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Facing Barack Hussein Obama
Race, Globalization, and Transnational America

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Arguing that race does not receive enough attention in studies of globalization, this article examines the implications of Barack Hussein Obama's successful presidential candidacy for both expanding and reducing the meanings of Blackness in relation to transnational America. In contrast to the “Third World” racioscape of Black America that became visible to the world during Hurricane Katrina, Obama's biography produced new tropes of Black identity that registered both the viability of the “American dream” and a cosmopolitan global sensibility. The article notes that Obama's victory has the potential to stretch Black racial identity beyond its hegemonic anchoring to America, but at the same time it is equally important to question nationalist discourses of American exceptionalism that surrounded Obama's campaign for minimizing the institutional contexts of race and class inequality.

Keywords: race; Black; globalization; Barack Obama; America; Hurricane Katrina

As I walk past a row of magazines in a chain bookstore 2 days after the inauguration ceremonies in January 2009, I witnessed a barrage of close-up images of President Obama’s face plastered on an array of covers that spanned a spectrum of taste cultures, from People magazine to The Atlantic Monthly. Inviting readers to engage in the politics of presidential intimacy, the deluge in such mass market portraits of Obama’s face momentarily inscribed him within normative cultural scripts of feminine subjectivity. The camera’s fine-grained aesthetic fascination with Obama’s face—deploying physiognomy as the window into his personality and identity—reminded me of the continual supply of women’s faces in the commercial world of global advertising that bridge the gap between commodity and fantasy. Emulating the brand power of female celebrity in the transnational consumer sphere, Obama’s face, as one report in Advertising Age claimed, had the power to launch a global makeover for Brand America’s tainted face: “After years of suffering a reputation as a menacing bully, suddenly America had a new countenance” (Wentz, 2008). An advertising professional and presidential historian, also quoted in this article, offered his hopes for refurbishing America’s reputation on the global stage, “We’ve put a new face on America and that face happens to be African-American” (Wentz, 2008).

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Beyond the facade of celebrity branding, Obama’s historically significant ascendance—one that purportedly gives the nation a new face—compels us to parse and probe the politics of racial identity in the global imaginary. In the aftermath of the inauguration ceremonies and Obama’s election to president in November 2008, news media recorded the euphoric reactions of citizens around the world. The implications of Obama’s victory for the analytic and lived categories of race, gender, class, and nation have very clearly rippled well beyond the national stage. What does it mean when terms such as “African American” or “Black American” or “Black” enter the lexicon of presidential identity in the context of America’s enduring construction as a transnational cultural and political space? What work does the intense focus on Obama’s racial identity do to challenge the amnesia over race in academic discourses on globalization? What particular configurations of Blackness did the Obama story incite in relation to a global reading and viewing public? I explore these questions in this article not from the vantage point of an expert on race or Black identity in the United States, but as an academic, who teaches on gender, race, and media more broadly and studies cultural globalization and South Asia, and as a South Asian immigrant, who has tried to make sense of race, ethnicity, and culture as I travel back and forth between India and America.

Globalization and Race

Appadurai’s canonic and oft-cited essay, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Economy,” describes the social and economic processes that constitute globalization as a series of flows in cultural representations (mediascapes), ideas and value systems (ideoscapes), people (ethnoscapes), currencies and capital (financescapes), and mechanical and informational technologies (technoscapes). Appadurai (1990) explained that the term ethnoscapes refers primarily to the landscape of moving groups and persons (tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers) whose travels across and within borders shape the politics of nations. Critiquing Appadurai and other scholars who have made similar arguments about the flexibilities and mobilities contained in globalization’s shifting and flowing ethnoscape, scholars of race, class, and globalization have pointed to the social experiences that become muted and recede to the background in such visions of portable ethnomodernity. Johar Schueller (2007) wrote that the prominence of migrancy to the North from the South in some theories of globalization ignores the “majority of the world’s labor that is not migrant” and it dismisses the salience of local resistances:

Whether conceptualized as Hardt and Negri’s multitude against empire, Appadurai’s mass migration of workers, or Anthony Appiah’s cosmopolitanism as perspective based on the ability to travel, transiency is central to all these formulations . . . because globalization theories have stressed the decentered flow of capital and cultural goods, as well as migrancy, they have tended to dismiss any local movements as reactionary. (p. 7)
Furthermore, questioning the idea that globalization happens to those living outside of the United States, Johar Schueller advocates for models of globalization that bring postcolonial theory into a productive conversation with critical race studies: “The theoretical impetus of this book—to bring postcolonial theory and critical race studies together—might well appear contradictory, particularly because postcolonial theory in its universalist and globalist guises simply absorbs the specific functioning of racism into a narrative of diaspora and migration” (p. 3). Similarly, Jackson (2006) draws our attention to the ways in which “theories of globalizing ‘flows’ and transnational scapes” are limited in how much they can “account for the entrenched and institutionalized non-flowingness and ine-scapability of race in contemporary American society—and all around the world” (p. 193).

