

## Acting Out the Racial Double Bind (or Being Black Like Obama)

Being an African American in a predominantly white institution is like being an actor on stage. There are roles one has to perform, storylines one is expected to follow, and dramas and subplots one should avoid at all cost. Being an African American in a predominantly white institution is like playing a small but visible part in a racially specific script. The main characters are white. There are one or two blacks in supporting roles. Survival is always in question. The central conflict is to demonstrate that one is black enough from the perspective of the supporting cast and white enough from the perspective of the main characters. The “double bind” racial performance is hard and risky. Failure is always just around the corner. And there is no acting school in which to enroll to rehearse the part.

Yet, blacks working in white institutions act out versions of this “double bind” racial performance every day. It is part of a broader phenomenon that we call “Working Identity.” Working Identity is constituted by a range of racially associated ways of being, including how one dresses, speaks, styles one’s hair; one’s professional and social affiliations; who one marries or dates; one’s politics and views about race; where one lives; and so on and so forth. The foregoing function as a set of racial criteria people can employ to ascertain not simply whether a person is black in terms of how she looks but whether that person is black in terms of how she is perceived to act. In this sense, Working Identity refers both to the perceived choices people make about their self-presentation (the racially associated ways of being listed above) and to the perceived identity that emerges from those choices (how black we determine a person to be).

Paying attention to Working Identity is important. Few institutions today refuse to hire any African Americans. Law expressly prohibits that form of discrimination and society frowns upon it. Indeed, most institutions profess a commitment to diversity, so much so that “diversity is good for business” is now a standard corporate slogan. Companies that invoke that mantra will have

at least one black face on the company brochure or website.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, employers want to think of themselves as “colorblind.” That perception is hard to sell if all the employees are white. Finally, to the extent that there are some blacks in the workplace, the employer can use them as a shield against charges of racism or racial insensitivity: “How can you say we are racist. Obviously, we wouldn’t adopt a policy that would hurt our African American colleagues.”

The reality today, therefore, is that most firms want to hire *some* African Americans. The question is, which ones? Working Identity provides a basis upon which they can do so. Employers can screen their application pool for African Americans with palatable Working Identities. These African Americans are not “too black”—which is to say, they are not racially salient as African Americans. Some of them might even be “but for” African Americans—“but for” the fact that they look black, they are otherwise indistinguishable from whites. From an employer’s perspective, this sub-group of African Americans is racially comfortable in part because they negate rather than activate racial stereotypes. More generally, the employer’s surmise is that these “good blacks” will think of themselves as people first and black people second (or third or fourth); they will neither “play the race card” nor generate racial antagonism or tensions in the workplace; they will not let white people feel guilty about being white; and they will work hard to assimilate themselves into the firm’s culture. The screening of African Americans along these lines enables the employer to extract a diversity profit from its African American employees without incurring the cost of racial salience. The employer’s investment strategy is to hire enough African Americans to obtain a diversity benefit without incurring the institutional costs of managing racial salience.

At least ten implications flow from what we have just said. Together, they constitute the core issues our book engages:

1. Discrimination is not only an inter-group phenomenon, it is also an intra-group phenomenon. We should care both about employers preferring whites over blacks (an inter-group discrimination problem) and about employers preferring racially palatable blacks over racially salient ones (an intra-group discrimination problem).
2. The existence of intra-group discrimination creates an incentive for African Americans to work their identities to signal to employers that they are racially palatable. They will want to cover up their racial salience to avoid being screened out of the application pool.
3. Signaling continues well after the employee is hired. The employee understands that she is still black on stage; that her employer is watching her racial performance with respect to promotion and pay increases. Accordingly, she

becomes attuned to the roles her Working Identity performs. She will want the employer to experience her Working Identity as a diversity profit, not a racial deficit.

4. Working Identity requires time, effort, and energy—it is work, “shadow work.” The phenomenon is part of an underground racial economy in which everyone participates and to which almost everyone simultaneously turns a blind eye.
5. Working Identity is not limited to the workplace. Admissions officers can screen applicants based on their Working Identity. Police officers can stop, search, and arrest people based on Working Identity. The American public can vote for politicians based on their Working Identity. Here, too, there are incentives for the actor—to work her identity to gain admissions to universities, to avoid unfriendly interactions with the police, and to gain political office.
6. Working Identity is costly. It can cause people to compromise their sense of self; to lose themselves in their racial performance; to deny who they are; and to distance themselves from other members of their racial group. Plus, the strategy is risky. Staying at work late to negate the stereotype that one is lazy, for example, can confirm the stereotype that one is incompetent, unable to get work done within normal work hours.
7. Working Identity raises difficult questions for law. One can argue that discrimination based on Working Identity is not racial discrimination at all. Arguably, it is discrimination based on behavior or culture rather than race. Therefore, perhaps the law should not intervene. And even assuming that this form of discrimination is racial discrimination, it still might be a bad idea for the law to get involved. Do we really want judges deciding whether a person is or isn’t “acting white” or “acting black”—and the degree to which they might be doing so? It is difficult to figure out what role, if any, law should play.
8. Working Identity transcends the African American experience. Everyone works their identity. Everyone feels the pressure to fit in, including white, heterosexual men. But the existence of negative racial stereotypes increases those pressures and makes the work of fitting in harder and more time consuming. African Americans are not the only racial minority that experiences this difficulty, though our focus in the book is primarily on this group.
9. Nor is race the only social category with a Working Identity dimension. Women work their identities as feminine or not. Men are expected to act like men. Gays and lesbians are viewed along a continuum of acting straight or not. Racial performance is but part of a broader Working Identity phenomenon.
10. We all have a Working Identity whether we want to or not. Working Identity does not turn on the intentional, strategic behavior of the actor.

