

‘OBAMA STUDIES’ IN ITS INFANCY

***Books on Obama, Race, and the 2008 Presidential Election*¹**

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JABARI ASIM, *What Obama Means . . . for Our Culture, Our Politics, Our Future*. New York: William Morrow, 2009, 240 pages, ISBN: 978-0061711350. Paper, \$13.99.

DEWEY M. CLAYTON, *The Presidential Campaign of Barack Obama: A Critical Analysis of a Racially Transcendent Strategy*. New York: Routledge, 2010, 240 pages, ISBN: 978-0415997355. Paper, \$24.95.

GWEN IFILL, *The Breakthrough: Politics and Race in the Age of Obama*. New York: Doubleday, 2009, 320 pages, ISBN: 978-0767928908. Paper, \$15.00.

MANNING MARABLE and **KRISTEN CLARKE** (Eds.), *Barack Obama and African American Empowerment: The Rise of Black America's New Leadership*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, 280 pages, ISBN: 978-0230620520. Paper, \$28.00.

SHELBY STEELE, *A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited About Obama and Why He Can't Win*. New York: Free Press, 2008, 143 pages, ISBN: 978-1416559177. Hard cover, \$22.00.

At the conclusion of Barack Obama's State of the Union address on January 27, 2010, MSNBC anchor Chris Matthews lavished praise on the president, infamously gushing, "It's interesting: he is post-racial, by appearances. I forgot he was Black tonight for an hour." According to many, this is the greatest of all Obama's super-powers; the ability to sweet-talk the public into a euphoric political hallucination, transporting followers into a world where he is cleansed of the stain of Blackness and the citizenry lives in racial harmony. If this is true, White voters, including Matthews, forgot Obama was Black long before the State the Union. By many accounts, this post-racial amnesia, rather than the nuts and bolts of voter mobilization, fundraising,

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message-crafting, or opponents' mistakes, ultimately resulted in Obama's victory in the 2008 election.

The reading public demands detail about the 2008 election beyond the mythology and celebration of Obama's political magic, and there is no shortage of books on the market. Mendell (2007) and Remnick (2010) offer journalistic investigations of Obama's life, providing insight into how Obama's biography influences his political constitution. Blow by blow accounts of the Obama campaign chronicle the candidate's peaks and valleys, and offer insight into the strategic world of the Obama team (Heilemann and Halperin 2010, Plouffe 2009, Wolffe 2009). Recent studies in political science address new questions about democracy and mobilization with direct implications for the 2008 election (Han 2009, Zukin et al. 2006). While race is a component of each of these accounts, there are few books with a dual focus on race and the 2008 election, penned by either scholars or journalists. The void is filled, in part, by academic journals, including the *Du Bois Review*, the *Journal of Black Studies*, and the *Western Journal of Black Studies*, that have dedicated special issues to race and the Obama victory. This literature review moves beyond these journals, concentrating on five academic and popular books about race and the 2008 election.

The variety of Obama texts confirms the 2008 election as a force that fosters conversations that cross academic boundaries, and cascade down from the ivory tower to newsrooms, living rooms, churches, and cafes below. As the field develops, it is useful to conceptualize "Obama Studies" as a three-pronged endeavor. First, Obama's own writing, which already includes *Dreams From My Father* (1995), *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), and numerous influential speeches, is fuel for scholars interested in rhetoric, communications, biographical literature, and political ideology and philosophy. Second, the non-trivial matter of governance will undoubtedly emerge as a vector of Obama Studies, especially considering the social and political context into which Obama threw himself. Legitimate questions about the future of the American empire abound, as the United States staggers through its current economic lull and the ongoing 'War on Terror.' These issues demand attention from social scientists of every ilk, as well as historians, philosophers, and all others who study law, economics, and power.

Third, the 2008 election attracts scholars working in multiple areas, and within this arena there are at least three sub-topics. Some who study the election will focus on its mechanics, for example, the impact of technology and social networking on civic engagement, fund raising, organization, and mobilization. Others will concentrate on discourse, writing about issue-framing and the candidates' self-construction in an era where celebrity culture, gossip, and public figures' private lives exert tremendous influence on their political careers. Lastly, academics and commentators focus on the election as a piece of social and cultural history that tells us something about meaning-making, social order, and social change. These studies are not about the mechanics of the election or policy implications of Obama's victory. Instead, they conceptualize the election as a social event to be analyzed and interpreted in its own right. No matter the sector or subtopic of Obama Studies one finds herself in, race looms large, and the authors of the books included in this review are mindful of this truth. Each book is summarized and evaluated with respect to its potential impact on Obama Studies as a nascent academic field.

