



# Recorded Events

## Ralina L. Joseph reads and discusses 'Postracial Resistance'

[00:00:05] Welcome to The Seattle Public Library's podcasts of author readings and library events. Library podcasts are brought to you by The Seattle Public Library and Foundation. To learn more about our programs and podcasts, visit our web site at [www.spl.org](http://www.spl.org). To learn how you can help the library foundation support The Seattle Public Library go to [foundation.spl.org](http://foundation.spl.org)

[00:00:39] Very happy to see you here tonight for an insightful examination of the media landscape and its impact on the African-American woman by author Ralina L. Joseph. Ralina L. Joseph is Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Washington and she is the founding director of the Center for Communication difference and equity. Lena is an expert on the communication of difference or more specifically of how race gender class and sexuality intersects with equity in our interpersonal and mediated worlds. She is the author of two books her first book is *Transcending Blackness* from the new millennium mulatto to the exceptional multiracial. But her new book *post-racial resistance black women media and the uses of strategic ambiguity* examines black women's negotiation of the ostensibly after moment of racism and sexism. I think you're in for a very interesting presentation. Please help me welcome author Ralina L. Joseph.

[00:02:03] Thank you. Thanks so much and thank you all for coming tonight. So what I'm going to do tonight is to give you a little bit. Begin by giving you a little bit of an overview of the book and telling you a bit how I enter in and talking through this idea of strategic ambiguity and then I'm going to go into the specific case study of Michelle Obama and talking about how she became the Michelle Obama that we know today the Michelle Obama of becoming by looking at the Michelle Obama that she was back in 2008. So I'm gonna go ahead and jump in and I mean to begin with a couple of stories that I begin with in my preface in their very first meeting a college students new roommate shifts the conversation from pleasantries about hometowns and class schedules to hair first complimenting her roommate's cool style and then moving closer saying I just want to see what it feels like just before her roommate's hand grazes her locks the student gently catches and removes it she feels her stomach her cheeks and her hands constrict with indignation

[00:03:21] But she doesn't slap her hand away. She doesn't yell she doesn't lecture.

[00:03:26] She takes a breath permits a tired smile and says with a measured tone please don't touch my hair. Later she'll Journal about this experience. Describe it in her request letter to transfer into a single and share it with faculty students staff and community members at her campuses Black Lives Matter protest. The morning after another widely televised murder of a black man goes viral the woman heads back to her job as a television writer. She takes a deep breath at the threshold of the writers room pausing to rebalance her coffee laptop and script bursting with a rainbow of sticky notes.

[00:04:06] She hears raucous laughter and feels relieved at the promised distraction. But as soon as she walks in the conversation stops and her colleagues eyes dart to their phone screens busying herself with setting up her space and giving herself a pep talk to pitch her first idea. She smiles and enthuses you all ready to start. Later she will channel her emotions from this moment into her own spec script and then the third opener on the first day of classes. A lecture hall full of students wanting ad codes for an oversubscribed course parade pass the woman shuffling through papers and outfitted in a tweed blazer and slacks. They line up behind a bearded man in bike commuter attire sitting on stage legs dangling the student dress the man reverently as professor and ask him for the honor of joining the class. Woman assesses the students in line in front of her flattered and smiling graduate student teaching assistant. She takes she takes the podium and warmly addresses the crowd. Welcome to communication three eighty nine. I am your professor and I will answer all questions about ad codes after class. Later she'll narrate this experience for her students in her lecture on stereotyping. So I begin the book with these three specific examples. The first one of students in a dormitory. The second one of these television writers which is how I end up the book which is with with some interviews of black women television writer producers directors and studio legal counsels and the third one with my own experience as a professor at the University of Washington to talk through the ways in which racism and sexism are racialized sexism.

[00:05:53] The term that sometimes used today is called misogyny are rarely function in extreme ways right. They function in these coded fashions and and we have this term that we call micro aggressions. Right. Micro aggressions are often described as allegedly well-intentioned right there. They're often thought of as as as what psychologist Gerald winks winks who says brief everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership micro aggressions thrive in spaces where racism remains unacknowledged and where people believe that the fallacy that our world is now post-racial or that we are beyond racialized inequality and perhaps race itself. And so that's that's where I start the book is with with this fraught idea that. We're caught in this world where racialized sexism is something that is always happening right. And yet people of color in my book Black women are hamstrung in the ways in which we're able to identify to talk about to to actually name what is happening in the moment.