An employer might perceive an African American as racially palatable even if that person does not intend for the employer to racially interpret her in that way. Irrespective of strategic behavior on the part of the employee, the employer will racially judge her based not only on how she racially looks but also on how the employer perceives her to racially act.

## Acting Like Obama

Americans understand the dynamic of being black on stage more than they might even realize. Barack Obama's ascendancy to the forefront of American politics has put the phenomenon into the public domain. Obama racially acted his way into the most significant role in the world, president of the United States. To do so, he successfully performed the racial "double bind," persuading white voters that he was not "too black" and black voters that he was "black enough."

Obama's persuasion techniques are almost always subtle. His performances are rarely racially didactic. Perhaps this is because we, his ever-watching political audience, are often (but as we shall see, not always) subtle about the racial roles we expect him to play. It is difficult for us to talk openly about a person's degree of blackness, as though racial identity were a thermometer. Few want to be accused of suggesting that a "real" black person should act one way or another. Leave it to late-night television to dispense with that worry.<sup>2</sup> A *Saturday Night Live* sketch featured cast members playing Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton discussing whether America is ready for a black president. Their answer: it depends on the person's degree of blackness, or "scales of soul." They then proceed to ask whether Obama's degree of blackness will change as America gets to know him. Different social factors move Obama up and down the scales. The fact that his name is Barack moves him up to a higher degree of blackness. But that he was called Barry in high school moves him down. That he was raised by a single mother moves him up, but the fact that he was raised in Hawaii moves him down. His marriage to a black woman moves him up—and so does the fact that in the past he dated white women.

One can challenge the accuracy of both the biographical elements of Obama's family history and personal associations and whether they move people up and down some scale of blackness along the lines the skit suggests. Nonetheless, the skit reflected a phenomenon about which people were (sometimes only quietly) talking. In none of these discussions did anyone assert that Obama was white, though some emphasized that his mother was white and argued that the public

discourse about his race obscured that fact. The issue was almost entirely about Obama's degrees of blackness. Both black and white voters were taking his racial temperature.

For Hollywood stars, such as Sarah Jessica Parker and George Clooney, Obama's racial temperature was just right: not too hot (which is to say, "not too black") and not too cold (which is to say, "not too white"). Other white voters read Obama's racial temperature that way as well. Two decades ago, when we were in law school and Obama had just finished his stint as the president of the *Harvard Law Review*, it was inconceivable to us that it would some day become fashionable for Hollywood stars to get behind a black man for president, let alone Barack Obama. Who would have thought that whites would be lining up to offer their support, leading the "yes we can" charge and proudly bearing Obama bumper stickers on their cars—even before many in the black community joined the effort? Who would have thought that a significant part of the Democratic political machinery would pick Obama over Hillary Clinton? This was all unimaginable. And yet all of this actually happened. The explanation—or at least part of it—was that Obama was not "too black," but still "black enough."

## On Being Not "Too Black"

Obama is biracial—the son of a black man from a small village in Kenya and a white woman born in Kansas. He grew up largely with the white part of his family in Hawaii. His professional and academic credentials are impeccable—Harvard Law School graduate, president of the *Harvard Law Review*, law professor at the University of Chicago, among other accomplishments. From Obama's very early public appearance at the Democratic National Convention in 2004, he seems to have understood that his political future would turn on his ability to work his identity for a white audience. He seems to have understood that he could not enact a racial performance that his white audience would perceive as being "too black." He pitched his speech at the Democratic Convention to avoid being racially pigeonholed in that role.

Now even as we speak, there are those who are preparing to divide us, the spin masters, the negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of anything goes. Well, I say to them tonight, there is not a liberal America and a conservative America—there is the United States of America. There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America—there's the United States of America. The pundits,

the pundits like to slice-and-dice our country into Red States and Blue States; Red States for Republicans, Blue States for Democrats. But I've got news for them, too: We worship an awesome God in the Blue States, and we don't like federal agents poking around in our libraries in the Red States. We coach Little League in the Blue States and yes, we've got some gay friends in the Red States.... We Are One People.<sup>3</sup>

The speech created a buzz. His audience loved it. Applause could be heard for days.

Yet, nothing Obama said was particularly remarkable. Granted, the speech was delivered with rhetorical flare, elegance, and grace. And, yes, Obama was, dare we say, articulate. But the substance of the speech was at best perfectly fine—nothing more—and not nearly as interesting or sophisticated as his subsequent speech on race, about which we will say more later. What *was* striking about Obama's performance, particularly from the perspective of a white audience, was that a black political figure was talking passionately about American politics without making them feel racially uncomfortable or racially guilty. At least some white Americans could have interpreted Obama's performance as offering them a kind of racial cover ("we are not racist because we support Obama"). This is not hyperbole. There are discrimination cases in which the defendant's response to the allegation of discrimination is basically to say: "I supported Obama for president, therefore I cannot be a racist."