Dewey M. Clayton's *The Presidential Campaign of Barack Obama* (2010) constitutes an earnest effort to place the 2008 election in its proper racial context. Clayton, a professor of political science at the University of Louisville, does not set out to answer an identifiable set of research questions, nor does he collect original data for analysis. This results in a rather bland mission for the book, as Clayton's "main focus

is to demonstrate that Barack Obama, as a Democrat, was uniquely poised to transcend race and party and was the first African American candidate with a realistic chance of winning the presidency in the United States" (p. 3). The benefit of this thesis is that the text is rather broad, providing readers with the requisite historical and sociological context to understand what makes this election significant. The first four chapters supply background on African American political history, as Clayton moves through African American electoral politics from Reconstruction to the present, reviewing descriptive vs. substantive representation, coalition politics, and changes in race-based strategies among the two major parties. The second half of the book details major happenings from the campaign, including the Obama team's tactical decision to invest in Iowa, battles with the Clintons and the McCain team, the Jeremiah Wright controversy, and the revolutionary impact of digital technology and social networking.

The book is well-researched, and Clayton should be commended for the range of sources and the volume of similar opinions he collects. Both America's political climate and Obama's campaign strategy produce the final outcome; Clayton tries his best to avoid wrongfully and romantically attributing Obama's victory to any single political phenomenon. When he does make argumentative commitments, however, there is significant room for further development. One such example is Clayton's assertion that Obama "provides a paradigm for candidates of color to transcend race" through his "bold and innovative approach to capturing the presidency." This is manifest in Obama's choice to "run a deracialized campaign. Obama and his advisors decided early on that he was not going to win the presidency by playing up his race" (p. 20). "Deracialization," the term most closely related to post-racialism, is defined as "avoiding explicit reference to race-specific issues and emphasizing issues that are perceived as racially transcendent" (p. 42). Clayton's emphasis on this strategy is echoed in quotations from other elected officials and various political pundits. But if Obama's approach is "bold and innovative," especially compared to the efforts of other Black presidential candidates, Clayton should offer a more thorough treatment of the presidential campaigns of both Shirley Chisholm and Jesse Jackson, topics to which he dedicates roughly two pages. Clayton notes that Chisholm explicitly cast herself as a Black candidate, and that Jackson's Rainbow Coalition is based on recognition of racial difference and cooperation. However, the author provides no details about how these discursive choices actually impacted Chisholm and Jackson during their campaigns in 1972, 1984, and 1988. If empirical studies suggest that these racial frames hurt Chisholm and Jackson at the polls, they should be cited. Were Chisholm and Jackson's opponents able to stimulate White racial anxiety through racist appeals? Did the candidates fail to articulate appealing racial futures for the country? These and other questions about previous campaigns go unanswered, and it would be helpful to know exactly how and why racialization damaged Chisholm and Jackson's chances if we are to accept the claim that deracialization helped Obama.

There are other holes in the deracialization/postracialism argument. First, Clayton casts the strategy as "bold and innovative," but Obama is far from the first Black politician to use it. Clayton acknowledges this, and includes excerpts from a recorded conversation with Congressman Artur Davis (p. 38), who points out that Tom Bradley ran a moderate, centrist, and deracialized campaign for the governorship of California in 1982 (he lost), while Douglas Wilder employed a similar strategy in Virginia in 1990 (he won). In light of this, Clayton needs to explain what about Obama's deracialization is bold and new, and whether this form of deracialization is different from previous instances.

Second, if deracialization is defined as the candidate's avoidance of issues that are perceived as racial, Obama's most famous speech, "A More Perfect Union" (2008), poses a problem. Clayton details the Jeremiah Wright controversy, lauding Obama's speech and grasping the irony, as he writes, "in a campaign that Obama was running to deemphasize race, and transcend race, his former African American pastor forced him to talk about race" (p. 113). The notion that Obama was "forced" to deliver this speech on race is certainly contestable. Instead of writing "A More Perfect Union," Obama might have issued a dismissive statement and declined further comment. Alternatively, he might have delivered a reply to Wright that was not as intensely focused on race. But anecdotal evidence suggests Obama viewed the Wright controversy as a unique opportunity to talk about race, one that would strengthen, rather than contradict, the core messages of his campaign. One could certainly make the argument that in these cases and others, Obama's strategy was not to avoid race entirely, but to craft a voter-friendly version of himself, casting his Blackness in a more empathetic and universalizing light through appeals to patriotism, faith, and populism.

