“You Lie!” The Story that Barack Obama’s Body Tells

Thesis

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By

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Abstract

The topic of what it means to be a real American was highlighted throughout the 2008 presidential election. Much of the reason for the question was the fact that for the first time in US history there was a chance of a non-white candidate winning the office. From political rallies to Sunday morning talk shows, deliberation over Obama’s Americanness became a part of the public discourse. Was he born here? Is he a Christian? What are his motives? And while the anxiety over his Americanness appeared to be an issue concerning white Americans, black Americans had their own questions about the Democratic frontrunner. Was Barack Obama really black? Would he make issues concerning the black community a priority? And when the questions about Obama’s realness were thought to be thoroughly exhausted, an article in the Chicago Sun Times declared him to be “our first female president.” From the very beginning of his candidacy to his position as president, Barack Obama has elicited questions of authenticity. Who is Barack Obama? Why has there been so much emphasis around his body? This research focuses primarily on the importance of authenticity in the history of American claims to citizenship. Obama’s Americanness is linked to the concerns of his blackness and his gender because of the limitations and conditions that have been and continue to be placed on citizenship. The objective of this project is to make clear that these issues of authenticity surrounding Obama only reinforce the dominant culture’s restrictions on
citizenship and therefore maintain white privilege by further marginalizing those who have been historically othered in American society.
Dedication

باسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

To my father Abdul-Hamid Ali Alchahal. I carry your name and your spirit. I will never give up either. They can take you from my side, but never from my soul.

“That was you daddy, born by a river in a little tent and I swear you’ve been runnin’ ever since. That’s my song too baba and one day I’m gonna’ sing it for you in a poem” – Suheir Hammad

To my mother Haifa Youssef Chehouri. I would walk the earth barefoot to receive your blessing. You have been my constant example.

“Your heaven lies under the feet of your mother”—Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)

To Lebanon. I pray that one day I will go home to the country that birthed me.

“Even in your madness I love you”—Fairuz

To all those who struggle for freedom.

“You are not to oppress and you are not to be oppressed!”—Muslim Saying
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In The name of Allah, The Most Gracious, The Most Merciful. I want to first give all Praises to The Most High. Without Your Will there would be nothing.

I must thank Dr. Simone C Drake. Your professional influence and personal friendship has truly been a blessing. You pushed me to consider myself in new ways. I am eternally grateful.

I would also like to extend my thanks to Dr. James Upton. Your sincerity and kindness is unmatched. You are an exemplary human being and the world would do better with more of you. I want to acknowledge Dr. Franco Barchiesi. Your commitment to social justice has been inspirational. And Dr. Maurice Stevens. Your style of teaching and concern for your students made this girl, who feels constantly out of place, at home in your classroom. Finally, I would like to recognize Ezekiel Peebles. Your continuous help was much needed and most appreciated during this process.

Selma, Ali and Nana. This project was a collaboration. Without you all to complete me it would not have been. My younger sisters and brothers, Mahmoud, Hanien, Ranien and Musbah. I adore you. My nephews, Abdul-Hamid, Jamal and Yousef. You three have raised me. I am a better person because of you. And Jon, your support has been a refuge for me.

I thank God for you all.
Vita

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Introduction

During a 2009 national broadcast President Obama addressed a joint secession of congress and the American people regarding his plan to reform the American healthcare system, a matter that had caused much debate during his candidacy. The president stated that he wanted to clear up any misinformation that had been disseminated through the media and mainstream politicians concerning healthcare reform. President Obama began his speech by denying that there was any truth to the rumors of death panels and economic collapse that many had claimed would be the outcome of what the media and his political adversaries had dubbed Obamacare. At about midway through his speech the president was interrupted by South Carolina congressman Joe Wilson. Wilson shouted “you lie” as the president assured the nation that his proposed healthcare bill would not cover undocumented immigrants, a concern of several Americans, including the many that considered Obama himself to be an illegal immigrant.1 As the crowd let off a roar of boos aimed at the unprecedented disruption, the president calmly replied, “It’s not true.” The immediate response of Vice President Joe Biden and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi who were seated in camera view directly behind the president articulated the feelings of many Americans who were watching the scene live. Pelosi shot a look of anger at Wilson while Biden lowered and shook his head in what seemed to be

embarrassment. The president continued his speech and concluded with no further interruption. Immediately after the incident Wilson apologized to the president and claimed that his outburst was a spontaneous response to an issue that concerned him. While Wilson’s “you lie” outburst was said to be specific to the debate over healthcare and immigration, it also summed up much of the rhetoric surrounding Obama since he first stepped onto the national stage in 2004. “You Lie”: The Story that Barack Obama’s Body Tells investigates the excessive concern over Obama’s identity by the American public.

During his run for the Illinois Senate in 2004 Obama’s opponent, Alan Keyes, continuously eluded to the notion that Barack Obama was not the same type of black American as he.\(^2\) That in fact he was not a black American. Keyes repeatedly stated that since Barack Obama was not a descendant of slaves he could not assume the same racial identity as those who were. While Keyes’ concern over Obama’s racial identity did not receive as much national media attention because it was a state political race, the problem of Obama’s blackness made it back into the limelight during his 2008 presidential campaign. Along with Keyes various black columnists felt the need to differentiate themselves from Obama. Stanley Crouch and Debra Dickerson gained the most media attention because of both the scale of the election and their popularity as commentators. In 2006 Crouch wrote an article in the New York Daily News entitled, “What Obama

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\(^2\) Here I am referring to the recent distinction that many like Keyes, Dickerson and Crouch feel the need to make when discussing racial identity regarding the term African American. While it has been the expression most often used by blacks within the US to define their racial identity since the 1980s, there has been recent debate over who gets to claim this term. Many believe that it conflates the identities of black Americans who are descendants of slaves and African immigrants. The film The Neo African Americans is a documentary that goes into detail on the subject.
isn’t, Black Like Me.” In his piece, Crouch claimed that while they may share phenotypical traits, the Senator from Illinois was not a real black American. Crouch was not alone in his refutation of Obama’s racial identity. Just a few months later Debra Dickerson wrote in her article, “Colorblind” on the popular website Salon that Obama was “an American of African immigrant extraction” rather than a black American. Dickerson also agreed on the terms of blackness that Crouch had set, “’Black’ in our social…reality means those descended from West African Slaves.” She continues by claiming that Obama is also not “politically and culturally” black.  

The debate over Obama’s blackness did more than stir the pot of racial authenticity that has been brewing in the black American community since the first Africans were separated into house and field slaves. The judging of Obama’s blackness coincided with white America’s concern over his Americanness and made the questioning of his legitimacy as a presidential candidate much more logical because of it. The topic of what it means to be a real American was highlighted throughout the 2008 presidential election. It is safe to say that much of the reason for the question was the fact that for the first time in US history there was an actual chance of a non-white candidate winning the office. From political rallies to Sunday morning talk shows, deliberation over Obama’s American realness became a part of public discourse. Was he born here? Is he a Christian? What are his motives? And when the questions about Obama’s realness were

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thought to be thoroughly exhausted, an article in the *Chicago Sun Times* declared him to be our first female president.\(^5\)

Immediately after he became president, Obama was accused of being overly apologetic and incapable of handling his position when he made his first Middle Eastern tour. Former Governor Sarah Palin recently went as far as to claim that he did not have the “conojes”\(^6\) to deal with domestic policy matters like immigration reform. In short, whether or not Obama was a real man began to be a topic of public debate. From the very beginning of his candidacy to his position as president, Barack Obama has elicited questions of racial and gender authenticity that often relate directly to his citizenship. Who is Barack Obama? Why has there been so much emphasis around his body? And what does it matter anyway? This research looks to answer these questions by focusing primarily on the importance of authenticity in the history of American claims to citizenship. The question of who is a real American is linked to the concerns about Obama’s blackness and his maleness because of the limitations and conditions that have been and continue to be placed on citizenship. For much of America’s history one had to possess three distinct qualities in order to claim citizenship: whiteness, maleness and Christianity. And while the American legal system may have adjusted its definition to include others, the fact is that these former requirements still affect the ways in which citizenship is understood. The objective of this project is to make clear these issues of authenticity surrounding Obama and explain how they reinforce the dominant culture’s restrictions on citizenship and therefore maintain white privilege by further marginalizing

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those who have been historically othered in American society. To do this I will break up the project into three chapters.

Chapter one, “Will the “Real” Americans Please Stand Up: Identity Politics and Citizenship in an Obama America,” does two things. First, it asks the question who is a real American according to historical legal and cultural precedent. It does this by explaining the racial, gender, religious and ethnic limitations that have been placed on citizenship. In order to accomplish this I will engage the work of critical race and gender theorists as well as the area of critical legal studies. In so doing I will demonstrate, through a re-telling of history, who has been considered a real American. The second part of chapter one gives a detailed account of why Obama is not a real American through the aforementioned restrictions. It further complicates the question of his Americanness by looking at how, when combined, Obama’s race, gender and perceived religion generate an image of the ultimate other. This section of the chapter requires an intersectional approach to reading Obama. This chapter is necessary as it historicizes the discussion around what it means to be a real American and opens the door on the debate of authenticity that has surrounded Barack Obama. It concludes with the argument that the denial of Obama’s Americanness will have lasting effects on the definition of citizenship and the role that people of color will occupy in the United States in regards to it.

Chapter two, “Man Enough?: Race, Masculinity and Citizenship in the United States of Obama,” will look at the role that gender played in the campaign and later presidency of Obama. First, it will consider the questions that arose about his gender with the aid of critical race and gender theory and masculinity studies. To do this we
must ask what it has historically meant to be a man in America. Next, it will discuss how Obama has performed his gender throughout the campaign as a way to deflect racial stereotypes. Finally, with the help of performance theory this chapter will then explicate the unique gender shift that has followed the election of Obama. Where white women have risen as protectors of the nation against Obama in their most dominant political role in US history, white men seem to have assumed a more submissive role in the rejection of the president as a means for white society regain full power over the definition of citizenship. This chapter’s concluding goal is to detail how gender is used by dominant society to maintain privilege.

Chapter three, “Black Enough?: Racial Authenticity, Citizenship and the Maintenance of Power” also focuses on the subject of authenticity. What does it mean to be black? Is there some sort of cultural and political litmus test? If so, what are the definitions of blackness? To do this I will use the sometimes strained relationship between Barack Obama and the black community as an example. It will answer why, in regards to those that deny him entrance, is he not really black. There seems to be two specific categorizations of blackness that are in question here: his political blackness and his cultural blackness. This chapter will first historicize the discussion over racial authenticity in the black community. Next, it will explain some of the definitions of political and cultural blackness in the US and lay out some of the reasons, based on these definitions, that Obama has been rejected. Once again intersectionality is critical in discussing the intricacies of identity politics in the black community. The final goal of this chapter is to discuss how the black community’s rejection of Obama furthers the
dominant cultures limitations on citizenship by forcing him (and those like him) further out into the margins of society and therefore furthering white privilege.

To begin this discussion a clear understanding of the term citizenship is necessary. To comprehend how the focus around Obama’s authenticity strengthens the dominant culture’s hold on citizenship one must be familiar with the privilege that is granted to those who possess full access to it. What does it mean to be a citizen in today’s America? To answer this question we look to the field of citizenship studies. According to Engin Isin, the former director of the Citizenship, Identity and Governance Center at The Open University, and sociologist Bryan S Turner there are, “…three fundamental axes extent (rules and norms of inclusion and exclusion), content (rights and responsibilities) and depth (thickness or thinness) of citizenship [that] are being redefined and reconfigured” to better understand its importance in contemporary society.\(^7\)

Contemporary notions of citizenship are concerned with more than the title that one holds “under the authority of the state.” Instead Isin and Turner state,

> various struggles based upon identity and difference (whether sexual, ‘racial’, ‘ethnic’, diasporic, ecological, technological or cosmopolitan) have found new ways of articulating their claims as claims to citizenship understood not simply as a legal status but as political and social recognition and economic distribution.

According to these two scholars, the importance of citizenship is pertinent to the various studies of identities. From racial and sexual identity to environmental and technological disparities, claims to citizenship are a way for, “…various groups across the world to

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enact their claims to recognition…" In other words, to be recognized as a citizen means that one is less limited in their definitions of self which in turn allows for access to political and social mobility. In the case of Obama, the denial of his Americanness based on his racial, ethnic, gender or religious identity(s) is a way to inhibit his and those who also assume these identity(s) ability for political, social or economic growth. Critical legal theorists have also devoted much of their efforts to eradicate legal injustices by focusing on the historical limitations to citizenship in America.

Ian Haney Lopez’s *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race*, historicizes the notion of whiteness and describes the ways in which it became a legal requirement in the creation of a real American. Lopez discusses not only the racial limitations to citizenship, but he, as well as other critical legal scholars, also makes clear the instability of race itself. Lopez describes the inconsistencies of racial identity throughout American history. The work of Lopez and other critical legal theorists opened the gates of inquiry into various antiracism projects. Critical race theory, an extension of critical legal studies, was a movement by legal scholars and activists who were “…interested in studying and transforming the relationship of race, racism and power.” The work of many of the scholars of this movement have inspired new and ever-growing facets of research that reveal the complexity of identity and its role in the lives of individuals and groups. One of these scholars is Kimberle Crnshaw.

