Introduction

When morning news show host Robin Roberts interviewed TV star and media darling Kerry Washington on the 2016 Oscars Red Carpet, the two glamorous Black women celebrities,1 replete in sleeveless floor-length gowns, dipped their toes into the topic of the day, #OscarsSoWhite. While the hashtag swirled across social media to critique the total absence of actors of color on the award list, Washington spoke without ever naming race, or using the words “Black” or “White”:

I mean I felt like a lot of people have asked me why I’m here tonight and the thing I’ve been thinking about is that when you think about the history of movements, the history of change, a lot of voices are needed at the table so I really respect and actually admire some of the people who are not here tonight—I really get it. But for me I felt like my voice and my heart, my voice is best used at the table. As a new member of the academy, I joined the academy about three years ago, I really want to be part of the conversation to make sure that there’s institutional change so that we never have a year like this again, so that we can be as inclusive as possible.

With few, controlled gestures and a welcoming smile, Washington graciously supported Black celebrities, like Jada Pinkett Smith, who took a very different approach to the topic of Black exclusion in Hollywood by boycotting the event. Washington nodded towards herself as a change-maker in a movement and stressed that her role was to claim a spot “at the table.” To underscore this idea, Washington explained, “we need everybody’s feelings. We need all those voices at the table.” She concluded her “inclusive” statement by asserting that the issue was “about women, it’s about people of color, it’s about age, it’s about making sure that our films and the awards that we give for films represent humanity.” In that quick two-minute interview, Washington coyly, and in a
postracial manner, did not name Black representation; she did not name racism; she did not name #OscarsSoWhite or #BlackLivesMatter. What she did instead was speak through code as Blackness emerged through the inclusive term “people of color.” Invoking other underrepresented groups, she created equivalences between gender, age, and race to soften the prickly issue of White-perpetrated, anti-Black racism. Washington tied up her ideas with the ultimate postracial bow of “inclusivity” and “humanity.” Her demure, ladylike performance contrasted sharply with Oscar host and comedian Chris Rock’s skewering of anti-Black racism, which uplifted Black men by stepping on Black women and other people of color; it also diverged from Pinkett Smith’s direct, speak (Twitter) truth to power boycott, pilloried by Rock and others as ineffectual, outmoded, and the stereotypical act of an Angry Black Woman. Washington’s equivocation ensured both that a large, diverse audience heard her intersectional suggestion for inclusion, and that neither #AllLivesMatter nor #BlackLivesMatter supporters changed the channel. It was an Oscar-worthy performance of what this book calls postracial resistance through the use of strategic ambiguity.
In the recent, but what feels like long-ago moment, the Michelle Obama era, Black women redefined what it meant to be an icon in our

celebrity-obsessed world. They enjoyed some of the most prestigious and most visible positions in U.S. popular culture and yet still could not speak in a forthright manner about racialized and gendered discrimination in mainstream spaces without retribution. Strategic ambiguity is a way of pushing back against that discrimination anyway through a coded resistance to postracial ideologies. It entails foregrounding cross-over appeal, courting multiple publics, speaking in coded language, and smoothing and soothing fears of difference as simply an incidental side-note. Strategic ambiguity comes about when a privileged minoritized person—in the first half of this book, a Black woman celebrity—and in the second half—a Black woman audience member or Hollywood cultural worker—gauges microaggressions in a room and uses the failure to name racism—one of the primary tools of postrace—in order to, as Washington puts it, claim a seat at the table.

Strategic ambiguity registers to postracial racists (i.e., those who hold deeply racist beliefs—both acknowledged and unacknowledged—but know better than to iterate them in public) as a safe response to twenty-first century gendered racism because it does not appear to upend the space; strategic ambiguity does not attack racialized sexism through walk-outs, pickets, or sit-ins. At the same time, strategic ambiguity is not simply the safe choice. It’s a different, necessarily subtle form of resistance and risk that balances on an escape hatch of deniability. Any race/gender talk by Black women is risky, even if that risk is insulated by the extreme privilege of celebrity, the conflicting codes of postrace, and the deniability of strategic ambiguity. As media consumers, we watch our favorite (or most hated) celebrities negotiating microaggressive forms of postracial racism, and we see our own strategies of resistance mirrored or rejected, which enables us to form new strategies for everyday life that align or diverge from their performances.

As Washington’s performance on the Red Carpet demonstrates, Black women’s inclusion—to use her word—in elite arenas such as celebrity culture was contingent upon their performance of strategic ambiguity. Washington was not the only celebrity whose success was contingent upon such a performance, and television was not the only cultural medium to deliver such a message. Because she showcased herself as a connoisseur of glamour and fitness, fashion blogs extolled the stylistic virtues of our First Lady, Michelle Obama, and lifestyle blogs fetishized
her exercise routine and healthy diet. Because she “transcended race,” in her own words, media mogul Oprah Winfrey remained *Forbes’* number one most powerful celebrity in the world year after year. Because she exuberantly promoted “colorblind casting,” entertainment magazines proclaimed that African American woman writer/producer/director (i.e. *showrunner*) Shonda Rhimes cracked the code of television (melo) drama, churning out the hits *Private Practice* (2007–2013), *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005–present), *Scandal* (2012–2018), and *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014–present). Because she sold her “African American, Native American, French” heritage as purchasable through the L’Oréal makeup True Match color called “soft sable,” Queen Bey—superstar singer Beyoncé Knowles—garnered crossover fans; her earlier strategic ambiguity laid the groundwork for her to transform to a Black feminist heroine of wokeness whose “Negro/Creole” background became an unapologetic articulation of radical Southern Blackness. Postracial Resistance: Black Women, Media, and the Uses of Strategic Ambiguity looks at how, in the first Black First Lady era, African American women celebrities, cultural producers, and audiences subversively used the tools of postracial discourse—the media-propagated notion that race and race-based discrimination are over, and that race and racism no longer affect the everyday lives of both Whites and people of color—in order to resist its very tenets. “The postracial discourse,” communication scholar Manoucheka Celeste argues, “seeks to keep power structures intact by making them almost impossible to critique.” This is a key part of the ambiguity in strategic ambiguity. Black women’s resistance to disenfranchisement has a long history in the U.S., including struggles for emancipation, suffrage, and *de jure* and *de facto* civil rights. In the Michelle Obama era, some minoritized subjects used a different, more individual form of resistance by negotiating through strategic ambiguity. I listen to and watch Black women in three different places in media culture: I use textual analysis to read the strategies of the Black women celebrities themselves; I use production analysis to harvest insights from my interviews with Black women writers, producers, and studio lawyers; and I use audience ethnography to engage Black women viewers negotiating through the limited representations available to them. The book arcs from case study analyses that document the individual successes that strategic ambiguity enables and the limitations it creates
for Black women celebrities, to a conscientious critique of the way performing strategic ambiguity can (perhaps) unintentionally devolve into playing into racism from the perspective of Black women television professionals and younger viewers. In the first half of the book, I analyze three examples of Black female icons—Michelle Obama, Oprah Winfrey, and Shonda Rhimes—who, in different ways, have experienced a racialized sexism specific to Black women. Each woman’s anti-racist, anti-sexist critique enacts postracial resistance by utilizing strategic ambiguity. In the second half of the book, I analyze the words of Black women audiences and industry executives who sometimes perform, sometimes negotiate, and sometimes flout strategic ambiguity in their own resistance to postracial racism.