This criticism aside, Clayton's analysis of the Wright controversy stands out as one of the better close readings of events from the campaign trail. The book would benefit from a few more sections where Clayton narrowed his focus and reflected on the cultural and political significance of campaign happenings. Two places ripe for a closer reading are Clayton's brief treatment of Michelle Obama (he dedicates one page to her portrayal during and involvement in the campaign), and Hillary Clinton's victory in the New Hampshire primary. Each case provides ample opportunity for analysis of the ways in which gender and intersectional identity influence our understanding of the Obama victory, but Clayton has little to say on these topics.

In sum, *The Presidential Campaign of Barack Obama* is a decent effort with significant room for improvement. The book is a useful summary of the 2008 election, providing readers with excellent historical context and source material from journalists, academics, and elected officials. However, there are a number of criticisms that go unanswered, few bold arguments that challenge the reader, and plenty of moments where Clayton might have offered closer readings of seminal events from the campaign. Moreover, the text contains a number of rough patches where the prose more closely resembles a draft than a final copy. One is left with the impression that the press felt rushed to publish Clayton's work in a timely fashion, rather than treating the writing and arguments with the care they deserve.

Clayton is certain that Obama's campaign and election are watershed events for American politics and the politics of race and ethnicity. Shelby Steele, author of *A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited About Obama and Why He Can't Win* (2008), is unconvinced that Obama's rise constitutes a paradigm shift of any sort. It is tempting to dismiss Steele's book entirely, given its title and the outcome of the election, but doing so would be a mistake. Though one meaning of the title pertains to the election, as Steele doubted that Obama would be able to garner the support from both Whites and Blacks without alienating one or the other, the book's main arguments about race and politics must be addressed regardless of the election's outcome.

A Bound Man begins with reflections on Obama's psyche, casting the president as a man who spent much of his life haunted by questions of racial identity. Obama knows from experience that traditional conceptions of race fall woefully short of capturing our experiences as racialized subjects, and due to his mixed parentage and life experiences, Obama seems to represent a rejection of common knowledge about race. However, Steele argues that while Obama the symbol embodies a break from

racial/political tradition, Obama the candidate forfeits his chance to abandon hackneyed models of identity politics.

Steele believes that Obama penned *Dreams From My Father* (1995) as a means of owning up to his personal vulnerability and to begin defending himself against the inevitable criticism that he is not authentically Black. For Steele, this defense manifests in the form of a desperate quest to embody something close to the authentic Black ideal, through Obama's work in Chicago, his rejection of his White girlfriend, and his dogged skepticism of Blacks who encourage him to assimilate. This is the first bind Obama finds himself in; he begins so far from authentic Blackness that Steele says his desire to embody it is inevitable, but he lives with the constant knowledge that he cannot expunge those parts of himself that invalidate the Black authentic ideal (p. 38). Obama's personal struggle has political implications, as Steele asserts that the quest for authentic Blackness will inevitably result in political decisions that undermine Black accountability and solidify a foolish belief in the merits of extolling Black victimhood. According to the author, the best course for Blacks is laid with emphasis on personal responsibility and an embrace of assimilation, rather than rehashing tired complaints about racism and victimization. Steele fears Obama will never have the gumption to pursue this course, because to be convincingly Black, "he has to exaggerate black victimization in America. And he has to argue for public policy that responds to the exaggeration rather than to the reality of victimization" (p. 71).

This criticism is extended through Steele's description of the additional binds Obama operates within, thanks to his situation within a paradigm that places prominent Blacks in one of two categories: bargainer or challenger. Bargainers make a pact with Whites, agreeing not to play on White guilt and use racist history against them in exchange for White trust and political support. Challengers insist that Whites, and by extension, American society, are fundamentally racist until proven otherwise, and while this unrelenting criticism of Whites may allow them to enter the public sphere, it diminishes their appeal to mainstream America. Obama is a "born bargainer," who resides at "iconic Negro" status, the highest level of bargaining achievement. Iconic Negroes strike a delicate balance, as Blacks support and are proud of their achievement, and Whites are enthralled because they identify with iconic Negroes and experience themselves stripped of racism (p. 86). Here is the problem:

When you are an iconic Negro, you are original, not your thinking. You have taken the bargainer's discipline and fashioned yourself, not your thought . . . you have few visible convictions. When you are iconic, and bound therein, you have no mandate upon which to run for the presidency beyond the offering of yourself (p. 119).