But even if white Americans were not experiencing Obama in terms of racial cover, they were certainly experiencing him in terms of racial palatability. Nothing in Obama's comments hinted at racial division, racial antagonism, or racial conflict. Indeed, nothing in his speech hinted at civil rights. This was not the Reverend Jesse Jackson. This was not Congressman John Lewis. This was not Al Sharpton. Then presidential hopeful, Joseph Biden, pretty much said as much. He described Obama as "the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy."<sup>5</sup> For *Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson, much of Biden's description was code for Obama's racial palatability to white voters. According to Robinson:

There was a sharp reaction, mostly focused on Biden's incomprehensible reference to personal hygiene. For my part, I never made it past "articulate," a word that's like fingernails on a blackboard to my ear.... Will wonders never cease? Here we have a man who graduated from Columbia University, who was president of the *Harvard Law Review*, who serves in the U.S. Senate and is the author of two best-selling books, who's

a leading contender for the Democratic presidential nomination, and what do you know, he turns out to be articulate. Stop the presses....

Yes, I'm ranting a bit. But before you accuse me of being hypersensitive, try to think of the last time you heard a white public figure described as articulate. Acclaimed white orators such as Bill Clinton and John Edwards are more often described as eloquent.... What's intriguing is that Jackson and Sharpton are praised as eloquent, too—both men are captivating speakers who calibrate their words with great precision. But neither is often described as, quote, articulate. Apparently, something disqualifies them....

I realize the word is intended as a compliment, but it's being used to connote a lot more than the ability to express one's thoughts clearly. It's being used to say more, even, than "here's a black person who speaks standard English without a trace of Ebonics."

The word articulate is being used to encompass not just speech but a whole range of cultural cues—dress, bearing, education, golf handicap. It's being used to describe a black person around whom white people can be comfortable, a black person who not only speaks white America's language but is fluent in its body language as well.<sup>6</sup>

Biden recognized that he had committed a *faux pas* and apologized for any offense his comments might have caused. He had "no doubt that Jesse Jackson and every other black leader—Al Sharpton and the rest—will know exactly what I meant."<sup>7</sup> Jackson was forgiving, Sharpton less so. When Biden called Sharpton to apologize, Sharpton began the conversation with a note about his personal hygiene: "I told him I take a bath every day." For Sharpton, Biden's comments were less a verbal gaffe and more an effort on Biden's part to "discredit Mr. Obama with his base" by distinguishing him from political figures like Sharpton and Jackson.<sup>8</sup> It was an effort to demonstrate that Obama was not "black enough."

Obama, for his part, considered Biden's comments "unfortunate" and "historically inaccurate." According to Obama, "African-American presidential candidates like Jesse Jackson, Shirley Chisholm, Carol Moseley Braun and Al Sharpton gave a voice to many important issues through their campaigns, and no one would call them inarticulate."<sup>9</sup> This might well be so. But little if anything about Obama's campaign linked him to these political figures. More to the point, white voters continued to draw an intra-racial line between Obama, on the one hand, and other black political actors, on the other. Obama was a different kind of black politician, a new category of black.<sup>10</sup> He was racially palatable. He was racially comfortable. He was not "too black."

## On Being “Black Enough”

But was he black enough? The fact that he lived on the south side of Chicago, attended a black church, and married a black woman all helped to shore up his racial authenticity. His relationship to basketball helped too. Obama seems to love the sport. And at least he thinks he is pretty good at it. Moreover, he prefers the Carolina Tar Heels to the Duke Blue Devils. “So what?” at least some of you must be asking. What’s the relevance of that? Others of you, particularly the sports fans, might even be offended; we shouldn’t make assumptions about a person’s race or degree of blackness based on the sports team that person chooses to support. That goes too far.

And, indeed, race may have absolutely nothing to do with Obama’s preference for Carolina. Perhaps when he lived in Chicago, he became a Michael Jordan fan. Any Chicago Bulls fan worth his salt knows of MJ’s Carolina pedigree. Or, maybe this was simply an election strategy and had nothing to do with race. Obama needed to win North Carolina. His team would have known that there are more Tar Heel fans among the voters in that state than Blue Devil fans.<sup>11</sup>

But, just maybe, Working Identity is implicated here as well. Recall the *Saturday Night Live* skit. It would not have escaped Obama and his advisers that the basketball program at Duke has long been accused of pursuing only those black players who some argue “act white,” whereas Carolina has long been perceived as the more authentically black team. Retired basketball player Jalen Rose made this point about Duke in an ESPN documentary:

For me, Duke was personal. I hated Duke. And I hated everything I felt Duke stood for. Schools like Duke didn’t recruit players like me. I felt like they only recruited black players that were Uncle Toms.