For many media consumers, the ubiquity of strategically ambiguous Black women on our screens is evidence that we have now, finally, arrived at equality, a world where race and gender are irrelevant in life chances or choices. And yet, such images on our screens—our televisions, phones, computers, tablets, and watches—function as fabricated fantasies that conceal very real intersectional disparities, at once racialized, gendered, sexualized, and classed. A quick snapshot of health statistics shows that African American women have greater rates of high blood pressure than any other group of women, the highest mortality rates from breast cancer, and are four times as likely to die from pregnancy-related causes or have premature births. In the realm of education, African American women’s college graduation rate has failed to rise with the rates of White women, Latinas, or Asian American women. Even college degrees do not level the playing field as statistically White women make more than Black women regardless of their degrees. Economic statistics tell us that Black women make 64 cents to every 78.1 cents White women make on every White man’s dollar. From 1980–2002, the median Black-White wage gap grew among women workers from eight to eighteen percent, while the median Black-White wage gap remained fairly constant for men.

This economic gap persists in the realm of entertainment media, where the median income of Black women writers, who make up only 1.9% of the membership of the Writers Guild of America, is far below other demographic groups. Although during the Michelle Obama era Black women’s images on screen were enjoying a surge in popularity,
Black women’s representation behind the scenes has yet to experience such a boom. In another subset of representations, the images on social media and mainstream news of seemingly state-sanctioned violence, Black women face similar disproportionality. Media portray that violence as exclusively targeting Black men and boys. For example, 2014 marked the killings of rallied-for names like Mike Brown, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice at the hands of police, but few know the names of similarly murdered Gabriella Navarez, Aura Rosser, Michelle Cussaux, and Tanisha Anderson.\textsuperscript{13} Black cis- and transwomen are systematically murdered in much the same ways Black men are killed: they are caught “driving while Black,” and are casualties of the “war on drugs.” Like Black men, they receive insufficient services for mental health crises and die in police custody. In addition, Black women also experience a particular form of intersectional oppression. Black women are called criminals after surviving domestic and sexual abuse, are policed because of their gender and/or sexuality, and face excessive force when pregnant and caring for young children. However, these women remain invisible in the media. The activist scholars in the “#SayHerName” project explain: “neither these killings of Black women, nor the lack of accountability for them, have been widely lifted up as exemplars of the systemic police brutality that is currently the focal point of mass protest and policy reform.”\textsuperscript{14}

Indeed, “the erasure of Black women is not purely a matter of missing facts”—it’s also a media framing problem. Media simply do not show all Black women—alive or dead—and that means that the greater public does not register the importance of all Black women’s lives. The #BlackLivesMatter movement was begun by three Black women—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—but critics and fans represent the movement online and in protests with an almost exclusive focus on Black men, often through visual registers.\textsuperscript{15} The prominent placement of a few Black women celebrities and the erasure of so many others in discursive spaces and representational practices shows up postracial discourse—or the idea that racism is now over—as an empty and dangerous lie.

*Postracial Resistance* asks what happened when the media spotlighted Michelle Obama, Oprah Winfrey, and the women in Shondaland, but shrouded the nameless, faceless Black women victims of police brutality, the women who did not become the rallying cries of the media’s
version of #BlackLivesMatter protests or past presidential addresses. This book can help us understand how the United States transitioned from the Obama to the Trump eras; I contend that the lie of postracialism, with its failure to expose how racism lay in wait beneath its façade, helped lull some 2016 Trump voters into the mythology that racism thus no longer existed, and the racial bile Trump spewed was inconsequential. *Postracial Resistance* documents a moment when the media’s racial progress narrative of our first Black First Family subsumed discourses of racialized violence against other Black people, and fomented desire for Black celebrity women. This book comes out of the Michelle Obama-Oprah-Beyoncé moment when individual Black women set standards for beauty, talent, and fame for *all* Americans, while structures of racism and sexism remained largely unchanged for large groups of Black women. Media texts can open or foreclose intersectional nuance; media can capture or erase the imbricated nature of race, gender, class, sexuality, and of racism, misogyny, classism, and homophobia. *Postracial Resistance* examines how, in the midst of the discursive foreclosures on racism and sexism at the heart of postracial ideologies, prominent Black women positioned themselves as strategically ambiguous, to what effect, and how cultural producers and audiences rejected such strategic ambiguity.

So What Exactly Is the Postrace in Postracial Resistance?

This book examines performances of Michelle Obama-era strategic ambiguity in the face of *postracial* racism. But what exactly is postrace? “Postrace” is a term used by race commentators to sometimes describe, sometimes decry, and sometimes imagine another racialized world. Postrace is far from neutral; indeed, as a racial ideology, it is so loaded and powerful that it delimited the iterative space for race critics in the Obama era. Commentators of all political stripes and academics in a variety of disciplines encased it in quotation marks, and punctuated the sentences it populated with question marks. Its existence, or lack thereof, was debated and celebrated. For some, it was something to aspire towards; for others, it was something to dismiss. Postrace can be seductive to a wide and diverse swath of race thinkers. One of the more strident embraces of postrace comes from postcolonial theorist
Paul Gilroy who challenges the “crisis of raciology,” claiming that holding onto “race thinking,” even—or perhaps especially—by anti-racist activists and critical race scholars, fosters “specious ontologies” and “lazy essentialisms.”