He works entirely within the current configuration of race relations. . . And he exploits that world to move *himself* ahead, not to advance a new configuration of race relations—or to end such configurations altogether. . . He is simply infatuated with the possibilities of his own skin color *within the world as it is*, not as it should or could be (p. 126–127, emphasis in original).

These excerpts are in lockstep with Steele's more recent commentary about Obama, as he argues, "[Obama] aspires to be 'post-ideological,' 'post-racial' and 'post-partisan,' which is to say that he defines himself by a series of 'nots'—thus implying that being nothing is better than being something. He tries to make a politics out of emptiness itself" (Steele 2009). Bold statements, indeed; Obama

emerges as a borderline ego-maniac. His achievements and rhetoric are exercises in misdirection, concealing the morally vacuous pursuit of power. The ascent to the presidency reveals a desperate need for attention no matter the cost, as Obama is more than willing to capitulate to current racial arrangements, rather than advance the revolution he is supposed to symbolize. Obama's post-racialism is a cheap façade constructed in the absence of substantive politics.

A Bound Man is a short text (roughly 150 generously formatted pages, depending on the edition), and Steele's writing skill, passion, and audacity command attention. Still, as an example of political and cultural analysis, there are weaknesses. There is no doubt that the book is written for a popular audience, but academics who read it will long for a stronger theoretical and empirical foundation. Steele makes little reference to peers who have considered similar issues, little effort to connect his ideas to larger conversations about race and politics, and dwells in the realm of conjecture rather than data analysis.

Additionally, the book fails to address counterarguments that pose significant problems. Steele believes Obama is doomed both personally and politically by his dual obsession with authentic Blackness and White approval. But by either personal or political measures, Obama seems to be doing just fine, and Steele's effort to portray Obama as a tortured soul feels strained. The president's narrative about race is complex, but not pathological, and any internal strife brought on by discomfort with his racial identity during the campaign was expertly managed. If Obama struggled with Steele's supposed identity politics conundrum, it certainly did not consume him, distract him, or prevent him from operating at full capacity during the 2008 election. Moreover, Obama was able to garner a hypermajority of the Black electorate, while maintaining the same level of White support as John Kerry, and expanding support from Latino/as and Asians. The political scenario envisioned by Steele did not play out.

Steele's expositions of racial politics in America are even more troubling. Like much of Steele's work, *A Bound Man* presents a narrative of American racial politics driven by two themes: the insidiousness of collective racial identity, and the phenomenon of White guilt in the post-civil rights era. Steele reduces Black collective identity to an empty and overzealous caricature of Black nationalism, rooted in "pride without achievement" (p. 36). Affirmation of racial identity is worthless, according to Steele, because it requires no action of those who claim it, and without acting, one cannot improve one's situation, political or otherwise (p. 41). Blacks and others who use collective identity to ward off oppression do so only in order to stigmatize and manipulate White America. According to Steele, multiculturalists and diversity-mongers have infiltrated the establishment, and American institutions must compulsively prove their racial innocence in order to retain moral authority. Our government is included among these institutions, and Steele believes White guilt produces something close to a desire to see a qualified Black man elected president, because the legitimacy of the office perversely depends on it.

Nowhere in these rants against collective identity and White guilt does Steele acknowledge that oppressed groups organize around stigmatized identities as means of self-defense when patterns of mistreatment are either legalized, socialized, or both. Mutual recognition among group members is often a precursor to both political consciousness and activism, and this activism is often undertaken not only in the interest of the group itself, but in the interest of greater social justice. Moreover, tomes of empirical evidence suggest that institutional inequality and mistreatment (racism, sexism, etc.) are legitimate problems, rather than self-serving multiculturalist fabrications. As for Whites' collective guilty desire to see a qualified Black man

become president, Obama did not win a majority of White voters, and more disturbingly, his rise has coincided with newfound access to the public sphere gained by racist extremists who threaten violence and produce hateful propaganda. Skepticism about Obama and his intentions is certainly within the bounds of legitimate inquiry, but *A Bound Man* seems strangely out of touch with reality.