In a subsequent interview, Rose elaborated:

Well, certain schools recruit a typical kind of player whether the world admits it or not. And Duke is one of those schools. They recruit black players from polished families, accomplished families. And that’s fine. That’s okay. But when you’re an inner-city kid playing in a public school league, you know that certain schools aren’t going to recruit you. That’s one. And I’m okay with it. That’s how I felt as an 18-year-old kid.<sup>12</sup>

Whether there is any merit to Rose’s story is an open question (one of us teaches at Duke and would prefer to think that there isn’t). The point is that, in the context of deciding which of the two teams should advance to the very

end of the NCAA tournament, Obama and his advisers presumably understood the implications of picking Carolina over Duke. Assuming that Rose’s characterization was at least partially shared by many in the black community, and particularly in North Carolina, where Obama desperately needed the black vote, this was a no-brainer. Preferring the Tar Heels would help with the black vote without alienating whites because UNC-Chapel Hill is more popular in the state anyway (it is the flagship state university). Picking Duke, on the other hand, could have compounded the extent to which some African Americans already perceived Obama to be insufficiently black—indeed, the kind of black that, according to Rose, Duke sought to recruit, the kind of black person who is not “black enough.”

For comedian and television personality Bill Maher, Obama is at times exactly that kind of black person. Expressing disappointment with Obama’s handling of the British Petroleum (BP) oil spill, Maher commented that Obama “is a little professorial. He saw someone [on the Gulf Coast] and said ‘I have been briefed on your pain.’” Pulling no punches, Maher went on to add: “I thought when we elected a black president we were going to get a *black* president. This [BP oil spill] is where I want a *real* black president. I want him in a meeting with BP CEOs, you know, where he lifts up his shirt so they can see the gun in his pants. That’s [in a “black” man’s voice] ‘we’ve gottamotherfu\*\*ing problem here?’ Then shoots someone in the foot.”<sup>13</sup>

Maher was not the first to ask whether Obama is authentically black or black enough. Author Debra Dickerson commented that Obama is not “black” from an American political and cultural viewpoint because that term refers to those descended from West African slaves.<sup>14</sup> Obama—who she says is “as black as circumstances allow”<sup>15</sup>—has not experienced the burdens of the legacy of slavery. Princeton professor Cornel West also raised questions about Obama’s racial identity and commitments. He did so in the context of criticizing Obama’s decision to announce his presidential candidacy from the location where Abraham Lincoln’s political career began, the Old State Capitol in Illinois, rather than from the State of the Black Union, Tavis Smiley’s annual gathering.<sup>16</sup> According to West, Obama “speaks to white folks and holds us [African Americans] at arm’s length.”<sup>17</sup> The Reverend Al Sharpton, who is now a staunch Obama supporter, was, at the time of Obama’s presidential run, even more pointed. “We cannot put our people’s aspirations on hold for anybody’s career, black or white,” Sharpton observed.<sup>18</sup> “Just because you are our color doesn’t make you our kind.”<sup>19</sup> For Sharpton, the fact that Obama looked black (in the sense of having “our color”) didn’t mean that he acted black (in the sense of being one of “our kind”).

To be fair to both West and Sharpton, one could say that they were simply noting that it was less than clear whether, if elected president, Barack Obama

would be focused on the various dimensions of black inequality. Neither was concerned about whether Obama acts black or white per se. But a black person's political commitments and connections to the black community are factors some African Americans employ to ascertain whether a person is sufficiently black, as the Working Identity criteria we listed earlier attests. Just ask Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. It is largely because of his political commitments and relationship to the black community that some African Americans continue to use the unfortunate term "Uncle Tom" to describe him.<sup>20</sup> West and Sharpton were not suggesting quite this much in their 2008 criticism of Obama, but they were commenting on the extent to which they perceived Obama to be *authentically* black. While neither West nor Sharpton even implicitly raises questions about Obama's blackness today (though West has been consistently critical of Obama's presidency), both deemed it appropriate and important at the time to comment on what Russell Robinson might call Obama's perceived "authenticity deficit."<sup>21</sup>

The issue has not gone away. There is now a literature exploring aspects of Obama's racial authenticity.<sup>22</sup> For example, Angela Onwuachi-Willig and Mario Barnes have argued that "[p]art of Obama's campaign strategy seemed to include an active disregard of race or 'racial' figures, even when they seemed difficult to ignore."<sup>23</sup> As evidence, they point to the fact that "when Obama accepted the Democratic nomination for the presidency on the forty-fifth anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'I have a Dream' speech, he never spoke the Reverend's name or even asserted the words 'black' or 'African American' during his speech."<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Victor Ray maintain that Obama "distanced himself from most leaders of the civil rights movement, from his own reverend, from his own church, and from anything or anyone who makes him 'too black.'"<sup>25</sup> Finally, Frederick Harris has weighed in, provocatively raising the question of whether Obama's racial distancing suggests that we might "still [be] waiting for our first black president."<sup>26</sup> His point, at least implicitly, is that in terms of political commitments, Obama is not black enough.

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### Getting the Double Bind Racial Performance Right

Part of what intrigues us about Obama's Working Identity is that, quite apart from Obama's "true" behavioral inclinations, whatever those might be, he likely makes conscious choices about how to work his identity. When, for example, he learns about the BP oil spill or the plans to build a Muslim community center near Manhattan's Ground Zero, he can react with emotion, anger, erudition, and so on. These are choices. But Obama exercises these choices under enormous

constraints. As we have said, he has to negotiate a racial "double bind." He has to be black enough to get buy-in from African Americans, but not so black that he loses the white vote. The difficulty for Obama is in knowing beforehand what racial performances will satisfy these two racial demands. When he gets this right, the results are striking.