“Postrace” is a term chosen by authors to denote or critique some moment after the importance of race. I use “postrace” to name the ideology—skeptically—and to point out the continued centrality of race in this ideology where race is ostensibly immaterial. I contend that in its very denial of the uses of race, postraciality remains embroiled in precisely what it claims not to be. In other words, postrace is an ideology that cannot escape racialization, complete with controlling images or racialized stereotypes.

Despite its ubiquity in the 21st century media landscape, postracial lacks a clear definition. Like many post words, postracial is far from self-explanatory. To chase the etymological roots of the word, the first part appears to be self-evident: post is Latin for after, but it also sometimes is translated as behind. Postrace means after race, in an evolutionary, next-stage-of-humanity fashion, as well as behind race, in a hiding-in-plain-sight, out-of-sight-out-of-mind fashion. And how about the second part, the “racial”? Race itself remains an open signifier, something untethered from biology, but bound to our everyday and institutionalized lives. Race scholars trip over ourselves to painstakingly point out that we understand that race is constructed, but that we must also document its very real existence in our world. Put another way, race is something “imagined but not imaginary.”

With this definition, after race could mean after biological, essentialized definitions of race, after racialism or racial particularity, or, in other words, after racialized primordial attachments. After race could mean after estimations of racial difference, leading to an assumed equality of culture, biology, and intelligence. Taken a step further, after race could mean after structural and interpersonal prejudice, or after racism or race-based inequality and injustice. Postrace could also mean against race—again, in the words of Gilroy, where we decry how “ideas of racial particularity . . . provide sources of pride rather than shame and humiliation . . . [and] become difficult to relinquish.”

And yet, postrace doesn’t mean any of these things alone: context is key. The openness of race further muddies the openness of post. Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah tracks down the open signifier of two other posts—postcolonial and postmodern—noting that “the post-
postcolonial, like the *post-* in postmodern, is the *post-* of the space-clearing gesture . . . what has come to be theorized as popular culture, in particular—[is] not in this way concerned with transcending, with going beyond, coloniality.”20 Sociologist Mike Featherstone writes that, with regards to postmodernism, “the prefix ‘post’ signifies that which comes after, a break or rupture with the modern which is defined in counter-distinction to it.” But, Featherstone goes on to argue, this particular post also means “a negation of the modern, a perceived abandonment, break with or shift away from the definitive features of the modern, with the emphasis firmly on the sense of the relational move away.”21 Similarly, postfeminist does not mean “after second wave feminism” to feminist media studies scholars like Angela McRobbie; postfeminism does not denote the egalitarian rewards produced by feminism, but rather a declared after moment that ironically conjures pre-feminist ideals.22

Another post—post-Black—appears, according to Nicole Fleetwood, to mean not after Black but rather to “register a profound frustration with normative ways of understanding black representation, aesthetic practice, and reception.”23 Curator Thelma Gordon in conversation with artist Glenn Lignon coined post-Black in the 1990s to differentiate a new generation of African American artists, who were, in Gordon’s words to journalist Touré, not “labelled Black” but “steeped in Blackness.”24 Touré describes twenty-first century American post-Blackness as “individual Blackness” as opposed to group consciousness.25 To Touré, post-Blackness means that “the number of ways of being Black is infinite.”26 Interestingly, in Touré’s formulation of post-Blackness, which he riffs off of Michael Eric Dyson’s “three primary dimensions of Blackness,” Black women barely register. Touré exemplifies his “extroverted” (Dyson’s intentional) Blackness through Malcolm X, Dr. King, Jim Brown, and Jay-Z; his ambiverted/Dyson’s incidental Blackness means Barack Obama, Colin Powell, and Will Smith; finally, Touré’s “introverted” (Dyson’s accidental) Blackness means Clarence Thomas or, in his only example of a woman, Condoleezza Rice. Although Touré interviews some prominent African American women in *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness?* and indeed acknowledges that the author of the term is herself a woman, in his explication, despite his assertion that post-Blackness comprises a state of “Black multilinguality,”27 Black women aren’t the primary speakers of the language. All of these theoretical post
terms—postmodern, postfeminism, postrace, and post-Black—are not simply markings of after, but are instead, in the words of Appiah, “space clearing gestures” that ostensibly make way new ways of expression and being, such as strategic ambiguity.

As is befitting strategic ambiguity, postracial is a similarly not an as-it-appears-to-be term. Instead of the post in postracial meaning after, it means later and quieter. Strategic ambiguity reflects the postracial label where race is inevitably and perpetually postponed or silenced only to be trotted out in delayed and more coded forms. Just as Stuart Hall reads Derrida’s definition of *différance* as pivoting between its two meanings of “to differ” and “to defer,” postrace means both immediate awareness of different race and eventual acknowledgment of that race.28 “Different race” in this case is akin to different racialization, or different ways of reading Blackness, through, for example, the lens of “hope and change.” This is certainly the way in which postrace was deployed during the 2008 election, with its utopian, post-first Black president, “yes we can” euphoria that overtook many liberal and progressive circles. But hope and change remained slogans and not precursors to a new Black enfranchisement in the Obama era. Postrace was not a new way of understanding race, but instead a slippery escape from race talk under the guise of a new phenomenon; strategic ambiguity made use of this slippage. In this book, strategic ambiguity is offered up as an affective iteration of and speaking back to postracial resistance that, like hope and change, doesn’t always move the needle on racial progress.

