



A POST-RACIAL ERA? We're not there yet, nor is it necessarily an ideal, says Li. "We want to know racial identities because those are the handles by which we begin to establish intimacy."

Q&A

Race Talk in the Age of Obama

President Barack Obama's rhetorical approach to race is one we see often in contemporary American literature, argues English professor Stephanie Li, in her new book.

Interview by Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

STEPHANIE LI HAS BEEN INTERESTED IN Barack Obama for as long as he's been a political figure. An assistant professor of English at Rochester, she's in good company among literary people who took an early interest in the author of *Dreams From My Father*, the memoir that Obama wrote

in 1995, after his election as the first black president of *Harvard Law Review* but before he launched his political career.

The book won praise as a work of literature from the likes of Toni Morrison and Philip Roth. And Li, a scholar of African-American literature who grew up in Minnesota as the product of an interracial marriage between a Chinese-American fa-

ther and a Mexican mother, identified profoundly with the young Obama—a "racial outlier," she says, who, like she did, sought guidance and solace in literature.

At Rochester, she teaches undergraduates and graduate students in her courses on Toni Morrison, *Race in American Fiction*, *Narratives of Immigration and Assimilation*, and others.

In her latest book, *Signifying Without Specifying: Racial Discourse in the Age of Obama* (Rutgers), Li examines Obama's rhetorical approach to race, both on the campaign trail in 2008 and in his written works, alongside the works of novelists Toni Morrison, Colson Whitehead, and Jhumpa Lahiri. She argues that Obama, like these novelists, evokes race through coded language—in his case, a language that carries cultural resonance for African Americans without explicitly naming race.

What do you mean when you say that Barack Obama is our first “signifying president”?

Obama is distinctive not simply because he's our first black president. Even as a presidential candidate, his rhetorical strategies, I think, distinguished him from other, previous black presidential candidates—from Shirley Chisholm, Jesse Jackson, or Al Sharpton, for example. My analysis rests on how Obama uses and manipulates his racial identity. So when I identify him as our first signifying president, I'm identifying the way in which he adopts racial code switching according to different audiences to maximize his identification with the widest array of voting populations.

You compare Obama's means of talking about race—which you call “signifying without specifying”—to an approach Toni Morrison has long employed and has called “race-specific, race-free” language. What does she mean by that phrase, and where has she demonstrated it in her work?

Morrison introduced the phrase “race-specific, race-free language” to refer to language that carries cultural resonances that are specific to African Americans but is free of explicit references to race.

A wonderful example is the letter of endorsement of Obama she made public in January 2008. She rejected the premise that she was supporting Obama specifically because of his racial identity. She said that

explicitly. But then she went on to state that she supported him because he manifested a quality that she identified as “wisdom.”

That was totally perplexing, because Obama had not even finished a full term in the Senate, and he's one of our youngest presidents. Wisdom is really not the quality that we would attribute to someone of his age and his experience. And as I demonstrate to my students in the Morrison class that I teach, when we look at Morrison's larger body of work, we see that wisdom is a reference to the ancestor—an ancestral figure that guides the protagonist and helps him or her to establish a close relationship to their own identity—in particular, their racial identity.

The wise ancestor is one of the key qualities Morrison identifies as essential to black literature. So for Obama to be identified as “wise,” I think, is a code word for “black.” That is, he's invested in his blackness, he understands where he came from.

But it's not only African Americans who employ this racialized language. Where else do we see it?

As I write in my book, we see it in the stories of the South Asian–American author Jhumpa Lahiri. Another great example is *A Gate at the Stairs*, the most recent novel by Lorrie Moore. Moore is a white author from the Midwest. In this novel there are these wonderful scenes in which a young college student is taking care of the black child of white adoptive parents. And the parents have convened a support group for parents of children of color, which includes both white and minority parents. Tassie, the babysitter, is taking care of these kids upstairs and listening to the conversation downstairs. So she can only hear the voices. She doesn't know who's speaking what. And so you have this mixture of conversation between white people and people of color, and it's all coded through the language.

Race-specific, race-free prose is a kind of device which is being used not simply by black authors, not simply by Obama and Morrison—though I think they're the progenitors of this—but is an idea that's being taken up much more broadly within contemporary American literature.

In what ways do you, along with Morrison, see race-specific, race-free prose as an ideal?

I understand race-specific, race-free prose as the language of intimacy. It's language

that recognizes difference without harping upon difference. And that's, I think, what happens when you know and love somebody within your family, within your circle of friends, within your community, and you understand their racial identity, you understand that's crucial to who they are. But it's not the only component by which you recognize their totality.

How did race-specific, race-free language work in your family as you were growing up?

It's hard, actually, to give specific examples. There was just an understanding that we were very different. But as a young child, it was also hard for me to know, is our difference specific to race?

Because my mother's first language was Spanish, she spoke with an accent. My mother also worked full time, as a scientist, which was different from most of my friends' mothers. So there were all of these ways that difference manifested in my life. It was hard to know. Were we isolated because we're racially different, because my mother's an immigrant, because my mother works full time, because my parents are scientists and none of my friends' parents are scientists? It's hard as a child to figure out what are the salient differences in life.

But certainly I think race played a significant role in that. I think race is part of how we understand people in society. We want to know racial identities, because those are the handles by which we begin to establish intimacy. And so now I'm as forthcoming as I can be. I prefer to have my racial identity known as quickly as possible. Because once that's out of the way, once those things can get known, that's the only way that you can get past it toward some greater degree of intimacy.

You also talk about some of the drawbacks of race-specific, race-free language, particularly as they manifest themselves in public conversation. What are they?

When I identify race-specific, race-free language as the language of intimacy, I'm locating it and its uses specifically within a domestic or a personal space.

Once you start using it in a broader, more politicized, grander scale, it's certainly subject to problems. It can engender a sense of paranoia, that sense that everything is coded, that everything is really about race. I don't think that's always constructive when it comes to deciding public policy. **R**