace. As part of her redefinition of Americanness, Obama pauses on her parents’ “hard work and sacrifice,” two ideas that might sound like conservatively tinged, “all American notions” but which resonate quite differently in lieu of the anti-Black racism in which African Americans have been historically and contemporarily pathologized. In such a context, Obama’s comments resound far differently than Joe Biden’s recounting of his kitchen-table chats with his working-class father, Hillary Clinton’s recalling her down-home roots in Scranton, or Sarah Palin’s many significations of her “real” American identity. The race and gender of the speaker cannot be dismissed. The context of the racist, sexist nature of the previous attacks on Michelle Obama is what makes her remarks extremely different, even though her rhetoric does not necessarily sound remarkably different from Biden, Clinton, or Palin here. She is negotiating racist, misogynistic postidentity culture and must respond in a safe, mainstream, and recognizable (read: White-friendly) manner, which is postidentity. Furthermore, Obama does not abandon a vision of collectivities, as she finishes her remarks,

People are just engaged in this election in a way that we haven’t seen in a long time and I think that everybody has agreed with that, that people are focused [Joy Behar: they’re coming out]. They’re coming out.

Obama narrates her own family as classically American and reframes pride and patriotism as not merely the purview of White, conservative Americans. On The View, Michelle Obama works to create a space in which she can reclaim her own humanity by presenting herself as having common goals with the White mainstream of the country. In a similar vein, her self-applied moniker of “mom in chief” was obsessed over in the popular media and was part of this effort. I do not think of this as pandering, as Hortense Spillers does. Michelle Obama’s appearance on The View, where she performs
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some signifiers of postfeminism and postrace, cannot be dismissed as postfeminist or postracial. Instead, Michelle Obama’s reframe must be seen in the context of a material history in which African American women have never had the luxury to be the most esteemed “lady” in the world. This material history is reflected not merely in representation but also in areas of life as varied as differential poverty, college graduation rates, home ownership rates, prenatal care, and infant mortality. As a snapshot example of racialized discrepancies for African American women, even in 2005, prenatal care was racially stratified with 75.6% of White women receiving care beginning in the first trimester, whereas only 58.1% of Black women received care (National Center for Health Statistics, 2008). In a related vein, infant mortality rates were over twice as high in 2005 for Black women than for White women (MacDorman & Mathews, 2008).

By recognizing this material history and taking it into account, we then understand why Obama’s “playful” words are actually resistant. We could not read Obama’s words as resistant if we were to look at them only in terms of race or only in terms of gender as feminist philosopher Maria Lugones (2008, p. 4) explains, “the logic of categorical separation distorts what exists at the intersection. . . . [T]he intersection misconstrues women of color.” Reading Michelle Obama at the intersection enables an understanding of her use of, and resistance to, postidentity. Black women’s claims to humanity using the language of mainstream goals is radical given the long history, and continued present, of dehumanizing Black women. Michelle Obama’s public statements illustrate that she is a Black woman voicing a collective rehumanization that is so powerful for some and so vexing for others. The key visual marker makes the difference in The View event as opposed to the February stump speech. Visually marked as feminist, she could not use postidentity framing to resistively insert a critique of postidentity assumptions about meritocracy; visually marked as postfeminist, she offers the same content without the backlash. Obama’s visual code of a stylistic mask allows her to get away with such resistant content.

Concluding postidentity performance and the First Lady

The conventional media coverage states that Michelle Obama went from being almost universally hated because of her unveiled racial animosity (e.g., being dubbed Mrs. Grievance on the cover of the National Review; Steyn, 2008) to being almost universally adored because of her accessibility (e.g., topping People Magazine’s “best dressed” list; Hare, 2009). I have argued here that this mediated “makeover” is achieved by her deploying less-coded to more-coded ideologies of postidentity. Her “makeover” is achieved by her performance of visual and linguistic postidentity codes in the second event. Michelle Obama’s presentation of her accessible-fashionista View-self matches the postidentity tools she used, even while she continued to offer content that subverts the racism and misogyny that remains even in our purportedly “postidentity” nation.

