

# The Race Whisperer: Barack Obama and the Political Uses of Race

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On January 20, 2017, Barack Obama ended his eight-year tenure as the 44th overall and first black president of the United States of America—a significant historical achievement whose meaning and legacy are subject to public and scholarly debate. Social scientists have long understood racial meanings, systems of oppression, modes of resistance, and political dynamics as intertwined (e.g., Du Bois 1920; Omi and Winant 1986). Recent scholarship covers the politics of racism and the uses of racial language by politicians of various persuasions (see Rosino and Hughey 2016). Yet there are unique flavors and textures to Obama-era racial politics. Scholarly attention has been dedicated to racial rhetoric about President Obama (e.g., Hughey and Parks 2014; Parlett 2014). But fewer works in this vein dedicate thorough analysis to Obama’s deft use of racial discourse. Melanye T. Price’s *The Race Whisperer* makes a welcome contribution by focusing on how Obama, a man known for his rhetorical style and substance, deployed racial narratives in distinct and powerful ways.

American politics are shaped by ongoing racial subjugation and conflicts wrought with material interests and competing visions of order and justice. Yet somehow Obama’s rhetoric on potentially divisive racial issues resonated with large swathes of the American public and rallied a multiracial coalition of supporters. Price investigates exactly how and why Obama could do this. Obama is seen here as an archetypal “race whisperer”: “one who is seamlessly and agilely able to employ racial language and tropes by using personal experiences or

common historical themes to engage and mobilize diverse racial constituencies” (p. 1). Importantly, this framework goes beyond an interrogation of the content of his words to connect them with their impacts among various audiences.

Analysts have often shown how political leaders use racial animus instrumentally in their quest for power. Yet Obama drew upon a decidedly wider range of racial sentiments and ideals. Price argues that because racial schemas are dynamic, contextually dependent, and performative, Obama used race as a “political instrument” (p. 6) throughout his career. The book breaks down the rhetorical strategies that emerged in major speeches and his responses to flashpoint events. These strategies include employing abstract liberalism in articulating racial conditions, invoking a patriotic valorization of whiteness, conveying tropes of progress and racial transcendence, and his symbolic rather than substantive approach to racial profiling and police violence. Especially instructive is Price’s analysis of how Obama deracialized his campaign and presidency through narratives that signaled allegiance with whiteness and extolled “the determinacy of individual choice and personal responsibility rather than structural impediments to Black equality” (p. 36). And in response to these discourses coming from the campaign trail and the White House, black Americans were often left in a double bind: either avoid challenging the status quo or risk delegitimizing the first black president.

Though careful not to depict Obama as “either a hero or a monster” (p. 31), Price nonetheless

accentuates the consequences of the racial meanings amplified in his quest to attain and maintain national leadership. The book adds a strong voice to an already vocal chorus of scholars (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 2014; Moore and Bell 2010) who note that, despite his charismatic appeal, substantive racial justice was more often eluded rather than nourished by these words and logics. While not producing concrete answers, the text provides food for thought on the dilemmas presented by the need to achieve black political success without abandoning strategies and visions that problematize and confront the ongoing reality of racial oppression. As the struggle for racial justice continues in the age of Trump and beyond, this analysis can help us unpack the past and reimagine the future.

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