

RACE 2008

RACE 2008
CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON AN
HISTORIC CAMPAIGN

Edited by
MYRA MENDIBLE



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Race 2008: Critical Reflections on an Historic Campaign

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To my "better angels" Angelina and Amanda...my reason to hope.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Tanya Bakhru is Assistant Professor of Women's Studies at San Jose State University. Tanya completed her PhD in Women's Studies in 2007 from the Women's Education, Research, and Resource Centre at University College Dublin under the supervision of Ailbhe Smyth. Her dissertation, *Reproductive Health and Globalization-A Cross Cultural Study* examines the impact of mechanisms of globalization on reproductive health non-governmental organizations and their policy formation in Ireland and the United States. Tanya's research interests include reproductive health and justice movements, feminist critiques of globalization, and transnational feminist organizing. Her recent publications include, "Immigration, Development, and Reproductive Health: The Case of a Globalizing Ireland" in *Gender and Development: Reproductive Rights* (July 2008) and "Negotiating and Navigating the Rough Terrain of Transnational Feminist Research" in *Journal of International Women's Studies* (November 2008).

Margaret Cavin Hambrick is Professor in the Department of Communication and Philosophy at Florida Gulf Coast University. She has published articles in *Peace and Change* and book essays in which she examined the dissent rhetoric of various activists such as William Sloane Coffin, Helen Caldicott, Sis Levin, and Glenn Smiley. In addition, she published an essay titled, "Evening Gowns to Burqas: The Propaganda of Fame," in *Readings in Propaganda and Persuasion*, edited by Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, Sage Publications, 2006.

Cyra Akila Choudhury is Assistant Professor of Law at Florida International University and a Visiting Professor at University of Richmond, T.C. Williams School of Law. Professor Choudhury received an MA in Comparative Politics from Columbia University focusing on women, religion, and South Asia. After completing her graduate work, Professor Choudhury worked at The National Academies in Washington, DC as a Research Associate on international labor law and education for a number of years. She completed her J.D. *cum laude* from Georgetown University Law Center where she was a member of Law and Policy in International Business (current-

ly Georgetown Journal of International Law). She then worked for Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer in their corporate finance practice, the New York Legal Aid Society in the immigration law unit, and advised a number of small local and national not-for profit organizations before returning to the Georgetown Law Center in 2005 as the Future Law Professor Fellow. She currently teaches Family Law, Sales and Leases, Payment Systems and Islamic Law. Her scholarship has focused on postcolonial theory and subaltern studies, critical theory, and identity, culture and nationalism. Her recent publications focus on the intersection of gender and religious identity in South Asia and the Muslim World and on international human rights theory.

Françoise Coste is Associate-Professor of American Studies at the University of Toulouse, France. She has devoted her PhD to the history and ideology of the Republican Party in the state of New York, as opposed to that of the national GOP. She has written numerous articles about the ideology of the Republican Party, mostly on questions related to women's rights (especially thanks to several studies following the activism of the pro-choice faction of the party, led by groups like the RMC – Republican Majority for Choice). She has also published a textbook on the American Presidency aimed at French graduate students (*L'empire de l'exécutif: la présidence des Etats-Unis de Franklin Roosevelt à George W. Bush*).

John M. Cox is Assistant Professor of History at Florida Gulf Coast University, where he also directs the university's Center for Judaic, Holocaust, and Human Rights Studies. Alongside a number of prominent scholars, he is a founding member of the editorial board of a new journal, the *Journal of Jewish Identities*. Cox earned his M.A. at Brandeis in 1998 and his PhD at the University of North Carolina in 2005. His first book, on German-Jewish resistance during the Third Reich, was published by Peter Lang in 2009. He is also contracted with Pearson Prentice Hall for a book that will offer a comparative analysis of four genocides (the Holocaust, Cambodia, Guatemala, and Rwanda). Cox's recent and forthcoming publications also include, "Herbert Baum: Jewish Resistance to the Nazi Dictatorship," in *The Human Tradition in Modern Europe, 1750 to the Present*, Cora Granata and Cheryl Koos, eds. (Rowman and Littlefield, 2007); and "Lost Worlds: Genocide and Diego Rivera's "Tenochtitlán"" in *Evoking*

Genocide: Researchers and Activists Describe the Works of Art and Media That Shaped Their Lives, Adam Jones, ed. (Key Publishing, 2009).