Postidentity, like all discourses, must be read in its context. For Obama, majority–minority settings have provided a safe space to name systemic and discursive racialized and gendered inequality. For example, at a campaign fundraising event
with prominent African Americans, Obama used “our” and “us” to refer to African Americans, stating, for example, “I am committed, as well as my husband, to ensuring that more kids like us and kids around this country, regardless of their race, their income, their status, the property values in their neighborhoods, get access to an outstanding education” (Thompson, 2009). To this same group she states, “I know that the life I’m living is still out of the reach of too many women. Too many little Black girls. I don’t have to tell you this. We know the disparities that exist across this country, in our schools, in our hospitals, at our jobs and on our streets.” When First Lady over a year later Obama presided over a ceremony at which a bronze bust of Sojourner Truth was unveiled, there she stated, “Now many young boys and girls like my own daughters will come to Emancipation Hall and see the face of a woman who looks like them.” She told the gathering, “I hope that Sojourner Truth would be proud to see me, a descendant of slaves, serving as the First Lady of the United States of America.” Such frank language illustrates that Obama sees herself as a racialized, gendered member of a larger African American community in a racist, sexist world. These statements illustrate a clear challenge to postidentity that is appropriate for the occasion and the audience. Obama is crafting a public identity that allows her to slip in critiques of the inequality still embedded in our nation.

Thus, Michelle Obama reframes and redefines traditional ideologies in the service of refuting racism and sexism. She refuses to let her body be used against her community. She resists postidentity through what Chela Sandoval (2000, p. 44) calls differential consciousness, a strategy in women of color feminism that “represents a strategy of oppositional ideology that functions on an altogether different register . . . . Differential consciousness is the expression of the new subject position called for by Althusser—it permits functioning within, yet beyond, the demands of dominant ideology.” Sandoval sees woman of color differential consciousness as a type of “differential praxis,” a theory that operates through real-life practice as decolonial strategy (p. 63).

Obama’s resistant strategies can continue to be evaluated as resistant in a variety of ways. She uses racialized and gendered euphemisms as a rhetorical strategy, for example, in the way that rhetorician Edward Schiappa (1989) describes the manner in which euphemisms are used to domesticate an otherwise fearful nuclear arsenal for an American public. Michelle Obama’s careful choice of terms could be considered a euphemism that domesticates an otherwise fearful racial arsenal for the American public. Obama’s coded language could also be an attempt at resistant passing analyzed by critical rhetorician Charles E. Morris III’s work on queer rhetorics. The coded rhetorics of passing uncover what is written beneath the surface and interrogate the “fourth persona” audience who recognizes the textual wink that signals another meaning hidden beneath the surface (Morris, 2009). A closeted person feeling the necessity to utilize one language over another is the very definition of coded speech, and therefore Michelle Obama could be seen as speaking in code to partially closet her Black feminist critique. Performing euphemisms as rhetorical strategy and passing through coding oneself as (an exceptionally glamorous) “every mom” has the effect of winking
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at the insider audience (of women of color) while fostering an acceptance and even adoration for the outsider audience (of White women). The mediated fomenting of positive feelings toward the United States’ first African American First Lady is significant as it bucks a culture in which African American women are still frequently reviled.

Popular media representations of Michelle Obama illustrate how in her public statements speaking back to verbal attacks Obama reclaims herself from the claws of postidentity by deploying its very tenets, by speaking about race, class, and gender in code, and by reframing and redefining ideas such as American and patriotism. The effect of “postidentity” culture is that, in the words of Chela Sandoval,

the ‘underclasses’ are perceived as having their own unsettling, ominous, and equal access to forms of power just as potentially threatening as those forms available to the capitalistic upper classes, White races, male genders, or dominant sexualities under previous hierarchical organizations of power.

This is a dangerous set of assumptions as “late-capitalist retranslation of difference allows hierarchical and material differences in power between people to be erased from consciousness, even while these same economic and social privileges are bolstered” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 75). In this essay, taking Michelle Obama’s lead, I have utilized women of color theorizing to unpack her comments at the February rally and read them against her later reframe on The View. As postidentity and resistance to postidentity are both enabled by women of color scholarship, Michelle Obama’s positionality can best be understood using the tools of women of color theorizing. Understanding Michelle Obama’s sophisticated speaking back to postidentity ideology provides minoritized 21st century subjects with a means to understand how power, privilege, racialized and gendered discrimination, and resistance function in our present moment.