[00:07:06] So what happens what happens when when we cannot actually name this phenomenon and the book is is set very much in in what I talk about as the Michelle Obama era and I think that while this moment was not too long ago it feels very very long ago in lots of different ways. This is a time when black women enjoyed some of the most prestigious invisible positions in US popular culture and yet still could not speak in this forthright manner about racialized and gender discrimination and the end. You know. Sometimes when I'm talking about racial eras and thinking

about the era of forty five versus the Michelle Obama era. It's not I'm not saying that that this moment is over. They live on top of each other in various ways right. But but I tried to really kind of name what was happening was operative at this particular moment and I'll give some examples about this as we're going through. So you know in this moment as black women are redefining what it means to be an icon in our celebrity obsessed world. What I'm talking about is this idea of strategic ambiguity and how I define this is for grounding a type of a crossover appeal courting multiple publics speaking coded language and smoothing and soothing fears of differences.

[00:08:31] Anything other than an incidental side note. So I talk about strategic ambiguity it's coming about when a privileged minorities person comes into the room and feels the racism feels the sexism but knows that it's not safe to actually explicitly call it out but also knows that that she needs to resist. And so how does that resistance occur when it can't occur with forthright language. That's what I explore in this book Strategic Ambiguity is is not a strategy of walkouts of pickets or sit ins but it's also not about safety because of the ways in which any race gender talk by black women is risky even if that risk is insulated by the extreme privilege of celebrity and the deniability of strategic ambiguity. And in the book I ask for our art from looking at some readings of celebrity figures to thinking about how audiences are reading these women's performances and resistance of racism and sexism and ask where we as audiences are consuming these performances. We're learning about how are we then going to resist right. Do we want to mirror these performances. We want to think about different types of ways of of of resisting that we're seeing on the screens themselves. And that's what I saw from the audiences that I spent some time with as well.

[00:09:57] So I mean I'm going to pivot to the specific case study of Michelle Obama. You know Michelle Obama who has earned the title of forever first lady for some of us. And you can see here in this in this little clause this is a mix of pictures some before and some during her time as first lady. And I'm going to set the scene and talk a little bit about the twenty eight I'm into the 2008 rather campaign. And what was happening at that moment before she became the beloved figure that she would she would soon become. All right. So in the months leading up to the selection of the 2008 Democratic nominee Michelle Obama was widely considered to be a liability to her husband's campaign in both anonymous online spaces and mainstream media outlets journalists and lay commentators alike attacked Mrs. Obama with astoundingly racist sexist vitriol.

[00:10:52] And people remember this right. She was going to be the reason that her husband's campaign sunk right. And people were trying to sink her simultaneously.

[00:11:02] And what did this look like Britney Cooper summed up these comments just focusing on Obama as quote unpatriotic unfeminine emasculating and untrustworthy while sociologists and Tosha Gordon described how Obama quote has been charged with epithets ranging from being quote ape like to a terrorist to a bitter angry black woman to President Obama's baby mama. If online comments were crude and explicit. Mainstream Press sentiments circulated barely sublimated racist codes that amounted to one underlying assumption. Michelle Obama simply wasn't the image of a first lady. So that's kind of my my setup in this chapter so you know an int she. So she talks about how she is. All this incredible hatred is thrown at her.

[00:11:47] Right. And she is not able to react. There is no way in which she can call it out at all right. I mean she's able to now and becoming. And on the press tour she's able to kind of let a bit of this out and to say I wanted to be able to this is incredibly painful. But she has to always take the high road she's taking the high road. She's acting as though nothing is bothering her. Right. And she's on the stump she's always on the stump. So one of these days that she's on the stump and she goes to Wisconsin and gives a speech that she had given a number of different times. Now the exciting thing for me you know I'm being a media scholar. I read kind of the tea leaves of media text and see the way that I can put stories together and that's what I did for this. Right but now with becoming you will be becoming coming out she talk specifically about this incident that I'm going to tell you about. So I was able to see where I was right and where I was wrong. And I have to say I was mostly right in doing some and doing some kind of piecing together of what was happening. So she's on the stump in Wisconsin.

[00:12:55] She goes to make this speech here that you know she had done a number of different times. But what was different this particular time was that the McCain campaign had decided that they heard she was making a couple of remarks.

[00:13:13] They thought they could pick up on right and publicized and they could really go across the conservative media and take her down.