In her influential 1989 article, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and

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8 Isin, Engin, (2002). 3
Antiracist Politics” Crenshaw explains that, “…dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think of subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical access.” In this article she introduces her theory of intersectionality and states that the regularity of looking at discrimination as either race based or class based or gender based further marginalizes those who embody “multiply-burdened” identities, specifically black women. Crenshaw explains that this, “…creates a distorted analysis of racism and sexism because the operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon.”

Intersectionality lends itself well to the discussion of authenticity and citizenship in regards to Obama. There are many who claim that Obama’s racial identity, no matter how disputed it may be in some circles, is the main reason for many of the critiques of his position as president. Charlton McIlwain author of “Perceptions of Leadership and the Challenges of Obama’s Blackness” argues that many of the concerns of white Americans over Obama’s leadership abilities are really “proxies” for race which introduces an additional facet of his perceived identity—religion/ethnicity. However, McIlwain does not take into consideration the connection that many Americans make between Obama and Arabs/Muslims which has led many to question Obama’s allegiance to the nation. Furthermore, it also denies the importance of gender in the public’s understanding of the president. According to their article, “What Does It Mean to Be an American? Patriotism, Nationalism and American Identity after 9/11” Qiong Li and Marilyn Brewer state that many perceive Arabs/Muslims or those mistaken as

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Arab/Muslims as less dedicated to the nation.\textsuperscript{11} Since Obama has both real and imagined connections to Islam and the Middle East he is many times subject to the same stereotypes including the belief that Arab/Muslims, men especially, are dangerous. This is not to say that McIlwain is incorrect in his assessment of white voters’ fears of Obama, but instead that it would be a more comprehensive examination if he were to look at the public’s reading of Obama intersectionally. This brings me to my next point of inquiry in this project.

Gender has always been a requirement of American citizenship. Women have historically been denied full access to the nation because they have been believed to be incapable of handling the responsibilities that are associated with it. The belief that women are emotionally and mentally weak in comparison to men has been a justification that dates as far back as Thomas Jefferson. However, gender is not necessarily a woman’s handicap alone. Many men have been denied citizenship rights because they are seen as unmanly. In her book, *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and the Narrative Form*, Priscilla Ward states, “[r]eformulations of personhood through an adoption of American gender roles…were a prerequisite to citizenship” for many of the indigenous peoples who wanted to enter into the new American nation.\textsuperscript{12} People of African descent, however, were not given the same opportunities as others to join the nation. Black men for instance were unable to achieve true manhood since they were seen as incapable of civility.

According to Gail Bederman author of *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1890-1917*, “…[i]n the context of the later


nineteenth century’s popularized Darwinism, civilization was seen as an explicitly racial concept.”¹³ Black men were not a part of civilization and so were not entitled to the privileges that came along with it. Other scholars have written on the limitations of citizenship based on the intersection of race and gender including a number of black feminists. From Michele Wallace’s *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* to Paula Giddings “The Last Taboo,”¹⁴ black feminists have used their own struggle with identity to inform the debate on citizenship.” Deborah King’s insightful essay, “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology”¹⁵ is a great example of the step that many black feminists have taken to dismantle the singular notions of oppression and embrace the belief that identity(s) like those who inhabit them are multiple and ever-changing. As stated earlier, for Obama it has been the intersections of his race, religion, ethnicity and gender that have elicited many of the concerns of legitimacy. The issue of gender and citizenship segues into another theme of this project; performance theory.

According to Judith Butler gender is performed.¹⁶ Men and women cite previous understandings of gender in their daily performances of identity. Performance then is a part of daily life and so can also be understood as either an ends or a means. In regards to the intersectionality of identity, performance is multifaceted. For this research we will look to performance theory to explain a number of things. First, Erving Goffman’s *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* will help to explain the daily exercises of

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performance. Goffman states that individuals either give or give off expressions as to
educe a particular response from their audience.\textsuperscript{17} In the case of Obama, some scholars
have argued that he both intentionally gives and unconsciously gives off particular
expressions to elicit particular responses. For example, Frank R Cooper describes
Obama’s use of gender as a conscious way to deflect racial stereotypes. Cooper states
that Obama’s “unusually calm” demeanor in interviews and public appearances, “…has
roots in the general need of black men to be non-threatening in order to achieve
mainstream success.”\textsuperscript{18} To follow Cooper’s logic it would seem that Barack Obama may
at times be conscious of the intersections of his gender and race and at others not and so
there is both a giving and giving off of expressions as a way to achieve and maintain
certain goals. This papers final point, which is to elucidate the ways in which
authenticity has been used to delegitimize Obama, is made clear with the help of
performance theory which is used as a tool to read the actions and reactions of both the
American public and Barack Obama.

Chapter one discusses how the search for American authenticity—an ideal
founded in raced, gendered, ethnicized and religious notions of reality pushes Obama
outside of the definition. This maneuver to remove Obama further eradicates other
minorities from full inclusion into the nation. Chapter two states that an intersectional
reading of his identity(s) must be taken to explain the current fascination with his body
and that his racialized manhood is indeed much of the reason for the questions
concerning his leadership abilities. The final chapter argues that the belief that there is a


\textsuperscript{18} Cooper, Frank R. (2009). 636.
true black identity further perpetuates not only the stereotypes of black Americans but also their actual position in society as second class citizens.

*You Lie!: The Story that Barack Obama’s Body Tells* provides a new example of the importance that authenticity plays in the ability of individuals and groups to claim citizenship. It states that in all three cases of questioning Obama’s legitimacy, whether it be his manhood, his race or his Americanness, the furthering of historical notions of citizenship that are based on racialized, ethnicized, gendered and religious definitions are strengthened. The goal of this research is to prove that the struggle for authenticity is many times used as a way to further marginalize those who already maintain an existence at the borders of society by using an interdisciplinary lens to look at the changing meanings of identity. By using intersectionality theory, critical race and gender studies, performance theory and masculinity studies this project is able to tease out a more comprehensive understanding of the connections between of identity politics, citizenship and power which should be used to further the cause of social justice.
Will The “Real” Americans Please Stand Up: 

Identity Politics and Citizenship in an Obama America

When Barack Obama first stepped on the national stage in 2004 at the Democratic National Convention he gained media attention for what many described as a “rousing” keynote speech.\textsuperscript{19} As the unknown senatorial hopeful stood on stage next to political giant, Ted Kennedy, Obama told the story of his life. He described how he came to be on that Massachusetts stage that particular night. Obama declared that it was because he was a part of the “greatest nation on earth” that he had the opportunity to be where he was. He sketched out his history for the audience and reveled in the detail that his family tree stretched from Kansas to Kenya. He even noted the fact that the ethnic diversity he represented was exactly what the US was based on. His speech was said to have ensured his Senate seat and catapulted him to near celebrity status. How did all of that seemingly positive attention that he received following his speech turn into caricatures of Obama as the ultimate “other”?\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{19} Goodwin, Amy. (2008, July 28). Democracy Now! Rising Star: Senate Candidate Barack Obama Delivers Rousing Keynote at DNC. Retrieved from

Even in the year 2008 the thought of the President of the United States being a man by the name of Barack Hussein Obama was out of the scope of possibilities for many Americas, albeit for different reasons. For some it was a dream yet to be realized in a nation that constantly spoke of diversity and freedom but was hard-pressed to ensure those ideals are extended to all citizens. For others it was a nightmare that would bring many of the xenophobic and racist fears of the other that have festered within the United States from its inception to fruition. The position of Barack Obama as leader of the free world would reignite both the effort of protest and grass-roots politicking. It would also bring to light the prejudices that this nation has tried to un-write from its history and conceal from the rest of the world. What is it about Barack Obama that has created such a stir? Does his race alone explain fully the amount of press that his personhood—rather than his policies—is receiving, or must other parts of his identity be probed? This chapter will focus on the ways in which the intersection of Obama’s identity(s) has come to challenge the image of the traditional American citizen—white, male, Christian. In other words, this chapter will answer the question why, according to historical precedent, is the Americanness of Obama challenged.

In order to accomplish this I will engage the work of critical race and gender theorists as well as the area of critical legal studies (CLS). Critical race theory (CRT) as a movement began in the 1970s as an extension of critical legal studies. Its main goal was and continues to be to “…attempt to develop a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law…”21 I will demonstrate, through a re-telling of history, who has been considered a real American by using the lens of CRT as a means to interpret

historical legal and cultural traditions. The second part of this chapter will then give a detailed account of why Obama is often not considered a real or authentic American through the various legal and cultural restrictions that have manifested in the US. It further complicates the question of his Americanness by looking at how, when combined, Obama’s identity(s) generate an image of the ultimate other. This section of the chapter requires an intersectional approach to reading Obama and so the work of scholars like Kimberle Crenshaw and Derrick Bell will be incorporated. Intersectionality theory (IT) states that every individual resides in the vortex of various intersecting identities and as such cannot be read solely through one particular identity. Instead the relationship of all their identity(s) must be accounted for simultaneously. Interestingly, this paper will also allows one to consider how privilege is negotiated when only certain aspects of a person’s identity is privileged and others not. This chapter concludes the discussion around what it means to be a real American by explaining the ways in which dominant society attempts to prevent full extension of citizenship status by minority groups as a means to maintain social privilege. I will do this by using the well-known debate over President Obama’s American authenticity as the foreground for the discussion on citizenship and identity politics in the United States.

The question of what it means to be a real American was continuously highlighted during the 2008 presidential election. Who is a ‘real’ American? Is there a design to this identity in question? If one was to look at American history the answer would have to be yes. There are rules to follow to be a real American. Some of these rules are rooted in the democratic ideal of a representative government while others are founded on the nation’s

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earliest visions of what the appearance of one christened an American should be. Three of the chief components to make a citizen were whiteness, maleness and Christianity. Following is a brief historical analysis of their importance in the making of an authentic American.

**Historical Claims to American Citizenship**

Almost immediately following the American Revolution, the Naturalization Act of 1790 was written “to establish an uniform rule of naturalization.” This new piece of legislation would help create race-based slavery as the lone system of acceptable bondage in the United States. The new law stated that “free white persons” would be able to obtain citizenship and by definition could not be forced to labor or be held against their will. For white indentured servants, this rule applied after they completed their agreed upon time of service. At this point in US history Africans and their descendants were no longer included in the discussion on citizenship. This dismissive attitude towards people of African descent can be linked to the writings of men like Thomas Jefferson. In, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson argued “It will probably be asked, Why not retain and incorporate the blacks into the state…” He justifies their exclusion by claiming, “…real distinctions that nature has made…” between the two races. He later uses those distinctions which he declares are “…political…physical and moral…” as reasons to withhold citizenship. Jefferson’s position surmised the sentiments of the majority of the

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nation concerning people of African descent; however, it did not end with them. These
natural differences were also applied to incoming immigrants from around the world.

Race and Citizenship

In *White By Law*, Ian Haney Lopez describes the importance of race as a
prerequisite to citizenship in the United States. He provides numerous examples of the
role that race played in the defining of the American for those who were entering the US
as immigrants. He states America’s first legal position on naturalized citizenship as only
allotted to white persons. Since there was no litmus test to determine who was and was
not white, the qualifications and results varied. During the turn of the 20th century the
massive influx of immigrants looking for work heightened the importance of
naturalization and consequently whiteness. People from across the world would fight for
the right to be white. Sometimes decisions on the whiteness of people differed within a
few years of each other. For example, between 1909 and 1915 the verdict on whether or
not Syrians were white changed repeatedly. The first three cases resulted in the
opportunity of naturalization for Syrian immigrants and the next three resulted in the
revoking of naturalization while the final case declared that, according to scientific
evidence, Syrians were in fact white and therefore eligible for citizenship.25

To comprehend how scientific evidence was used to decide the whiteness of an
individual one must first understand its foundation in scientific racism. Briefly, scientific
racism “refers to research which promotes or appears to promote a racist ideology while

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forgoing the ideals of scientific objectivity.”²⁶ Scientific evidence based on racism was often used in the justification of various types of oppression including slavery.²⁷ Lopez also explains why at times scientific evidence was exchanged for common knowledge and vice versa when arguing cases of whiteness, “The Supreme Court abandoned scientific explanations of race in favor of those rooted in common knowledge when science failed to reinforce popular beliefs about racial difference.”²⁸ Since there is no biological difference between races, if physical proof of difference like skin color and hair texture were not apparent, evidence would be supplanted by the belief that there was a general understanding of difference that needed no substantiation. Either way, if an individual’s identity did not propagate the social standards of whiteness at various times in American history, citizenship was denied. However, for black Americans their African ancestry was all that was needed to place them in a particular category in the American social stratum. The general consensus was that their position was set and there would be no genuine recognition of dissenting views on the subject by the United States government until the mid 19th century with the case of Scott v Sanford.

In 1857 the United States Supreme Court heard the case of Scott Sanford, a man who declared that since he was residing in a free state he was not obligated to servitude. Sanford was suing for his right to freedom as a citizen of the state of Missouri. The Supreme Court disagreed and stated that people of African descent were not American

citizens, regardless of status and therefore were, “not entitled as such to sue in its
courts.” Chief Justice Roger Taney justified the court’s judgment by claiming that the
constitution never intended to extend citizenship to Africans or their descendants and that
their position within the United States was basically one of a fixed second class status.
Here I am drawing on Enslin’s definition of citizenship where more than the right to
political participation is entrenched in its meaning. Enslin states that citizenship also
gives membership status and facilitates identity development among other things to those
fully accepted into the nation. While the court’s decision was heavily influenced by the
fact that slavery was still legal (five of the nine Supreme Court Judges presiding over the
case themselves owned slaves) it was not the sole reason for the exclusion of African
Americans. The social hierarchy that racial segregation promoted could not stay in place
if the full rights of citizenship were granted to all members of society.

