CHAPTER I

THROUGH THE FOG

> There would be no great problem if, when the things changed, the vocabulary died away as well. But far the more common situation in the history of ideologies is that instead of dying, the same vocabulary attaches itself, unnoticed, to new things. . . . In this they resemble those creatures of horror fiction who, having neither body nor life of their own, take over the bodies and lives of human beings.
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> —*Barbara J. Fields*[1]

On December 18, 2006, months before Senator Barack Obama formally announced his intention to seek the presidency, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Diane McWhorter discussed the obstacles to electing a black president in the United States. The primary barrier, according to McWhorter, was whites' reluctance to give up white privilege. She explained, "[during the civil rights movement] one of the reasons that the whites were so obstinate about giving into any quote, 'demands'—as they called them, quote, 'Negro demands'—was that, you know, the expression was if you give them an inch, they'll take a mile. To me, the primitive fear of white people is that, if you have an African-American as the leader of the free world, that they're going to give away white privilege—you know, that we are going to have to give up something that we have taken for granted."[2]

"White privilege" is a slippery phrase. McWhorter's understanding is rooted in measurable economic and political advantages. As a group, white people sit atop the unjust racial and economic hierarchy, and they collectively benefit when people of color are mistreated or denied opportunity. But white privilege is not just about quantifiable economic ad-

vantage and clearly identifiable acts of injustice. The other piece of McWhorter's explanation deals with the things that are "taken for granted." This is the idea at the core of white privilege: it is a collective, implicit acceptance of whiteness as virtuous, normal, unremarkable, and expected.[3] The same goes for male privilege; all of humankind is conveniently reduced to "mankind" rather than "womankind," because maleness is thoughtlessly accepted as a baseline standard. Up until 2008, when instructed to imagine a nameless, faceless American president, without any race or gender prompt, most of us would have imagined a white man, because that is what we are socialized to expect. Given this definition, Obama's rise seems like a massive blow to white privilege and the existing racial order—the impossible has happened.

When examined from another perspective, however, the racial order appears unchallenged by Obama's rise. He was only the third black person elected to the Senate since the end of American Reconstruction in 1877. Drastic racial and ethnic inequalities, prejudice and stereotyping, and the marginalization of nonwhite people from positions of power persist today. Rigid residential segregation and the unprecedented expansion of the prison state have literally locked disadvantaged black and brown people into neighborhoods and behind bars without any chance to climb into the more stable middle class. The justice system repeatedly fails to prevent the physical destruction of black and Latino bodies; stories of brutality, harassment, and malfeasance litter the airwaves and front pages in every region of the country.

America seems lost in the fog, lurching forward and drifting backward, goaded by winds of both progress and decay. For every voice that hails Obama as the living embodiment of "hope" and "change," a dissenter insists that Obama's rise has either halted the march towards social justice or depleted our collective tolerance for even thinking and talking about race. This state of confusion, where Obama's America weeps race-heavy tears of joy from one eye and anguish from the other, is the starting point for this book, yet its aim is not to reach a definitive conclusion about whether race relations are getting "better" or "worse." Rather than measuring our racial state, we have to understand what race is, and we

cannot understand race through dictionary definitions alone. Instead, we have to deal with race in action, drawing on concrete examples from our own lives that provide common ground for discussion and, eventually, understanding. President Obama's rise is an invaluable teaching tool because Obama is part of our collective experience. Scholars and journalists have studied the president to gain insight into his thoughts and actions, but this book focuses on Obama to understand how racial meaning is generated and how we might think about race more clearly.

Thinking and Talking About Race

Howard Winant writes, "The 2008 election was the first to have a viable Black candidate, but it was hardly the first U.S. election to be about race. In fact, every national election is about race."[4] From slavery to Jim Crow and civil rights, to the Southern strategy, to terrorism and immigration reform, racial politics have played key roles in candidates' campaigns and electoral outcomes. Events during Obama's campaign and first term, such as the Jeremiah Wright controversy, racial epithets and threats cast by anti–health care reform advocates, Justice Sonia Sotomayor's confirmation process, the resignation of Shirley Sherrod from the Department of Agriculture, and a host of other incidents, make navigating racial controversy a part of Obama's job description, even if addressing the ongoing catastrophe of mass racial inequality remains beyond the ill-conceived purview of contemporary presidents.[5]