[00:13:21] So she makes her pride comments first in Milwaukee and then in Madison Wisconsin. She says what we've learned over this year is that hope is making a comeback. It's making a comeback. And let me tell you something for the first time in my adult life I'm really proud of my country as not just because Barack has done well but because I think people are hungry hungry for change.

[00:13:46] Right.

[00:13:47] So what I want to talk about here is how how what she what she's telling us is her talk of hope which she is underscoring with a collective vision. And it's not just about individual success. She's talking about folks who are usually overlooked. And she continues saying and I've been desperate to see our country moving in that direction and just not feeling so alone in my frustration disappointment. I've seen people who are hungry to be unified around some basic common issues and this made me proud. And I feel privileged to be a part of even witnessing this traveling around states all over the country and be reminded that there there is more that unites us than divides us. Right. So what I talk about here is in particular create her insertion of I statements right. She's not isolating herself from the people that she's rhetorically conjuring up she's very much in the category of the people who are dispossessed.

[00:14:40] She and her family are a part of this group that she's identifying with. She also makes this particular type of an of an interracial moment of connection in the next part she says that the crowd is to keep in mind the struggles of a farmer in Iowa are no different than what's happening on the South Side of Chicago. The people are feeling this team pain and wanting the same thing for their families

right. So we see here that working class whites the farmers in Iowa were cast out by the then Republican regime in the same way the working class African-Americans those on the South Side of Chicago were what this amounted to was that people needed to stand together and cross racial unity. So of course this is not at all what's covered so I'm not going to put a pin in that for a second and move back. To. The image that you all see on the screen because

[00:15:31] What I just focused on were her words.

[00:15:34] We got just a segment of that but I think that the incredibly virulent response that's about to come comes largely because of this image that she presents for us.

[00:15:48] So in the speech that she gave you for example as she's presenting your speech she is unsmiling. She's very very serious. She's not the Michelle Obama that's. Quite perky. You know that she they would we see nowadays who's always smiling. She speaks in longer sentences. Right. You can see that she's wearing this gray crew neck sweater. She's got her her little minimal no nonsense Bob. They're. Her jewelry that kind of just blends into her outfit. Her very minimal makeup. It's the content of her words. Right now what she's wearing. Not her feminized performance that are the focus here. And what I'm kind of contending is that that she is projecting the image of a feminist. And that's part of what makes her so vulnerable to being attacked so attacked. She is incredibly after this. So

[00:16:53] Conservative commentators most probably television news personalities Joe Scarborough and Sean Hannity and the McCain campaign quickly picked up on the single portion of the comments. Take it out of context for the first time in my adult life I'm really proud of my country. 24 hour cable news networks feature these comments around the clock as proof that Mrs. Obama was bitter and un-American. They caricatured her as one cultural commentator said as quote emasculating sarcastic and bossy Cindy McCain the very picture of the traditional read white first lady picked up on Michelle Obama's line that same day saying at a campaign rally as she introduced her husband I'm proud of my country. I don't know if you heard those words earlier. I'm very proud of my country.

[00:17:37] And there was Republican merchandising that soon followed this as well. So there was Republican merchandising that said pride in country that came out almost immediately after these remarks. So this all happens.

[00:17:50] And myself as media star you know I'm reading how when this is coming out you know following the stories seeing the news coverage and seeing when it starts and when it stops and and noticing how she ends up being sequestered. Well she actually talks about this in becoming which was fascinating to me.

[00:18:12] She talks about how David Axelrod and his team brought her into his office into their office and said the image that you have going on right now this look that Michelle Obama had is not is not going to work. This is not going to fly. We need for you all to have a team of folks that are going to change this image and what they change this image to is the Michelle Obama that we end up seeing



and that becomes far more recognizable. Who becomes this right. So she has this coming out months later on THE VIEW. So she's sequestered. She has this image makeover. She comes out on The View a number of months later she's wearing this. So she's doing to this. She begins doing the whole high low fashion thing. She wears this this this black and white floral dress that sells out immediately. Also very very smart. The campaign rolls out a Web site that's called Mrs. O dot work around Mrs. O. Or you can actually log on and purchase any given outfit that Michelle Obama has warned that day on whether she was going to go to the soup kitchen or she was going to go to a gala that evening could go on and buy something from Saks or go on and buy something from J. Crew that would link everything on there. So this is all the way in which she's really kind of shown to be the successful person. She also they also roll out the mom in chief. Right. Where she is not she is not trying to be a part of her husband's campaign right. All Hillary Clinton she's not trying to trying to take over she's not she's not the emasculating woman that she's that everyone is portraying her to be right.