The meaning(s) of postrace come not just from its etymology and its mode of pronouncement but from its ideological genealogy. While the popularity of the term postrace is relatively recent, the philosophy behind it is not. Colorblindness, a topic on which critical race scholars have written for decades, is one of the most prominent predecessors to postrace. In his critique of colorblind constitutionalism, Neil Gotanda draws upon fellow critical race theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw’s writings about a certain “perspectivelessness” or a “colorless” positionality that legal analysts of color are expected to enact.29 Gotanda describes colorblindness as akin to assimilation whereby “race should have no real significance, but instead be limited to the formal categories of white and black, unconnected to any social, economic or cultural practice.”30 Media studies scholars Sarah Nilsen and Sarah E. Turner utilize
the term “colorblind” to denote “an ideological rhetorical stance that serves to distort the goals of the civil rights movement by claiming that the movement’s objective was the eradication of racial considerations.” Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva names this phenomenon “colorblind racism,” and education scholar Mica Pollock calls this same ideology “colormute,” whereby “deleting race words can actually help make race matter more.” To denote postracial racism anthropologist John Jackson uses the phrase de cardio racism to describe “a kind of hidden or cloaked racism, a racism of euphemism and innuendo, not heels-dug-in pronouncements of innate black inferiority.” Critical rhetorician Anjali Vats looks at the appropriation of race in high fashion to demonstrate how racism hides inside postracial ideologies in “racechange.” Whether called perspectiveless, colorless, colorblindness, colormute, colorblind racism, de cardio racism, racechange, or postrace, these ideologies share the deleterious effect of silencing race talk while ignoring—and perhaps even fomenting—racialized discrimination.

Postrace thus remains slippery. One way to pin down such slipperiness is to describe postrace through the way in which sighted humans understand evidence: a visual image, a look. In other words, who, exactly, can be postracial? I’ve posed this question to groups of undergraduates by showing them a variety of photographs of our last few presidents and having them shout out whether they believe each president to be postracial or not. I explain that this is an unquestionably problematic exercise that falls back on the very binaries I exhort them to move beyond . . . and yet, in class, we all admit that we cannot help but default to the position that we “know” race by “seeing” it. I’ve found that the students assess the images of presidents as “postracial” or “not postracial” according to the degree to which the presidents appear to “enact otherness,” as art historian Cherise Smith has described racialized identity play. Audiences remain split about Bill Clinton, who enacted various signifiers of Black cool (such as playing the saxophone in sunglasses on a 1992 election campaign episode of The Arsenio Hall Show) while also legislating policies disproportionately disenfranchising African Americans (such as the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, i.e., welfare reform). Without fail they agree that George W. Bush, who enacted White populism (signified through his strong Texas drawl and “charming” garbling of language) while being the heir to a White,
Connecticut-bred political dynasty (with a grandfather as senator, father as Vice President, and brother as governor), is not postracial. Not only is Bush not postracial, but he’s also not raced; as a White male subject, he has the luxury of occupying a neutral, unracialized, normative (i.e., White) space.

Barack Obama, who students read as phenotypically Black, enacts racial flexibility harder to pin down as he fluidly switched codes with different audiences during his presidential campaigns and presidency. At times he was sneered at for his “mom jeans”—what could signify as less cool, hence “less Black” and less threatening—and, at other times, he was fetishized for his swagger, read by audiences to be particularly African American and male. Students most overwhelmingly vote Obama to embody the postracial, and they seem to agree that the postracial label means not simply “enacting otherness,” but also “having [minoritized] race.” By popular race logic, iterated by Whiteness studies scholars such as Ruth Frankenberg, Toni Morrison, and George Lipsitz, White people—as traditionally constructed—are raceless; as normative racialized bodies, Whites are rhetorically absent from race. Thus, Whites cannot be postracial but people of color who “have race” can. But not all people of color signify as postracial. Postracial people succeed in White settings, or more specifically, garner mainstream power and privilege across demographic groups, but especially with Whites. Such postracial people of color must also be seen by Whites as nonthreatening and safe. Black women who are read as postracial, are subjects positioned to successfully enact strategic ambiguity.

My choice to show students pictures of presidents is not a random one. Much mediated discourse on postrace has focused on African American male politicians, and, in particular, Barack Obama. Communication scholar Catherine Squires tracks the rise of the term from a one-off mention in a 1976 *Newsweek* article on Jimmy Carter’s egalitarian Southern politics (a far cry from the “Southern strategy” of race-baiting politicians) to the near-constant application of the term to the “new generation” of Black politicians, including Barack Obama, who “were heralded as proof of racial progress since the 1960s.” However, the Obama era, in which the fiction of meritocracy became hegemonic and restricted, and enabled the space for minoritized subjects. Such restriction emerged from the refusal of race and racism to be named
because of postracial discourse, and such enabling occurred when Black women learned from and used this very refusal.

As I examine in this book, Black women who succeed in mixed spaces—whether public figures like our former First Lady, a talk show host, a showrunner, television writers, producers, and executives, or “regular folk” like college students at a predominantly White institution—perform strategic ambiguity. These women’s public performances, in the words of literary scholar Daphne Brooks, illuminate not the invisible but, rather, “the politics of Black female hypervisibility in the American cultural imaginary.”38 In a climate in which frank discussions of difference can be impossible, many hypervisible Black women carefully couch and code their sentiments on race and gender. In other words, postrace succeeds not at silencing powerful African American women, but in generating new iterations of resistant speech through strategic ambiguity.

Despite daily reports and videos of race-based violence across the country, a postracial ethos remains deeply entrenched in U.S. culture, including U.S. media culture. This book identifies how minoritized subjects respond when those invested in the myth of postrace dismiss mere reference to race and gender, much less racialized or gendered discrimination or pride, as outmoded, irrelevant, or even racist and sexist. *Postracial Resistance* examines what such individual struggles against racism and sexism look like when viewed through the screens of media representations, audiences, and creatives in the very recent past. Such ideologies gain their strength from their everyday and everywhere quality. Repeated, truncated, postracial soundbites on all of our screens told us that Michelle Obama was “racist” because she identified the existence of racism or that Oprah was “crying racism” because she made public an experience of discrimination.

Black women, and particularly powerful Black women, could (and can) not speak in a forthright manner about racialized sexism or indeed anti-Black violence because they were always seen as driven by bias and agenda. But they did speak back. They resisted in ways that didn’t always look like traditional resistance, with strategic ambiguity. Such individual resistance, coded through the politics and performances of Black women’s respectability politics, meshed well with postrace. To elucidate the contours of this resistance, *Postracial Resistance* uncovers
different responses-to-postrace strategies, and centers different media studies methodologies. I use what media studies scholars such as Toby Miller and Douglas Kellner describe as the tripartite methodologies of textual analysis, political economy, and, in Miller’s words, audience ethnography or, in Kellner’s, audience reception.  