"Race" is rooted in false beliefs about the validity of observed physical differences as indicators of human capacity or behaviors. Human beings build categories and make distinctions naturally. But there is no biological basis for racial categories and no relationship between classification based on observed physical characteristics and patterns of thought or behavior. Humans do not have separate subspecies or races the way some animals do, and genetic traits like skin color are inherited separately from other physical and mental traits, such as eye and hair features, blood type, hand-eye coordination, and memory. The company line among academics is that "race is socially constructed," meaning that it is an idea produced by human thought and interaction rather

than something that exists as a material fact of life on earth. Social imperatives change racial categories and meanings over time, as political, cultural, and scientific developments force us to reconsider what once seemed certain. No matter the time and place, race is intimately bound with the distribution of rights and resources, and racial ideas are manifest in social inequalities.

The danger in affirming race as a social construction is that this understanding is easily distorted into the false belief that race does not exist or does not matter. This problem is compounded by exalting "assimilation" as part of the moral quest to achieve a color-blind society, where people's attitudes and behaviors are completely liberated from racial thinking and everyone is treated equally, regardless of color. The impulse towards color blindness, combined with the belief that racism is a thing of the past, results in "racism without racists,"[6] as the institutional foundation for racism remains intact despite a reduction in attitudinal antipathy towards racial others. Even if individuals no longer affirm racist beliefs, the institutions that order our social lives, such as banks, schools, and the criminal justice complex, utilize practices and policies that maintain and strengthen white social dominance. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva documents a plethora of strategies employed by those who defend themselves against the moral charge of racism, but whose actions do not interrupt institutional racism and whose beliefs clearly support the unjust racial order.[7] Those of us who are interested in racial problems walk a difficult line, explaining that although race is a product of our own making and classic, explicit racism has diminished, the United States remains in the midst of a crisis of white supremacy and racial hierarchy.[8]

It is daunting enough to face the harsh reality of race in small word counts, let alone wade through hundreds of pages of racial pontification. Talking and writing about race in everyday life is difficult, in no small part because we do not want to face the glaring racial divisions and racism right under our noses. Michael Taussig writes,

> This reconfiguration of repression in which depth becomes surface so as to remain depth, I call *the public secret*, which, in another version, can be defined as *that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated*. . . . This "long

knownness" is itself an intrinsic component of knowing what not to know, such that many times, even in our acknowledging it, in striving to extricate ourselves from its sticky embrace, we fall into even better-laid traps of our own making. . . . Knowing it is essential to its power, equal to the denial. Not being able to say anything is likewise testimony to its power.[9]

There is significant and useful ambiguity in Taussig's phrasing when he writes that the secret "cannot be articulated." First, this inability to articulate may refer to fear of repercussion or social disruption. In other words, we have the language to tell the secret, but we dare not do so. We may see something wrong and feel the urge to scream, "I am the only black person on this crowded commuter train to the Boston suburbs, and the only empty seat in the whole car is the one next to me! It's racism!" But we refrain out of cowardice, or because it is impolite, or because it might be misconstrued in some way. Especially in white-dominated spaces, we often avoid race-talk out of courtesy and prudence, but silence betrays us as a path to justice. Eviatar Zerubavel asserts, "The careful absence of explicit race labels in current American liberal discourse [sic] is indeed the product of a deliberate effort to suppress our awareness of race. Ironically, such deliberate avoidance may actually produce the opposite result."[10] Even when we neuter our language for the sake of an ostensibly worthy political goal, such as the elimination of racial bias or the prevention of racial insult, we suffer self-inflicted moral and political wounds by remaining quiet; and race stays on our minds.