The withholding of rights to certain groups allowed for a social stratification that
maintained at least the air of privilege to even economically depressed whites. bell hooks
describes the current image of this power struggle between poor whites and blacks of
various economic backgrounds in her book Where We Stand: Class Matters: “All black
people knew that white skin gave…more power and privilege than even the wealthiest
black folks…On the surface, at least, it made the lives of racist poor white people better
to have a group they could lord [power] over, and the only group they could lord it over

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30 Enslin, Penny. (2000). Education and democratic citizenship: In defense of cosmopolitanism. In M.
Leicester, C. Modgil, & S. Modgil (Eds.), Politics, Education and Citizenship. New York, New York:
Falmer Press.
31 PBS. Dred Scott Case: the Supreme Court Decision. Retrieved from
were black people.”

Joe Feagin and Eileen O’Brien concur with hooks’ sentiment in their book, *White Men on Race: Power, Privilege and the Shaping of Cultural Consciousness*. “The result of [racial oppression] is significant inequality in resources…and power…that provides privileges to whites over black Americans and other Americans of color.”

In *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* George Lipsitz describes how white Americans have profited from their race. He states that whiteness has a social value that whites are encouraged, through the maintenance of marginalization based on race, to advance as a means to hold on to privilege. These advantages, while not all times economic, were not ones that whites were readily willing to give up and people of color, especially those of African descent, bore the brunt of this hording of privilege.

Blacks in the US would not gain the legal right to be called citizens until the passing of the 14th amendment in 1868. However, it did not provide either the right to vote or cultural membership status for them. While whether or not the latter has been achieved is still debatable, the former was extended to black men with the passing of the 15th amendment. Though, blacks did not truly receive the right to vote until the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Prior to that, scare tactics and legal loopholes allowed for the disenfranchisement of African Americans. However flimsy they may be, these notions of race continue to influence the ways in which Americans understand citizenship. For black

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men, these racial stereotypes incited fear and claimed ineptitude on those categorized by them.

From criminal to sexual deviant, the black male in America has been used as dominate society’s scapegoat for centuries. In her article, “The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics: White Women and Black Men in the South after the Civil War,” Martha Hodes gives a historical analysis of the negative images of black men and the influence post-Reconstruction politics had on them. The 13th, 14th and 15th amendments, also known as Reconstruction Amendments, were all passed within five years after the close of the Civil War. The abolishment of slavery, the title of citizen and the right to vote were all given to African Americans through these amendments (excluding the right to vote for black women which did not come until the early 20th century). These newly acquired rights were not well received by everyone. Some white Southerners would do anything to keep blacks excluded from society. Hodes argues that because, “The separation of blacks and whites was essential to Southern whites who were determined to retain supremacy after the Civil War” the accusations of the rape of white women by black men became a popular tactic in the delegitimization of black men. She goes on to quote, Joseph Rainey, a Southern black Republican who claimed that the real reason that full inclusion of blacks into the state brought on questions of black male sexuality was because, “it had a tendency to make him [the black man] feel his manhood” which was not acceptable to white men.35 In his article, “Testeria: The Dis-ease of Black Men in White Supremacist, Patriarchal Culture,” Arthur Flannigan Saint-Aubin concurs

35 Hodes, Martha. (1993). The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics: White Women and Black Men in the South after the Civil War. Journal of the History of Sexuality. 3 (3). 404
with this theory behind the criminalization of the black male body when he states, “... the dominant culture needs its nigger boys, its ugly inferior, its other in order to construct itself as superior and beautiful men.” Saint-Aubin goes on to claim that “...in a white supremacist, patriarchal culture, the black man is thought to embody the essence of masculinity—masculinity in its purest, most unadulterated and therefore dangerous form.” This idea of the dangerous black man has had real consequences and continues to affect the lives of African American men. It also influences the perceptions of black men and their role as citizen in America society. However, black men were not the only one’s assumed to be incapable of participating fully in society. Women, of all races, were seen as unqualified for the responsibilities and undeserving of the privileges that came with receiving full rights of citizenship.

Gender and Citizenship

In a letter to her husband concerning the creation of the constitution, Abigail Adams writes, “In the new code of laws, remember the ladies and do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands.” John Adam’s response was, “I cannot but laugh. Depend upon it, we know better than to repeal our masculine systems.” In his response, John Adams claims the country for men. When he uses the word our to define the masculine system of government that was newly being structured, he is stating its chauvinist nature and with that one word he accomplishes the exclusion of an entire sex. From America’s birth women were not meant to be full citizens.

The position of women within the United States was initially based on their status in Europe. According to their religious convictions as Puritans (and other Christian reformist groups) the first settlers believed that division between the sexes was said to be from God. This division held men at a substantially higher social standing. The justification being that as the descendants of Eve women were incapable of the same mental and spiritual achievements as men. In fact, they were seen as the reason for God’s initial anger with man, and were to be at the mercy of those truly made in His image—men. As a result males were privileged in every area of social, political and economic life. Categories based on the sex of an individual would determine the roles that they held in society and women were often confined to the home, where even there they were under the control of male relatives.

I must differentiate between sex and gender as its conflation plays a role in the inequity between men and women. Sex is the biological variance between men and women; the difference in their reproductive abilities and physical characteristics. Gender on the other hand, like race, is a socially constructed phenomenon that assigns roles to be associated with men and women. These roles may differ depending on the society one is in, with men frequently benefiting from them. Positive characteristics or those that were deemed superior were often used to describe men while women were usually defined by the opposite. For example, the strength of a man in turn defined the weakness of a woman. These characteristics were then used to explain why women should be kept from certain areas of society and naturally connected to others. For instance, the belief

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that women were more emotional than men kept them out of political life for fear that they could not make rational decisions while at the same time linked them to the role of caretaker. In, *You have Stepped out of Your Place: A History of Women and Religion in America*, Susan Hill Lindley describes women’s status poignantly as “culturally assigned subordination.”39 The effects of this inequitable status continue to be apparent in contemporary America. From wage disparities and the economic glass ceiling to cases of physical abuse, women continue to suffer from the historical denial of their rights based on the belief that there are inherent differences between the sexes.

Although the challenges of race and gender ensured that black women would not be seen as citizens at this stage in US history, white women were citizens by name alone. White women did not have all of the rights that came with the title. Their status in society was also that of a second class citizen. Although white women were not forced to labor under the threat of bondage and could not be bought and sold by law, they were the property of their fathers and husbands.40 Women would get the vote in 1920 with the passing of the 19th amendment which prohibited voter discrimination based on sex. It should be noted however, that the place of black women in society changed little after this constitutional revision. Since their race still ensured discrimination, black women would be kept from the polls for decades after the 19th amendment and would also not have real access to political life until the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

*Religion and Citizenship*

40 Lindley, Susan Hill. (1996).
So far I have outlined the description of the historically real American citizen based on race, gender and ethnicity but what about religion? Was not the struggle for religious freedom the reason for the creation of these United States of America? How then is it possible that there be a religious requirement for citizenship? There is no specific clause in the United States Constitution that states the president must be a Christian of the Protestant denomination. On the contrary, article VI of the constitution states that “… no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” However, every president since George Washington with the exception of John F. Kennedy has been Protestant. Furthermore, Kennedy’s Catholicism received headlines and was a topic of discussion throughout his campaign and later his presidency. While some believed that Kennedy’s “Catholicism made him too controversial,” others argued that his religious beliefs had no bearing on his chances, that in the US what mattered most were his policies. However, Kennedy’s father was quoted in a *TIME* magazine article saying, “Let’s not con ourselves. The only issue is whether a Catholic can be elected President.” Even though Kennedy was a Christian, his differing denomination brought on questions of voter allegiance and religious politics that had previously not needed to be addressed. The *TIME* piece determined, as did many others, that religion was definitely a factor in Kennedy’s campaign. That whether or not he won the election, the idea that his faith could be discounted was naïve. The article concluded with a quote from a previous editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* stating,

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However, the country would do better, we think, to face the fact honestly that religion is, and always has been, a political issue and that it is not improper for it to be so . . . So let us by all means not bar religion from politics. Let us even in this campaign ask ourselves anew the ancient questions about Church and State. But let us make sure we are asking them in the right way for our time.\textsuperscript{42} 

Religion was indeed a prerequisite for citizenship then and it is still today. Historically, to be a real American adherence to Christianity, preferably Protestantism was necessary. This was because the first settlers believed that God had an active hand in the outcome of all human experiences and so the success of the budding colonies was dependant on their dedication to Him. This also meant that each time a colony was unable to provide for its residents and every violent encounter with the indigenous nations, colonists were being punished for their deficient spirituality. In actuality, religion was used in similar ways that immigrants and people of color would be used in future decades. The blame for social ills had to be placed somewhere and for early settlers that would be on those they felt were not pious enough or lacked a true commitment to God. At this time in US history more than public shame came to those unfortunate enough to be seen as irreverent. 

Accusations of witchcraft in the colonies began almost half a century before the Salem Trials. Men and women were at times accused of this form of heresy because they did not attend church regularly or were seen as lacking in

\textsuperscript{42} The Catholic Issue. (1960, April 18). \textit{Time Magazine}. Retrieved from \url{http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,874023,00.html}
their religious convictions. However, it is now believed that much of the hysteria stemmed from disputes between neighbors. Condemning someone as a witch almost ensured that those accused would be killed, jailed or banished from the colony. Many times this meant that the accuser would gain the property of the accused. Whether or not people actually believed that their neighbors were experimenting with the supernatural is likely to never be known. However, what can be deduced from it is that religious beliefs were so deeply engrained into the first European settlers that they were willing to see their neighbors and family members hung or crushed with stones as a punishment for a crime almost impossible to discern. Mass hysteria over religion did not end with the colonies. In fact, it has been noted by historians that Americans often summon stringent forms of Christianity in times of rough economic periods or when society is said to be in danger of moral collapse.

Religious revivals seem to be a response to societal problems that do not have a tangible or easily recognizable culprit. From the First Great Awakening in the 18th century to the rise of contemporary religious conservatism, Americans have always turned to religion as a remedy for their troubles and that religion has consistently been Christianity. The current increase in Evangelical Christian Churches is evidence of what some are calling the Fourth Great Awakening. In, *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Egalitarianism*, Robert William Fogel explains this renewed interest in religion as both politically motivated and socially consequential. He states, “...this current revival has produced a new,
culturally oriented political agenda and has mobilized a zealous reform movement, often called the *religious Right*..." The religious Right is mainly comprised of Evangelical Christians who believe themselves to be reformers of American Christianity. As past reformist groups, they hold to the belief that Christianity is at the foundation of the American tradition. The belief that one group knows what is best for the entire nation usually leaves in its path real consequences. Many times these consequences affect those that are already marginalized. In the United States, religion has been used to justify various forms of oppression. Christian theology was a proponent of slavery, misogyny and xenophobia, among other things. Yet, until this day, the accusation of being anything other than a Christian will have negative effects on any person who is looking to hold public office.

*Obama: Un-American Four Times Over?*

Now that there is an understanding of what it has historically meant to be an American—white, male and Christian—the second half of this chapter will concentrate on inserting the rhetoric surrounding Obama and his Americanness into this discussion. Why is Obama *not* an American? It is my argument that the intersection of Obama’s identity(s)—race, ethnicity, religion and gender—conflict with the historical understanding of American citizenship. If this is the case then

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Obama’s position as president challenges the standard definition of the American identity simply by him holding the office.

In, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic state that, “No person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity… everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances.”  In other words, race is always seen through the multiple identities that any one individual represents. For Obama this means that his race is inescapably influenced by his religion and gender. Furthermore, the fact that his father is Kenyan brings up the question of ethnicity when considering Obama’s Americanness. The teasing apart of Obama’s identity will help navigate the muddy waters of race, ethnicity, religion and gender in America. To begin this discussion I will look at each of these aspects of Obama’s identity(s) as independently as possible.

As a presidential hopeful the reaction of the public to Obama seemed to characterize the diversity of America. There were some that immediately loved him, some that were quick to discredit him and still some that wanted to wait and see how they felt about him. It seemed no different than in any other presidential election. However, as the campaign began progressing and the unlikely contender seemed to gain popularity, a much clearer Obama dichotomy began to surface. There were of course his staunch supporters that came out in record numbers to get him elected and then there were those that felt that his presence in American politics was not just questionable but that it was

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unlawful. In other words, some Americans believed that Barack Obama had no legitimate right to run for office. The term real American then began to echo on the campaign trail. Politicians as well as the news media were either using the term to describe him or highlighting its importance in the campaign, claiming that Obama’s Americanness needed to be addressed. Some were blatant in their accusations of Obama’s un-American identity while others seemed to only hint at it. From concerns over whether or not Hillary Clinton’s campaign was involved in “race-baiting” as a tactic to demonize Obama to Sarah Palin’s very clear comments about him “paling around with terrorists,” questions began to surface about who this Barack Hussein Obama really was.⁴⁵ Pictures then began to surface of Obama as an Arab. So alarming was the notion of his otherness that the New Yorker satirized the public hysteria by depicting Obama in the Oval office in traditional Arab garb burning an American flag with a photo of Osama Bin Laden hanging over the fireplace. As the campaign went on the accusations grew louder and more frequent. The conversation about Obama being a real American even had to be addressed by his opponent John McCain.