This book illuminates the promises and perils of the postracial resistance of strategic ambiguity through my examination of not simply mediated events and the entertainment industry, but also audiences and media executives. Popular culture cannot be understood fully without incorporating the voices of audiences; as media scholar John Fiske notes, “popular culture [is] a site of struggle, but while accepting the power of the forces of dominance, [effective audience analysis] focuses rather upon the popular tactics by which these forces are coped with, are evaded or are resisted.” Fiske’s ideas point to the multiple cultural studies approaches to incorporating audiences. Communication scholar Robin Means Coleman explains: “Reception studies (variously termed ‘reception theory,’ ‘reception analysis,’ and ‘reception aesthetics’) are distinguished by an examination of the nexus between a medium and its audience.” While all forms of reception studies focus on meaning-making, Means Coleman articulates a number of central and guiding questions for scholars of audiences. She questions: “What is the nature of reality as perceived by the audience during reception? What do these acts of decoding and interpretation mean? What knowledge can be derived from understanding the reception process? How should these realities, meanings, and knowledge be explored?” Means Coleman’s research questions illustrate how she celebrates the knowledge of individuals, instead of, in an alternate media studies approach, simply “envisaging the audience as a construct” [emphasis in original], and in particular how readers are positioned by a commercial nexus. Means Coleman’s approach—like Stuart Hall’s, Jacqueline Bobo’s, and John Fiske’s, which I emulate in this book—imbuces more agency in individuals as the “active audience” than circumscribing viewers as constructs.

Strategic Ambiguity

The subtitle of this book draws upon revered rhetorician Kenneth Burke’s phrase to denote the flexible analytic frame a listener or watcher
must deploy to understand a rhetor’s motives in constructing a speech or action. To lay out the terms of his “grammar of motives,” Burke states, “what we want is not terms that avoid ambiguity, but terms that clearly reveal [to rhetorical critics] the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise” (italics in original). In other words, we can’t rely upon seemingly clear language if we want to understand complex motivation. Burke’s phrase has been taken up by scholars and practitioners in a wide variety of arenas. Strategic ambiguity is commonly known as a military policy utilizing doublespeak for sensitive and often explosive issues of national security, such as weapons of mass destruction. Organizational communication scholars have adapted Burke’s phrase to describe how elites protect their privilege and manage potential conflict among underlings. Economists describe strategic ambiguity as a feature of successful contracts that allows for pragmatic flexibility. Anthropologists and sociolinguists also document such flexibility in their discussions of code-switching, where strategic ambiguity is deployed by an outsider speaker who seeks to decrease potential conflicts with both outsider and insider groups.

While my definition of strategic ambiguity draws upon aspects of doublespeak, conflict-management, pragmatism, and code-switching as elements of the performance, I use the term more in the way rhetorician Leah Ceccarelli describes it, as something that can “result in two or more otherwise conflicting groups of readers converging in praise of a text.” Ceccarelli draws upon John Fiske’s reading of Madonna as a polysemous text to provide the example of how 1980s and ’90s era Madonna can be read by certain audiences as “sex kitten” and by others as the assumed opposite, “feminist.” As a strategically ambiguous agent, Madonna enables “subordinate and dominant social groups [to] gain pleasure from their support of the text (even though that support derives from different interpretations of the text’s meaning), and the ‘author’ of the text [i.e., Madonna] benefits from the increased popularity.” Ceccarelli describes strategic ambiguity as a tool that the powerful can use to shore up hegemony but also that the powerless can use to chip away at that hegemony. On the one hand, powerful groups use strategic ambiguity to consolidate their power by “appealing to the powerful while placating the marginal just enough to keep them from openly rebelling against the discourse and the system it supports.” On the other hand,
disempowered groups use strategic ambiguity to “insert . . . a hidden, subversive text” that “critique[s] an oppressive regime without inviting suppression, imprisonment, or death.” I am interested in the uses of strategic ambiguity by elite Black women who, in Ceccarelli’s formulation, are simultaneously powerful and disempowered.

Ceccarelli also notes that, regardless of political impact, strategic ambiguity is “an effective way to increase the popularity of a text.” Because of these divergent political ends to the means of strategic ambiguity, polysemic texts should neither be “universally praise[ed] . . . as subversive of hegemonic power, [n]or . . . universally condemn[ed] . . . as an example of miscommunication.” Indeed, polysemy is the very stuff of media studies—as Stuart Hall famously documents, some viewers will decode the dominant messages encoded in the text, others will decode entirely oppositional messages, while a third group will enact a negotiated positionality.51 For example, in the realm of reality TV, media studies scholar Racquel Gates writes that media “texts [are] intrinsically polysemic, laden with meanings and significance that are activated by a variety of factors.” This book is concerned with precisely these polysemic, negotiated, grey areas.

The phrase “strategic ambiguity” also speaks to Gayatri Spivak’s notion of “strategic essentialism” whereby groups consisting of similarly-identified members can set differences aside to work together for a specific political end; it is “a strategic use of positive essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest.” The two phrases differ as they contain elements that are near inverses of each other: where ambiguity is soft, undefined, and connected, essentialism is hard, defined, and oppositional. Essentialism is easily pinned down where ambiguity is slippery. As opposed to strategic ambiguity, which individuals enact for the purposes of individual success, strategic essentialism happens through groups for the purposes of group betterment. Strategic essentialism remains in a time-and-issue bound political realm, and not, as in strategic ambiguity, the non-temporally-bound realm of identity construction. In other words, strategic essentialism is what coalitions of the weak engage in to garner strength by partnering with each other, while strategic ambiguity is how individuals who are disempowered by their minoritized identity status, and yet often privileged by class, garner
strength by individual action. Ambiguity and essentialism are, in fact, polar opposites: ambiguous performances embrace the grey spaces, whereas essentialized ones rely upon black and white delineations.