Katherine Hale's expertise is in the language of conflict and cooperation. Currently Professor of Communication and Philosophy at Florida Gulf Coast University, Hale is past Chair of Graduate Programs in Conflict Resolution at Antioch University McGregor. She is a consultant in the areas of public engagement strategies and processes, negotiation of identity, and conflict intervention. She cares deeply about quality of public talk and its impact on effective, responsible, and collaborative thinking and decision-making. She has facilitated large public processes developing policy around environmental and public issues and has mediated disputes for individuals, corporations, higher education, government agencies, and non-profits. With a PhD in political communication and conflict, Hale has written about the language of public and interpersonal negotiation and of conflict and cooperation strategies. Previous research on communication at the presidential level includes a book chapter on candidate and media narrative orchestrations in the U.S. and French elections of 1988 as well as research in progress on the language of international summitry.

Estella Habal has been teaching at San José State University for nine years. She teaches across disciplinary lines to engage Filipino history, Asian American Studies, feminist theory, and oral history. Dr. Habal has a long history of involvement in local Asian American communities. Her first book is about the history of the International Hotel, *San Francisco's International Hotel: Mobilizing the Filipino American Community in the Anti-Eviction Movement* (Temple University Press, 2007). Dr. Habal is currently a member of the Board of Directors of the Manilatown Heritage Museum, a non-profit organization responsible for a series of projects designed around the site of the former International Hotel, including the International Senior Housing Complex, a community center, and historic museum. A first generation college graduate, Dr. Habal has four children and four grandchildren.

Myra Mendible is Professor and Chair in the Language and Literature department at Florida Gulf Coast University. Her interdisciplinary scholarship explores links between national politics, popular culture, gender and ethnicity. Mendible's work has appeared in a

range of peer-reviewed national and international journals, including *Peace Review*, *Radical Psychology*, *International Fiction Review*, *Genders*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *Cultural Critique*, and others. She is the Editor of *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture* (University of Texas Press, 2007) and the author of a forthcoming monograph, *Putdowns and Showdowns: Shame and Humiliation in American Culture*.

Daniel McNeil is a Lecturer in Black and Minority Studies in the Department of Film and Media at the University of Hull, UK. He is also a research fellow at the Wilberforce Institute for the study of Slavery and Emancipation. His most recent book is *Sex and Race in the Black Atlantic: Mulatto Devils and Multiracial Messiahs* (Routledge, 2010), and his academic articles have engaged with the politics of difference and postcolonial melancholia. His forthcoming monograph engages with depictions of “white liberals” in popular culture.

Oiyan A. Poon is currently a postdoctoral research associate at the University of Massachusetts, Boston Institute for Asian American Studies. Her research interests include Asian Americans in education, education access and equity, and racial inequalities and public policy. Prior to earning her PhD in Education with a certificate in Asian American Studies at UCLA, Oiyan was the first Student Affairs Officer in Asian American Studies at UC Davis and the first APA Student Affairs Director at George Mason University. From fall 2007 through the 2008 general election, she supported the Obama campaign by helping with grassroots outreach to Asian American voters, while conducting participant observation-based research on the campaign. She also organized volunteers for Obama in California, Nevada, Hawaii, and Florida.

INTRODUCTION: POST-ELECTION BLUES

Myra Mendible

“Now, even as we speak, there are those who are preparing to divide us, the spin masters, the negative ad peddlers.... I say to them tonight.... There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America—there’s the United States of America.”

Barack Obama,
2004 Democratic Convention Speech

The dust has settled after the *sturm und drang* of the 2008 presidential campaigns, but the factionalism and controversy they exposed and often exploited are still very much with us. Bridging the partisan divide in Washington and forging a more “united” America were central themes of Barack Obama’s campaign, but news of gridlock in Washington, bailouts for Wall Street, and protests on Main Street do not reflect a more perfect union. In fact, the nation’s first African American president finds himself presiding over an increasingly turbulent and polarized citizenry. Obama’s rhetoric of hope and change swayed voters his way on November 4th, but it is the language of fear and suspicion that speaks loudest at town hall meetings, public rallies, and congressional debates today. Indeed, calls for unity have faded into a noisy din of “spin masters” and “negative ad peddlers.”