Jabari Asim's *What Obama Means . . . for Our Culture, Our Politics, Our Future* (2009) offers a more favorable interpretation of the 2008 election than does Steele, most directly answering questions of Obama's meaning and social impact in the book's final chapters. Like Clayton (2010), Ifill (2009), and others, Asim argues that Obama presents a new model of Black leadership that eschews 'Black' issues in favor of broad goals that align with Black interests (p. 205). Though there is a chapter dedicated to the divide between the new and old guard of Black American politics, Asim does not dedicate any time to discussing "post-racialism"—evidence that he does not think much of the term. He also believes that almost immediately, Obama will change the tide of Black pride, making it fashionable for Blacks to claim and pursue a more intellectual self-image (p. 216), though discerning readers will bristle at the absence of any actual data about such trends.

Asim also presents insights about the convergence of socio-economic and cultural conditions that led to Obama's election, and pays lip service to the excitement and energy generated by young adults during the campaign. However, the more original sections of *What Obama Means* are dedicated to locating Obama within the history of African American iconography, rather than explaining how he won the election, or detailing Obama's social influence. More specifically, Asim demonstrates that the themes and controversies that have colored Obama's public life, such as his coolness, charisma, sex appeal, and rhetorical ability, are old tropes in the world of Black American celebrity, whether the field is music, athletics, acting, or politics. These wanderings among African American stars of American popular culture result in a text that is not especially cohesive, as the book lacks a driving thesis that moves it forward. The journey, while less than thrilling, is occasionally pleasant, as Asim helps readers build connections between Obama and his iconic Black predecessors.

The list of Black celebrities Obama is indebted to is lengthy. Performers such as Denzel Washington, Sidney Poitier, Prince, and Michael Jackson have been able to navigate the complex terrain of Black sexual iconography without being read as stereotypical Black male predators. Additionally, Prince and Jackson spent much of their careers describing a world free of racial obsessions, a path Asim argues that Obama followed on the campaign trail (p. 22). Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods embodied Black cool as self discipline and composure under pressure. These figures also extended the meaning of coolness to include that quality which provides common ground for people worlds apart (geographically, economically, and politically) and generates sustained interest among followers who had little interest in the field prior to the rise of such a charismatic figure. Just as Woods made golf relevant to entire populations that had never watched the sport before, Obama made it hip for previously disengaged legions of young people to follow the election.

Admiration for Black celebrities in American popular culture is a bit of a paradox, given the history and contemporary context of racism in the United States. This love/hate relationship is examined by Asim through his interrogation of the "Magic Negro" trope, a figure related to the "iconic Negro" introduced by Steele. The Magic Negro is a figure with which we are all familiar; most often appearing in feature films, he is distinguished by his redemptive essence, and sole function as a buddy character who aids White protagonists as they pursue success, love, mastery, or moral reformation (p. 148). For Steele, the story ends there, as the loyalty and love

shown by White characters, or the White voting public in this case, tragically binds the Magic or iconic Negro (Obama) to Whites, as he repays their affection by expunging White guilt without changing the rules of race. Asim, however, challenges such a reading, pointing out that Obama does not adhere to traditional dictums of racial loyalty (either Black or White) (p. 158). Further, he draws on Henry Louis Gates, Jr. who notes that the Magic Negro's celebrated status always falls short of full-fledged acceptance, as the very qualities that make him exceptional and endear him to Whites are viewed with fear and suspicion in a historically White supremacist society. Obama's eloquence and calmness are simultaneously redemptive and suspect by virtue of the stain of Blackness, which casts a shadow of doubt and mistrust upon even the most esteemed representatives of the race. The 'real' Barack Obama must be hiding something nefarious under that soothing and sophisticated exterior; the mere fact of his Blackness means we can never really know if he is a Black nationalist, a socialist, or a Muslim extremist, no matter how pleasing he seems to the eye or ear.

What Obama Means also contains Asim's views on the responsibilities of the contemporary race man, and the racial significance of comedic portrayals of Obama. However, the book is not likely to leave a major indent in the field. As previously noted, there are problems with cohesion and force of argument, as the text reads less like an analytic mission than a reflective exercise. Second, Asim dangerously borders on Obama-worship at times, as is the case in passages such as "not even Adam Clayton Powell . . . displayed such a nimble mind," and, "[Obama] appears to possess the special knowledge that Ralph Ellison spoke of, the secret of how to make life swing" (p. 39). Third, like *A Bound Man*, the text lacks the empirical and theoretical substance required of a book capable of shaping academic inquiries that might follow, and the author does not consciously endeavor to enter into conversations with other scholars. Though Asim is far more adept at close readings of iconic figures and events than is Steele, the meanderings through the careers of figures like Prince and Poirier do not always shine an especially bright light on Obama's social or political significance. In the end, those who are fans of *both* Obama *and* Black popular culture are likely to be satisfied, while other readers are likely to be disappointed.