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Notes

1 I am paralleling postracial and postfeminist discourses, as opposed to postracial and postgender ones, because of the regressive, conservative effect of postracial and postfeminist ideologies, as opposed to the more potentially transgressive nature of postgender so noted in transgender theory (see, e.g., Bornstein, 1995; Halberstam, 1998).

2 See, for example, “Thinking Post-Identity,” a 2003 special issue of the Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association (Vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 1–162). Editor of the special
issue, literary scholar Judith Roof (2003, pp. 2–3) optimistically writes, “post-identity challenges . . . the dialectical habit of thought that perpetuates the structural repetition of the system itself.”


4 Smith (1998, p. xvi) describes how “social transformation will become possible only as we understand how these dynamics and relations [of dominance] are inscribed and produced.” We have to read “overlapping, discontinuous, and multiply interpretable discursive sites” (p. xviii).

5 Postmodernism originates with scholarship by Jean-Francois Lyotard. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard (1979) expresses a certain “incredulity [toward] metanarratives,” whereby he questions the previously assumed-to-be-sacred teleologies of Enlightenment progress. Additionally, poststructuralism is also a moment in which “identity” loses much of its integrity. For example, Jacques Derrida’s (1978) critique of the so-called scientific nature and objectivity of language in *Writing and Difference* assessed the “logocentrism” of structuralism and argued that language is ambiguous, unstable, full of “slippage,” constantly changing, and open in meanings and the self is not separate or singular but is rather a construct. Just as contemporary postidentity ideology champions, the ostensible fluidity of gendered and racialized meanings, poststructuralist scholarship celebrates the fluidity of linguistic meanings. On one level, new millennium postrace and postfeminist culture claims that there is no singular essence to a racialized or gendered identity. However, in practice, postidentity can lead to different bodies, whether queer, disabled, of color, or working class, being represented and yet rhetorically erased. In other words, when differences are visually present but disempowered and unremarked on they are devalued. Although bodies “of difference” are often featured prominently in postidentity culture, they can function as mere multicultural decoration or, in the words of Brenda Weber (2009, p. 137), operate as “a discourse of style as substance.”

6 Judith Roof (2003) also uses the phrase “exhaustion of identity politics” to describe why the journal *Post-Identity* was created in the late 1990s.

7 For full disclosure, I have to admit that I am not merely an unbiased observer of our First Lady. I am a fan and so I have worked harder to substantiate my intuition about Obama’s linguistic choices. However, I don’t believe that my fandom makes my reading more flawed. Indeed, as Ann duCille (1993, p. 569) writes, “Readings are never neutral. All criticisms are local, situational. My own critical interpretations . . . are always-already colored by my race and my gender.” In this article, I try to articulate what I imagine to be Michelle Obama’s particular struggle. This is not just to help me think through the positionality of our First Lady but also to think through my own positionality. She becomes a signpost for how other women of color understand and imagine ourselves. For women of color professors ensconced in White, patriarchal departments and universities, and for scholars grounded in “biased” and “unscientific” knowledge produced through ethnic studies and feminism, when and how are we allowed to speak?

8 Valerie Smith (1998, p. 21) writes that “unacknowledged cultural narratives such as those which link racial and gender oppression structure our lives as social subjects; the ability of some to maintain dominance over others depends upon these narratives
remaining pervasive but unarticulated.” For women of color like Obama, however, explicit, uncoded speech on race and gender is simply not possible. When minoritized and marginalized identities are named in code, the message remains available for insiders to decipher while protecting it from outsiders’ scrutiny. Texts are open enough to enable, in the words of rhetorician Leah Ceccarelli (1998, p. 398), a polysemy, “a bounded multiplicity, a circumscribed opening of the text in which we acknowledge diverse but finite meanings.” Thus, 20th century women of color theory must be reinvigorated by 21st century postidentity resistance by an iconic figure like Michelle Obama.