One step removed from complete racial silence, race baiting and implicit appeals tell the "public secret" about nonwhite deviance, generating racial meaning without explicit hate speech towards people of color. Tali Mendelberg explains that the social norm of equality (color blindness) creates a national political climate that is hostile to overtly racist appeals and racial language. Instead, the injection of race into political contests takes place "under cover," as white candidates attempt to influence voter behavior in their favor by implicitly priming racial fears about nonwhite opponents. During the 2012 Republican presidential primary season, Newt Gingrich unleashed a series of rhetorical attacks designed

to prime white voters' racial fears and resentments. First, he homed in on the American poverty crisis by focusing on black teenage unemployment, proposing that inner-city schools hire their own students as janitors. According to Gingrich, this plan would help the students learn work habits "so they didn't have to become a pimp, or a prostitute, or a drug dealer."[11] Weeks later, during Gingrich's march to victory in the South Carolina Republican primary election, he described President Obama as a "food stamp president."[12] These invocations of black ghetto pathology are launched into the public sphere in lieu of direct statements about blacks' inherent laziness, sexual deviance, and violent tendencies. But the racial meanings of prostituting, drug dealing, and welfare scamming are unambiguous, because the speaker attaches them to black people, rooting them in the black body, whether that body resides in the White House or the ghetto. Gingrich won the South Carolina primary, and Mitt Romney tried to reestablish the fallacious Obama/welfare connection during his 2012 presidential campaign, which demonstrates the situational effectiveness and political allure of race baiting without explicit racism.[13] By contrast, when people are made aware of these cues, the effectiveness of implicit priming is diminished,[14] and race-based mistreatment can be recognized and addressed.

An alternative reading of Taussig's public secret posits that the secret is "long known" but untellable because *we do not have the language necessary to tell it*. That is, our language is directly tied to power, and hegemonic language cannot be used to rearrange power relations; in Audre Lorde's terms, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."[15] Toni Morrison explains the perils of living without language that falls outside the bounds of hegemony, as "one is obliged to cooperate in the misuse of figurative language, in the reinforcement of cliché, the erasure of difference, the jargon of justice, the evasion of logic, the denial of history, the crowning of patriarchy, the inscription of hegemony; to be complicit in the vandalizing, sentimentalizing, and trivialization of the torture black people have suffered."[16]

We are not simply banned or scared away from talking and writing about race altogether. Racial meaning is not solely engendered through

silence and racial coding. The power of race lies in the fact that even when we attempt to address it, our efforts are undermined and obfuscated by everything from rampant misinformation to imprecise terminology, to ideas about polite conversation and appropriate settings, to a lack of conversational entry and exit strategies. In short, much racial analysis is neither epistemologically adequate nor likely to lead to insight or political progress. As Stuart Hall notes, "there is always something left unsaid about race,"[17] and Evelyn Higginbotham explains that this is because race acts as a "metalanguage" that "not only tends to subsume other sets of relations, namely gender and class, but it blurs and disguises, suppresses and negates its own complex interplay with the various relations it envelops."[18] This is akin to Taussig's warning that "even in our acknowledging it, in striving to extricate ourselves from its sticky embrace, we fall into even better-laid traps of our own making."

"Metalanguage" is a metaphor, and I do not mean to convey that race abides by a clear set of grammatical and syntactic rules, or that it is activated solely through verbal exchange. Race is not a language; it is commonly understood as a system of social classification, and it has material effects on people's lives. However, race does not act like a stable system of classification. Instead, echoing Hall, Higginbotham, and others, I insist that *race operates like a language*, because it produces and covers up meanings both simple and complex; because it signifies things beyond the obvious; because it is flexible, adaptable, and dependent on context. As Hall tells us, "race can never be finally fixed, but is subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation."[19] *Race is not only subject to this process; it actively shapes other knowledge systems: race redefines and appropriates vocabulary itself.*

Racially Speaking

Consider the following example: On March 2, 1996, college basketball analyst Billy Packer, who is white, referred to Georgetown University star Allen Iverson as a "tough monkey," in reference to the pint-sized guard's fearless play. Iverson is African American, and Packer was criticized for what many viewed as a racist characterization, despite the

fact that he intended the remark as a compliment. Many of Packer's friends and colleagues including Georgetown's legendary (and African American) coach, John Thompson, rushed to his defense, denouncing the notion that "monkey" should be interpreted as a slur. Packer met with the Reverend Jesse Jackson in an effort to mediate the controversy and understand why people had taken such offense. Describing what he learned from Jackson, Packer offered the following: "'Naïve' is probably a pretty good word, because ever since I've been a kid I have never looked at people in terms of black and white. I'm absolutely not a racist, and anyone who has ever been involved with me knows that."[20]