Unlike Asim, Gwen Ifill makes a clear case for the change that Obama represents in *The Breakthrough* (2009). Ifill's journalistic resume is a mile long, but when she drew the assignment as moderator of the second presidential debate on October 2, 2008, controversy ensued. While McCain raised no objection to Ifill's role, critics charged that Ifill could not possibly moderate the debate, given her forthcoming book about Obama (Frederick 2008, Malkin 2008). But *The Breakthrough* is not an exercise in cheerleading—though one suspects Ifill holds Obama and the other Black political elites that appear in the text in high regard, she avoids the reverent tone of Asim's book. Instead, Ifill uses Obama's rise to tell a story about the generational divide within Black politics, and more specifically, among Black political elites. Ifill is another author who avoids the term "post-racial" as a buzzword, but the breakthrough is a shift in strategy for Black politicians away from an emphasis on Black identity and building support from a Black base. The new generation emphasizes skillful navigation of both the Black and White worlds, and broad appeals capable of captivating a multiracial electorate.

Obama is not the breakthrough, but he is its finest example. Ifill observes, "most of the time, Obama left it to his surrogates to defend him when it came to race. In narrowing the differences between Obama and the majority-white nation he was appealing to, the campaign simply set out to erase race as a negative" (p. 56). Ifill is not alone in pointing this out; Clayton, for one, makes a similar point in his text. In my critique of Clayton, I argue that he misconstrues this phenomenon by wrongly

casting Obama as the primary trailblazer, he emphasizes deracialization and post-racialization rather than speaking about new configurations of race, and he fails to provide a point of comparison between Obama and those who came before him.

Ifill avoids these pitfalls for two key reasons. First, she depicts Black political elites and commentators as an interconnected community that is aware of the shift as it is happening, rather than something that was taken by storm and forever changed by Obama's innovation. Ifill uses figures like Colin Powell, Shirley Chisholm, Jesse Jackson, and Douglas Wilder to illustrate the internal political differences among Blacks (pp. 24–25). It follows that Senator John Lewis would have difficulty choosing between Obama and Hillary Clinton during the primary (p. 38), and that Professor Eddie Glaude questions the Civil Rights generation's hesitance to relinquish the torch (p. 44). *The Breakthrough* is not a story about Obama inventing an entirely new dish; it is about a cauldron of ideology and activism that has settled at a new temperature and taste.

Second, in the same breath as her statement about the Obama team's commitment to protect their candidate from race-based scrutiny, Ifill acknowledges a series of racially-tinged episodes, including Obama's March 2007 "Joshua Generation" speech in Selma, Tim Russert's questions about Louis Farrakhan at the democratic primary debate in February 2008, Obama's Father's Day 2008 speech in Chicago, and the Wright controversy. So while Ifill establishes that the strategy was to deemphasize race, she is more attentive than is Clayton to the myriad instances in with deracialization either failed or was not pursued by the Obama campaign.

Among other high points, *The Breakthrough* includes an entire chapter dedicated to gender politics and the intersections and competition with race, topics directly pertinent to the Obama campaign that are conspicuously absent in the other single-authored books reviewed in this essay. She includes statements from Oprah Winfrey, Donna Brazile, and Alice Walker about the unfairness and impossibility that Black women are faced with when choosing between gender and race, as the choice alone denies the intersectional reality of Black women's experiences. As the Clinton campaign came to grips with the threat that Obama posed, campaign allies argued that Obama's race was a gimmick distracting voters from the fact that he was just another male seeking the office. When it became clear that Clinton would not win the nomination, calls for her to concede were recast as "'boys' bullying the 'girl' to drop out" (p. 81). Ultimately, appeals to gender loyalty, orchestrated by both Clinton and Sarah Palin, could not overcome the Obama campaign. Ifill is balanced in her analysis as she moves past the election's outcome, citing the United States' poor record of electing women officials relative to other developed nations, noting the disparity between the numbers of men and women who enter the world of electoral politics, and acknowledging the role that implicit bias may play with respect to candidates who belong to marginalized race and gender categories. Though Ifill refrains from offering her opinion about race/gender disadvantages in politics, the chapter ends with a quotation from Artur Davis, who asserts, "there is no one who believes that in any state in the country, if you are a strong enough candidate, there is a barrier if you're a white female. We obviously haven't reached that point with race" (p. 88).