The inflections in globalization theories toward ethnicity has oriented scholars to engage with culture, nation, and heritage as lenses to understand social identity rather than race, a concept that remains tethered in a problematic fashion to the terrain of the United States. Insisting on the importance of finding ways to insert race into the vocabularies and terminologies of globalization, Thomas and Clarke (2006) begin their edited volume, *Globalization and Race: Transformations in the Cultural Production of Blackness*, with the following statement:

> While scholarly analyses of globalization have proliferated, and while there have been recent attempts within the social sciences to consider the articulations among ethnicity, gender, and sexuality within a global frame of analysis, race and processes of racialization are not usually considered central issues in academic discussions of global economic and political transformations. (p. 1)

These authors also speculate on the reasons for the relative absence of race and constructions of racial identity in scholarship on globalization in the social sciences and humanities:

> Invoking race in a global context seems to conjure up Western experiences of difference or generalized concepts such as white racial supremacy, concepts that reek of a kind of ontological approach to whiteness and blackness—an absolute truth about racial difference everywhere—that the constructionist approach disavows. (p. 2)

> The disconnect between our de-essentialization of race and our fetishization of the global, therefore, seems rooted in the difficulty of making an argument that gives race explanatory power once it has been established that race operates differently in different contexts. (p. 2)

> By studying how “people traditionally classified as ‘black’ or of ‘African descent’ are actively transforming racial meanings,” these authors contend that we can gain a better understanding of “new forms of subjectivity, cultural practice, and political action that also move us beyond racism” (pp. 2-3). Extending Thomas and Clarke’s
discussion further, I also argue that race in communication and media studies has become anchored to questions of national history and domestic concerns of U.S. institutions and state policy rather than a phenomenon that has relevance in the international arena. Jackson refers to this unspoken amnesia about race and globalization when he writes that “certain provincializing assumptions within American anthropology today (and within American ideologies more generally) might imagine globalism to be far better spied in other parts of the world,” with the result that U.S. academics can often end up ignoring globalization’s intersections with the problems of race, gender, and class in their own backyards and neighborhoods (p. 190). Thomas and Clarke’s prescriptions to study race in the context of globalization include the need for “studies of racial process to be more attuned to the ways changing relations of power globally have generated innovative alliances” (p. 19) and for work that shows how “blackness does not just index race; it also indexes gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, labor, nationality, transnationality, and politics” (p. 9).

**Global Citizenship and the Rise of Obama: Producing and Reducing Race**

In November 2005, I arrive at the international airport in Mumbai, India, one late night, and take a cab to my destination. The friendly and talkative cab driver, who had expressed his desire to migrate to America two minutes after I seated myself, now began pummeling me with practical questions about the viability of the American dream. He asked me where he should think about moving once he gets to America. I tell him about the difficulties of balancing income with cost of living and opportunities for community life (contact with other Indian immigrants, food choices, and religious affiliation) in the United States, giving him examples drawn from my own circle of Indian friends and acquaintances. After listening carefully, the driver said, “Well, I do know where I should not go, the place where all those poor people got stuck due to the cyclones and rain. And, most of them were not gorā [White/foreigner], were they? The place did not look very different from the slums in Mumbai.” Later, after we had talked about Hurricane Katrina for a while, he requested me to write down “New Orleans” on a piece of paper so he would remember the place he should avoid.