The problem is not the word "monkey" itself; it is that the meaning of the word cannot be derived simply from immediate intent.[21] Packer may harbor no conscious antipathy towards black people, but is there something about Iverson's blackness that makes Packer more likely to call him a "monkey," even in praise, than he would a white player? Insisting that Packer is "racist," or obsessing over questions of intent, misses the point. The metalanguage and public secrecy of race take over the meaning of the incident. Packer's defensiveness and complete denial does not result in exoneration, as race remains an active social force and the comment is contextualized by a history of similar remarks.

Again, I have no interest in condemning Packer. In instances such as this, when people argue that "monkey" holds racial significance, they are often derided as race-obsessed warriors for self-defeating political correctness, looking for a fight. Rather than building such a case, let us interrogate the opposite position, namely, that this comment has absolutely nothing to do with race, or that it was an isolated incident. Those who make such arguments must forget, ignore, or explain away an ongoing history of associating black people with apes.[22] There is something deviant and threatening about the combination of race and gender, blackness and masculinity, that keeps this racist imagery in circulation throughout American popular culture. She who takes the nonracial position is unconvinced that the African-male-as-ape overtones of "classic" American films like *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *King Kong* (1933) have any bearing on LeBron James's 2008 *Vogue* magazine cover photo, where

the basketball genius poses, mouth agape in midscream, with an arm around the waist of supermodel Gisele Bündchen. She forgets that thirteen years before the Packer incident, another Georgetown basketball star, Patrick Ewing, was greeted by rival fans in Philadelphia with a sign reading "Ewing is an ape," and that a banana peel was thrown on the court when he was introduced by the arena's public address announcer.[23] She ignores that in 2011, Brazilian soccer star Roberto Carlos had a banana peel thrown at him during a game in Russia, another in a series of incidents in European and Russian professional football where players of African descent are subject to racial harassment.[24] Later in that same year, a spectator hurled a banana peel at black Canadian professional hockey player Wayne Simmonds during a game in Ontario, Canada.[25]

She was not watching in 2008 when news cameras captured footage of a man at a Sarah Palin rally proudly brandishing a stuffed monkey (a children's toy, not an actual monkey) with an Obama sticker taped to its forehead.[26] An enterprising toy company made a similar connection, selling a stuffed animal called "The Sock Obama"—a stuffed monkey with exaggerated red lips, dressed in a suit with a campaign button on the lapel. When pressed for an explanation or apology for their depiction of Obama, the toy company released this tongue-in-cheek statement, mockingly invoking "naivety" with eerie resemblance to Packer's self-defense: "We guess there is an element of naivety on our part, in that we don't think in terms of myths, fables, fairy tales and folklore. We simply made a casual and affectionate observation one night, and a charming association between a candidate and a toy we had when we were little."[27]

This is how the metalanguage of race works. For those who are upset, the meaning of the Packer comment is not determined by the immediate visual stimulant of Iverson's play, or solely by the context of the sentence in which the term appears. It is determined by racial history and the global reality of racism. The discourse of innate and dangerous black male physicality is a pillar of racist ideology. Especially when the context emphasizes black bodily supremacy or bodily menace, race moves through our minds like water through sand, dampening "monkey" and changing its constitution. The Packer incident was not

an attack, and the word "monkey" does not hold the exact same meaning as the instances of overt racism catalogued above. But the range of explanations for why the word was spoken and why people were unnerved must take such events into account.