During one of John McCain’s rallies a supporter was caught on camera claiming that Obama could not be trusted because he was an Arab. McCain quickly grabbed the microphone and corrected the woman saying, “No ma’am, no ma’am. He’s a decent family man citizen.”⁴⁶ While McCain was trying desperately to keep the albatross of racism and xenophobia off the neck of his campaign, he only heightened the fear of the

“other.” By quickly negating the claim that Obama is an Arab, McCain hoped to put the minds of his supporters at ease and focus his campaigning on their different political stands. He also hoped to dodge criticisms from the media—mainly the left—concerning racism in his party. McCain tried to convince his audience that his opponent was indeed an American, just “one that he disagreed with.” When he tried further to reassure his supporters that Barack Obama was not some scary figure invested in the demise of the United States, he received loud boos and shouts of terrorist in reference to his opponent. Of course some of the booing and anti-Obama sentiment must be contributed to the nature of American politics. It is routine to get the crowd revved up during rallies and to highlight the stark contrasts between one’s campaign and their opponent’s. The animosity towards Obama, however, went far beyond partisan difference. Obama was not having his policies questioned with the accusation of Arab or terrorist; he was having his right to govern and his intentions as leader interrogated.

While the media was quick to report the anti-Arab sentiment that the audience member was espousing, very few people noticed that McCain’s retort was also lined with racialized notions of citizenship. During an episode of Real Time with Bill Maher, a political series on HBO, actor Ben Affleck took notice of the lack of interrogation of McCain’s response, that Obama was not an Arab but instead a “good family man citizen” and said that the remark would not have been socially acceptable if it was directed towards another minority group, like Jews or Catholics.  

McCain’s initial reaction was to clear Obama of the Arab stain by quickly informing his audience that his opponent was a

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citizen. What he accomplished by doing so was to reify the notion that Arab and citizen are antithetical terms. This statement of course begs the question can you be anything other than white, male and Christian and be an American.

The idea that you cannot be both Arab and American as explained above is backed by historical, legal precedent. The American legal system, up until 1952, also took this position concerning citizenship rights to persons born outside the US. It then would only speak to reason that those who are descendants of people unable to achieve citizenship would themselves be denied full admittance into the nation. However, it is not merely the ethnicity of Obama that is in question here. The words Arab and Muslim have become interchangeable since September, 11 2001. It is hard at times to even get the news media to correct the conflation of the two terms. Furthermore, while the majority of Arabs are Muslim, the fact is that the majority of Muslims are not Arab. Still, this distinction is not usually made and so one becomes the other and vice versa. For many Americans this has also been a cause for concern over the election of Obama.

Consequently, in the spirit of the American legal system, to label Obama as Arab is to define him as foreign and therefore ineligible for full citizenship. Simultaneously, the labeling of Obama as Arab brought the question of faith to the forefront of the presidential race.

As discussed above, religion is political. And to be the president of the United States of America one must demonstrate that religion will be an important part of her/his presidency. For Obama, this became a major factor in the deciphering of his Americanness. His Christianity, like that of many politicians, came under fire during his
campaign. However, while for other politicians it is usually their stance on issues like gay marriage and abortion that bring on criticisms from Christian groups, for Obama the criticisms seemed to be in response to what he really was. In other words his being mistaken as Arab also created a religious identity for him that many Americans understand as synonymous with Arab—Islam. I use the term mistaken because even though some may argue that the labeling of Obama as Muslim or Arab was an intentional political move to discredit him, there a number of Americans who believe it to be true. In the documentary Right America, Feeling Wronged individuals are asked whether they would consider voting for Obama. While some of the respondents used racial slurs and stated that race indeed was the main reason for their opposition, others stated that they were unsure of his religious affiliations. “I think he’s a Muslim” was the answer that one gentleman gave when he was asked what it was about Obama that gave him pause. The film also documents the efforts of “value voter” coalitions. A Columbus, Ohio value voter coalition captain was interviewed and said that, “If just my people, if just the Christians make up their minds and realize, you know, that the right guy is McCain, God will heal our land.” In her mind Obama is not a true Christian. Much of the reason for the questioning of his faith was based simply on his name.

President Obama’s middle name became a prominent issue throughout his run for office. While his first and last names are not traditionally American by any means it was his middle name that caused most of the commotion. The name Hussein elicits a certain type of fear and hatred in America that stems all the way back to the US’ initial

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involvement in Iraq during Desert Storm. However, the subject of Saddam Hussein was not necessarily top priority in the minds of Americans until the September, 11 2001 terrorist attacks. Following the attacks, Saddam Hussein was accused of consorting with terrorists and harboring weapons of mass destruction that threatened the security of the United States. The allegations of WMDs and the subsequent US invasion of Iraq helped to only fuel the fear of Arabs and Muslims in America. During this time, Arab and Muslim Americans struggled to be seen as dedicated to the nation. Even the Bush administration seemed to recognize the need to distinguish between Arab, Muslim and terrorist. Preemptive press conferences were held to state America’s position on the relationships it had with the Arab and Muslim world and warned that hate crimes directed at people based on their religion or ethnicity would not be tolerated by the US government. Nonetheless, these statements did little to quell the post 9/11 hysteria.

The incidences of hate crimes towards Arabs and Muslims skyrocketed in the weeks and months following the attacks. According to the FBI, the rate of hate crimes against Muslims increased by 1,600% between 2000 and 2002. In their article, “What Does It Mean to Be an American? Patriotism, Nationalism and American Identity after 9/11,” Qiong Li and Marilyn Brewer state, “The 9/11 attacks resulted in immediate, visibly evident increases of expressions of national identification and unity throughout the United States.”49 Their article goes on to question whether or not this increase in national identification affected attitudes towards diversity. It concludes, “[P]atriotism and nationalistic American identity combined are related to less tolerance to cultural

diversity, negative attitudes towards minority groups, and restricted criteria for identification as a “true’ American” (Emphasis added) (736). The belief that a Muslim cannot possibly be as dedicated an American as any other person and therefore not a real American is as clear today as it was on September 12, 2001. In the recent CNN Republican Debate the presidential hopefuls were asked whether or not they would be comfortable with Muslims in their administration. Without taking into consideration the candidates’ responses, it is obvious that the issue of Muslims being real and in this case, trustworthy and patriotic Americans, is still prevalent. Imagine that the question was whether or not Jews were acceptable or if women could handle responsibility? The questioning of Obama is acceptable because he is thought to be a member of a group that holds little claim to American citizenship. Journalist John D Russell of Newsweek claims that Arabs and Muslims (and those mistaken as either) are currently on the receiving end of “acceptable racism.”50 The suggestion that it is now socially tolerable to discriminate against Arabs/ Muslims because of 9/11 is similar to the reaction towards Japanese Americans following the attack on Pearl Harbor. The misconception that Barack Obama is of Arab descent already suggests that he is not fully American. Add to that the fact that his middle name is a traditionally Muslim one and the same as one of the United States’ longtime enemy and we can begin to see the complexity and conflation of Obama’s identity(s). The image of black men in the media has propagated the stereotype of their dangerousness. Therefore, Obama’s blackness would have been an issue for many Americans regardless of his father’s ethnicity or his religious affiliations. The

historical treatment and typecasting of black men in America ensured it. However, Obama’s identity was even further complicated when the historical fear of the dangerous black man is combined with the contemporary anxiety towards Arabs and Muslims.

In her article, “Islamophobia and the ‘Privileging’ of Arab-American Women,” Nada Elia discusses the position of Arab-American women as privileged in post 9/11 America.\(^{51}\) She states that the stereotypes of Arab men as dangerous along with the effects of terrorist attacks have had on the American psyche have allowed for this privilege to be assumed. Elia further justifies this by claiming that Arab women have also been understood as regularly oppressed by the West. She goes on to say that the categorization of Arab women as the oppressed and the Western interest in the Arab woman’s story has advanced the stereotype of the dangerous Arab man into Western consciousness. Taking from Elia’s article, I argue that since Obama is sometimes, either deliberately or mistakenly, labeled an Arab/Muslim he also is affected by these stereotypes and so the privilege that his maleness would regularly assume suffers. This is to say that the imagined and real connections that Barack Obama has to the Arab and Muslim world has put him in a position to suffer from the categorizations of scary and dangerous that come with them. Furthermore, the fact that blackness in America has also been branded dangerous guarantees that Obama’s body is understood as unsafe which denies him the advantages he would normally accrue in a nation that has privileged heteronormativity. Does this mean that race trumps gender?

In the beginning of this chapter I stated that it is the intersection of Obama’s identity(s) that has caused much of the commotion surrounding his position as president. I have tried to show how each aspect of his identity(s) has been understood in American history as to illustrate how, when put together, they have created in Obama the ultimate other. What this project furthers is the belief that it is impossible to say definitively that race is more important than gender or that religion is more of a factor in discrimination than ethnicity. All of these identities work differently in different people. There is no way to state with any amount of certainty that one aspect of an individual’s identity will always have a more prominent role in how they are perceived. What can be surmised from this project is that the continuous questioning of Obama’s identity(s) is likely a way in which dominant society is trying to maintain privilege. Through the denial of citizenship, individuals are economically and socially disadvantaged. They also become the stand-in targets for social anxiety. The intersections of race, gender, religion and ethnicity (among other things) that are represented by Barack Obama and his position as president are helping to formulate new and ever changing definitions of real Americans. However, this process is not happening without strong resistance. That Obama’s identity is continually questioned in search of reasons to discredit him is a testament to the resolve of those who refuse to allow “their” nation to change its historical position on privilege. The talk of Obama somehow being the representative of a racially progressive country only goes to show that race (as well as other aspects of identity) continues to be utterly important in American life. Obama’s position as Commander-in-Chief may have disrupted the historical notions of American citizenship, but it by no means secures racial or gender equality. Instead, it brings to light the amount of progress that needs to be
made if full equality for all is the ultimate goal. Thus, the denial of Obama’s Americanness will have lasting effects on the image of citizenship and the role that people of color will occupy as its presence continues the search for American authenticity—an ideal founded in raced, gendered, ethnicized and religious notions of reality.
Man Enough?

Race, Masculinity and Citizenship in the United States of Obama

In a 2010 interview on Fox News Sunday, former Governor of Alaska and vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, responded to proposed Arizona Senate Bill 1070—a bill that would, among other things, legalize racial profiling as a means to locate and punish ‘illegal’ immigrants—by commending Arizona Governor Jan Brewer while simultaneously condemning Barack Obama. Palin alleged, “…Brewer has the cojonas that our president does not have to look out for all Americans”. When she was later questioned about her comments, Palin defended her original statement again remarking on Obama’s facilities, “…our president lacks the guts to do anything about it [immigration]…” While immigration reform was and continues to be a major political issue, Palin’s concern over the president’s cojonas seemed to be more of a jab at his masculinity than his stance on domestic policy matters. By making this statement Palin is arguing that there is a manly way of handling immigration reform and then there is the president’s way—one that she suggests is effeminate. As off-putting as her comments may have been, Palin was not alone in her remarks about the president’s manhood. In a more recent interview Congresswoman Michelle Bachman of Minnesota stated that President Obama is “threatened” by her. Bachman went as far as to claim that Obama,

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“fears” her as a contender in the upcoming presidential election. Bachman’s claims of Obama’s ‘fear’ of her are easily translated into questions about his masculinity since a real man would not be afraid of any woman. The remarks by both Palin and Bachman assume effeminacy rather than masculinity in Obama’s character. What are these women really saying about Barack Obama? Are these remarks solely criticisms regarding his political positions inflamed, possibly, by partisan influence? Or are they instead comments geared to incite questions about Obama’s masculinity and therefore further the interrogation of the president’s legitimacy? If the latter is true, how should the catechizing of Obama’s manhood be understood? Furthermore, what should be made of the fact that the outspoken accusations against Obama’s manhood are largely coming from white women while many white male political opponents have taken an almost meek approach to their condemnation of the president?

During his 2009 address to a joint secession of Congress President Obama was interrupted mid-speech by Congressman Joe Wilson of South Carolina. In this unprecedented act of insubordination, Wilson shouted, “you Lie” as the president declared that his proposed healthcare bill would not cover undocumented immigrants. When asked about his actions Wilson claimed that the response was completely spontaneous and lead by his emotions. While he received criticism from many, including members of his own political party, masses of Americans began to popularize Wilson’s “you lie” outburst as a slogan of opposition to the president. T-shirts and bumper stickers proudly commemorated the moment as a patriotic outcry. Similarly, Speaker of the

House of Representatives John Boehner maintained that his tearful 2010 acceptance speech was so emotional because he was talking about the current elusiveness of the “American Dream.” A dream that, according to Boehner, because of the current administration’s ineptitude at leadership, cannot be realized by millions of Americans. Boehner went on to claim that there are certain things that evoke such sentiments, one being the love for his country. Yet, it is not just male politicians that are reacting to the presidency of Obama with emotion. Popular radio and talk show host Glenn Beck has also let his feelings take over in recent months. Beck apologized for his demeanor on one broadcast saying, “I’m sorry. I just love my country and I fear for it” while he was discussing the management of the nation’s resources and how the country has strayed from its intended course. How is it, in a nation that has historically valued heteronormative gender roles, where women with any amount of power are usually criticized for showing the slightest bit of emotion and manhood is defined as synonymous with strength, that these men are not only able to shed tears in public, but are being commended for it? Can we presume that these comments, like those of Palin and Bachman, also have to do with Obama’s manhood, the only difference being that they are implicit in their questioning of it? Simply put, what are these white men so afraid of and how does it relate to the much more aggressive stance that white women have taken towards Obama? Has white male fear of the president sparked white female aggression?