[00:20:01] She's really just there for the care of her daughter. She's really just there as this sparkling fashionista. So she's on The View and and women what does she say.

[00:20:14] So she comes out the audience is rapturous. The hosts are rapturous there.

[00:20:23] And Barbara Walters says to her. What's your answer to all these attacks. And she responds Well you know I take them in stride. It's a part of the process. We're not new to politics. But let me tell you of course I'm proud of my country. Nowhere but in America could my story be possible.

[00:20:42] So as opposed to her remarks a couple of months earlier when she was on the stump. Her remarks here deploys some signifiers of what I talked about this post race but here her transformation is complete. I also talked about how she has this very kind of like a highly feminized performance here. Her her her sentences are shorter. Her tone is more intimate friendly or conversational. She has smiles that punctuate her statements. This is not a seriously delivered speech but it's a perky monologue that's peppered with interjections from the co-hosts. You know at this moment you know I want to also be clear that

[00:21:19] I'm not mad at Michelle Obama for doing this right I understand this. This is part of the the strategy. This is part of strategic ambiguity. I understand this was very much a means to an end. This was a way in which she sublimated the country's racism. This was a brilliant type of a performance that needed to happen here and there was a lot of judgment from all different types of corners that was happening of her at this moment so.

[00:21:47] So as she's talking here so if you think about the part that I quoted and her narration of of different communities think about her narration here she continues she calls herself a girl twice in succession she says I'm a girl that grew up and Barbara Walters says give the people a little bit. I'm a girl that grew up on the South Side of Chicago. So she speaks a lot on personal individual matters to use me and not collective ones. She is in utilizing the tropes of post race Obama named her blackness through the code of the South Side of Chicago which like in the first speech was meant to

connote both black and working class. But here it is not used alongside the conjuring of an Iowa farmer to foster interracial working class community. Right. A possible allusion to cultural miscegenation or shared oppression but to signify the point from which she has departed the point that she moves beyond the South Side of Chicago becomes a place Michelle Obama made it out of and not a place in which people currently reside.

[00:22:49] So.

[00:22:50] And she talks about herself she says she she says My father was a working class guy who worked a shift all his life. And because of his hard work he sent not just me but my brother to Princeton. Barbara Walters says he is now the coach. He's now the coach of the or of Oregon State Beavers.

[00:23:06] I tell people just imagine the pride that my parents had who didn't go to college. They felt that through their own hard work and sacrifice they could have us achieve the things so they could never imagine. And so I am proud of my country without a doubt. I think when I talked about it in my speech I think I was talking about having pride in the political process

[00:23:26] Right. So she you know she's talking about her dad here as just a working class guy. Right. In becoming for those real who have read becoming she very much talks about about his blackness. Right. And she talks about the way in which he was discriminated on the basis of his blackness but that never is allowed to enter into this type of a narration here. There's not a space for that. Right. And you know.

[00:23:52] So anyway. So I said I'm focusing so far but focusing on blacks the test was far from a pander to post race. I think it's a deployment of it as part of her redefinition of Americanness. Obama paused on her parents hard work and sacrifice to ideas that might sound like conservatively tinged all American notions but which resonated quite differently. In lieu of the anti black racism in which African-Americans have historically temporarily been mythologized in such a context Obama's comments resounded far differently than Joe Biden's recounting of his kitchen table chats with his working class father Hillary Clinton's recalling her down home roots in Scranton or the time Sarah Palin's many signifiers of her religion American identity. So I'm talking about like how how the race and the gender of the Speaker cannot be dismissed here. So that's what happens on.

[00:24:43] On the view her approval ratings start to soar after this right and there becomes this true fetishism of Michelle Obama right. And she is on the cover of everything and everyone is talking about how do you get Michelle Obama arms and everyone is is talking about her fashion. So is the Michelle Obama moment and it continues to soar throughout both of their terms and she continues to experience all kinds of virulent racialized sexism along the way as well. Right. And then

[00:25:19] I want to talk a little bit about the 2016 Democratic National Convention.

[00:25:25] So so throughout these eight years there are lots of moments like the ones that I that I stopped on where Michelle Obama is naming racialized sexism in code and there are moments when she is speaking more forthrightly right. I talk a little bit about when there is the dedication of the bust of Sojourner Truth for example and the moments where she chooses to use terms like us. And all of the other types of kind of coded signification that happen. And then there is also the constant kind of retreat back to coded language around race coded language around racism and around racialized sexism. And then we have the DNC.