In many cases, racial meaning is created and halfheartedly disguised without explicitly mentioning racial categories. The man at the Palin rally with the Obama monkey did not yell racist slurs into the camera or offer a thorough explanation of how race combines with gender to solidify the monkey's racial meaning. Instead, he smugly introduced his prop as "Little Hussein," in reference to Obama's middle name. However, in the opposite case, where racial labels are overemphasized, the elements that give a racial term its meaning are also hidden. For instance, in early 2012 a writer for *Elle* magazine in France tried to compliment the Obamas for incorporating "white codes" of fashion into their clothing style,[28] thereby teaching other American blacks how to dress respectably. In this case, whiteness was named and emphasized. When someone compliments or criticizes a person of color for "dressing like she is white," the phrase holds meaning because whiteness is commonly associated with a style of dress that is available only to those who can afford to buy clothes from particular stores or designers, and choose to do so. In this way, racist associations between whiteness, wealth, status, and beauty are strengthened without words like "rich" or "classy" that force listeners to recognize how the statement moves beyond purely racial knowledge. "Dresses like he's white" becomes a shorthand phrase for more complicated intersecting indicators: the meaning of the phrase depends on silent class difference just as much as it does on the spoken racial difference.

Racial Thinking with Clarity

How can we avoid the pitfalls of racial confusion and make sure we get the meaning correct? Evelyn Higginbotham develops her theory of race as a metalanguage to emphasize the necessity of *intersectional* analysis.[29] In the case of gender, for example, this does not mean we should simply consider gender as a complement to race. Instead, we must explain how

gender intersects with and transforms race, and vice versa. Barack and Michelle Obama both self-identify as black. But stereotypes of black masculinity and black femininity differ, and perception and treatment of each member of the Obama family differ accordingly. To take the example a step further, perceptions and treatment of Barack and Michelle are often different from perceptions and treatment of black men and women who are impoverished, as class, race, and gender intersect with each other to produce meaning.

Meaning is generated through difference; "black" and "white" hold separate meanings because we understand each color as different from, and in relation to, the other. We might even say that this meaning is fairly consistent in the Western world, in the sense that whiteness signifies normalcy and superiority, and nonwhiteness signifies deviance. But the normalcy of whiteness and the deviance of nonwhiteness can never be fully described in purely racial or phenotypic terms. Describing the supposedly inherent *character* of blackness, brownness, redness, and yellowness—describing precisely *how* they differ from whiteness, or the nature of the relationship between two racial signifiers—requires moving beyond the initial system of classification and beyond the list of races. Racial signifiers are based on phenotype, and therefore visuality. But the image of the racialized body, and therefore the racial label, signifies something beyond corporeality: the visual signifier has cultural, behavioral, and political implications (often grounded in false beliefs) that require categories other than color schemes and body parts to understand and articulate. The meaning of a racial term is always dependent on its intersection with knowledge that lies beyond the immediate and the visual.[30]

Some scholars interested in social justice believe that affirming intersectionality is not enough to produce effective criticism, and that the "race, class, and gender" mantra should be forsaken. Antonia Darder and Rodolfo Torres, for example, concede that race, class, and gender are interrelated, but strongly object to treating these forces as equals, because the influence of *capitalism* is unrivaled.[31] By definition, they argue, class distinctions imply material domination and inequality in capitalist society. Class groups come into being as a result of exploitation, and

the social fact of class difference is rooted in labor. By definition, the capitalist and the laborer are unequal—the capitalist has more power. This is not the case where race and gender are concerned, because it is possible to imagine race and gender categories that are different from each other but whose relationships are not determined by exploitation. Orange people and green people, for example, may be considered different, but this categorical difference is not unequal by definition, because the categories are not encoded through labor as material reality. It is often considered "democratic" to celebrate racial and ethnic difference, but not class, because class difference, and poverty in particular, is engendered through exploitation and suffering.[32]

If one of the suggested paths out of the racial trap is focusing on structure and insisting on labor relations as the key to all systems of oppression, another is to focus on the cultural realm and abandon the language and epistemology of race. This strategy cannot be reduced to a willful ignorance of the ways in which race continues to matter in society. Paul Gilroy knows that racialization and racism occur, and that they are deeply injurious. But he writes that it is time for people, especially politically marginalized nonwhites, to leave racial ideas behind. Gilroy argues that even when oppressed groups reclaim their assigned racial labels to resist domination, maintaining racial solidarity and keeping those labels intact demand authoritarianism and reliance on a fascist discourse of authenticity. In addition, commercial forces have taken hold of racialized cultures, especially black culture, which results in spectacular and hypervisible black commoditization. When this happens, blackness is transformed into a commitment to pseudo-revolutionary style that has nothing to do with lived experience or productive politics for black people.[33] As an alternative to the racialized tradition, Gilroy argues, we should commit to using the notion of "diaspora" when discussing spatial and citizenship affiliations. More importantly, Gilroy suggests a commitment to "planetary humanism," an ethic grounded in rationalism and disdainful of robust collective identities.