As stated in chapter one, Obama’s identity(s) had been the subject of debate in regards to the legality of his position as president. By the time of these interviews

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Obama’s religion, ethnicity and even place of birth had been researched thoroughly by his detractors for evidence of illegitimacy. And while the drama over his birth certificate would find its way back into the public eye in future months, at the beginning of his tenure it seemed that the he’s not real dispute had finally began to subside. However, if one were to look closer at the criticisms of Obama, it might be found that, much like his race and ethnicity, his manhood never really vanished from public debate. It has merely been disguised in discussions on leadership and courage with fear and cojones replacing words like masculinity and manhood. In his article, “Perceptions of Leadership and the Challenges of Obama’s Blackness”, McIlwain claims that many of the concerns white Americans have pertaining to Obama’s leadership capabilities are in fact, “proxies” for race. He argues, “…the question of leadership is…the most salient manner in which White evaluations of a Black presidential candidate get expressed.”

Though McIlwain’s study focused on the media’s perception of race and leadership in the campaign of Barack Obama and how that affected his chances it lends itself to the main assertion of this chapter, that Barack Obama’s body has elicited a particular response from the public that is based on aspects of his identity(s). Since questions concerning his race and gender are objectionable in progressive political discourse, implicit language is often used to condemn his identity(s) while claiming to be critical of his actions.

This chapter then takes McIlwain’s hypothesis that race is many times camouflaged in discussions on leadership a step further by adding gender into the equation. I argue that since Obama’s race cannot be understood independent of his gender

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an intersectional reading of his identity(s) must be taken to explain the current fascination with his body and that his racialized manhood is indeed much of the reason for the questions concerning his leadership. While in chapter one I outlined the importance of an intersectional understanding of Obama’s identity as a way to interrogate the basis for the discounting of his position by some Americans, this chapter takes the question in a different direction. We must now ask not only why Obama’s body caused a stir but also how does Obama negotiate his race and gender in the midst of all the hype surrounding his identity. Furthermore, has the way that Obama has performed his manhood had a direct effect on the gender performance of others? To understand the importance of Obama’s gender in his role as president and why it has become such a popular target for analysis by many of his opponents, one must first take a critical look at the historical and cultural meanings of manhood in America. What has it meant to be a man in this country?

To answer all of these questions I will enlist the areas of critical race and gender theories, masculinity studies and performance studies. I will look at the links between Obama’s race and gender and their importance in the othering of him. Since chapter one went into detail on this subject, the goal of this chapter will be to apply the argument that various parts of Obama’s identity are being used to delegitimize him to the current reactions that are specific to Obama’s masculinity. To do this I will also look to masculinity studies to first define and clarify the importance of manhood in America. I will use performance theory to discuss how, as Frank R. Cooper describes, Obama has negotiated his manhood as a way to deflect racial stereotypes throughout his campaign
and later his presidency. Finally, this chapter will explain the unique gender shift that has taken place since the ascension of Obama to the presidency. Where white women have risen as protectors of the nation against Obama in their most dominant political role in US history, white men seem to have assumed a more effeminate position in their rejection of the president. This chapter’s concluding goal is to detail how gender is used by dominant society to maintain privilege by asserting that the accusations of incompetency are in actuality attacks on Obama’s manhood and by extension his Americanness. I do this by arguing that the gender switch that has taken place is in direct response to the presidency of Barack Obama and has been used as a means to preserve the historic definition of citizenship supported by imbued racial and gender stereotypes in America while simultaneously disturbing heteronormative gender roles as a means to accomplish said objective. I will begin by briefly describing the history of manhood in America.

**A Brief History of Manhood in America**

Historically, to be an American man one had to fulfill certain requirements one of which was based on racial identity. To be a man in America was first and foremost to be white. In fact white men were seen as civilization’s only possessors of true masculinity. Blacks and other racial minorities in America were unable to obtain the heights of manhood because they were inherently less than men. These ideas of racial superiority have been around since the formation of the United States; however, they did not become

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imbedded in the American consciousness really until the start of race-based bondage in the mid 18th century. People of color, including Africans and the indigenous populations of the new world, were seen as the epitome of impecuniousness, with the inability to think and cultivate civil society without the assistance, or indeed the control of white men. It was believed that non-whites and especially blacks needed the guidance of white society or they would be destined to remain in savagery and barbarism. According to the relatively recent work on American manhood in the field of masculinity studies there have been various stages of American manhood that have developed since the nation’s inception. While there are some differences in how these stages are labeled, the categories are more or less comprised of the same characteristics and requirements. This section will begin by defining the stages of American manhood that Michael Kimmel describes in his book, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History.*

According to Kimmel, during the United States’ founding there were two forms of manhood that were vying for authority. He labels these types of manhood as the Genteel Patriarch and the Heroic Artisan. Both the Genteel Patriarch and the Heroic Artisan were models of European masculinity that arrived in the new world with the initial settlers. For the Genteel Patriarch and the Heroic Artisan economic autonomy was a major constituent of a ‘real’ man. Land ownership was the Genteel Patriarch’s expression of economic autonomy while for the Heroic Artisan it lied in the form of craftsmanship. While financial stability was key in the defining of colonial manhood, there was another component even more important to the masculinity of the first

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Americans. The position in his family and his community was an essential element in the defining of an early American man according to Anthony E. Rotundo. He labels this form of masculinity as *communal manhood*. By definition of this title a man’s identity was based on the role he played in his community. Rotundo states that a man’s value to the community and his familial social status was more important than his economic standing in society. At this time a man’s position as head of household gave him much of the authority that was required to achieve full manhood. And since the importance of the family structure was based on the prevailing religious beliefs at the time men were given ultimate power. Rotundo explains that as Puritans, men and women believed that they were designated roles according to their sex. These roles privileged men and gave them authority over women because of the belief that men were indeed made in the image of a male God. Economics and religion helped to justify male supremacy in colonial America.

At this point in American history men were in charge of their family and their communities and they had no one, other than God, to be accountable to. This form of manhood, however, was only able to survive as long as the culture of the new nation permitted. Once economic and social transformations were underway, the definitions of manhood altered to better fit the new ways of life.

Both Kimmel and Rotundo agree on the next stage of American manhood. The Self-made man emerged at the end of the eighteenth century. This form of manhood, like the one before it, was based on the circumstances of everyday life. While communal manhood thrived in an era of close-knit communities and agricultural labor with family units comprising the workforce, the self-made man showed himself to be a better fit for
the newly independent country’s social and economic systems.\textsuperscript{59} The rise of free enterprise, industrialization and urbanization brought about a new set of goals for the American man. Not only was the acquisition of wealth a priority, but the measure of manhood heavily depended on financial success for legitimacy. Masculinity was now linked more to work than home; work that was no longer in the hands of individual men as was the case with the Heroic Artisan or the Genteel Patriarch. Men were now at the mercy of the industrialized nation and the capitalist system both of which were based on the belief that any man could become successful if he worked hard enough. This would of course begin to disadvantage a number of men as the few who prosper from capitalism depend on the failures of many; the self-made man began to lose the likelihood of success. Kimmel details additional reasons for his decline in the new American society.

Immigration, the rise of women in the workforce and the migration of blacks to northern cities all made for economic competition that white men, previously assured jobs based on their advantages as white and male, were ill-prepared for. No longer were experienced men and artisans holding jobs that required specialized skills. Mass labor and technological advancements meant that a man was dispensable at work. Urbanization caused, “…the elaborate requirements of the [racial] caste system” to blur.\textsuperscript{60} Whether being displaced by people of color, women or machines that could do the job faster and with lower labor costs, masses of white men were beginning to lose their grip on the newly independent country’s social and economic systems.\textsuperscript{59} The rise of free enterprise, industrialization and urbanization brought about a new set of goals for the American man. Not only was the acquisition of wealth a priority, but the measure of manhood heavily depended on financial success for legitimacy. Masculinity was now linked more to work than home; work that was no longer in the hands of individual men as was the case with the Heroic Artisan or the Genteel Patriarch. Men were now at the mercy of the industrialized nation and the capitalist system both of which were based on the belief that any man could become successful if he worked hard enough. This would of course begin to disadvantage a number of men as the few who prosper from capitalism depend on the failures of many; the self-made man began to lose the likelihood of success. Kimmel details additional reasons for his decline in the new American society.

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exclusive access to economic authority.\textsuperscript{61} No longer was success a viable option for most. And since the self-made man relied on “individual achievement” for his legitimacy, the odds of failure brought on an anxiety that had not been a part of American manhood previously.\textsuperscript{62} A race to the top inevitably creates losers and American men began to feel the full force of loss. Kimmel argues that the issues brought on by many of these new changes like industrialization, the women’s movement and so on, lead white American men to want to, “retreat to a bygone era.”\textsuperscript{63} An era that did not allow for women in the workforce or people of color as competitors for jobs. An era that kept immigrants, women and people of color in their place and left white men holding the reins of empire. The centuries of racial and gender oppression had made white men unprepared to see integration as progressive steps towards equality. Instead, they saw their loss as the leaders of society and began to blame those around them.

\textit{Race and Manhood in America}

People of color bore much of the brunt of white male anxiety. Racist stereotypes began to reemerge as popular explanations for difficult economic times and segregation was strictly enforced. The popularity of Darwin’s \textit{Origin of the Species} in the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century only heightened the tension between white men and racial minorities. Cultural critics and philosophers began to apply Darwin’s survival of the fittest theory to human societies claiming that the difference between groups provided the justification for domination and the ideologies of racism and classism flourished with this newly found

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{61} Michael Kimmel. (1996). 90 \\
\textsuperscript{62} Michael Kimmel. (1996). 23 \\
\textsuperscript{63} Michael Kimmel (1996). 89-90}
scientific evidence. White America would maintain its position that European based civilization was the only ‘true’ form. Civilization, defined as “[a]n advanced state of intellectual, cultural, and material development in human society”\(^64\) would be seen as forever connected to race and so manhood would be limited to only those who were a part of this definition; white men. Gail Bederman discusses the link between racialized manhood in America and its correlation to discourses on civilization in her book *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1890-1917*. She states,

> In the context of the later nineteenth century’s popularized Darwinism, civilization was seen as an explicitly racial concept…Gender, too, was an essential component of civilization. Indeed, one could identify advanced civilizations by the degree of their sexual differentiation…Finally, the discourse of civilization linked both male domination and white supremacy to a Darwinist version of Protestant millennialism.\(^65\)

This quote identifies the three major components of a civilized nation as it was understood in American society; whiteness, maleness and Christianity. Civilization’s existence depended on good white Christian men. These beliefs of civilization would continue to influence the definitions of manhood at the expense of men of color in America. Black men in particular would be used as the standard of negation in terms of real American manhood. America has consistently tried to erase black masculinity or label it abnormal. As stated in chapter one, this lead to images of black men as dangerous, sexually deviant, and incompetent creatures that needed to be controlled by


white society. The contemporary consequences of these stereotypes are disproportionate numbers of incarceration, homicide, suicide and poverty among black males. The black man in today’s America continues to struggle against these past images of him as either inept at manhood or hazardous to the nation. Barack Obama being seen as incapable and weak, as the remarks by Palin and Bachman suggest, fit into the historical racialized understanding of the black man’s role in America. Additionally, the tears that are streaming down the faces of men like John Boehner and Glenn Beck insist in the stereotype of the scary black man who is taking the country from its rightful owners on a path towards immorality and decadence. How has Obama battled against these images and procured the nomination of his party and later election of 2008?

According to his article, “Our First Unisex President: Black Masculinity and Obama’s Feminine Side,” Frank R. Cooper determines that President Obama was forced to negotiate his gender as a way to avert various racial stereotypes placed on black men. In particular, Cooper states that there are two general categories, what he has terms the bipolarity of black masculinity, in the stereotyping of black men; the Good Black Man and the Bad Black Man. He describes the Bad Black Man as the completely anti-integrationist scary black man and his opposite as the reassuring Good Black Man who wants nothing more than to assimilate into white American society. Cooper believes so as to not fall into either stereotype Obama was careful in the ways he represented his gender. He goes as far as to say that Obama consciously appropriated femininity in his campaign as a tool to fight the stereotypes that are associated with the Bad Black Man,

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specifically the angry black man. To do this, Obama illustrated certain feminine characteristics. Cooper quotes *Marketing* magazine and their description of Obama’s campaign as, “classically feminine” because it was “more collaborative, more human, more feelings-led and people-focused.” However, while Obama needed to utilize feminine characteristics to try and fight off the stereotypes of the ultra aggressive Bad Black Man, he also needed to be sure not to seem “un-presidential.” For example, Obama could not assume a seemingly ‘macho’ position on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan because, “…that would have triggered the Bad Black Man stereotype…” Still, he could not seem too effeminate because that would bring on accusations of weakness. However, the Good and Bad stereotypes did not only elicit fear and/or criticisms based on ideals of manhood, it also brought forth the contemporary concerns of a society that at times refers to itself as post-racial. A prime example of the struggle between racialized images of manhood that Obama needed to trounce was with the very issue of race and its significance during his campaign.