[00:26:10] So at this moment here in her 2016 DNC convention speech she emerged as the star wearing a cap sleeve fitted dress with sweetheart seaming that could only be described as deep Democrat blue Obama's grace and poise ruled the stage with a platform adorned in a similar blue. Obama became the physical embodiment of the 2016 Democratic Party. Her hair dusted her shoulders her bangs swooped over one eye and her earrings appeared to be the marriage of hoops and pearls. Her skin glowed while her beautifully eyes element and her words emerged from lips shining with a neutral color. So she begins her speech by narrating her family's entrance into the White House as one of concern for her daughters.

[00:26:57] She named Trump in code iterating the family's response negativity right. This is the famous when they go low we go high continuing broadly. Her speech punctuated times by audience shells of we loving Michelle Obama says we know that our words and our actions matter right. So she's not even going to name forty five at all right. This is this is as close as we go before moving on to racial specificity. Such words matter for all yes but especially for kids like the little black boy who looked up at my husband his eyes wide with hope and he wondered Is my hair like yours and some of you all probably have seen that picture that Pete Souza captured of the little boy the little African-American boy touching on President Obama's head right touching his hair. Obama continued the story of this country the one that brought me to this stage tonight was one of quote generations of people who felt the lash of bondage the shame of servitude. The sting of segregation. And then the next part of this speech goes viral. I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves. She paused with assurance for thunderous applause. Her eyes appeared to be slightly welling up with tears as she continued. I watched my daughters and she touches her chest. Two beautiful intelligent black young women playing with their dogs on the White House lawn. This statement was capped off by more roaring approval applause from the crowd. So here. You can see how different her statements are right from what we saw on the View. She's refuting post race by underscoring her daughter's race and gender. Calling them in calling the teens in a feminist manner young women and not girls right.

[00:28:44] Underscoring their blackness by naming that first. And so this is part of what I talk about in this in this. In this particular moment that we see her movements from from performing strategic ambiguity to really forthrightly kind of speaking speaking truth to power as complete here.

[00:29:03] And I want to actually see has the amazing thing and I had no idea that Michelle Obama's writing becoming was to actually see how she talks a bit of this out. So we see this you know even that the speech at the DNC and the type of critique that I talk about still is so controlled right.



[00:29:26] And how does she then talk about it for example in becoming in the press junket. So I'm going to say this for a second. So we can watch a little bit of this go. We had all nice snap we had to watch seven commercials. I realize that but you now don't look shield your eyes shield your eyes and. OK maybe I should pull that out until I can figure this out here and it all set up perfectly perfectly timed for all of you all.

[00:30:01] Ok. We got it. Don't worry you're going to hear it in future days.

[00:30:07] Here it comes. Just need the sound. Things work in the rehearsal. It was perfect. We had it playing look great. I played it. We're going to see it. Did anybody see this. The interview with Robin Roberts. Nobody watches

[00:30:21] You sight. Yeah. This is I think this is the first one that she did in preparation for the tour. Yeah. So this one got really got a lot a lot of press. So try again. OK. I have to go back a little bit. It was so loud. You know this is going to work. OK. I'll just. OK. OK I'll summarize what happens here.

[00:30:43] So in this in the next part of the part that I was going to show you all and this is all if you want to look this up this is all available streaming online.

[00:30:49] You can have to sit through seven commercials though I warn you we have to sit through seven commercials to watch this. I'll just pass this up here. So so you know throughout the throughout the the course of love President Obama but I feel like I want to pause on there we go. Plus here we'll pause there. So throughout the course of this interview we've we've seen them go through kind of her life story from her childhood home into Princeton and and through kind of talking through the White House and seeing some of that early footage. And here we're starting to hear about some of the things that I wrote about right.

[00:31:28] And also how Robin shows her back some footage of her after having experienced some of this incredibly virulent racism and sexism in her saying I'm fine I'm fine it doesn't bother me I'm fine it's really it's really OK I'm used to it it's public life it's whatever. And here she is saying that really hurt. That was incredible incredibly painful. And

[00:31:54] I think that we do not do ourselves or anyone any type of a service this incredible disservice to pretend that we are these iron clad beings who who just are expected to be super women all of the time. And and you know what she's saying is that our strength comes about through through our vulnerability.