While theories of strategic ambiguity might well apply to other minoritized groups, in this book, strategic ambiguity functions as an articulation of a sometimes conflicted, sometimes confounding, and always postracial twenty-first century iteration of Black feminist resistance, which must be considered in the grey spaces Ceccarelli shades and the means-for-an-end motivation Spivak iterates. Indeed, while—in the words of Carole Boyce Davies—“the Black female subject refus[es] to be subjugated,” reading such refusal is not a straightforward process. Instead, again with Davies’s insight, we must understand that “Black female subjectivity . . . can be conceived not primarily in terms of domination, subordination, or ‘subalternization,’ but in terms of slipperiness, elsewhereness.” This “slipperiness” means that Black women are “constantly eluding the terms of the discussion.”54 Such slipperiness, the strategic ambiguity of the Michelle Obama era, is the tool that minoritized subjects use to resist intersectional oppression when, in a postracial moment, those around them ignore oppression, explain it away, or acknowledge it only in a single register.

Why Do We Care So Much About Media Representations?

Representation matters. Media representations inform political representations, and political representations feed media representations, as Stuart Hall and his colleagues at the Birmingham School describe in their model of the endless circuit of culture.55 All representations are more than simply images, sounds, and writing on a screen; they are more than entertainment or distractions. In what media studies scholar Douglas Kellner calls “media culture,” “a culture of the image” provides “the materials out of which people forge their very identities.”56 Representations of Black women, like representations of most minoritized groups, are particularly meaning-laden. Black women both in front of and behind the screens bear a heavy burden of representation—what historian Kevin Gaines documents as the philosophy of “uplifting the race.”57 For all audiences, regardless of racialized identification, images
of African American women are either affirmations or denials of Black women’s very humanity. They are primers on and cautionary tales about respectable or inappropriate actions, dress, speech, and demeanor.

Audiences place an undue burden on representations of Black women as both hypervisible—objects of desire and scorn—and invisible entities who fail to register as significant. Indeed, as visual culture scholar WJT Mitchell notes: “Hypervisibility—being remarked, noticed, stared at—can only be understood if it is placed in some relation to its dialectical twin: invisibility.” Such hypervisibility and invisibility are racialized and gendered. Hypervisibility—such as the omnipresent showcasing of Black women celebrities in our media—is, as digital media studies scholar Safiya Noble puts it, “a means of rendering Black women and girls invisible,” or failing to show how intersectional discrimination affects everyday Black girls and women. We see a few famous Black women’s bodies, but we don’t hear multiple, complex narrations of Black women’s lives. Such representations bear particular weight because Black women are still underrepresented in popular culture, especially on television. In 1976, George Gerbner and Larry Gross described TV as “the central cultural arm of American society,” and “an agency of the established order” that “as such serves primarily to extend and maintain rather than to alter, threaten, or weaken conventional conceptions, beliefs and behaviors . . . Its function is, in a word, enculturation.”

Race/gender framing in the invisible/hypervisible dialectic means that minoritized audiences can castigate less-than-“respectable” images of the group(s) with which we identify and wring our hands in dismay. We highlight the representations that make us look “the best,” pinning them, liking them, and re-tweeting them in pride. In short, we imbue representations with our hopes and our dreams, our fears, and our anxieties. While representations most certainly perform a disciplining role of interpellating or hailing subjects into being, our interactions with mediated images are far from straightforward or cause-and-effect. Because representations of us are so pregnant with meaning, we sometimes struggle to see representations as politicized tools, or performative events, that are conscribed by the burden of representation, what cultural studies scholar Kobena Mercer describes as a “moment of corrective inclusion” to counteract . . . historical exclusion.”
However, this doesn’t mean that minoritized audiences mindlessly consume our representations, becoming the “dupes” Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno feared the “culture industry” would create. Sometimes, for example, consuming popular images of Black women on television prompts us to, as author Morgan Parker writes, “move out of Shondaland,” and boycott beautiful, seductive, and also troubling racialized and gendered images despite our hunger to see ourselves. Thought of another way, minoritized audiences experience what Judith Butler calls disidentification when we encounter problematic images of ourselves. Jose Estaban Muñoz describes disidentification as what happens when audiences confront stereotypical representations of themselves but instead of accepting such stereotypes as truth, they “scramble[e] and reconstruct . . . the . . . message of a cultural text.” This scrambling allows minoritized audiences to “recircuit” its meanings. Muñoz explains; “disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.” In other words, individual media consumers resist the constant pressure from media texts to believe that we are the stereotypes on screen. Many minoritized viewers, instead, maintain a strategically ambiguous relationship to our images on our screens in small moments of postracial resistance. This book illustrates that the postracial resistance of strategic ambiguity is an approach that not only celebrities employ, but that all audiences enact as well.

The Power of Screens

Our ever-present screens enable 21st century Black women’s strategic ambiguity. In the Michelle Obama era, any given speech event or performance might, at any given time, have been recorded, taken out of context, excerpted, and highlighted. Savvy 21st century media consumers, producers, and critics, who are often one and the same person, are ultimately aware that screens, and the surveillance technologies behind them, will influence if not infiltrate every moment. Truly, as communication scholar Amanda Lotz notes, “the new technologies available to
us require new rituals of use. Not so long ago, television use typically involved walking into a room, turning on the set, and either turning to specific content or channel surfing.67 Today, not only is our watching not bound to a particular physical location, but it is also not bound to a particular temporal moment; as Lotz asserts, “the control over the television experience that various technologies offer has ruptured the norm of simultaneity in television experience and enabled audiences to capture television on their own terms.”68 Audiences’ viewing habits “on their own terms” has only increased the impact of televisual imagery in all of our lives.