To maintain black voters’ confidence Obama needed to assure the African American community that their interests were being looked out for. However, the future president did not want to repel white voters by seeming preoccupied with the subject. Obama had to find a space between the Good accommodationist and the Bad segregationist. This became of particular interest for some African Americans who were distraught over the idea that Barack Obama would not focus much of his campaign agenda on race. (This issue will be discussed further in chapter three where I discuss the black community’s responses to the election of Barack Obama). Obama was cognizant

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of the fact that he needed to perform his racialized manhood in specific ways as to educe certain reactions from the American public. Reactions that would allow him to occupy different spaces at once; white Americas comfort zone with race and black Americas contiguous struggle for racial justice.

Erving Goffman describes these decisions on the part of an individual to convey an image that will result in a positive reaction from others as a “sign activity”. He explains that individuals can either give or give off expressions. The former being deliberate and the latter being, “non-verbal [and] presumably unintentional."\(^{68}\) Is Obama mindfully performing his identity as to elicit a particular response? I argue that Obama is both giving and giving off expressions when he performs his gender. An excerpt from Goffman’s *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* will help illuminate the importance of performance in the reading of Obama’s gender,

The impression that [an individual] gives…involves verbal symbols or their substitutes which he uses admittedly and solely to convey the information…known to attach to these symbols. [To give off] involves a wide range of action that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor, the expectation being that the action was performed for reasons other than the information conveyed in this way… one finds that when an individual is in the immediate presence of others, his activity will likely have a promissory character. The others are likely to find that they must accept the individual on faith, offering him a just return while he is present before them in exchange for something whose true value will not be established until after he has left their presence…The security that they justifiably feel in making inferences about the individual will vary, of course, depending

on such factors as the amount of information they already posses about him.\textsuperscript{69}

The most critical information about Obama that is held by dominant society is his identity. It is because of the racist definitions that various aspects of his identity(s) bring forth that Obama must actively try to control, as best he can, how his identity is understood. Goffman continues,

This control is achieved largely by influencing the definition of the situation which others come to formulate, and he can influence this definition by expressing himself in such a way as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his plan. Thus when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey.

For Obama to publicly state that he was willing to talk with countries that America had historically considered enemies was running the risk of making him seem weak on national defense. However, the opposite image of the scary or Bad Black Man may have been more damaging. Obama appeared to choose a middle ground. While being seemingly amicable in his stance on the position the US should take with nations like Iran and receiving flack for it, Obama did make clear his strength clear in a speech to AIPAC with assurance that he had an “unshakable commitment to Israel.”\textsuperscript{70} By being forceful in his expression of solidarity with Israel, Obama was able to enlist heteronormative ideals

\textsuperscript{69} Goffman, Erving. (1959). 43
of masculinity without evoking racist notions of the dangerous black man. He was also able to dispel some of the reports of his being a secret Muslim, a rumor that heightened the scary black man stereotype by intending to stir up the post-9/11 fears of Arabs and Muslims, by aligning himself with the Jewish state and its AIPAC constituents. Obama was controlling both the expressions that he gives, in his reassuring pact with the country’s closest Middle Eastern ally and those that he gives off, when he maintained an extremely ‘calm’ demeanor as to maintain a certain level of trust among the American people. Trust that many had previously questioned because of his race and gender.

Obama was and continues to walk a gender tightrope. In the beginning of his campaign the main goal was to deflect racial stereotypes that are inherently linked to black masculinity. However, Obama’s gender performance many times resulted in the questioning of his manhood. Cooper’s ultimate conclusion is that Obama’s unwillingness to perform his race or gender in the ways that dominant society expected has left open spaces where people are, “…all more free to perform our race and gender as we see fit than we had previously believed.”

I agree with Cooper’s assessment and believe that it also describes the performance of gender by those who have employed racialized notions of gender to discredit Obama.

In this chapter’s opening paragraphs I laid out a few examples of the ways in which Barack Obama has been contested in the media by politicians and TV personalities. A lot of the time Obama’s manhood was the focus of much of the

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71 Cooper, Frank R. 633
disapproval.\textsuperscript{72} McIlwain explains that many times white Americans are uncomfortable with criticizing black Americans for fear of being labeled racist and so instead they use language that would seem to focus on qualities that are distinct from race.\textsuperscript{73} However, in a racialized society such as the United States it is impossible to remove race from any discussion. Race is entrenched in our understandings of the social. From manhood to citizenship race is a part of the American discourse even when it is not spoken. And when one is surrounded by racial stereotypes that threaten to limit their physical, mental or emotional existence individuals have learned to use other social constructions like gender to maneuver around cultural barriers. For Barack Obama it was his appropriation of femininity as a tool to fight racialized stereotypes of black manhood. Similarly, those who have questioned Obama’s masculinity appear to have exchanged historic gender roles for ones more suitable for combat.

When Kimmel talked about masculine retreat as exclusion he was discussing a point in American history where white men felt that they were in danger of extinction. After the flow of immigrants, blacks and women into the public, political and economic spheres white men began to long for a time when they only had to compete amongst themselves. This seems to be taking place again but instead of trying for the ultra-masculine they have turned to femininity. Take America back has become a very popular statement since the election of Barack Obama. One could infer two things from this

\textsuperscript{72} Greenwald, Glenn. (2008, Mar. 10). War Cheerleaders: “Is Obama man enough to be President?” \textit{Salon}. Retrieved from \url{http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/glenn_greenwald/2008/03/10/obama}

statement. The first being that those using the statement want to take America back from those in charge, mainly Obama. Looking at it this ways also implies that America belonged to someone and it needed to be retrieved and given to its rightful owner, seemingly white men. The other way to understand the quote is in terms of time and place. Some Americans are longing to go back in time. The question here is what are they willing to do in order to bring back the America that elevated white manhood above all else? Perhaps, the manipulation of gender roles?

Since American manhood has historically promoted physical and emotional strength, many times to the downfall of American men, it seems odd that one can turn on the television or the radio and see or hear a grown man crying. Similarly, with the definition of femininity as the opposite of masculinity it should appear out of the ordinary and a reversal of history to hear a woman, especially a white woman, speak about a man’s fear of her, especially a black man’s. American media representations of black men have consistently shown them to be licentious perpetrators scheming to attack white women. Dangerous and deviant, black men were only kept at bay because of the strength of will and morality of white men. By claiming these stereotypes to be truth, white society was able to justify the oppression of blacks far beyond the time of slavery. Belief that there is an inherent difference between blacks and whites continues the propagation of racial stereotypes, including those that claim black men to be dangerous to white women. However, the position of Barack Obama as president has forced a new approach to keeping privilege from the masses by influencing the ways in which many within dominant society are performing their own genders.
It is my argument that as a reaction to the presidency of Obama white America has scrambled to find a way to delegitimize him as a means to maintain racial hierarchies and more importantly to preserve the definition of citizenship. To do this, I believe that many white Americans have unconsciously switched or appropriated gender roles. For example, white women have not retreated or shown themselves to be afraid of the president, as would stereotypical images of the relationship between black men and white women would suggest, instead they have taken the much more aggressive stance against him. Whether they are questioning his manhood or claiming that he is incompetent, white women have not taken the same road as their male counterparts in the rejection of Obama. The more afraid white men have become, the stronger and more vocal white women are.

In the beginning of this project I stated that the ultimate objective in the discrediting of Obama is for dominant society to maintain historical definitions of citizenship as a means to maintain privilege. In this chapter we see the manifestation of this struggle with the reversal of gender roles as a means to an end. The position of Barack Obama as president and his presence in the White House has disrupted not only the past definitions of citizenship, but in the eyes of many white Americans it has twisted the natural law of man. This warped version of reality has resulted in white men’s loss of manhood which in turn pushed white women into the position of protectors of the nation. Barack Obama has become the literal representation of the collapse of the nation to white America who has always understood US citizenship through a raced and heteronormative gendered lens; white and male. For Obama to be the most intimidating version of the Bad
Black Man he would have to scare white men, the possessors of true masculinity. This is fundamentally how the gender switch is working. To see John Boehner cry on the floor of Congress because he fears for the troops shows more than his patriotism. It also implies that he does not trust the man in office to make the right, moral decisions to protect the nation. When Glenn Beck tears up about the loss of his country what is he really saying? First, he is staking claim to the nation as his, but he is also saying that he wants his country back. Back from who? Or more importantly, back to where?
Black Enough?
Racial Authenticity, Citizenship and the Maintenance of Power

In his 2006 article for the *New York Daily News*, “What Obama Isn’t; Black Like Me,” columnist and cultural critic Stanley Crouch stirred controversy when he declared, “Other than color, Obama did not - does not - share a heritage with the majority of black Americans….when black Americans refer to Obama as "one of us," I do not know what they are talking about…while he has experienced some light versions of typical racial stereotypes, he cannot claim those problems as his own - nor has he lived the life of a black American.”74 Soon after his statements many Americans discovered that Crouch was not alone in his concerns over Obama’s blackness. Two months later author, columnist and editor, Debra Dickerson wrote in her article, “Colorblind,” “Obama isn’t black. ‘Black’ in our….social reality, means those descended from West African slaves…”75 Like Crouch, Dickerson was unconvinced of Obama’s blackness. Although these comments provoked the discussion about Obama’s claim to be the first black president they did not start the interrogation into his racial identity. In 2004 Obama’s opponent for the Illinois State Senate, Alan Keyes, said that while he and Obama shared physical characteristics, they did not have “the same heritage.” “My ancestors toiled in slavery… My consciousness, who I am as a person, has been shaped by my struggle,

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deeply emotional and deeply painful, with the reality of that heritage.”\textsuperscript{76} What Dickerson, Crouch and Keyes are ultimately saying is that Obama is not authentically black in the way that black is understood in the US. That physical characteristics and racial phenotype do not grant him entrance into a group that he has identified with for much of his life. That his black credibility does not measure up. All of these remarks about Obama’s blackness began to raise questions. If Obama isn’t black then what is he? Who gets to decide who is and who isn’t black? What exactly does the life of a black American look like? Finally, what does it mean to white America that Obama’s racial identity is being questioned? While these three commentators may have opened the door and ushered the conversation into the forefront during a critical time in American history, they cannot be said to have started the debate over who is and is not really black.

\textit{History of Racial Authenticity in the Black Community}

The concern over racial authenticity in America has not been an ephemeral one. In fact, “…history is replete with examples of the struggle over the definition of black identity and its corollary of authenticity.”\textsuperscript{77} E. Patrick Johnson gives a great many examples of the dichotomization that racial authenticity has caused in the social and political lives of black Americans. Johnson points out the various times in history where the real blackness of one person has been challenged by another’s definition. From W E B DuBois’ accusations of Booker T Washington’s accommodationism to Malcolm X’s


repeated criticisms of Martin Luther King’s form of civil disobedience, how to act or represent or protect blackness has been continuously disputed. So, who is right? Who is real? Acclaimed scholar Waheema Lubiano asks this question best when she critiques what she calls the Spike Lee discourse. Lubiano argues that Lee’s statements about telling the truth in regards to his portrayal of the black American experience only portrays limited versions of his truth. She then questions that truth by saying,

But compared to what? Compared to what is not real? Compared to other things both real and unreal? Compared to whatever else exists, has existed, or might be able to exist within the present terms of cultural production, or under terms that might be changed by our examination of what is real? Compared to who else exists, has existed, or can exist within the specific histories—past and present—of Black people across the diaspora engaged in filmmaking?  

Lubiano goes on to state that the immediate labeling of Lee’s work as the real thing by himself and critics would not have been so readily accepted save the fact that there is a lack of a critical mass of black filmmakers that would be necessary for a fair comparison. If one were to take Lubiano’s reasoning and apply it to the criticisms of Obama by Crouch, Dickerson or Keyes, one could easily argue that the lack of equal representation of black social critics and politicians may lead many Americans to quickly take their definitions of blackness as the truth. If one is to side with Lubiano then the next question is whether or not there is any legitimacy to Lee’s claims of keeping it real. Should Lee not say that he is telling the truth if that truth is limited? Or are all claims like Lee’s to

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authenticity problematic because they put forth singular truths? If there is no real blackness why does the struggle for racial authenticity exist? What about white America, what does the questioning of Obama’s racial identity mean in a nation that has used race as a marker for citizenship? Is the questioning of Obama’s blackness a form of xenophobia and if so what can be surmised from the need of many within the black community to concretely define blackness?

As in chapters one and two, this chapter also focuses on the subject of authenticity. Is there some sort of cultural and political litmus test in defining real blackness? To answer these questions I will first discuss racial authenticity. It is necessary to clarify its importance in the black community because while it has become used as “another trope manipulated for cultural capital” it has also been employed by black Americans to empower themselves. An explanation of the connections between the 1960s and 70s black psychology movement and the birth of Black Nationalism in America during this time will help to elucidate the complexity of black racial authenticity in the American context as both were influential in the move towards the redefining of black identities. This chapter will then answer why, in regards to those that deny him entrance, is Obama not really black. There seems to be two specific categorizations of blackness that are in question here; his political blackness and his cultural blackness. This chapter will explain some of the definitions of political and cultural blackness in the US and lay out some of the reasons, based on these definitions, that Obama has been rejected. According to many of the his detractors in the black community, along with his missing

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link to slavery Obama’s cultural and political past does not represent the black community’s interests and so is questionable. This is important because of the implications that lie in defining blackness in such terms. Both critical race theory and intersectionality theory are vital in discussing the intricacies of identity politics in the black community and shall be applied here. While Obama’s paternal lineage may be a major reason for his exclusion by some, it is by no means the solitary cause. His political and cultural pedigrees have also been debated in regards to his racial authenticity. Lastly, I will discuss what I believe are some repercussions in the struggle over racial authenticity by deciphering how dominant society maintains power and privilege via the black community’s effort to define real blackness. This is done primarily through the dominant culture’s limitations on citizenship which force Obama and subsequently other minorities who do not fit into the accepted versions of blackness, Americanness and so on, further out into the margins of society. To being I will start with the challenging task of explaining authenticity and describing its transformation from its empowering definition during the black psychology movement to its current position as an exclusionary tool used to create distinguishable physical, cultural and political markers between groups and individuals.