Recall candidate Obama's now-famous speech on race. Many describe it as one of the greatest American speeches. It signaled the audacity of hope and stressed that we can become a more perfect union through racial healing, responsibility, and cooperation.<sup>27</sup> The enthusiastic response to his speech, while understandable, obscured that Obama's racial "double bind," the fact that he could afford to be neither "too black" nor "not black enough" is precisely what produced the historic address. More specifically, the speech was a reaction to what came to be known as Reverend Wright's "God Damn America" speech:

The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing "God Bless America." No, no, no, God damn America, that's in the Bible for killing innocent people. God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme.<sup>28</sup>

The endless circulation of Wright's words, spoken four years earlier, created a firestorm of controversy. Obama was potentially in trouble. For more than twenty years and up until that moment, Wright had been Obama's pastor. In addition to marrying the Obamas, he had baptized their two daughters. Obama's initial reaction was to explain that Wright "is like an old uncle who says things I don't always agree with." This did little to squash the controversy. More was required. Few would have predicted that the "something more" would be a major speech on race. Such a speech could render him not simply "the candidate of race," to borrow the words of Rush Limbaugh, but the black candidate of race. The circulation of Wright's statements changed the calculus. The statements essentially blackened Obama. At least initially, when Obama was still suffering from an authenticity deficit, he could not simply have repudiated Reverend Wright. That would have made him not "black enough" in the eyes of some black voters.

Obama negotiated these competing racial demands—that he be "black enough" but not "too black"—by giving a speech in which he engaged race both in historical and contemporary terms. In the context of doing so he condemned and contextualized the minister's fiery comments. While Obama made clear that some of Wright's sermons reflect "a profoundly distorted view of this country—a view that sees white racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with

America above all that we know is right with America," he also pointed out that Reverend Wright's church, "like other predominantly black churches across the country,... embodies the black community in its entirety.... The church, contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and yes, the bitterness and bias that make up the black experience in America."<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, Obama specifically discussed ongoing racial inequality, noting that American schools are still segregated "fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today's black and white students."<sup>30</sup> Racism, he maintained, is not something that resides "in the minds of black people"; it is a real problem that must be addressed "not just with words, but with deeds."<sup>31</sup>

That Obama criticized, but did not repudiate, Wright, and at the same time spoke unequivocally about the persistent problem of race, reduced the likelihood that people (especially blacks) would consider him not "black enough." Indeed, among the blacks who welcomed the speech, some worried that it might have made him "too black" in the eyes of whites.

This did not happen. Obama's poll numbers had dipped after Wright's comments became public, but the candidate recovered his ground after the speech. This political recovery was not just a function of the fact that Obama's speech reflected his now-familiar rhetorical signature—elegance, sophistication, and balance—but was also because, in addition to calling attention to racism, he spoke of our collective capacity to beat it. Moreover, he urged African Americans to link their "particular grievances—for better health care, and better schools, and better jobs—to the larger aspirations of all Americans—the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man who's been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family."<sup>32</sup> He called for racial solidarity, not racial balkanization, and racial unity, not racial division. Further, he admonished blacks to take "full responsibility for our own lives—by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them."<sup>33</sup> The themes of racial cooperation, racial unity, and black social responsibility throughout his speech reduced the likelihood that people (especially whites) would consider him "too black."

That Obama was negotiating the line between being "black enough" and not "too black" in his speech is reflected in his own words: "At every stage of the campaign, commentators have deemed me either 'too black' or 'not black enough.'"<sup>34</sup> There is reason to believe that this awareness shaped the very way in which Obama structured his presidential bid. According to the *New York Times*, Obama directed members of his staff to devise a strategy, based on existing research, not only for how he should manage the question of race throughout

the campaign, but also for how he should make Americans "comfortable with the idea of putting a black family in the White House."<sup>35</sup> In this sense, Obama's staff was advising him not only on matters of policy but also on how he should work his identity. Whether Obama continues to receive or request such advice is hard to know. What is clear is that his Working Identity is always on the political table.

Consider the case of Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old black male who was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, allegedly in self-defense. The story quickly became headline news and required Obama to work his identity in response. Trayvon was wearing a hooded sweatshirt at the time, and some attributed his death to that fact. According to Geraldo Rivera, for example, the hoodie was "as much responsible for Trayvon Martin's death as George Zimmerman was."<sup>36</sup> From Rivera's perspective, in effect, the hoodie took away Trayvon's innocence and turned him into a "bad" black. "Trayvon Martin's you know, god bless him, he's an innocent kid, a wonderful kid, a box of Skittles in his hand. He didn't deserve to die," Rivera commented.<sup>37</sup> "[I]f he didn't have that hoodie on, that—that nutty neighborhood watch guy wouldn't have responded in that violent and aggressive way."<sup>38</sup> For Geraldo, the lesson from all of this is clear: "[P]arents of black and Latino youngsters particularly [should] not...let their children go out wearing hoodies." He added, "People look at you [in a hoodie], and what's the instant identification? What's the instant association?...[S]omeone stickin' up a 7-Eleven...[A] mugging on a surveillance."<sup>39</sup> Concern about these associations has caused Rivera to instruct his own "particularly dark-skinned...son Cruz (24)" not to wear hoodies.<sup>40</sup>