As I traveled within India and answered similar queries about the Third World conditions of Black citizens living in the First World, it became clear to me that images of Hurricane Katrina delivered through the mediascape of instantaneous television news had brought a hitherto hidden American racioscape to life for some people in India, a racioscape of poverty and disenfranchisement that disrupted the global hegemony of the American dream. It is precisely this sense of a global “Third Worldness” that Rodriguez (2007) alluded to when he drew analogies between the victims of Katrina and the dark-skinned Ayta community in Philippines, which experienced similar struggles with displacement and destruction when the Mount
Pinatubo volcano erupted in 1991. Media coverage of Hurricane Katrina made visible to a global audience a racial community that was rendered physically and socially immobile—referring back to Jackson’s ine-scapability of race—in an America whose participation in globalization is increasingly based in creating an uberconsumer market utopia for goods and services produced elsewhere.

If Hurricane Katrina’s visual repertoire of race did the work of globalizing a particular version of Blackness—its historical containment within marginal structures of class in the United States—President Obama’s ascent to a political office whose whiteness seemed impossible to dismantle, circulated a different story of race. How did Obama’s racial identity do the work of redefining Blackness and expanding its boundaries to encompass a more global sensibility? Obama’s widely publicized biography inscribed Blackness within a hybrid cosmopolitan sensibility, one that meshed American insiderness with an international outsidersness, and hence, cemented his identity as a global citizen. From his Kenyan father to his White American maternal family and his life in Hawaii and Indonesia, Obama’s subjectivity, as African writer and political columnist Wa Ngugi (2008) noted, represents a “mosaic of cultures and experiences” to make him among the world’s first political leaders to “fit snugly into the skin of globalization with all its promises and contradictions.” Obama’s triumph provoked the media to stretch the skin of race to accommodate the identities of non-Western people, who are not typically viewed as a race. Using the terminology of race instead of culture or ethnicity to describe the global communities that responded to Obama’s triumph (Dickey, 2008), a Newsweek report carries the headline, “Reflecting on race barriers, Obama’s breakthrough provokes a global race to capitalize on, and build on, his win.” This global race that surfaced in solidarity with Obama spanned a Bedouin sheik in an Israeli village, a politician of Turkish descent in Germany, Hungarian citizens, and a low-caste Indian woman politician.

Following a similar narrative trajectory, The Boston Globe’s archive of photographs on the inauguration ceremony, part of a series titled, “The Big Picture,” registers visually the wide sweep of President Obama’s global endorsement. Pictures of groups of people watching the inauguration ceremony on television in France, Iraq, Afghanistan, Mexico, Kenya, and Bosnia Herzegovina document the cultural production of Blackness as global celebrity in the realm of electoral politics, a departure from the more widespread global commodification of American Black masculinity in the arenas of sports and entertainment. In image after image, television, along with Obama, occupies the role of heroic protagonist, uniting global audiences in their act of witnessing a key event in America’s history. In one particularly moving photograph, the glowing bluish light of a television screen illuminates the faces of young Black men in one of the poorest quarters in Nairobi, Kenya, transfixed as they watch Obama (not visible in this photo) being sworn in as president. Linking Africa to America and homeland to the Black diaspora, this picture of television’s global reach projects a discourse of global racial solidarity crossing the boundaries of class and nation.
A kitschy *youtube* video offers another variation of Obama worship, one that translates his celebrity status and his Black identity into the popular idioms of the global language of Bollywood. Set to the soundtrack of a song from *Mela* (2000), “Bollywood Obama” blends images of Obama delivering public speeches and conversing with ordinary Americans on the campaign trail with Bollywood film clips that show young Indians dancing energetically and swaying to the beat of the music. In one scene, as Obama begins to speak, his open mouth fills up with an image of ornately dressed young Indian women enacting the familiar erotics of Bollywood’s musical fantasies. Other visual signifiers—the Indian flag juxtaposed with Obama speaking, Obama’s face overlaid with henna markings, the word “Obama” streaming across the Taj Mahal—do the work of transforming Obama into a global *desi* (South Asian) icon. Ironically, as one *youtube* commentator noted, “Obama’s Blackness intersects here with a lyric that describes the hero’s desire for a ‘gori’, a light-skinned beautiful woman.” In the United States, Obama enjoyed overwhelming support from the Indian American community, with some supporters even arguing that Obama’s victory paved the way for Indian Americans to aspire to the presidency: “Obama’s inauguration means a new day in America especially for Indian-Americans, now any Indian-American can truly dream of occupying the highest office in the land or the most powerful position in the world whether their name is Bob, Bobby or Baljit” (“Obama Has Truly Energized,” 2009). Here, Obama’s unusual name (Obama has described himself as a “skinny kid with a funny name”), paired alongside his Blackness, becomes a source of empathetic identification.

