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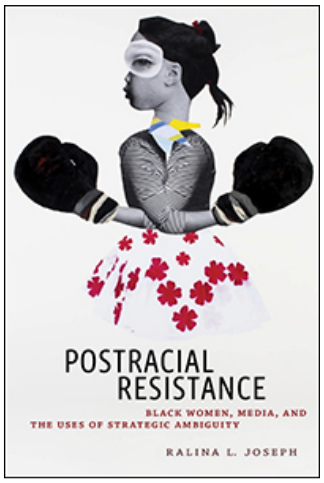
Ralina Joseph, **Postracial Resistance: Black Women, Media, and the Uses of Strategic Ambiguity**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2018, 280 pp., $30.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Kelli Moore
New York University, USA



On her *Becoming* book tour, former first lady Michelle Obama rejected Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's feminist dictum that women "lean in" to their work–life ambitions: "That whole, 'So you can have it all.' Nope, not at the same time. That's a lie. And it's not always enough to *lean in*, because that shit doesn't work all the time" (CNN, 2018, emphasis added). News outlets suggested that the audience, who erupted in applause and laughter at the first lady's candor, relived the pleasure of eight years of authenticity and relatability associated with Mrs. Obama's persona. But just what kinds of speech acts convince audiences of Michelle Obama's authenticity and relatability? What work do authenticity and relatability perform, and for whom? Critical communication scholar Ralina Joseph answers in her book, ***Postracial Resistance: Black Women, Media, and the Uses of Strategic Ambiguity.***

Postracial Resistance refines ideas from Joseph's first book, *Transcending Blackness* (2013), focusing on postracial discourse through the lens of multiracial people caught between the pain of cultural confusion, and the positive positioning of the postracial ideal by others. *Postracial Resistance* narrows the focus on postracial discourse, considering how economically mobile Black women "do things with words" during the Michelle Obama era (Austin, 1975). The book is a much-needed contribution to sociological analysis of Black women's talk, arguing Black women's vocal performatives enact postracial political resistance. Joseph introduces readers to the related concepts of postracial resistance and strategic ambiguity. Postracial discourse refers to discourse about the end of racism, the hopeful afterward, or "beyond" of race: "Postracial discourse [is] the media propagated notion that race and race-based discrimination are over, and that race and racism no longer affect the everyday lives of both Whites and people of color" (p. 197). Postracial discourse belies a crisis of the ordinary. Strategic ambiguity is a common reticent performance of Black women's resistance and a symptom of postracial discourse. Joseph's descriptions of strategic ambiguity are neither pathological nor traumatic. Rather, the performance of strategically ambiguous language is seen as a coy mode of expression among Black women who realize they are "the only one" in the office. Thus, the argument of *Postracial Resistance* is structured around the individual's empowered mobilization of the oppositional relationship between Blackness and freedom. Strategic ambiguity represents a mode of address that rhetorically persuades about the salience of racism even as it cleverly resists explicit reference to structural racism that makes the world. It reveals the microaggressive character of racist sexism that Black women experience inter- and intraracially.

Joseph examines how strategic ambiguity surfaces conversationally among Black women celebrities, youth, and Hollywood television executives. The Michelle Obama era and postracial discourse are coincident. As the term implies, we have ostensibly moved beyond the category of race; its cultural relevance is on the wane.

The author is suspicious of the color-blind optimism attached to postracialism, suggesting the discourse is an alibi for more sinister ways of disqualifying anti-Black racism from framing contemporary U.S. politics. Black women's postracial resistance emerges generationally and is further conditioned by social class. Chapters 1 through 3 examine different performances of strategic ambiguity by cultural elites Michelle Obama, Oprah Winfrey, and Shonda Rhimes, middle-aged Black women who are familiar with Black women's respectability politics. The author's textual analysis samples public appearances, speeches, and social media posts from each woman in which she responds to an event of racialized sexism with varying degrees of success. The second half of the book showcases the author's interventionist experimental design and depth of reading in communication studies. Her description of working with students to study race and gender on television are exemplary of collaborative student teaching, and the citational practice throughout the book is equally generous, befitting truly integrative academic scholarship. Chapters 4 through 6 present an ethnographic study of Black women's postracial resistance. Here, her analysis samples talk from Black women college students and television production executives making it in Hollywood. *Postracial Resistance* discovers that youth and veteran corporate executives disdain strategic ambiguity and create more racialized modes of address in opposition to postracial racism structuring mainstream television.

Joseph affirms modes of television consumption where spectators watch in critical opposition to narrative content (Grey, 1995; Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Smith-Shomade, 2013). Among youth, "hate-watching" speaks to an act of viewer resistance, enflaming anew their distaste for the thing seen—in the case of Joseph's study, *America's Next Top Model* and its host, Tyra Banks. Youth reject the show as a standard postracial vehicle that rehearses rather than repairs symbolic violence against women of color in the beauty and cosmetics industry. Young viewers' hate-watching stance is an antidote to "individual-focused, clenched-teeth survival strategy of postracial resistance" (p. 132). Young women of color do not need to be strategic or ambiguous about their views on content because they watch with heightened critical resistance. They are the most vociferous in their resistance to postracial racism, compared to the established Black women celebrities analyzed and therefore the hope of the book.