[00:32:17] Right. And it was in this moment this was last last fall where Sheila Bahama is the antithesis of shady right. She is she's so classy but she gets as close to shady as we've seen her go when she talks about kind of speaking back just to Sheryl Sandberg where she's like leaning in not always a good thing. First of all it's not possible for everyone. Right. It's a very classy notion. Not everybody is able to very racially every class notion but also not always a good thing. Right.

[00:32:44] What type of what what what is the impact on our souls when we are always having to lean in when we're always having to take the brunt of everything and not to show that that that it hurts. And so I was going to kind of end there it was you know. Where my where the book goes so I talk about how Michelle Obama is the one iconic figure who really performs this thing I'm trying to name a strategic ambiguity

[00:33:13] The most flawlessly. Right. It works the best for her and it feels like she maintains her soul in the process and she uses it effectively as a tool. Right. I then in the next chapter talk about Oprah Winfrey who has used it throughout her career. Right. Oprah Winfrey who is famous for for having talked about how I transcended race. That's what she said back in in the 80s when she first got her television show how she in fact tries to pick up the strategy at a particular moment. And it doesn't work for her it doesn't ring true. And I talk a little bit about Shonda Rhimes and and and how she has come to prominence through being able to perform a certain type of colorblind casting. Right. And she also performs this similar type of kind of colorblindness at times in her own press.

[00:34:09] And then when does she deploy strategic ambiguity at a moment of attack some interest in these moments of attack and also not as successful as Michelle Obama.

[00:34:21] So I kind of go through that in the first half of the book and then the second half of the book what I was interested in was thinking about how were real live African-American women negotiating through.

[00:34:33] Not that the icons aren't real but they're you know they're on the screens not talking to Oprah or Michelle Obama or Shonda Rhimes. Right I'm reading media covers. I'm very much clear about I'm reading these reports with these particular types of representations but for the women that I was able to actually speak to.

[00:34:49] How. How were they kind of negotiating through these different experiences. And so I spent some time with some audiences thinking about their representations and how they were resisting racialized sexism and they did this in a particular setting as we were watching a television show. So we watched a season of their favorite show at the time a group of young women which over time was America's Next Top Model. And as we hate to watch the show because they they absolutely hated Tyra Banks. They thought that she was a misogynist that she was a sellout. They thought that she was disproportionately cruel to women of color that they would pause the show and then provide these particular type of race and gender critiques. So I talk a little bit about that and the ways in which they are saying we are not using strategic ambiguity right. These women are very very young. And now I shared all this information with them this happened 10 years ago shared this all with them. Now a lot of them are saying I actually I don't have the luxury to speak forthrightly in the ways that I thought that I would.

[00:35:58] Write. I have to use strategic ambiguity in lots of different ways in my life as as at at this corporation in my life as a peachy student and all these other institutions that I've joined. And then I

end the book with with a chapter where I'm talking to black women television executives who kind of skirt these different types of strategies to talk about how they use strategic ambiguity in various ways but that it's a first line of critique. It's a first line of defense. And then if it doesn't work that they figure out all types of other ways to go. So I tried to figure out how to bring this to a variety of different settings in order to kind of exercise that theory to see if it really kind of how it worked in various ways. And you know part of my part of my philosophy is is you know riffing off of one of my favorite Malcolm X quotes which is that racism is like a Cadillac. They make a new model every year.

[00:37:03] And so if racism is like Cadillac and they make a new model every year we have to think about how do we have all the different types of tools to work on each of those driven Cadillacs.

[00:37:14] And so in my book as I'm tracing strategic ambiguity in these various different ways from it is kind of a perfect deployment by Michelle Obama through his Ford deployments and these various ways where these other celebrity figures and through its flouting of strategic ambiguity by these young women these were all different types of tools that people are picking up to try and resist racism and sexism. And what I try and do in my work is to think about all those tools as valuable even what even what Oprah Winfrey is providing us in various ways and about how we can then pick up and utilize those tools as as media consumers and as as folks that need to think about different strategies to change our world around us.

[00:38:15] Ok so we will take some time for questions and answers so just raise your hand if you have a question or comment. OK.

[00:38:25] Ok. This the department that you work in that you or. What is your department. You do. I'm in the communication department. OK. I was just wondering why you didn't touch upon some of some male responses to racism because these are these are interchangeable and I'm just curious.