The race that culminated in the election of Barack Hussein Obama touched a nerve in America—a nation that has yet to come to terms with an abiding racial divide. It exposed the fault lines of American society, evoking deep-seated apprehensions concerning race, immigration, and America’s role in a post-9/11 world. Despite the evocative power of America’s national myths, our “nation of immigrants” harbors entrenched nativist sentiments that can be read-

ily harnessed for political gain. This was all too evident throughout the 2008 campaigns, as anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and anti-“foreigner” rhetoric fueled passionate, angry protests; aroused suspicions about Obama’s citizenship status; and turned the race for the presidency into a mythic battle between “real” Americans and socialists, commies, and terrorists.¹

RACE 2008 brings together a diverse group of scholars and activists to explore the social dynamics that were the backdrop of Obama’s momentous election. Contributors analyze the gendering of the candidates, the exploitation of race and class tensions, as well as blog entries and mainstream news coverage of the campaigns. Some draw on personal experiences to offer a glimpse into grassroots activism, ethnic coalitions, and social movements mobilized during this election cycle. Others provide detailed case studies or innovative readings of the characters and events that made this campaign memorable. Collectively, their work reveals the competing anxieties and aspirations shaping the 2008 campaigns and underlying the current political stalemate.

Of particular interest is how “identity politics,” once primarily a concern of women of color, postcolonial critics, and other oppositional groups, became a mainstream pastime during the campaigns. In an election cycle that saw unprecedented participation by women, Latinos, and African Americans both as voters and candidates—“race” (closely aligned with “gender”) was bound to be a major topic of conversation. But “race” in mainstream American culture is usually coded as a referent for “non-white” people, a way of speaking about “them” (African Americans and other ethnic minorities). Since “whiteness” acts as the default setting, it typically remains unspoken and unacknowledged by whites themselves. As the philosopher Lewis Gordon puts it, to be non-white is to be racialized, while “To be raceless is to be ‘pushed up toward whiteness’” (122).² Ironically, “whiteness” stepped into the spotlight in 2008, as it was fretted over, pointed to, and talked about throughout the campaigns.³ Most significantly, through a rhetorical sleight-of-hand, a longstanding racial hierarchy was inverted (if only symbolically): “whiteness” emerged in public discourse as a political liability and “blackness” as a privileged site.

Such transcoding was in evidence on the Democratic side when Geraldine Ferraro attributed Obama’s success to his being black, noting that “if Obama was a white man, he would not be in this position.”⁴ In this reversal of white privilege, Hillary Clinton was imag-

ined as the “victim” of black male popularity. Similarly, John Edwards often played the underdog during the campaign, making self-deprecating remarks about being a “white” male. The news media pursued the white-as-disadvantage storyline, one news anchor even asking Edwards, “What is a white male to do running against these historic candidacies?” (Jaffe). There were also blatant, repeated appeals to “white” women by both Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton, while political pundits tracked, scrutinized, and obsessed over the “white working class voter.” Later, the Republican bid for Hillary’s supporters focused on “white women” who were expected to switch their vote to Palin not because of any ideological affiliation but merely on the basis of mutual “white femaleness.”

These kinds of direct appeals to the “white working class” fostered divisions and even antagonisms between poor whites and other oppressed or disenfranchised groups. They relied on the same oppositional framework that historically pitted indentured whites against African slaves; white women against black men; or the “white working class” against impoverished others.⁵ This is a tactic that works to avert the potential for intergroup coalitions or other strategic alliances which might genuinely pose a challenge to the status quo. As Tracy Thomas argues, it “presents striking parallels to the battle for voting rights after the Civil War when infighting between abolitionists over race and sex created deep separatism that pitted allies against each other and diluted their political strength” (1). During the campaign, *New York Times* reporter Maureen Dowd resurrected this notion by reducing voter choice to a false dichotomy: “People will have to choose which of America’s sins are greater, and which stain will have to be removed first. Is misogyny worse than racism, or is racism worse than misogyny?”⁶