Joseph expands the ethnography of young women of color to include the discourse of Black women television executives who create media representations. Black women executives in the culture industries also maintain a more radical critique of White entertainment structures. Over time Black women executives move from strategic ambiguity into racialized resistance. Though the chapter examines the role of professionalization on Black women's resistance to postracial racism, Joseph does not explain why youth and seasoned media professionals display higher degrees of postracial resistance than celebrities—seemingly loyal to Black respectability politics—who publicly model strategic ambiguity. Would youth be as resistant to postracial discourse in front of the press as opposed to a television audience viewing party? Does strategically ambiguous speech increase with jaded experience, or does it decrease through grit, and help from good mentors amid social isolation, or is something else afoot? Here the waning of respectability politics and waxing of social media anonymity could be explaining factors for why some Black women adopt more racialized resistance, but these factors are less developed in the book.

The disturbing aspect of strategic ambiguity is how its display affirms the spirit of coyness rather than the stark truth of parrhesia. Coyness is an affective position seen as feminine, which economically and socially mobile Black women rhetors develop on the way up when dealing with postracial racism's bad faith. One of the

strengths, then, of *Postracial Resistance* is how the argument expands the "affective turn" in cultural studies. Strategic ambiguity is a mood induced in Black women in elite spaces. The focus on Black women's talk styles attests to Joseph's ability to broaden affect studies to include the structure of feeling of the postcolonial and postracial racism; in other words, strategically ambiguous speech affectively signals the ascendance of postracial discourse.

One often gets the impression that strategic ambiguity might just be the Black and Brown woman's manner of "leaning in." Here strategic ambiguity shares affinity with Lauren Berlant's idea of "cruel optimism." In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Berlant tells of an affective position we assume in order to attach to a notion of the "good life," even in the face of the ongoing disappearance of social, economic, and cultural structures needed to fulfill its promise. Many objects of our optimistic attachments are, in fact, not good yet continue to guide our actions and intentions in the lifeworld. Readers must discern whether people of color who strive by deploying strategically ambiguous language might be trapped in cruel optimism.

Joseph blames the "light touch" of strategic ambiguity for the successful presidential campaign of Donald J. Trump and the incitement of physical and institutional White violence.[1] "Postracial resistance didn't alert and activate those unused to reading racialized nuance enough to fear the coming of the virulent racism hiding in plain sight. Postracial resistance allowed [Trump] to sneak up on certain members of the complacent, Obama-loving populace" (p. 197). Ultimately, Joseph seems after a reparative reading of practitioners of strategic ambiguity, a reading that is very troubled by their coyness before White power structures. But, she is compassionate of the many structural pressures upon Black women to uplift themselves and their communities. Strategic ambiguity is not only the art of finessing a sentence. It is also a social performance, a regime of living in resistance to postracial racism.

Postracial Resistance clarifies postracial logics—how they manifest ambivalence in public speaking events and even the most mundane speech acts of Black women in positions of institutional diversity and inclusion.[2] Joseph adds Black women's talk to the topic of postracial discourse emerging in critical communication, cultural studies, ethnic studies, and sociology. As Joseph centers Black women's strategically ambiguous speech, she identifies the role of minor affects—feelings of anticipation, confusion, concern, and ambivalence—in the libidinal economy of anti-Blackness.[3] Black women's resistance to postracial racism emerges in the social and affective interplay between the experiences of economically mobile Black and Brown folks competing in White corporate structures and the normal routines of anti-Blackness: state-sanctioned violence against Black people, overpolicing, incarceration, precarious housing/predatory loans, and low educational investments. What becomes clear is how postracial discourse celebrates the possibility of Black

[1] Clearly, a number of issues contributed to Trump's election, and many, as of this writing, are being investigated by the U.S. Department of Justice and the Offices of State Attorneys of New York, District of Columbia, and Virginia.

[2] I am thinking here of Sara Ahmed's book, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012).

[3] I am referencing Sianne Ngai's argument about minor versus major affects in her book, *Ugly Feelings* (2005). Ngai critiques most political analyses as privileging the major affects of anger, fear, pride, and shame. For her, a more nuanced political analysis is necessary that focuses on the role of minor affects like confusion, concern, and boredom, where the subject's political agency is suspended rather than assured.

opportunity within racial capitalism while skipping over the horror of its systemic faltering. *Postracial Resistance* could benefit from more moments of theoretical entanglement between strategically ambiguous negotiations of postracial racism and radical speech against anti-Black violence. The aesthetics of Black social life is the theoretical backbone implicit in Joseph's timely and important book.

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