What is the cost of following Gilroy or Darder and Torres to the hilt? Suppose I am visited during office hours by a first-year student

named "James," an Asian American who announces that although he never spent much time thinking about race and ethnicity, he was moved by Barack Obama's 2008 campaign and victory. The president's story led him to think about his own identity, and his place in America. James wants to talk about his experiences with racism and sexism, and get my recommendations about classes to take, books to read, and ways to politically engage these issues while on campus.

As an educator, I have a choice to make. I could politely inform James that his so-called racial awakening is illusory, and that to truly understand himself he needs to study labor and class relations rather than race and gender, which are fruitless distractions. Alternatively, I could take Gilroy's argument to heart and tell James that I am happy to chat but that I will not talk about these topics using racial terms and categories. When he feels the need to use racial language, I tell him he can only use the word "diaspora" to talk about groups, or find another way to describe racialized subjectivity. I then move on to a compelling summation of Gilroy's view, emphasizing the need to commit to a utopian and humanistic vision, one that persists undeterred by the staunch differences between the world as it exists today and the world as we want it to be.

If I take either of these two paths, no matter how politely I make these suggestions or how persuasively I make the case for each alternative, I am at serious risk of alienating this young person. James has made himself vulnerable to me and has told me that this intellectual spark is clearly tied to personal experiences as a racialized and gendered subject, in accordance with conventional understandings of race. The events he recounts have occurred in the material world and are not figments of James's imagination. I may be sympathetic to portions of Gilroy's analysis or to the explanatory dominance of class, but if my ultimate goal is to get James to see the wisdom of other approaches, I have to validate the student's experiences first. I have to start by talking about race and ethnicity in order to explain what it means when we say these concepts are socially constructed, and show that they interact with other forces.

My choice to stick with intersectionality is driven in large part by its versatility. Emphasizing how race, class, gender, and other discourses change and depend on each other allows for a range of contact points, where thinkers of all ages can start with familiar ideas and experiences and plug into a matrix rich with possibility. Intersectionality is a compulsion to search for and highlight all the social forces that give cultural events racial meaning. This line of thinking reveals that racial oppression depends upon, and supports, all other systemic forms of social injustice, and that addressing racial problems yields benefits beyond the realms of race relations and racial inequality. Political issues from environmental sustainability to LGBT rights impact and are impacted by the racial order, and the possibilities for coalition-based social justice activism abound.

Paint the White House Black

It is difficult, then, to productively address race: Problems of *racial knowledge* stem from a climate of silence and from the inherent properties of race itself. *Racial language* often fails us or corrupts our vocabulary, and the *meaning of race* is dependent on interactions with other social forces. Subsequent chapters use topics pertaining to the Obamas to illustrate these points and solve the problems caused by inadequate racial language and murky racial meaning. The raw material for the book includes a synthesis of research from fields across the academy, readings of texts and social performances, and analysis of in-depth interviews with students.

I approach each topic with the following questions: In a narrative about racial history or an explanation of a racial phenomenon, which are the key terms and passages that contain racial meaning, even if words representing racial categories never appear? When racial terms do appear in the narrative, are they helpful? Do they actually describe social experience, or do they obscure it? Which other forces and explanations might racial language be distracting us from? Finally, if all of the research I cite in building an argument about race comes from studies designed only to analyze racial differences, what have I omitted from my

explanation? None of these questions yielded answers that would downplay the importance of race relative to other factors. Rather, this sort of inquiry more fully reveals the meaning and power of race in action.