The essays collected here encourage readers to complicate such either/or fallacies and to confront the “spin masters” and “negative ad peddlers” that would reduce America’s complex political and social dynamics to an antagonistic and rigid set of polarities. Four main sections arrange these diverse analyses in ways that highlight their primary concerns. “Cracks in the Ceiling” begins with two essays focusing on gender and sexuality. Tanya Bakhu’s “Making Space: Articulating an Inclusive Framework of Reproductive and Sexual Health Politics,” investigates the ways that “whiteness” shaped public responses to the unintended pregnancy of Sarah Palin’s teen daughter. Bakhu also comments more generally on the “racing” of women’s reproductive choices in public debates. In “What

Kind of Feminist is a ‘Feminist for Life?’” Françoise Coste examines the Republican Party’s repeated attempts to link “anti-choice” Sarah Palin to “feminism” in order to seduce female voters, appropriating the term for political gain while ignoring women who are actually both Republican and pro-choice (like the members of the RMC – Republican Majority for Choice).

The next section, “What’s in a Name?” looks at the politics of identity shaping campaign rhetoric and fueling inter-group conflicts. Cyra Akila Choudhury’s “The Election’s Imagined Identities” turns our attention to the various ways that Muslims were excluded and marginalized during the campaign, calling attention to related debates about American identity, terrorism, and national security. In “From Rev. Wright to ‘Joe the Plumber,’” John Cox explores how racial and class-based anxieties were linked and exploited for political effect. In an unusual move in a country where social class is so rarely invoked, Hillary Clinton openly courted the “hard-working white working class” during the primaries. Later, the McCain/Palin campaign’s celebration of “Joe the Plumber” replicated this desperate and ultimately ill-fated overture to the “white working class.” Both sides tapped mutually-enforcing fears about racial and class others. Daniel McNeil’s study of mixed-race discourse, “Black with ‘White Blood,’” sheds new light on attempts to deploy the specter of Barack Obama’s mother, Stanley Ann Dunham, during the 2008 electoral campaign. Although Obama’s *Dreams from my Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995) insisted that he ceased to advertise his mother’s race during childhood, his public appearances between 2004 and 2008 often alluded to his “white blood.” McNeil traces the creation of a candidate who can facilitate a race man persona – and the cloak and dagger operations of an “off-white” American hero – by reading Obama’s self-fashioning alongside the performativity of other Black icons.

The next section, “Visual Media and Representations” takes us into the world of politics as celebrity and performance. After McCain’s remark comparing Obama’s popularity to that of Britney Spears, Obama supporters (and even Britney’s mom) took issue with such a comparison. Margaret Cavin Hambridge points out in “Out of the Wilderness into the Spotlight” that Obama did manage to successfully embody the celebrity persona, but she argues that the “Obama effect” resulted from his ability to balance this persona with a prophetic one—a kind of personal construct that may prove necessary in any successful run for national office. A media-driven envi-

ronment demands that candidates not only perform well for the cameras, Cavin Hambrick's analysis suggests, but that they also inspire and mobilize us to act. Katherine Hale's chapter, "Obama, McCain, and Alfred E. Smith" analyzes the tangible effects that may result from candidates' media savvy. Hale evaluates the distancing and unifying strategies used by Obama and McCain by focusing specifically on their performances at the Alfred E. Smith dinner. This important televised event provided the candidates (and Americans) a moment of what literary and social critic Kenneth Burke referred to as a "comic" or hopeful frame of relating in a conflictual context.

The final section, "Ethnic Constituencies on the Front Lines," offers an up-close, behind-the-scenes view of local ethnic politics and grassroots activism. "Why is Barack Obama a Filipino?" by Estrella Habal explores the Filipino American community's ambivalent responses to Barack Obama's candidacy. Nevertheless, she argues, Obama's victory marked an important juncture in Filipino Americans' political and cultural participation. In "Baiting Red, Turning Blue," I consider the "red scare" tactics deployed in Miami during the campaign, raising questions about the viability of political strategies that rely on exclusive, rigid notions of identity and on the suppression of dissident voices. Finally, Oiyan Poon's "Did Obama Have an 'Asian Problem?'" describes the various ways Asian Americans participated through both academic and grassroots activities in this watershed election. Poon evaluates policy reports and academic studies published in 2007 and 2008 regarding the Asian American vote to ask, How do these publications, mostly authored by Asian American Studies affiliated scholars, contrast with mainstream news media accounts?