The shooting, statements about hoodies, and the police (mis)handling of the investigation, created a furor. Initially, Obama said nothing. Then, in response to pressure from leaders in the black community (who pointed out that he had not hesitated to reach out to the Georgetown law student whom Rush Limbaugh had called a "slut"), he intervened,<sup>41</sup> observing that: "If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon."<sup>42</sup> This carefully crafted statement reminded all Americans that Obama is black and reminded African Americans that Obama conceives of himself as black. Moreover, the statement signaled that, because Obama exists within a black family context, he and his family are vulnerable to racism. Essentially, Obama was saying: If I had a son, he'd be black; as such, he would be subject to the kind of risk that resulted in Trayvon Martin's death. All of this subtle signaling solidified Obama's connection to African Americans. In that moment, he was "black enough."

At the same time, Obama's comments did not alienate white Americans. This is because they were not explicitly racialized. Few quarreled with Obama's statement "If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon." How could they? It is descriptively

accurate at least in the sense that if Obama had a son he would indeed look black. This is hardly a controversial claim, and at any rate, is not the kind of statement that would make Obama “too black.” Like his speech on race, then, this was another successful “double bind” racial performance.

Much is at stake with respect to whether Obama successfully performs the racial “double bind.” Small missteps in acting “too black” or not “black enough” can negatively impact the public’s reactions to his domestic and foreign policy initiatives. How Obama works his identity shapes and is shaped by the positions he takes on Iran, the Middle East peace process, the financial crisis, immigration reform, and marriage equality. As we write this, in mid-2012, a presidential campaign is under way. And this time, entitlement programs are likely to be at the heart of the debate. Obama’s opponents are going to push him to defend these programs, knowing that the widespread perception is that the primary beneficiaries are black.<sup>43</sup> This could render Obama the “welfare president,” an idea that could still take root in and grow from the same fertile racial ground as the “welfare queen.” This is not far-fetched. Prior to dropping out of the Republican primary, Newt Gingrich repeatedly referred to President Obama as the “food stamp president.”<sup>44</sup> And, more recently, Mitt Romney, the Republican nominee for president, has released a series of negative advertisements falsely stating that Obama seeks to eliminate welfare-to-work requirements that make the receipt of welfare contingent upon fulfilling certain work obligations. These advertisements, like Gingrich’s comments, forward the idea of Obama as the “welfare president.” Were white Americans to perceive Obama in that way, it could move him up the scales of blackness, rendering him “too black.”

From the other side of the “double bind,” Obama will likely continue to contend with questions about whether he is “black enough.” In this respect, one can query whether his recent position supporting marriage equality for gay and lesbian couples will move him down the scale. This seems unlikely, both because the African American community’s views on gay marriage, like those of other racial groups, are in flux and because Obama’s intervention has generated a robust debate among black churches and among African Americans more generally on this very issue. None of this debate has been about whether this church or that one, or this African American or that one, is “black enough.” Instead, the debate has been about whether the Bible supports same-sex marriage and whether, as an historically subordinated group, African Americans in particular should be supportive of LGBT rights. Quite apart from how this debate comes out, there is every reason to believe that, going forward, Obama will continue to have to shore up his relationship to African Americans—but without racially threatening or alienating white Americans. This “double bind” racial performance

is part of a broader script that Obama’s position on the most visible stage in the world requires him to enact.

## Beyond Obama

Obama is not alone in his dilemma. African Americans in predominantly white institutions experience similar performance pressures all the time. They, too, have to negotiate a racial “double bind.” They, too, are black on stage. Although “double bind” racial pressures in the workplace can take a variety of institutional forms, perhaps the best example is the employer who wants his African American employee to be black enough to function as racial window dressing for the firm (for example, by serving as the African American representative on important committees) but not so black as to create racial conflict or discomfort in the workplace (for example, by agitating for robust diversity initiatives within the institution).

That many African Americans find themselves negotiating the line between being “black enough” but not “too black” suggests that they are not passive objects of discrimination, waiting for the experience to happen to them and complaining about it after the fact. They proactively work their identities to avoid discrimination in the first place. This is what Johnny Williams did in the context of his job search subsequent to completing his MBA degree from Booth School at the University of Chicago. After a miserable time in the 2010 job market, Williams embarked on a set of strategies to increase his market appeal. One involved removing all references to race from his resume. “His membership, for instance, in the African American business students association? Deleted.”<sup>45</sup> According to an article by Michael Luo of the *New York Times*, Williams’s logic was this: “If they’re going to X me, I’d like to at least get in the door first.”<sup>46</sup>

Williams’s account was part of a more general story the *New York Times* ran about the racial gap in employment opportunities for white and black college graduates. Roughly a week later the *Times* ran another article by Luo, “‘Whitening’ the Resume.”<sup>47</sup> It focused on the resume-whitening strategies African Americans employ to minimize the salience of their blackness. These strategies are not about “passing” in the sense of presenting oneself as white to escape the burdens and disadvantages of being black. Indeed, because some institutions are expressly interested in diversifying their ranks, it is sometimes helpful to be identifiable as black. The question is, how black? In whitening his resume, Williams was not denying his race. He was trying to appear less black “to at least get in the door.”<sup>48</sup>