The subject of authenticity is one of dangerous terrain. Its presence assumes realness which in turn, “…implies the existence of its opposite, the fake…”⁸⁰ The belief in a true or real representation of race therefore necessarily limits options for identification. If there is a concrete definition of blackness what happens to those who

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fall outside of that definition? Suppose the definition allows for skin color variations but does not accept anything other than heteronormative gender roles and sexual preferences? What does the definition then say about the intersectionality of one’s identity? Is one black before they are female or before they are gay or before they are Muslim? If skin color does not guarantee entrance, what are other blackness deal breakers? Being raised in a white home, going to Ivy League schools, having a variety of religious affiliations in one’s family, not being the descendant of slaves? If so, then along with Barack Obama would be any number of black Americans raised in a white adoptive family, the scores of blacks who have, are or will attend prestigious colleges and universities and any African American whose family immigrated to the US after the Civil War, just to name a few. Professor Cornel West draws a similar conclusion about the problems and limitations that authenticity brings when he discusses the appointment of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. West maintains that while Thomas may not have been the most qualified for the position he received the consent of black leaders, in spite of Anita Hill’s accusations of sexual harassment and Thomas’ history of distancing himself from the black community, because of his appeals to racial authenticity. So powerful were his appeals that “…black nationalist and male-centered claims to black authenticity” assisted in Thomas’ ability to conjure the support of not only mainstream black leaders, but also those like Louis Farrakhan, a man who publicly condemned the tenets of the political party Thomas was affiliated with.81 The unwillingness of black leaders, as well as many others within the black community, to criticize Thomas for both his political associations and the charges of sexual misconduct perpetuated a definition of blackness that insisted

on the value of men at the expense of women. In a later interview Hill went as far as to say that “[Thomas] began to personify race and I then became… raceless.” Since Hill decided to “…testify against another black person, especially a black man…” she “…earned the antipathy of large segments of the African American community.” In Hill’s opinion her gender invalidated her race and because she was seen as obstructive she no longer was within the parameters of a definition of blackness that was in the best interests of the group. Thomas was especially able to exploit this because of the inflammatory language he used in his denunciation of Hill’s charges. Thomas repeatedly referred to historical violence targeted at black men claiming at one point that he was undergoing “a high-tech lynching.” This statement, along with others brought on the image of the victimized black man and further justified his appeals to race. The emasculating black woman, an image long accepted by white America—proven by the country’s ready acceptance of Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report that blamed black women for the problems in the black community, specifically citing the role of black women as “retarding the progress” of the entire community—became the illustration of Hill while Thomas remained, at least to the all white male committee members, the hard-working “Good Black Man.” Thomas was able to employ race via the image of the black man in crisis which corresponded to the stereotype of the black matriarch. And while West claims that questions about Thomas’ blackness, “were debated…throughout

it was Hill who was finally pushed outside of the definition. The confirmation hearings that ignored her racial identity while elevating his proved this to be true. If nothing else, these two examples show the instability of defining race in any concrete terms. Blackness differs because those who embody it differ. It differs because there are other identities apart from race that are retained within black bodies. Sexuality, ethnicity, religion and gender are also apart of black peoples’ lives and contribute to how blackness is seen and understood. And while these examples show the instability of defining race it must be noted that there were ways that the discourse of authenticity was used by black Americans to empower themselves.

While it has become a political and cultural marker, the idea that there are authentic black identities stemmed from a need to define blackness in terms that “…counter[ed] Blacks internalized hatred of themselves given Whites perceptions of them.” This is to say that the purpose of explicitly claiming authentic black identities began as a way to oppose former conditions of black identity, “…in which blacks viewed themselves as inadequate, inferior [and] incapable of self-determination…” that were induced by a racist society. This was the thinking of many black psychologists of the late sixties and seventies. Individuals like Reginald L. Jones, commonly known as the father of black psychology, felt that the study of black behavior up until this point had focused on “pathology oriented notions.” In order to extricate many of the stereotypes of black people removal of the mainstream belief that blacks are psychologically inherently

86 West, Cornel. (1993). 25
different from whites was necessary. This initiated what is now known as the black psychology movement. Some argue that the movement began in the 1920s when the first PhD in psychology was obtained by Francis Sumner. While there is truth to the fact that the effort to eradicate racist claims of black inferiority was a priority of Sumner and others, it is commonly know that the period of the late 1960s and 70s was indeed the movements’ zenith when black psychologists made a “concerted and sustained effort to expand their concerns into a distinct system of thought…”\(^8\) There were various influences on the black psychology movement and its formation at this particular time in American history. The Civil Rights Movement had about reached its summit in 1968. The death of Martin Luther King had discouraged many and the rhetoric of non-violence that had previously dominated was being replaced by a much more nationalistic frame of thought.\(^9\) The ideological positions of Black Nationalism were fast becoming popular in the struggle for racial uplift. Malcolm X’s infamous “by any means necessary” declaration became the movement’s battle cry. No longer would individuals allow themselves to endure physical or mental abuse without retaliation. This could be done, in part, because of the ideological differences between Black Nationalism and the previous efforts of the Civil Rights Movement. While the Civil Rights Movement promoted non-violence and integration, many black nationalists promoted self-protection and separation. Groups like the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense armed themselves and policed their own neighborhoods and maintained that self-preservation was their God given right. The Black Panther Party had a Ten-Point Program where they stated their

\(^8\) Jackson, Gerald G. (1979). *Studia Africana*. 1 (3). 270-293

demands one being a change in the educational structure that had long convinced black children of their inferiority. Black pride was championed and according to William L. Van Deburg the greatest accomplishment of the Black Nationalist movement was, “convincing people that they had sufficient power within themselves to escape ‘the prison of self-deprecation’” through “promoting the psychological well being of the Afro-American people.”

There were also international occurrences that influenced the effort of black Americans to empower themselves. African countries were gaining independence in record numbers by the end of the 1960s. The second half of the 20th century looked like it would be ushering in a new African narrative. And the dismantling of colonialism proved to be a great motivator for black Americans. All of these incidents did not leave black psychologists unaffected. They too felt the need to battle racism and they used their field of study to combat not only white racist attitudes, but also the internalized racism that was the inevitable outcome of a white supremacist culture. Thus, the Association of Black Psychologists which was created in 1968 was determined “…to have a positive impact upon the mental health of the national Black community by means of planning, programs, services, training, and advocacy.”

Racial Authenticity: Empowerment or Measurement

In his groundbreaking 1970 article in Ebony, “Toward a Black Psychology,” Joseph White declared, “…it is vitally important that we develop, out of the authentic experience of black people in this country, an accurate workable theory of black

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psychology” (Emphasis added). The term black authenticity used by White and other black psychologists was indeed a way to take the growing popularity of Black Nationalism and use it to better understand the psyche of black Americans. To combat racism with Afrocentric ideology as opposed to white-oriented knowledge. According to Dr. Maulana Karenga,

the resurgence of black nationalism, and its black power expression, encouraged and demanded black caucuses within white-controlled and white-oriented professional organizations as well as independent black organizations. In 1968 the Association of Black Psychologists was founded in the midst of criticism of American Psychological Association for its limited vision and conscious and unconscious support of the racist character of American society.  

To say that there were authentic identities was to say that the belief in black inferiority was unacceptable. That in fact their real identity had been stained by the generations of racism that were entrenched in American culture and so black Americans had to, “…purge [them]selves of the concept of cultural deprivation and all its derogatory implications. If a concept is needed, then we must seek a more accurate, authentic and honest term.”  

Black authenticity, as it was promoted by black psychologists, was not a system of exclusion, but instead a much more inclusive ideology that would allow blacks to see and understand themselves as different from the racist stereotypes that dominant

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society had placed on them. How then did this belief in “authentic” black identities as a tool of empowerment turn into the sizing up of people’s blackness? The answer to this question also lies in the Black Nationalist movement.

Another principle of Black Nationalism is the belief in racial solidarity as a means to political, social and economic progress. Many believed, including the overwhelming majority of black nationalists, that if black Americans wanted to change their positions as second class citizens they would need to band together. Professor Cornel West has labeled this the closing-ranks mentality, “…the notion that America’s will to racial justice is weak and therefore black people must close ranks for survival…”95 This closing of ranks or use of racial solidarity is also described by other scholars as a way for minority groups to maintain their identity and oppose assimilation. Charlton McIlwain states that where authentic black identities were, “…the individual psychological response to the problem of racism, the notion of black solidarity (group identity) around the same time became the group political response.”96 However, this idea poses problems for those who do not accept race as their sole or primary way of identifying. This has been a major issue for black women who have struggled to find their place in the fight for gender and racial justice. Black women have historically been pressed to choose between their gender and their race. Kimberle Crenshaw clarifies that the difficulty for black women is many times the fact that identity politics “conflicts or ignores intra group differences.” She goes on to state that, “…many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently

95 Cornel West. (1993). 24  
96 McIlwain, Charlton al. (2011). 74
understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the women race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately."\(^{97}\) In Anita Hill’s case many believed that, “…what was inappropriate was that a black woman’s commitment to a gender issue superseded what was largely perceived as racial solidarity.”\(^{98}\) For Hill racial solidarity could not protect her from sexual harassment by a member of the group she was supposedly more connected to. Hill made the choice to see herself as both black and female, not allowing either identity displace the other, which many believed disobeyed the tenets of black solidarity. McIlwain comments about the move away from racial solidarity as what, “…gives rise to the possibility, probability and potential of appeals to black authenticity.”\(^{99}\) If McIlwain’s statement is true then one reason that people like Crouch may be questioning Obama’s racial authenticity is that they believe he is lacking racial solidarity with the black community. I make this claim not only because of Crouch and Dickerson’s assertions of Obama not living the life of a black American, but also because during his campaign many black leaders were concerned with Obama’s tendency to evade the topic of race. In an article in the \textit{Los Angeles Times}, Conrad Worrill, director of inner-city studies at Northeastern Illinois University, resonated the sentiments of many when he was quoted as saying that many black activists question “the depths of [Obama’s] links to the black community.”\(^{100}\)

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\(^{99}\) McIlwain, Charlton et al. (2011). 75
According to Crouch’s article, there is more to Obama not being black than his missing ancestral link to slavery (although that is a major issue of his and most others who deny Obama’s blackness). Crouch’s statement that Obama “has not lived the life of a black American” is similar to Dickerson’s criticisms of Obama’s cultural and political blackness. Both of these columnists are claiming that the current president of the United States cannot claim a black racial identity because he has not lived a particular life. Dickerson goes as far as to say that Obama “had no part in our [black] racial history.” What life are they referring to? Let’s begin by looking briefly at the life of Barack Obama.

Barack Hussein Obama was born in Honolulu, Hawaii in 1961. He is the child of a white American mother from Kansas and a black Kenyan father. His parents divorced when Barack was very young and as a result he did not have much contact with his father for the majority of his life. While he spent roughly four years of his early childhood in Indonesia, after his mother remarried Obama moved back to Hawaii with his grandparents while his mother finished field work in her pursuit of a PhD. For most of his adolescence Obama was apart from both of his parents. He was not raised in a particularly religious home but has stated on occasion that his grandparents were Christian. He attended both Columbia and Harvard Universities. He was made editor of the Law Review at Harvard making him the first black editor and graduated magna cum laude in 1991. Obama first moved to Chicago after graduating from Columbia and worked as a community organizer. He was head of the Developing Communities Project where he worked closely with the black churches in the area. Obama left Chicago in 1988 to attend Harvard Law where he became the first African American to be named editor of
the Law Review. Obama graduated in 1991 and moved back to Chicago where he practiced constitutional law and taught at the University of Chicago Law School. In 1997 Obama became a member of the Illinois State Senate and moved on to the United States Senate in 2004, beating out Democratic incumbent Alice Parker and Republican Alan Keyes. While this is a very brief history of Obama’s life, it brings up many of the major points of those who claim that he did not live a culturally black life.