Davis is, in fact, the subject of an entire chapter, and two other chapters are dedicated to Cory Booker and Deval Patrick. Towards the end of the text, Ifill crafts a series of vignettes about lesser-known rising Black political stars, including San Francisco District Attorney Kamala Harris and Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter. In presenting these stories, Ifill demonstrates that these leaders are learning from each other's experiences, and having many of the same conversations within their

camps and with the public. *The Breakthrough* devotes equal attention to Obama's contemporaries as it does to the president and his campaign, and the author should be applauded for the range of voices she features and the richness of her portrait of contemporary Black political leadership.

Alas, for all the qualitative data she collects, Ifill is not a social scientist. Though the book is about a clear shift in the character of Black politics, Ifill describes the shift without fully explaining how and why it came to pass. As a result, the breakthrough can be read as a dispositional phenomenon, or as some sort of natural historical evolution, rather than as a result of social forces. If one were to read Michael Dawson's (1995, 2001) work as a companion to *The Breakthrough*, a more concrete explanation for these changes would emerge; one rooted in class cleavages and the institutional deterioration of the Black counterpublic. Ifill's text is timely and distinct, and as a piece of journalism, there are few blemishes. But it is not likely to chart a new course for subsequent academic studies of either the 2008 election, or the other political figures she profiles.

The final book for consideration is *Barack Obama and African American Empowerment* (2009), edited by Manning Marable and Kristin Clarke. Marable, the founding Director of the Institute for Research in African American Studies at Columbia, has long since assumed his place in the canon, and Clarke is a civil rights attorney for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. Together, they compile a collection of traditionally-written academic articles and essays, some from well-known figures in African American Studies, such as Joy James and Mark Sawyer, and others from less senior researchers. The volume is well-conceived, and academic readers will be comforted by the formulaic structure of each entry, as the essays and articles contain clear thesis statements and proceed in organized fashion.

The anthology is divided into three sections: "Background to the New Black Politics" (pp. 13–120), "The Meaning of Barack Obama" (pp. 121–160), and "The 2008 Presidential Campaign and Beyond" (pp. 161–262). Before moving into these sections, Marable provides a useful introductory chapter, entitled "Racializing Obama: The Enigma of Postblack Politics and Leadership," that emerges as one of the strongest contributions in the collection. Marable does not use the term "post-racial," but he begins with the premise that the race-neutral and pragmatic Black elected officials have gained a strong foothold in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and that many of these leaders were elected in non-Black districts. While these officials espouse a range of ideologies, they share a common strategy in their disavowal of the pursuit of race-based politics; a fundamental theme in the texts reviewed in this essay. Marable argues that Obama does not erase his race or deny his African descent. Instead, the president melts his Blackness into a more palatable multicultural story of self that emphasizes the American dream. Marable closes the essay by pointing out that we should expect a decidedly moderate agenda from the president, given Obama's predilection for pragmatism and compromise. In response, "A new, antiracist leadership must be constructed to the left of the Obama government, one that draws upon representatives of the most oppressed and marginalized social groups within our communities" (p. 11). More pointedly, the electoral triumph of a new generation of pragmatic Black leaders, winning favor from White voters and distancing themselves from civil rights era ideology, is evidence of disturbing class stratification among African Americans and Latino/as. In many ways, the new leadership elite are "out of touch with dire problems generated by poverty, unemployment, and mass incarceration" (p. 11). This emphasis on the class divide and Marable's conviction about the peril it portends are largely absent from Ifill's work, though she highlights many of the same electoral and ideological trends.

The opening section on the new Black politics is the strongest segment of the book. Articles by Robert Smith, Derek Hyra, and others pick up on the theme of class stratification among Black Americans, and offer insight as to its effect on both local and national government. Turning readers' attention to Obama, Frederick Harris provides a brief but useful overview of survey data collected about the 2008 election by Columbia University's Center on African-American Politics and Society (CAAPS). Survey results illustrate political divisions among African Americans and between different racial groups, providing much needed empirical reference points for discussions of individual vs. collective identity. Data also challenge conventional thinking about Obama's avoidance of all things Black during the election, as data indicate that many Black voters believed Obama spent plenty of time speaking directly to them or about their interests and issues.