The following chapter addresses the codependence of "race" and "nation," focusing on what I call the "politics of inheritance." I begin by discussing racism and national identity, unpacking the ways race affects American nationalism and patriotism. The insidious linkage between whiteness and Americanness fuels a shameful percentage of the vitriol directed at Barack Obama. But the argument is not just about how race corrupts the meaning of nation; it is about the underlying logic of inheritance as a baleful path to political knowledge. Obama's 2008 election is indicative of the uncertainty swirling around race, as described above. But Obama's rise also points to the chaos surrounding contemporary national identity, and the waning but still formidable grip of the politics of inheritance as the core of nationalism. A close reading of Obama's 1995 memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, reveals alternative methods for arriving at both racial and national identity. I offer suggestions for forging a new American nationalism.

Chapter 3 picks up on the theme of "newness" and "futuristic" political subjects by investigating multiracial identity. Obama is frequently described as "black" rather than "multiracial," "biracial," or another term denoting racially mixed parentage. The president makes both explicit and implicit reference to his multicultural background, while avoiding in-depth discussion of multiracialism. However, the peculiar history of interracialism and multiracialism produces tropes of multiracial representation and anxieties about racial bodies that we all recognize, even if Obama does not describe them. The metalanguage of race can drown out real life experiences and turn multiracial people into symbols and objects. I move beyond multiracial iconography and build on the burgeoning literature about multiracial people by allowing them to speak for themselves. I analyze a collection of interviews with young adults who self-identify as racially mixed (biracial, multiracial, and so on); these interviews map the boundaries of multiracialism, feature discussion about Obama's racial identity, and take measure of the president's

racial significance. Interviews reveal the metalinguistic challenges of race as well as the promise of intersectionality.

The fourth chapter follows from the third, as multiracial people are often depicted as one of many foreboding signs of misguided "post-racialism," igniting panic about "the end of black politics." Not only does Obama's racially mixed body pose a threat, but many argue that Obama downplays his blackness by avoiding direct discussion of racial issues and deemphasizing any connections to the old guard of African American politics. It is tempting to understand this rhetorical trend as a sudden and unprecedented shift from civil rights blackness to postracial politics, or attribute it to Obama's political savvy and disposition. Instead, I call attention to research on the class divide within the black American community and the transformation of the black *counter-public*—the real and virtual spaces where black ideologies and political organization foment. These elements reveal the shift to postblack or postracial politics as a gradual phenomenon, driven by its intersection with class, rather than an innovative campaign strategy inspired solely by Obama or any other candidate. Improving the state of black politics, an ostensibly "racial" problem (as signaled by the word "black"), requires grappling with new forms of technology and new kinds of political space. Access to contemporary tools of political communication is impacted by class inequality; the entire discussion here demonstrates the impossibility of separating race from class.

Chapter 5 returns to the foundation of intersectionality theory, focusing on Michelle Obama, whose ascendance (like her husband's) forces us to deal with intersections of race, class, and gender. Though Ms. Obama stands among the most celebrated first ladies in history, she is also subject to public representations that vacillate between timeworn racist stereotypes of black womanhood and a newer, more complicated representation: the uppity black superwoman. The superwoman image is especially insidious, as it traps black women within the confines of their success and conceals racism and sexism. Michelle Wallace is one of several black feminist scholars who explain that the fact that black women manage to survive hardship and disadvantage comes to per-

versely signify their mythic strength, an attribute we celebrate at the expense of actually combating oppression.[34] Michelle Obama represents a paradigmatic case of this phenomenon with a slightly different hue, thanks to her substantial privilege and power. But the chapter is not merely a history of Ms. Obama's public career or a lament of the stereotype, as her example speaks to the interventions necessary for stepping out of the shadow of such stereotypes.

The final chapter pans back, placing the book in its context and describing the future implications of thinking about race in the terms I have laid out. I also describe the power of studying celebrities and their stories, not as metaphors for our real lives but as gathering sites that bring us together. Finally, two appendixes provide additional information about contemporary racial inequality in the United States (Appendix I), and offer methodological details relevant to the interview analysis in Chapter 3 (Appendix II).

Race is a difficult concept to grasp; outbursts and silences disguise its relationships with a host of other phenomena. But ignorance, avoidance, and silence will never lead us into the clear. When race is quiet, we have to amplify and expose its web of relationships. When race is too loud, we have to settle it down to achieve understanding. The goal of the book is to use Obama's rise to talk about race sensibly, with respect for its complexity and in concert with other ideas that are important to us.