[00:38:49] Yeah. Well I mean the book is is very specifically focused on black women. And while I absolutely agree that there are lots of different ways in which all different types of minorities folks other people of color LGBTQ folks could experience similar types of coded responses I really wanted to have to write the best book that I could in the most specific way that I could. And for me that meant focusing on black women. So that's what my that's why my case studies here are on black women in a lot of the other work that I do. It is able you can use these theories as as a point of application for lots of different folks. What I think is interesting is that I think that people have trouble thinking about. Understanding black women as the sole example that then can be used as as that point of identification. Right. There's there's there's a I've been noticing it as I give both talks. There's lots of people to say but where am I in here as opposed to I identify with what the black woman is experiencing right. Yeah. Yeah

[00:40:08] But I think that there's a lot in here that lots of different folks can really identify with while still kind of saying. But we can be naming the specificity of black women's experience. Thank you

[00:40:21] I have a comment and a question. Yes ma'am. The comment is that this is the perfect example of how insidious racism is because the racist then gets to dictate how racist gets talked about. Yes. It is terrifying.

[00:40:38] Yeah and insidious in so many ways that these people that the racists get to control continue to control the dialogue because then she became an angry black woman and snatched totally shut her down. My question is did you get any black press coverage of Michelle Obama during this area whether that C-SPAN video that you had or I'm just curious about like the Amsterdam you know just different black dress. I don't know. I don't know if you were looking at news. What kind of press you were looking at AG responses. Yeah I was curious about black press response. Yes.

[00:41:14] Thank you. That was the question of the historian who wanted the archive.

[00:41:18] I appreciate that. No no but but on that first on that first question though I mean this is why strategic ambiguity is not this. It's not a strategy to dismantle the master's house right to use RG Lord's words. It's about it's about incremental change. Right. And I talk about it as a strategy that allows one through. It allows the singular person through. It does not allow large communities to come through it does not allow systemic change to happen at present.

[00:41:59] Yes. I'm sorry. I'm usually yes or no because everyone was to hear you. Yeah. She wants to hear you to. Yeah

[00:42:10] But in terms of the archive question I was really interested in this book in particular in mainstream coverage and so I did Lexis Nexis searches and fought for mainstream coverage. I looked at how the story art across I could show you what I what I looked at.

[00:42:28] But I was not I was not interested in black press coverage. I was interested in very mainstream coverage for each of the different incidences. Right because I didn't want to read the counter narrative.

[00:42:38] I wanted to read that the narrative that was really kind of oppressing and holding everything else down the moment.

[00:42:45] Thank you. My question involves around why the racists get to define the language. Why is that and how do you deconstruct that situation to push back so why do races get to control language. Well I mean. Language Language is one of the structures of our institution

[00:43:10] Right of it's it's in the language is something that comes out out of out of our our ideologies. And so if we have racist ideology structuring our world we understand how to speak how to iterate ourselves from from the ideologies that structure our world and our society. And if our society is a racist one from its fabric from its history from every institution that we have it only makes sense that our language is equally racist right now. How do we unpack that. So I mean this is what I do with my. On the other hand might wear my other hat. I just had a class with the librarians here on

interrupting privilege. That's that specifically about how do we work to unpack our language. How do we work to to to think through making sure that we're not speaking from this old racist past. And I think that it's not about. Figuring out that list of words that we cannot say right. It's about actually understanding how power and privilege are functioning in language and connecting our language used to these larger structural issues of of discrimination of racism of sexism and homophobia and and making sure that our our individual choices are linked to those larger structural choices. So it's like a whole systems approach which is part of what makes it so difficult.

[00:44:40] Yes. Oh yeah. Mike and no we'll bring it down. Yes please. Yeah. Yeah. I'm sorry I didn't see that.

[00:44:50] I just wanted to say thank you for writing this book. I can only imagine that it's just a scratch on the surface to begin with so my question to you is now that you've started the conversation what's coming down the line Oh well thank you for the question for me.

[00:45:16] I mean I think that it's it's linked to this gentleman's question here it's about the types of critiques that I'm making in this book. How do we actually how do we go from critique to action. And so the one of the books that I'm working on right now is as a field guide to interrupting privilege. I've been teaching all of this stuff on interrupting privilege and I'm actually trying to put together a book on and on how everyone can can do these different things even if you're not a trained facilitator for it. So I'm I'm trying to think through what are the ways in which everyday folks can work together to to to work on changing our world. So I think that there are so many people that want to do good and and just don't know how. And I think that especially here in Seattle that it starts with people being really afraid to speak because they're so afraid and particularly around issues of race because people don't know and understand languages of race. And part of us because we are so segregated right in our social worlds or so part. So that's what a lot of my my work is is thinking through how do we kind of respectfully work to to come together to unpack racism.