Williams's story converges with a central theme of *Acting White*, namely, that the resume-whitening phenomenon is a mechanism some African Americans use to appear racially palatable or not "too black." Invoking the experience of another African American, the *New York Times* article hit the nail on the head: "Activism in black organizations, even majoring in African-American studies can be signals to employers"—signals that suggest that one is too black.<sup>49</sup> Eliminating those explicit racial markers is one way of "calming down on the blackness," to quote Yvonne Orr, who has worked for fifteen years in fund-raising for nonprofits.<sup>50</sup> Looking for work in Chicago, Orr "removed her bachelor's degree from Hampton University, a historically black college, leaving just her master's degree from Spertus Institute, a Jewish school. She also deleted a position she once held at an African-American nonprofit organization and rearranged her references so that the first references listed were not black."<sup>50</sup> In adjusting her resume, Orr was following her mother's advice. Notwithstanding the fact that Orr's parents had been members of the Black Panther Party in the 1960s, Orr's mother instructed her daughter that she didn't need to "shout out, I'm black" on her resume.<sup>51</sup> In effect, Orr's mother was advising her on how to work her identity to be more racially palatable to prospective employers.

Decision-makers—whether voters, employers, law enforcement officials, or school admissions officers—implicitly or explicitly demand that African Americans work their identities to satisfy decision-makers' racial expectations. Failure to work one's identity can result in losing elections, unpleasant and even deadly interactions with law enforcement, losing out on jobs, being passed over for promotions, and denial of admission to educational institutions. The disadvantages are not a product of simply being black. They are a product of how black a decision-maker perceives a particular person to be. In this respect, what we describe is not so much an interracial discrimination problem (decision-makers preferring whites over blacks) but rather an intra-racial discrimination problem (decision-makers preferring some blacks over others). The eight chapters that follow explore the different contexts in which this form of discrimination can occur and explain why the phenomenon should concern us.

Chapter 1, "Why Act White?" asks a central question about Working Identity: why would a person of color do it? Why might an African American, for example, "act white" or not act "too black"? The answer is, to be racially palatable to the majority race. Being racially palatable is hard against the background of negative stereotypes associated with one's race. Chapter 1 describes the incentives for African Americans to work their identities to disconfirm these racial stereotypes. There are a myriad of strategies a person might use. These include

strategic passing (I might look black, but I am not *really* black), racial comforting (I won't make you feel guilty about being white), and racial distancing (I don't hang out with other black people). All these strategies have costs. To the extent that an employee is overly concerned with negating racial stereotypes, he may take on too much work (to prove that he is not lazy), attend too many social events (to prove that he is "one of the guys"), refuse to ask for help when he needs it (to avoid the impression that he is unqualified), or avoid other racial minorities who might mentor him (to signal that he is racially colorblind). In short, an employee who is worried about negating racial stereotypes may end up with more work and fewer resources than his white counterparts. Chapter 1 sets out these and other costs of Working Identity.

Chapter 2, "Talking White," explores the ways in which conversations at work are implicated in the Working Identity phenomenon. For the most part, people invoke "talking race" to discuss either accent discrimination (for example, an employer who refuses to hire a person because she sounds "too Asian") or racial discrimination (for example, a landlord who invites a prospective tenant to see an apartment because the person "talked white" but then refuses to rent the apartment to that person upon discovering that the person is black). Chapter 2 highlights a more subtle speech dynamic that disadvantages African Americans in the workplace: what an African American says at work can confirm or negate stereotypes of black people and make her more or less racially salient as an African American. Talking white, then, is not just about accent, it is also about substance. Substantively, anything an African American says that diminishes the extent to which her employer or her co-workers perceive her to be black is "talking white." On the flipside, anything an African American says that increases the extent to which she is perceived to be black is "talking black." Within majority-white workplaces, talking white is more advantageous to the employee than talking black. Chapter 2 explains why.

Chapter 3, "Acting Like a Black Woman" focuses on Working Identity dynamics as they affect black women. Black feminists have long argued that black women are doubly burdened, inside and outside the corporate context, because of the intersection of their race and gender. Scholars often cite *Rogers v. American Airlines*, an important anti-discrimination case, to make this point.<sup>53</sup> Renee Rogers was terminated from her job as a flight attendant because she wore her hair in braids. In part, the plaintiff's argument was that American Airlines's policy prohibiting its employees from wearing braids disparately impacted black women—that is, it impacted black women more than any other social group. Chapter 3 demonstrates how the *Rogers* case also implicates Working Identity. Hair is a part of a person's Working Identity. In the corporate

context, black women who wear their hair in braids or dreadlocks are less palatable and more racially salient than black women who do not. An employer can interpret the decision to braid or dread one's hair as a decision not to "act white," or as a decision to act "too black."