The representations I consider in this book have, by essence of their popularity, been celebrated by audiences as screen-worthy and as such must be understood through the logic of their digital capture for the ages. Such representations never simply go away; they live on in echoes. The moments of both resonance and cacophony created by these mediated echoes are the phenomena with which Postracial Resistance is concerned. Representations acquire meaning because they are not, in Stuart Hall’s words, “isolated and separate concepts” but rather connected through “the articulation of different elements into a distinctive set or chain of meanings.”69 Mediated images are never floating in isolation; they always function in relation to each other. Furthermore, representations, even those that seem ephemeral, exist as links in a chain sutured together with our omnipresent social, digital media. Although ideologies weld the links of the chain, the chain is not unbreakable; as Hall notes, “one of the ways in which ideological struggle takes place and ideologies are transformed is by articulating the elements differently, thereby producing a different meaning.”70 This book considers such ideological struggle through performances of postracial resistance and strategic ambiguity on a variety of screens. Because of digital technologies, audiences will always be able to read Oprah’s strategic ambiguity emerging through her tweets about being shut out of a fancy Swiss store just as her press tour for her film The Butler begins (chapter 2). We will re-experience Michelle Obama’s strategic ambiguity bubbling up as she charms The View audiences so successfully that the entire country temporarily sublimates its racism to obsess about her fashion iconicity (chapter 1). We will follow, once again, Shonda Rhimes’ tweets that manage to skirt racial specificity while signifying racial critiques (chapter 3).
Women of color audiences will benefit from such endless access to images of other women of color, as they castigate or adore such representations (chapters 4 and 5). Black women television workers will negotiate this loop of imagery as they fight against racist and sexist Hollywood systems in order to include their voices (chapter 6).

*Postracial Resistance* suggests that mediated images do not produce, reflect, or create unidirectional iterations of audience desires but instead provide insight into complex and co-constitutive performances of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Reading the performances of prominent Black women in media as strategically ambiguous means understanding how they can use rhetorical tools of postrace to resist its very ideological tenets. Reading the responses of audiences and executives as skeptical, reluctant, or resistant uses of strategic ambiguity means understanding how Black women perform racialized and gendered identities in myriad ways. Strategic ambiguity is a way to speak back to controlling images. It’s an acknowledgement that women of color’s access to privilege and power in mainstream or ostensibly egalitarian, meritocratic spaces is contingent upon the tricky dance of postracial resistance or performing the codes of postrace to resist racist ideologies. Strategic ambiguity means fomenting a certain desire for Black women celebrities across all of America or, as film scholar Michael DeAngelis writes in his work on Hollywood stars’ self-construction as sexually ambiguous, developing the means to “operate as fantasy.” Strategic ambiguity, as a co-constitutive performance of Black feminist resistance, is key to naming and fighting against racialized sexism without appearing aggressive or angry; strategic ambiguity means avoiding being pinned down as oversensitive or delusional in a so-called postracial moment.

**Black Feminist Resistance and Strategic Ambiguity**

While *Postracial Resistance* documents postracial resistance in 21st century media culture, Black women’s resistance is far from a new phenomenon, as historians and literary critics have thoroughly documented. Historian Deborah Gray White notes that, for African American women, “resistance in the United States was seldom politically oriented, consciously collective, or violently revolutionary. [I]t was generally individualistic and . . . aimed at maintaining what seemed to all concerned to
be the status quo.” Historian Stephanie M. H. Camp describes enslaved Africans’ “everyday resistance,” a phrase she draws from political scientist James Scott, as “the wide terrain between consent, on one hand, and open, organized opposition, on the other.”

Historians Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson write that “the extraordinary achievements of black women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did not grow out of degradation but out of a legacy of courage, resourcefulness, initiative, and dignity that goes back to 1619,” the moment when enslaved Africans encountered first contact with Europeans and Native Americans in North America. Hine and Thompson detail the resistance of enslaved women “by refusing to work, by engaging in sabotage, even by running away . . . Some committed suicide, which was not necessarily an act of despair and defeat . . . [as] most enslaved Africans believed that death would return them to their families and countries.” For enslaved people, Hine and Thompson point out, “resistance was a way of life . . . Survival itself was a form of resistance.” Both overt and covert, individualistic and collective, Black women’s opposition formed, in the words of Patricia Hill Collins, a “culture of resistance.”

In the post-bellum period, some Black feminist resistance also took the particular form of performing, in the words of Lisa B. Thompson, as a “Black lady.” Thompson argues,

> Acting like a black lady became a highly conscious performance developed in part as a response to social codes and ideals of propriety dictated by nineteenth- and twentieth-century reformers who strategized for more humane treatment of African Americans . . . circulating ideologies such as the Cult of True Womanhood and the Cult of Domesticity, which emphasized piety, purity, and submissiveness, held promise for revising notions about black people as immoral.

Such enactments of the “politics of respectability,” in the words of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “disavowed, in often repressive ways, much of the expressive culture of the ‘folk,’ for example, sexual behavior, dress style, leisure activity, music, speech patterns, and religious worship patterns.”

The nineteenth-century club women’s movement showcased such “Black lady” performance. The leaders of Black middle-class club
women’s movement and in particular the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), explain Cindy L. White and Catherine A. Dobris, “were acutely aware that prevailing racist ideologies made no distinctions among Black women; all would be judged by the worst.” The NACW took the motto “Lifting as We Climb,” which meant, in the words of White and Dobris, that their organization “address[ed] the condemnation of any Black women by elevating all Black Women.”80 While social uplift was the primary goal of the NACW, White and Dobris argue the notion of “elevation” was not a conservative idea because Black women were not afforded the privileges of humanity granted to White women. In fact, Lisa B. Thompson describes such women as activists; their performances of a Black lady brand of “domesticity, chastity, and propriety” exemplifies, to these scholars, a form of Black feminist resistance couched in respectability politics.

Respectability politics also created, in Hine’s phrase, a “culture of dissemblance,” a particular silence around Black women’s private lives so that they might “protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives.”81 The idea of minoritized subjects’ silence as resistance is not one that simply applies to the past. Anthropologist Signithia Fordham writes of silence as resistance in her landmark studies of African American girls’ educational experience. Fordham observes: “silence among the high achieving females at . . . school is an act of defiance, a refusal on the part of the high-achieving females to consume the image of ‘nothingness’ so essential to the conception of African-American women. This intentional silence is also critical to the rejection and deflection of the attendant downward expectations.”82 As Fordham illustrates, the history of Black feminist resistance-that-might-not-look-like-resistance lives in the present. Visual culture scholar Nicole Fleetwood puts it this way: “In the early twenty-first century, black women continue to be marked by blackness rooted in a legacy of a racial past and their bodies continue to bear these psychic and corporeal scars in dominant visual culture.”83 This violence is not simply metaphorical. Representational violence—or images of Black women as less-than-fully-human—helps justify real-life violence against Black women. Media representations of racialized gender both inform and are informed by constructions of race and gender in U.S. culture.84
From Celebrities to Consumers to Producers of Celebrities: Chapter Setup