The first remark made by many is that Obama is not black, he is biracial. Since his mother is white Obama is also part white. While this is not untrue, the fact is that in the United States any individual who was biracial has always been understood by dominant society as black. This goes back to the one drop rule that stated a person with any amount of African blood is to be considered black. This idea became popular and was made into law during the Jim Crow era of the South as a way to maintain a social and economic hierarchy based on race. Another argument is that Obama grew up in an area that did not have a large black population. Once again this is also true. However, the belief that Obama is not black because he was raised amongst a diverse community—Hawaii is the most ethnically and racially diverse state in the US—is quite troubling. What are the implications of such claims? By stating that black people should only live among other blacks or that “true” blackness can only be honed in particular areas implies that racial identity is cohesive and final. That all black people have the same understanding of identity. We know that this is problematic because of the work of Kimberle Crenshaw. I noted earlier that Crenshaw points out the problems that black women have had as a result of this way of thinking. In her article, “Mapping the Margins:

Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color” Crenshaw states, “[t]he problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite- that it frequently conflates or ignores intra group differences.”102 This conflation then assumes singularity and so limits individuals’ options for identity. Another issue closely related to his being raised in Hawaii is that many claim Obama has lived the life of an elite member of society only “benefiting from black progress” and never contributing to it. To argue that an individual who is able to receive an Ivy League education whether it is from the benefit of their parent’s income or their attainment of scholarships and grants has not lived the life of a black American is saying that black Americans are innately connected to a lower socioeconomic status and must live a life filled with poverty or lower middle-class status at best to prove their black credibility. Brent Staples of The New York Times says, “[t]he claim that Obama has not lived the typical African American life…goes right back to the race police of the 1960s who decreed that the only authentic black experience was one that featured hardship and crushing encounters with racism, preferably with an urban American backdrop.”103 And while it is ridiculous to measure the racial authenticity of an individual based on geographic location, there is something to be said about empathy and the ability to identify with those who have lived a different life.

Many within the black community were concerned that Obama might not understand the “depths” of racism not because he is of “African extraction” as Dickerson

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wrote, but because he lived at a distance from what many believe are the most intensely racialized parts of the United States. That Obama was lucky enough to receive top-notch education did not disqualify his blackness, but that he did not experience firsthand the troubles of inner-city school life gives many reservations about his ability to comprehend the lives of other black Americans who were not as lucky as he. It is when the fear of his inability to empathize transforms into a debate about whether or not he is “real” it becomes an issue of authenticity. However, it was not his cultural upbringing alone that brought on questions concerning his racial identity.

The black church’s role in the black community has always been one of paramount importance. From the beginning, the black church’s primary role was to the freedom of its parishioners. The church argued that the system of slavery was an abomination to God and it continuously worked to resist racism. Black pastors used their understanding of Christianity to comfort their parishioners and preached that freedom, whether here on earth or in the afterlife, would be granted to those of all races who followed the word of God. The church became more than a physical and symbolic place for blacks to gain solace from the pains of everyday life. It was the meeting place for free and enslaved blacks to plan and organize and it produced the majority of black abolitionist leaders. Men like Fredrick Douglass and Henry Highland Garnett were preachers who believed that their service to God was accomplished in part by their dedication to the freedom of black Americans. Women like Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman were also members of the black church who used Christian tenets in their fight for the rights of blacks. The importance of the black church for the political progress of black Americans would only continue to grow. In the most comprehensive and oft-cited
text on the beginning stages of the Civil Rights Movement, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, Aldon Morris proclaims that,

[t]he black church functioned as the institutional center of the modern civil rights movement. Churches provided the movement with an organized mass base; a leadership of clergy largely economically independent of the larger white society and skilled in the art of managing people and resources; an institutionalized financial base through which protest was financed; and meeting places where the masses planned tactics and strategies and collectively committed themselves to the struggle.  

This is no more evident than in the fact that the majority of black politicians have either come out of the church or have used the church to cultivate their campaigns. In the past, the few black Americans who ran for president including Shirley Chisholm, Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton were all highly involved in the black church. The importance of the church came up again in the 2008 election when many criticized Obama for the fact that his campaign did not come out of the church. While the secret Muslim accusations seemed to be mainly a concern of white America, there were blacks who felt that his Christianity was not as important a factor in his life as it should have been. And while Obama spent the last twenty years of his life consistently attending a black church, there were still those who questioned his Christian conviction. More importantly however, was the fact that much of the worry over his campaign not emerging from the church was really a proxy for a larger issue.

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Whether or not Obama would make the interests of black Americans a priority seemed to be the most important question among black Americans. Many blacks supported Hillary Clinton during the beginning of the race for the Democratic Party’s nomination because many believed that both she and her husband had proven their resolve to the black struggle. The question now was whether or not this young man from a biracial home and an elite educational background would make sure to present black issues to the American public as significant to his campaign and future presidency. This is where the concerns over Obama’s cultural blackness began to influence how people understood his political blackness. And when Obama distanced himself from Jeremiah Wright right after the controversy surrounding his sermons, including one where he is filmed shouting “Goddamn America” to a roaring crowd, Obama looked to be even more removed from the black community. Obama’s avoidance of race during campaign speeches and his evasion of the topic during interviews made blacks question further his intentions as president.

In an article in the *New Republic* entitled “Why White People Like Barack Obama” journalist Peter Beinart claims that once a black candidate becomes, “a darling of the white press” he is sure to undergo questions about his racial authenticity. In Beinart’s opinion Obama is seen as a “good black” for all of the same reasons that people like Dickerson and Crouch claim that he is not black; being the child of an immigrant, going to Ivy League schools, being raised by the white side of his family. Beinart goes

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on to claim that because he is seen as a “good black” he will have to prove himself to the black community in ways that men like Al Sharpton a “bad black” would not have to because of their established dedication to the race. Going back to Frank R. Cooper’s assessment of America’s dichotomization of the black male image, the “good black man” is understood as one who would like to assimilate into white dominant society and the “bad black man” is the opposite. The “bad black man” is seen as the race affirming Black Nationalist who would like nothing more than to separate himself from dominate society. These images are then placed upon Obama and others who are willing to brave the racial storm of American politics. Obama will need to navigate his racial image because as Cooper stated, he needed to seem man enough for the job without invoking the angry black man stereotype. ¹⁰⁷ However, Obama also needed to be sure to show the black community that he was invested in the struggle for racial justice. Cooper makes an important closing remark that will lead us to the conclusion of this chapter that the struggle over racial authenticity within the black community is dangerous because it assumes that there is a right way and a wrong way to be black which in turn reinforces dominant society’s assumption that there is a right way to be American. While Cooper discusses the dangerousness of playing into the role of the good black man because it reinforces the belief that the majority of blacks do not “merit inclusion” because of their inability or unwillingness to assume that identity this chapter argues that the struggle over racial authenticity is just as dangerous because it also plays into the hands of dominant society’s stereotypes of the real American.

If being authentically black means one has to be the descendant of slaves than it is much easier to ostracize immigrants as unreal blacks and subsequently as unreal Americans. Furthermore, the belief that a true black identity is one of hardship and poverty further perpetuates not only the stereotypes of black Americans but also their actual position in society as second class citizens. How is a community to ever fully pull itself out of a perpetual second class status if its “true” identity is one that stems from that? Simply put, by claiming that there are real black identities white America is able to maintain privilege because of the position that these “real” black identities assume in mainstream culture. Furthermore, white America’s ability to control privilege allows it to continue to define citizenship on its own (historically racialized) terms. The othering of Obama by the black community works in the same manner that dominant society has othered blacks, by using authenticity as a tool to measure worth.

The belief that black people are a monolithic group with certain requirements that must be met in order to claim entry only reinforces the oppression of particular individuals within that group. It denies individuality and in fact affects the group as a whole. Black women for instance have been historically expected to relinquish their gender identity for racial solidarity. This has affected not only their standing within the black community, but it has affected the position that black women hold in the larger US society which in turn perpetuates the marginalized position of the black community. The denial of the multiplicity of black female identities reinforces the belief that identities can and should be limited. The fighting within the black community in regards to authenticity furthers the cause of white privilege by reinforcing the notion of realness while simultaneously limiting options for black identity.
Conclusion

In the process of writing, You Lie! The Story that Barack Obama’s Body Tells I was asked to give an intellectual genealogy of the project. Initially, I began by chronicling the events that led to my interest in the topic. The “you lie!” interruption by Congressman Joe Wilson was indeed the first time I sat up and took notice of the peculiar ways in which many Americans were responding to Barack Obama’s presidency. Screaming at the commander-in-chief during a national address must be more than partisanship uncensored, I thought. And so I began to ask what else, besides blatant racism and political battling—two of the most popular explanations given by the news media, could Wilson’s disruption mean? This is when I began to incorporate authenticity into my research. What made Wilson believe he had the right to call the president an outright liar was the same thing that allowed Stanley Crouch and Debra Dickerson to deny Obama’s blackness and Michele Bachman to refuse to recognize the president’s manhood. Authenticity was at the center of my research because it seemed that every time Obama was being questioned he was simultaneously being denied entrance into one group or another. He could not be president because he was not man enough. He was not really black because he was not a descendant of slaves. His inability to govern stemmed from the fact that his manliness was deficient. All of this barring of Obama made me consider the power of inclusion. I then realized that my interest in the subject of
authenticity had began much earlier than Obama’s 2009 speech and the project itself was about me as much as it was Barack Obama.

As a child growing up in Allentown, Pennsylvania there were many times I felt incompatible with my surroundings. Many times my own realness was questioned. My strange name and different religious beliefs never really allowed me to claim the same Americanness that seemed to be inherent in my friends. I was not permitted to do the same things as my “American” friends like attend sleepovers or eat pepperoni pizza. I could not wear the same cloths or talk of dating like my Americans friends did. I was allowed to say the pledge of allegiance, but I distinctly remember being told that I was Muslim first, Lebanese second and then American. And as a 29 year old woman who has spent over 28 years of her life in the United States, I cannot remember having ever called myself an American. Being an American was always like wearing an ill-fitting dress; it was uncomfortable and made me feel awkward. I felt excluded from the group and that exclusion made me question everything I said and did. As an adult I learned that, like President Obama, whether or not I wanted it to be, my identity was also political. This first time I understood the consequences of my identity came quickly after September 11, 2001.

I am not sure exactly who the first person was to tell me that my status in the United States was undefined. That I was not really a citizen. The years between 2001 and 2003 are a blur of meetings with lawyers, appointments with Immigration and Naturalization Services and the deportation of loved ones. Someone finally explained to me that since I did not have proof of my own citizenship I had to go through the process.
of naturalization. I remember asking a number of people about the fact that my mother was a naturalized citizen, but only once do I recall receiving a response. During one of my many conversations with an INS employee I mentioned my mother’s citizenship status and the fact that I was a minor when she was naturalized. The agent asked me where we “were originally from” and I told him Beirut, Lebanon. His first response was to say that I needed my own naturalization certificate because of my country of origin. When I asked him to explain further he continued to state my need of proof. This same question would be asked of me in different ways in the years following that conversation.

_You Lie! The Story That Barack Obama’s Body Tells_ is the manifestation of my inability to find that proof. At least not the kind that would automatically have people assume I belong instead of asking me, “so where are you originally from.” As if my place of birth would help everything make better sense. Or my name, my religion and my ethnic background would be an explanation to why I do not quite look like an American. I realized that my interest in Joe Wilson and Barack Obama came from a very personal place of anger and fear. Fear of not belonging and anger at the belief that others, “real” Americans, were the ones who made the decisions. While working through this project I also came to the reason why Joe Wilson felt he had the right to shout at the president. Wilson did not need proof—his identity was the proof. This is the power of inclusion. Barack Obama’s position as president of the United States has involuntarily brought with it a struggle over the American identity and those who win claim ownership of that identity will hold the power to define others. Since Wilson represents what it has historically meant to be an American; white, male and Christian, he is working from a
position of power. He is understood by others as real. Even those of us who have been
denied full entrance into the American identity have never questioned Wilson’s
Americanness. Never questioned his love for this country. Never asked for proof of his
eligibility to run for political office.

This research has done more than provide a new example of the importance that
authenticity plays in the (in)ability of individuals and groups to claim citizenship. It
asserts that the furthering of white privilege is done in many ways, one of which is
through the strengthening of definitions of citizenship based on racialized, ethnicized,
gendered and religious notions of reality. It has also shown that the outcome of searching
for authenticity necessarily limits the availability for entrance and options for
identification. Looking to concretely define an identity will ultimately infringe on the
rights of others.

This project can be expanded in various ways. One could look at to see if the
constant questioning of Obama’s authenticity will influence his chances at re-election.
Will his Americanness be a matter for debate in the 2012 election or has the public grown
tired of the question? Another direction to take the project is to look at what I have
labeled the gender switch. If Obama is reelected does the position of white women as
protectors of the nation continue? Or if the United States sees a white male president in
2012 will women like Michele Bachman continue to be as aggressive in their political
roles? One could also look to the black community’s role in Obama’s re-election
campaign. Does Barack Obama feel the need to involve the black church more or does he
continue to distance himself from discussions of race? Will his blackness be on the lips
and keyboards of commentators like Dickerson and Crouch? These are all directions that expand each chapter of this project. However, there are certain issues that have not been discussed at all in this research. For example, what are the effects that the search for American authenticity on different minority groups. How does the search for American authenticity affect the relationship between Arab-Americans and African-Americans? Does the marginalization of these groups affect the ways in which they relate to one another? This direction is important because the goal of this project is to tease out a more comprehensive understanding of the connections between identity politics, citizenship and power in order to further the cause of social justice and to do so we must take into consideration the relationship the minority groups have with one another, especially when the most derogatory stereotypes about the two have been superimposed on the first non-white president of the United States of America.

The election of Barack Obama has reignited both the effort of protest and grassroots politicking and has brought to light many of the prejudices that this nation has so eagerly tried to conceal from itself. The effort to achieve and define American authenticity has had a “trickle-down” effect. It has become the justification for the continuing of racial, ethnic, religious and gender discrimination that has been an unfortunate element of American life. Authenticity is unavoidably linked to oppression. Therefore, to fight it we must not use “the master’s tools.” That only makes him more powerful.
References