Our hope is that chapters 1 through 3 will persuade readers that we should take the Working Identity phenomenon seriously. Some readers might be persuaded and still wonder whether Working Identity is something the law can and should manage. As it turns out, the law is already managing a version of this problem. Chapter 4, "Acting Like a White Woman," demonstrates one context in which this is so. Central to chapter 4 is the widespread recognition that a woman's vulnerability to discrimination is a function of her Working Identity, or the way she expresses her gender. Institutions treat women differently depending on whether they are perceived to be masculine or feminine. A case involving a Nevada casino that terminated a white female bartender because she refused to wear makeup demonstrates this point. We discuss this case to illustrate the relationship between Working Identity and sex discrimination cases involving white women. To the extent that courts take performance dynamics seriously in the context of gender cases involving white women, it is worth thinking about whether they should do so with respect to race as well, a question we pick up in chapter 7. Before doing so, we take the discussion beyond the corporate context in chapters 5 and 6.

Chapter 5, "(Not) Acting Criminal," focuses on racial profiling. Identity performances play a crucial role in the context of both police interactions and public policy discussions about racial profiling. To avoid being stopped by the police, black people might drive less frequently than they otherwise would, drive less flashy cars when they do, and avoid wearing hoodies while driving. To terminate a police encounter, a black person might refrain from asserting his right (to signal that he is a "good black"), be overly cooperative (to signal that he is not an angry black man), consent to searches he has a right to refuse (to signal that he is not carrying drugs). In each example, the Working Identity strategy is to perform law-abidingness against a background stereotype of criminality. The strategy is also at play in public policy discussions about racial profiling. For example, at the height of the public campaigns against racial profiling, the campaign of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) against racial profiling included the circulation of images of well-dressed and seemingly respectable black men. Its implicit message is that because racial profiling is affecting the lives of "good" black men, the practice should be abolished.

Chapter 6, "Acting Diverse," focuses on affirmative action. The Supreme Court has been clear that diversity is a compelling justification for affirmative

action. In accepting this rationale, the Court rejected a number of others, including the existence of societal discrimination, role modeling, and the under-representation of minorities in certain professional and occupational settings. Focusing on higher education, chapter 6 raises the question of whether the diversity rationale for affirmative action encourages admissions officers to screen applicants to ascertain whether they are "too diverse" or not "diverse enough," a corollary of the "too black" or not "black enough" problem we discuss. We provide concrete examples to illustrate the different ways in which university officials may intra-racially select among African American applicants, preferring some over others, depending on how these applicants have worked their identities in their applications.

Our final two chapters focus on solutions. Chapter 7, "Acting Within the Law," outlines two broad anti-discrimination approaches judges might take to tackle the Working Identity problem. Neither is completely satisfying. Thus, chapter 8, "Acting White to Help Other Blacks" explores whether solutions may lie at the level of individual action. There is a growing sense that the representation of people of color at the top of institutions will produce trickle-down benefits to those on the bottom. Chapter 7 questions this assumption. The presence of people of color at the top of the corporate hierarchy may do little to help those at the bottom. Indeed, notwithstanding the strong notion in the black community that African Americans should "lift as we climb," incentives exist for African Americans at the top of the ladder to pull it up behind them once they land on higher corporate ground. Doing so helps them to blend in, to solidify the firm's impression of them as racial exceptions, and to maintain their status as "good blacks." Working to increase the number of blacks in a firm is a surefire way to racially stand out.

The epilogue notes some of the objections we heard once we began circulating our book manuscript. We respond to those concerns and in doing so share our optimism—that the Working Identity phenomenon and intra-racial discrimination will soon move from the margins of legal discourse into more mainstream conversations about race, law, and equality. Shifting racial discourse in this way is important. Anti-discrimination law and the reputational harms of maintaining all-white work environments substantially diminish the likelihood that employers will discriminate against *all* blacks. Employers who want to discriminate are likely to do so by discriminating against a subset of blacks based on their Working Identity. This creates an incentive for black prospective employees to signal that they are "good" by adopting precisely some of the strategies Michael Luo's *New York Times* articles mentioned. We need to have a much better sense of the extent to which people are engaged in these strategies.

We need to think much harder about what, if anything, the law can do. And we need to identify much better mechanisms for holding a range of institutional decision-makers—employers, police officers, admissions officials—more accountable to the extent that they engage in intra-racial distinctions of the sort this book describes. Our optimism is that *Acting White?* will put us closer to accomplishing these goals.

## 1

## Why Act White?

In Comedy Central's hit, *The Chappelle Show*, host Dave Chappelle presents a number of skits under the rubric of "when keeping it real goes wrong." Each skit illustrates the cost of being true to one's convictions, or "keeping it real" (See figure 1.1). One of these skits helps frame this chapter. It features a black male executive, Vernon Franklin. As it opens, we see Vernon walking confidently through the corridors of the corporation for which he works. He is on his way to what appears to be the prized corner office. In the next shots, he is shown sitting at his desk, both poring over his work and leisurely reading the newspaper. He seems comfortable and happy.

Subsequently, we see him in a conference room with several other executives, all of whom are white. As he moves through the halls, to his office, to the



Figure 1.1 Dave Chappelle.  
Source: © Laura Farr/ZUMA/Corbis.

# Acting White?

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*Rethinking Race in "Post-Racial" America*

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DEVON W. CARBADO

and

MITU GULATI

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