Obama’s cosmopolitan “global Blackness” and his funny name, however, turned into a domestic liability at times forcing him to walk a rhetorical tightrope of diplomacy during his 2008 campaign. Controversies over Obama’s official religion—Islam or Christianity—precipitated conflicts between his national identity as an authentic American and normative discourses of religious and racial identity in the United States. Rumors that Obama, whose middle is Hussein, had been raised a Muslim and attended religious schools or madrasas in Indonesia were debunked by news media, but nevertheless fueled an Islamophobia whose currents had been swirling in the public sphere in a post 9/11 America. Obama’s repeated pronouncements that he was *not* a Muslim only seemed to reinforce the demonization of Muslims as alien others, the pagan, and barbaric “Orientals” of Europe’s colonies who could not claim their identities as American citizens. Stepping into the fray to help Obama and challenge Islamophobia, another Black leader Colin Powell who endorsed Obama stated that “he is not a Muslim, he’s a Christian. He’s always been a Christian. But the really right answer is, what if he is? Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this country? The answer’s no, that’s not America.”

Later, as the controversy faded, Obama toned down his rhetoric of “I am not a Muslim,” and instead began articulating his plans to change the Bush foreign policy regime in Iraq and his willingness to engage in dialogue with Muslim leaders. Khalil (2008) noted that Obama “represents a phenomenon that has drawn global attention
and captivated the minds of Muslims around the world as he wages a spirited campaign to become the next president of the United States.” Khalil registers here the support that Obama generated in a global Muslim community that had mobilized in opposition to the Bush administration’s “war on terror” campaign and the military intervention in Iraq. Khalil recognizes the ways in which Obama’s racial and religious identities converged in the global Muslim community’s sympathy for him: “Internet campaigns exploited Obama’s alleged Muslim links by portraying America as a ‘racist country’ whose citizens and politicians would never permit Obama to win because he is black and has Muslim roots. The effort was misleading, but nonetheless garnered the candidate even more sympathy in the Muslim world.” Even as Obama’s middle name registered his family’s contacts with Islam in Africa and Indonesia, a Christian minority that has endured persecution in an Islamic nation also mobilized Obama’s Christian identity to make their cause visible in the global arena. A Boston Globe photograph of Pakistani Christian children holding portraits of Obama during a prayer ceremony in Islamabad, Pakistan, generated lively debate on the blog Sepia Mutiny about the impact of Hindu and Islamic fundamentalism on South Asia’s Christian populations.

Recalling Thomas and Clarke’s advice to problematize Blackness in the context of global spaces as inciting new alliances and indexing social registers outside of race, we can see that Obama’s biography radiated outward in the global mediasphere to challenge a hegemonic notion of Blackness as quintessentially American. His expansive racial identity traversed multiple continents and touched different world religions (including his father’s atheism) even as his White American grandparents and dark-skinned African American wife from Chicago, Michele Obama, allowed him to shore up his authentic American identity. Yet it is also important to consider here the consequences of these global representations of solidarity in the wake of Obama’s achievement of the “American dream” for American nationalism and for race in America. The “American dream” and the “American way of life,” as Grewal (2006) notes, are persuasive ideological constructs that circulate in varied transnational contexts to produce shifting global allegiances that in turn revive the idea of America as a mythical national space of unbridled freedom and democracy:

As a superpower and policeman, a multicultural nation as well as a site of hierarchical racial and gendered formations, America the nation-state, along with American nationalism, produces identities within many connectivities in a transnational world, whether as the source of imperial power or as a symbol of freedom and liberty. (p. 196)

Grewal examines the uneven production of racial, gendered, and multicultural subjects in post-9/11 America to map the continuation and fulfillment of earlier neoliberal nationalist ideologies in the global popular and consumer spheres. Focusing on the outpouring of international support for America after 9/11, Grewal argues that the emergence of this new transnational solidarity “contributed to the
formation of an ‘American exceptionalist’ nationalism that was the dominant discourse after 9/11” (p. 206). A new internationalist alliance of the civilized against the barbaric in this moment affirmed the exceptional status of America and its democratic promise of the “American dream” for a transnational public.