9 Adrienne Davis (2002, p. 93) writes, “through language one acquires a voice, thus demanding recognition by others. Through these linguistic eruptions into existence, people achieve subjectivity, agency, humanity.”

10 For a link to the speech itself, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYY73RO_egw (viewed October 27, 2009). Obama’s second set of remarks differed from her first because in her second she added the word “really” (“for the first time in my adult lifetime, I’m really proud of my country.”).

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“希望最终归来”：重新解读第一夫人

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【摘要】

本文通过使用有色女性理论在认识论和政治上的框架，探讨了在 2008 年总统竞选的报道中米歇尔•奥巴马对主流媒体对她的种族和性别处理所作的回应。作者认为，米歇尔•奥巴马使用了后身份工具来反对后身份认同，后身份工具是一种保守的意识形态，它能够加剧国家已进入了一个“后”种族主义和性别歧视时代的虚构情境，让探讨二十一世纪种族主义和女性歧视安全进行。理解米歇尔•奥巴马对后身份认同意识形态的回应能够为我们提供二十一世纪少数民族的命题，来理解在新千年美国的权力、特权、种族和性别歧视以及反抗功能。
« L’espoir renaît enfin » : un recadrage de la première dame

Épistémologiquement et politiquement ancré dans les théories sur les femmes de couleur, cet article examine la réaction de Michelle Obama au traitement raciste et sexiste qui est fait d’elle dans la couverture médiatique grand public de la campagne électorale présidentielle de 2008. Je soutien que Mme Obama utilise les mêmes outils de postidentité, une idéologie conservatrice qui promeut la fiction voulant que le pays en soit arrivé à un moment « après » le racisme et le sexisme, pour dénoncer cette postidentité, une manière plus sûre d’aborder le racisme et la misogynie au XXIe siècle. Comprendre la manière dont Michelle Obama répond à l’idéologie postidentitaire fournit aux sujets minorisés du XXIe siècle des moyens de comprendre comment le pouvoir, le privilège, la discrimination racialisée et genrée et la résistance fonctionnent dans les États-Unis du nouveau millénaire.
„Die Hoffnung kehrt endlich zurück“: Die First Lady neu besehen.

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희망은 최종적으로 귀환을 만들고 있다: 재프레임된 영부인

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본 논문은 색갈여성이론에 의해 인식론적으로 그리고 정치적으로 프레임된 것으로 2008년 대통령선거 캠페인당시 주요 미디어 보도에서 미셸 오바마에 대해 인종적으로 그리고 성적으로 편견을 보인 보도에 대한 미셸의 반응을 연구한 것이다. 본 논문은 오바마가 미국이 인종주의와 성적주의를 극복했다는 허구를 증진시키는 보수적인 이론인 후기동일시의 도구들을 이용했다고 주장하고 있다. 이는 21세기 인종주의와 여성을 싫어하는 주의자들의 논쟁에 개입하는 안전한 방법으로 후기동일시 이론을 논박하는 것이다. 후기동일시 이념에 대한 미셸 오바마의 연설들을 이해하는 것은 어떻게 파워, 특권, 인종적 그리고 성적 편견과 거부가 21세기 미국에서 기능하는가를 이해하는 수단으로서 역할하고 있다.
Este artículo, enmarcado epistemológicamente y políticamente en la teoría de las mujeres de color, examina la respuesta de Michelle Obama a su trato racista y sexista por parte de la cobertura de los medios dominantes de la campaña de la elección presidencial del 2008. Argumento que Obama usa las herramientas de post identidad, una ideología conservativa que promueve la ficción que el país ha llegado a un momento “después” del racismo y sexismo, y argumento en contra de la post identidad, una manera segura de tratar al racismo y la misoginia en el siglo XXI. Comprendiendo el discurso de Michelle Obama en relación a la ideología de la post identidad provee a los sujetos de las minorías del siglo XXI de los recursos para comprender cómo el poder, el privilegio, y la discriminación racial y de género y la resistencia funciona en el nuevo milenio de los Estados Unidos.