"The Obama Effect"

The election of the first mixed race African American president was supposed to herald a new, "post-racist" America. After all, where else could the son of a white woman from Kansas and a Black man from Kenya grow up to be president? But Obama's election has yet to produce evidence of a more racially harmonious American society. It can even be said that it further obscured institutional racism and galvanized a racist backlash. As race historian David Roediger points out, "Obama does not represent the triumph of an advancing anti-racist movement but rather the necessity, at the highly refracted level of electoral politics, of abandoning old agendas, largely by not mentioning them" (*How Race Survived*).

During his campaign, Obama generally tried to emphasize his goals for a “united” America and to avoid the “elephant in the room”: the enduring inequalities and divisions between “white” America and its others. The epigraph to this chapter, an excerpt from Obama’s 2004 speech calling for a “united” America, expresses an ideal that most Americans would support at least in theory. But progress toward this goal will only occur when we confront and address the reality of structural and systemic inequalities. Obama’s election can instead make it easier to deflect this reality and idealize the state of race relations in America today. It can be used to endorse the myth of meritocracy, the nation’s most enduring and powerful narrative, in which the only barrier to individual success is the unwillingness to work hard enough or some other character flaw. As Roediger notes in a recent interview,

If you accept the idea that racism is a personal failing, his election will show that a lot of people have overcome that personal failing, and I wouldn’t dismiss that. I think it is an important fact about the United States. But it’s not a fact that changes the fact of wholesale inequality or wholesale incarceration of black and brown people. Those won’t change as a result of the election.⁷

One need only consider conservative radio talk-show host and former Secretary of Education for President Reagan, Bill Bennett, who recently remarked that Obama’s election should mean an end to “excuse-making” by people of color: “Well, I’ll tell you one thing [Obama’s win] means...You don’t take any excuses anymore from anybody who says, ‘The deck is stacked, I can’t do anything, there’s so much in-built this and that.’”⁸ This is the same Bill Bennett who once told a caller on his radio show that a sure way to reduce crime would be to “abort every Black baby in this country.”⁹

Further complicating matters for America’s young president is the immensity of the problems he inherited. Economic instability creates the breeding ground where racism and xenophobia thrive, so it is no wonder that a financial meltdown and high unemployment contribute to the current volatility in Washington and beyond. Since Obama’s election, membership in anti-immigrant groups has “risen from around 40 in 2005 to over 250 today” (Arana). The Southern Poverty Law Center notes “a dramatic resurgence in the Patriot movement and its paramilitary wing, the militias.... an astonishing

363 new Patriot groups appeared in 2009...a 244% jump” (Potok). The Center’s “Intelligence Report” in spring of 2010 warns of increasing violence:

Since the installation of Barack Obama, right-wing extremists have murdered six law enforcement officers. Racist skinheads and others have been arrested in alleged plots to assassinate the nation’s first black president. One man from Brockton, Mass. — who told police he had learned on white supremacist websites that a genocide was under way against whites — is charged with murdering two black people and planning to kill as many Jews as possible on the day after Obama’s inauguration. Most recently, a rash of individuals with antigovernment, survivalist or racist views have been arrested in a series of bomb cases. (Potok)

Distortion and misinformation persist, mostly circulated via popular conservative media outlets, talk radio, and internet blogs. Thus citizens in the world’s most open society are increasingly misinformed and self-deluded. For example, a Harris poll conducted in March of 2010 suggests that 67% of Republicans believe Obama is a socialist, another 57% that he is a Muslim, and 45% that he was not born in the United States and is therefore ineligible for the presidency.¹⁰

Yet the news is not all bleak, and the “hope” and “change” message still resonates among many not only in the United States but also around the world. Confidence in Obama has elevated America’s standing in the world by a sizable margin,¹¹ world leaders are again engaging in nuclear arms control talks,¹² educational and health reforms to benefit the poor are underway, and African Americans are more optimistic about their future than before Obama’s election.¹³ This may be the moment when coalition-building efforts could prove most effective in countering the politics of fear, nativism, and conflict that we explore in this book. It is possible, after all, to reframe the debates about class, race, gender, and ethnicity in ways that do not force a false choice between two mutually exclusive options. Such reframing can open up possibilities for strategic alliances, as axes of injustice intersect one another in ways that affect a cross-section of interests and identities. No one is a member of an exclusive collectivity, and people who are subordinated along one axis of social division may well be dominant along another. Yet we remain

stuck in vicious circles of mutually reinforcing cultural and economic subordination (Fraser). In these contentious times, hopeful appeals seem naïve and passé to many. But social justice and equality activists, progressive leaders, and those in the “yes we can” crowd will do well to remember Lincoln’s admonition during this nation’s most bitterly divided time: “We can succeed only by concert. It is not ‘can any of us *imagine* better?’ but, ‘can we *all* do better?’ The dogmas of the quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise — with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew.”