Section two, on "The Meaning of Barack Obama," is comprised of only three entries. The first essay, by Gerald Horne and Malaika Horne-Wells, examines the controversy swirling around Michelle Obama, arguing that the Obamas, and Michelle in particular, have become the target of rampant anxiety about the political and economic decline of the United States as a White patriarchal empire and world power. In some ways, Michelle is a more attractive target than Barack because she is not the elected representative of the citizenry, and is doubly threatening by virtue of her gender, as a symbol self-sufficient womanhood with a foothold in the public sphere and the upper vestiges of the labor market. The final essay in the group, penned by Sherrilyn Ifill, dispels the notion that young people are politically apathetic by examining the voting culture of *American Idol*. When conditions are right, and voters are presented with telegenic candidates and user-friendly technology platforms to engage in the process, *Idol* is proof that young people jump at the chance to express themselves through voting. With much higher stakes, the Obama team was able to replicate enthusiasm about voting among a younger demographic, a feat which proved critical to the outcome of the election.

The final section, dedicated to the 2008 election itself, contains many of the themes discussed elsewhere in this essay; 'post-racial' politics and the relationship with the civil rights generation, Obama's management of racial controversies during the campaign, and his prioritization of White support and a broad-reaching agenda. One chapter that deserves special mention is a piece on threats against Obama and the politics of fear, written by Gregory S. Parks and Jeffrey J. Rachlinski. The authors argue that the threats of violence against Obama are different from threats that other political figures face, regardless of race and historical era. Parks and Rachlinski keenly note that Obama is not operating within the same context as southern lynchings in the early part of the twentieth century, or assassination attempts on other Black leaders, because such acts were responses on behalf of anxious Whites who realized that Black political advancement posed a direct threat to their status in the racial and socio-economic hierarchy. Obama, the authors argue, is not a threat to this status. Violence directed against him lacks the support of law enforcement and the legal system, and it relies on implicit, rather than explicit appeals to racism tied to unconscious racial bias. In many cases, the emotional move towards violent expression is not the goal of those who prime implicit biases and racism against Obama, but regardless of intent, we must recognize this possibility and work to prevent it (pp. 234–235).

On the whole, *Barack Obama and African American Empowerment* is a valuable resource. Like any edited volume, some chapters are stronger than others, but at the very least, readers should be able to mine those mentioned in this review for a few valuable citations. The strengths of this collection are: it is well-edited from start to

finish; it approaches the Obama phenomenon from multiple angles, rather than simply focusing on the campaign and election; and unlike some of the other books reviewed, the reader knows exactly what to expect as she moves from one section to another. When compelled to focus on the book's weaknesses, two spring to mind. First, readers looking for articles based on massive data sets and/or field notes specifically about the 2008 election will not find them here. This is somewhat unavoidable considering the book's publication date (2009), which does not leave much time for researchers engaged in large projects with original data to prepare submissions. Second, the middle segment of the book, on "The Meaning of Barack Obama," is a bit flimsy. No explanation is given for why these three pieces are chosen for this section, and it seems as though a few of the entries from the final section might be better suited for the "meaning" portion of the book. These complaints aside, Marable and Clarke's collection is a success. While none of the articles stand out as contributions that will surely change the field, the collection is a worthy addition to any Obama scholar's library.

These five books are grouped together because each claims an explicit focus on race and the 2008 election. Following Chris Matthews's exhortation, Obama's post-racialism and the management of his Black identity weigh heavily on the minds of each author. However, none of the authors argue that Obama succeeds in completely erasing his race, or that the election signals our collective arrival at a time and place where race is no longer relevant. Instead, when it is invoked, "post-racialism" emerges primarily as a political strategy, in contrast with previous Black American political ideologies, strategies, and paths to power. There is no consensus that the new Black politics is a boon, either for Black people, or for America as a whole. None of the authors believe that Obama's election signifies the end of implicit bias, institutional racism, or contemporary racial stratification. Whether journalist or academic, progressive or conservative, the writers agree that plenty of racial reckoning lies ahead.

As a new area of inquiry, Obama Studies is still without a definitive, book-length academic treatment of the election or the campaign. There are insights to be gleaned from the popular texts reviewed, and writers who are not academics may succeed at their tasks without making substantive contributions to the research community. But even when allowing for the fact that authors set out with different goals in mind, none of the texts in this collection qualify as instant classics, destined to serve as pillars for the research that follows. There is little doubt, however, that more Obama books are in preparation, and the field will soon have its landmarks.

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NOTE

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