[00:46:32] Thank you for this book. I think it's really important to look at how women are used use to. Bolster the underlying I hate this word but I'm going to use it hegemony like the underlying just this is the way it is and it's the way it's supposed to be and all that.

[00:46:51] But the thing that caught my my ear was when you said Michelle went from being from the South Side to escaping the south side and sort of like this the neo liberalism of of the individual instead of the systemic. And so in some ways like Michelle and. Oprah are used as an approach it's not about it's an oppressive. They're their images are used as an oppressive force for people who are still I'm from the South Bronx from the South Bronx or from the south side instead of being of the people they become. And so I think that's such an essential point. Thank you for talking about it and I hope you talk about it a lot more because that's what we need and we don't need stories about coming. We need stories about not only not like Lincoln and the you know log cabin but real stories.

[00:47:52] Yeah right. Right. Thank you. That was a long one. Yeah. And you know what I what I'm talking about is is how she she is using the very dangerous type of neo liberalism right the very




dangerous form of post racialism and using herself as the example of someone whom she and her brother as a people who did escape and and it's troubling and it's tricky right. And at the same time it's the reason that that the Obamas were elected. So. So it's a particular type of compromise that works at that particular moment and she's able to slip in other types of critique at other moments. I know I know many more people that have have this gets into other bigger conversation about respectability politics for example. I think that. I see it done more subversively with with Michelle Obama than for example with Barack Obama. Right. He for example if you all were watching I'm paying attention to the speech that he made at Morehouse a couple of weeks ago was still complaining about people pulling up their pants. Right. So I think that Ben that it doesn't feel as subversive with him as it does with her. So I hear you that that did it and this is this is the problem with this type of a performance right. That it's it's not it's it's operating at so many different levels. Right. It's meant for so many different types of audience. There are some people that's going to be winking at her and be like Oh we see what she's doing here that somebody was going to be saying oh look at she was the one that made out how come all these other people can't do it right.

[00:49:31] And why can't I. Right. That's right. Right. Right. Right. And then internalize that. Right. Thank you.

[00:49:39] So I think in the matter of time this will be our last question and then Lena can sign books and say something to you personally.

[00:49:48] So this question is about the fact that she's on this kind of rock star book tour and she's filling places like the Tacoma Dome right and all these white folks who are there who think that they love her and adore her. Yeah. And the question is are they hearing the critique that she is offering. Do they really understand what she is telling them when she talks about the perfection that she knew that she had to hold while she was in the White House being the first black first lady and her and her family. And do they really understand that she's still exploring how she can truly be herself in a racist society that does not want her to be herself as a black woman.

[00:50:36] And I don't even know if that's the right question but yeah yeah I mean I think by that but by the build of your questions you probably have a sense of what the answer is. I think that audiences are complex. Right. I think that. That there are people who attach themselves to all different aspects of Michelle Obama. So for example I was there when when she was first lady I had a white colleague whose mother who has had a white mother who was obsessed with Michelle Obama and because of her jump rope routines. And to her which which was I guess we're on you know during her her Let's Move campaign. And so we'd watch her jump rope routines. And so her and her like 60 something mother who is who is who was very fit would like watching you share her preteens. And that's what she was focused on. Right. So so I mean I think that she she has a lot of fans that will clearly that that kind of focus in on different things. And then at moments of discomfort Wright can kind of back away. So I don't know if leg the jump rope fan is wanting to hear the race critique. Right. It's been a number one bestseller so she has lots of different fans. But but I think that she certainly has. Has brought all kinds of new conversations. I mean I was definitely fasting that when the book first came out and when the ones who've been old actually see the Robin Roberts interview that the focus was all on her



having fertility treatments and going to marriage counseling with Barack. Like that was what was like the headline news by this book. This is what you want to read about it. It was not about let's these questions about race. Those were very those were like you know kind of fourth and fifth paragraph.

[00:52:25] So I think that that for at least in terms of the mainstream selling of becoming that's that's not what the publishers are or understand is going to to make it into you know it wasn't becoming a black woman's journey to the White House and beyond. Right.

[00:52:47] This wouldn't have been the same thing.

[00:52:50] And yet I think that that's a lot of what we actually see in the book.

[00:52:53] Yeah. Thank you and thank you everyone for coming.

[00:52:57] Thank you.

[00:53:05] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.