Indeed, we can...and so we must.

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Notes

¹ In March of 2010, Republican National Committee fundraising plans made this approach explicit, calling for an aggressive campaign capitalizing on "fear" of President Obama and socialism. Interestingly, a copy of the presentation was left in a hotel hosting the \$2,500-a-head Republican fundraising retreat. See <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0310/33866.html#ixzzokFaqyPpn>

² I use the terms "white" and "black" with the understanding that that these categories are meaningful and significant only as cultural/social constructs.

³ This pattern continues in a post-Obama political culture to the point of absurdity, as when Fox TV commentator Glenn Beck accused the half-white Obama of harboring a "deep-seated hatred of white people." *Fox and Friends*, July 28, 2009.

⁴ See Reuters story online: <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSN1159673020080312>

⁵ This means of social control is as old as the idea of "whiteness" itself. As historian Edmund Morgan shows, in 1600s British North America, indentured Europeans and enslaved Africans

initially saw each other as sharing the same predicament. It was common, for example, for servants and slaves to run away together, steal hogs together, get drunk together....White, black and native workers, bonded and free, cooperated to counter the harsh class oppression of the plantation elite. (327)

Chip Smith cites the wealth of court records that "testify to the many instances of cooperation and solidarity among servants" (17). He argues that the threat of uprisings posed by a united labor class led to the privileging of "white" laborers over Africans.

[O]nce this system of white racial oppression took hold in the South—once the white race came into existence—Southern white workers never again rose up against the plantation system. White people's anger...targeted the slaves as the cause of their misery rather than the slave system and its white ruling class. (21)

⁶ "Duel of Historical Guilts," *New York Times*, 5 March 2008: A23.

⁷ Roediger, David. "Obama's Success Not a Sign that U.S. has Overcome Race Issue, Historian Says." Interview. Illinois News Bureau, Office of Pub-

lic Affairs, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. 11 Sept. 2008. <<http://news.illinois.edu/NEWS/08/0911race.html>>

⁸ <http://stuffwhitepeople.do.blogspot.com/2008/11/play-race-doesnt-matter-anymore-card.html>

⁹ September 28, 2005 broadcast of Salem Radio Network's *Bill Bennett's Morning in America*. [Transcript] <<http://mediamatters.org/mmtv/200509280006>>

¹⁰ <<http://news.harrisinteractive.com/profiles/investor/ResLibraryView.asp?BzID=1963&ResLibraryID=37050&Category=1777>>

¹¹ Pew Global Attitudes Project, Research center, Washington D.C. 23 July 2009 <<http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=264>>

¹² "Obama's Nuclear Summit Gets Shot of Momentum: President Begins Talks with World Leaders after Reaching Agreement with China on Iran Sanctions." CBS News. 13 April 2010. <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/04/13/world/main6390980.shtml?tag=latest>>

¹³ Susan Page, "Poll: Hopes Buoyed on Race Relations." *USA Today*. 23 Oct. 2009. <http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2009-10-22-race-poll_N.htm>

MAKING SPACE: ARTICULATING AN INCLUSIVE FRAMEWORK OF REPRODUCTIVE AND SEXUAL HEALTH POLITICS

Tanya Saroj Bakhru

“Reproduction is not just a matter of individual choice.... Reproductive decisions are made within a societal context including inequalities of wealth and power.”

Dorothy Roberts,
*Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty:
Building a Social Justice Vision of Reproductive Freedom*

Reproductive politics express a variety of competing social meanings and values. In particular, during periods of political re-negotiation, such as presidential elections, debates around reproductive choice issues intensify, generating increased mainstream media and feminist attention. Framing these debates is a pro-choice/pro-life dichotomy that keeps the focus on abortion and precludes discussion of women’s sexual and reproductive health beyond a single issue. Using the 2008 presidential election as a critical moment in these negotiations, this chapter considers multiple ways in which reproductive choice discourse is embedded with ideological meanings that are racialized and class based. My analysis examines responses to the unintended pregnancy of the Republican vice-presidential candidate’s daughter, a focus that will highlight the cooptation of pro-choice language by the conservative right to justify an anti-choice agenda. I argue for a reproductive justice framework that can complicate the pro/anti life dichotomy and provide a more nuanced understanding of the complex web of sexual and reproductive health concerns facing diverse groups of women.