Although nuanced very differently from the condolences and sympathy that poured in from all parts of the world after 9/11, the global solidarity that emerged in conjunction with Obama’s election to the presidency, and in particular the responses to his triumph as a Black man in America, also fueled neoliberal American exceptionalist nationalism in the arenas of racial progress and equality (Rodriguez, 2008). Multiple currents outside and inside America, including the global reach of hip hop and rap music’s commercial renderings of Black resistance, and Obama’s own nationalist rhetoric bolstered this transnational investment in American colorblind nationalism. Obama has been careful to balance his inspirational and unifying nationalism with strong disclaimers about the weaknesses of America, but the selective repetition and amplification of particular rhetorical statements, “There is not a Black America and a White America and a Latino America and Asian America, there’s the United States of America,” and “If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time . . . tonight is your answer,” on television news and in popular biographies also provoked celebratory proclamations of a postracial America (Hsu, 2009; Marquand & Pommerau, 2008; Mazrui, 2008). When interviewed for a story in the Christian Science Monitor, Pap Ndiaye, an academic in Paris, said that “Obama has restored belief in the American dream” and that Obama’s success put “France on the hot seat” (Marquand & Pommerau, 2008). A German citizen in the same story argues that Obama’s victory could be a lesson for Germany on the value of migrants and that America’s shining moment would hasten the opening up of Germany.

The circulation of these discourses that position America as a nation where upward mobility is unrestricted for Black Americans evacuates questions of class (education and family background) from Obama’s own biography and disavows the institutional and historical structures of race and class that displaced hundreds of poor Black citizens after Hurricane Katrina. Pinkney’s hyperbolic anger against the hypocrisy of the “Obama spectacle” ignores some of the productive ways in which Obama’s story of ascent destabilized the hegemonic equation between Blackness and Americanness (Pabst, 2006), but his strong plea to dispute the “installment of Obama” as ushering in a “postracial era in the nation” deserves careful attention. Pinkney (2008) noted that the enormous challenges of joblessness, poor health care, failing public education, and homelessness that affect the lives of ordinary “people of all colors and ethnicities” perverts not only the idea of the “American dream,” but even more importantly, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream of economic and social justice for those living in the peripheries of American prosperity.
Recentering America: The First Black President in a Decentered Nation?

During my visit to India in November 2008 after Obama won the elections, relatives and academics (Obama supporters) asked me repeatedly, “What is he going to do? How is this man going to meet these expectations of hope and change? What will happen to America?” These questions highlight the changing conditions of a global economic context—America’s relations with the emerging market nations of India and China—that surround Barack Hussein Obama’s historic election. Obama’s status as the first Black president dramatized the accessibility of the American dream at a time when a host of economic developments threaten the security of America’s taken-for-granted position in the global economy. Capturing the flavor of these shifting currents, an Indian magazine proclaims boldly that India is “Taking over the world.” Outlook magazine’s triumphant cover portrait (November 6, 2006) in which the faces of four successful Indian entrepreneurs replace the sculpted faces of the four former U.S. presidents on the iconic Mount Rushmore Memorial seeks to reverse the earlier hierarchies of First World–Third World economic relations. Zakaria’s analysis of a post-American world, a world in which America has to contend with the “rise of the rest,” points to the third great shift in modern history, the first being the rise of the Western world, the second the rise of the United States, and the third contemporary moment when America may dominate in the military and political arenas, but “along every other dimension—industrial, financial, social, cultural—the distribution of power is shifting, moving away from American dominance” (Zakaria, 2008). In the midst of this economic decentering of America, Obama’s successful bid for the presidency generated debates about how America could recenter itself through a program of change in the global economic, foreign policy, environment, and military arenas.

The Onion’s satirical story headlined, “Black Man Given Nation’s Worst Job”(2008) provokes reflection on the historical context of Black labor and achievement in America even as it illuminates the challenges that lie ahead: “African-American man Barack Obama, 47, was given the least desirable job in the entire country . . . As part of his duties, the black man will have to spend four to eight years cleaning up the messes other people left behind.” Some of Obama’s bold campaign promises to redistribute economic power in an increasingly class-divided America earned him the slur from right-wing media outlets of being an “international socialist” (Kincaid, 2008), a label that presents another ripe subject for exploring the historical articulations of race and labor in the global economy that emerged in the midst of Obama’s candidacy. This article’s brief exploration of the Obama story’s implications for Black identity in the global mediasphere points to the rich opportunities that lie ahead for scholars to examine representations and transformations of race, nation, and globalization in the next several years to come.
Note


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