In late August 2008 John McCain tapped Alaskan governor Sarah Palin as his vice-presidential running mate. Palin, up until that point, was relatively unknown on the national political stage, but her reputation as a Washington outsider and bipartisan reformer was considered an asset to the Republican campaign. Her stance on social issues such as abortion, gay marriage, health care, or education was seen to affirm the agenda of those who found John McCain too moderate to appease the full spectrum of Republican Party constituents needed to win his bid for the White House. Palin's ascension to vice-presidential candidate was perceived by many as a way to reinvigorate the Republican Party (Anonymous, 2008; Block, 2008; Couric, 2008; Montagne, 2008).

However, as I watched the Palin nomination unfold and listened to commentary from both mainstream and alternative media outlets, I began to see a contradictory and paradoxical persona emerging. For example, during an interview with journalist Katie Couric (2008) she was asked if she considered herself a feminist. Palin replied,

I do. I'm a feminist who believes in equal rights and I believe that women certainly today have every opportunity that a man has to succeed and to try to do it all anyway. And I'm very, very thankful that I've been brought up in a family where gender hasn't been an issue.

Palin's simultaneous acknowledgement of and disregard for the impact of gendered politics in her life seemed to me to downplay feminism's relevance and enduring value as a liberatory and transformative movement. It seemed strange, or perhaps calculated, that she would concurrently embrace a feminist label and work diligently to stifle the progressive agenda feminism embraced. Her paradoxical positioning during the election was emphasized by her status as the first woman in the Republican Party, a constituency professing traditional family values and gender roles, nominated to vice-presidential candidate and second woman to run for vice-president on a major party ticket, after Geraldine Ferraro in 1984. These circumstances placed her in a unique position in the public eye as issues of politics, race, and gender collided at this historical moment.

Only days after her selection for the Republican national ticket, the Palin family issued a press release, via the McCain campaign, that their 17 year old unmarried daughter, Bristol, was pregnant. This news generated media frenzy and placed Sarah Palin's conservative

stance on abortion and abstinence-only-until-marriage-views in the spotlight, once again underscoring a contradictory message between her professed ideology and lived reality. Immediately, the McCain campaign acknowledged the reported pregnancy and claimed that the announcement was intended to clarify rumors that Sarah Palin's son, "who was born in April with Down syndrome was actually her daughter's child" (Block, 2008). In their official statement the Palins said,

We have been blessed with five wonderful children who we love with all our heart and mean everything to us. Our beautiful daughter Bristol came to us with news that as parents we knew would make her grow up faster than we had ever planned. We're proud of Bristol's decision to have her baby and even prouder to become grandparents. As Bristol faces the responsibilities of adulthood, she knows she has our unconditional love and support. Bristol and the young man she will marry are going to realize very quickly the difficulties of raising a child, which is why they will have the love and support of our entire family. We ask the media to respect our daughter and Levi's privacy as has always been the tradition of children of candidates. (Ververs, 2008)

It was made clear to the public that Bristol's choice to carry the pregnancy to term was made of her own volition and that she would marry the father of the child, Levi Johnston, and thus legitimize the pregnancy. It is here, in a relatively brief but intense firestorm of media coverage that I see issues of gender, race, sexuality, and politics being grappled with publicly both implicitly and explicitly. I also contend that this same moment offered a tremendous opportunity for feminist voices to step in and complicate the very notions of reproductive choice and rights that infuse reproductive health discourses in the United States.

Media coverage surrounding Bristol Palin's pregnancy repeatedly highlighted several points of contention. First, questions were raised as to whether the circumstances of Bristol Palin's pregnancy would push right wing, evangelical constituents away from the McCain/Palin ticket or make Sarah Palin more endearing and "real." Interviews with delegates of the Republican Convention, which was held days after the McCain campaign's announcement of the pregnancy, expressed a consensus of support for the Palin family among