*Postracial Resistance* looks at how, in the Michelle Obama era, the media positioned highly visible and successful African American icons, such as our former First Lady, as having transcended race, to use Oprah Winfrey’s words; this permitted the media to ignore issues of Black female disenfranchisement. I show how Black women, including icons such as Winfrey herself, strategically negotiated such positioning with postracial resistance. The first half of the book—chapters 1 through 3—uses textual analysis to uncover how Michelle Obama, Oprah Winfrey, and Shonda Rhimes echoed media framing, employing the language and styles of postrace, while fighting against its ideologies. Like film scholar Mia Mask, in the first half of the book, I aim to “push the discussion of African American celebrity beyond the ‘good, politically progressive role model’ versus ‘bad, regressive black stereotype’ binary that stifles dialogue and divides scholars.”85

Chapter 1—“‘Of Course I’m Proud of My Country’: Michelle Obama’s Postracial Wink”—scrutinizes the First Lady’s response to her racist and sexist treatment in mainstream media in the 2008 presidential election campaign. Michelle Obama faced many attacks from the McCain-Palin campaign and the conservative media in the 2007–8 election campaign season, including ridicule over her “fist bump” with Barack Obama at a St. Paul, Minnesota, campaign rally and the parody of her as a Black Panther on the cover of the *New Yorker*. But no attack was as brutal and sustained as the one that came after her “pride” comments during a stump speech in early 2008. In this chapter, I analyze Obama’s response: coming out as a postracial, postfeminist glamour goddess on *The View*. How did such a strategically ambiguous performance allow Obama to speak back to negative popular media representations without incurring additional racist and sexist wrath? Why did Obama’s reframes, redefinitions, and coded language work so effectively in this particular case?

As no book on Black women in media would be complete without at least a mention of Oprah Winfrey, chapter 2—“Because Often It’s Both: Racism, Sexism, and Oprah’s Handbags”—takes us straight to the Queen of All Media. Winfrey has always occupied a unique, exceptional, and almost superhuman position in the American cultural imaginary. From
the advent of her national talk show in 1986, Winfrey quickly ascended the pop culture mountain, partially by strategically positioning herself as a figure who can at times supersede the pesky bodily, cultural, and historical instantiations of identity, the trifecta of race, gender, and class, and partially by strategically signifying in particularly raced, gendered, and classed manners. Winfrey has long since abandoned the status of mere mortal in the eyes of fans and foes alike. In her ubiquity, Winfrey did much to not only shore up her own brand, but also configure the representational space of a particular brand of celebrity African American womanhood. That particular brand was strategic ambiguity, and Oprah Winfrey was the ultimate magician who transformed a racialized space into one safe for Whiteness. But what happened when the magic trick stopped working, or when Winfrey’s postracial, strategically ambiguous negotiations of race and gender weren’t successful? What happened when Winfrey experienced a gendered racism that was far from coded and polite? In this chapter, I analyze the limits of Winfrey’s so-called racial transcendence, considering a telling moment when she used strategic ambiguity but was still pilloried in the press as a race-baiting, uppity, Angry Black Woman.

Chapter 3—“‘I Just Wanted a World That Looked Like the One I Know’: The Strategically Ambiguous Respectability of a Black Woman Showrunner”—examines Shonda Rhimes’ twenty-first century Black respectability politics through the form of strategic ambiguity. I trace Rhimes’ performance of strategic ambiguity in the press, first in the pre-Obama era and at the beginning of her first show, *Grey’s Anatomy*, when she stuck to a script of colorblindness, and a second in the #BlackLivesMatter moment and after a string of hits, when she called out racialized sexism and redefined Black female respectability. In the first moment, when *Grey’s Anatomy* just got its legs and the press celebrated her and her new show as a success, Rhimes appeared to have a clenched-teeth approach to all aspects of self-disclosure and, in particular, to talking about race and gender. Then, in the second moment, and after a racialized and gendered attack, Rhimes spoke back with an unambiguous critique. In the shift from the pre-Obama era to the #BlackLivesMatter era, how did Rhimes’ careful negotiation of the press demonstrate that, in the former moment, to be a respectable Black woman was to perform strategic ambiguity, or not speak frankly about race, while in
the latter, respectable Black women could and must engage in racialized self-expression, and thus redefine the bounds of respectability?

The second half of the book, chapters 4 to 6, analyzes the words of Black women who are behind and speaking back to their screens, and postulates about what happens when postracial resistance and strategic ambiguity are not available as strategies for success. Companion chapters 4 and 5 consider the vernacular—but no less powerful—responses of a woman of color audience responding to representations of women of color on television who perform strategic ambiguity. These two chapters use ethnographic and audience reception research to analyze how a group of young women of color form their community in opposition to televisual claims of the postracial and of strategic ambiguity. I look at how non-mediated, “real-life” Black women speak back to controlling media images.

I met once a week for thirteen weeks with a group of young women who gathered weekly to watch a full season of their favorite television program, *America’s Next Top Model*. In their flow of commentary before, during, and after the show, the women used the televisual representations of Black women to deconstruct the ethos of postraciality and to negotiate their multifaceted racialized and gendered personae in a White-dominant city and university. These young women claimed agency in the face of what they interpreted to be racist and sexist media representations, and they subsequently produced counternarratives to strategic ambiguity. They identified themselves against what they read to be limited scripts of Black womanhood featured on their TV screens, and did so by centering their community of women of color. Chapter 4—“‘No, But I’m Still Black’: Women of Color Community, Hate-Watching, and Racialized Resistance”—focuses on how the young women constructed their community through identifying against strategic ambiguity. Chapter 5—“‘They Got Rid of the Naps, That’s All They Did’: Women of Color Critiques of Respectability Politics, Strategic Ambiguity, and Race Hazing”—looks at how the young women rejected the corporate notion of the management of difference in their viewing community.

The final and sixth chapter—“Do Not Run Away from Your Blackness”: Black Women Television Writers and the Flouting of Strategic Ambiguity”—focuses on television production economies and relies upon interview data in order to illustrate how Black female television
writers, studios’ in-house legal counsel, and producers skirt and tease notions of postrace in constructing their own brands of resistance. This chapter investigates how a coded, more polite, and postracial form of racialized sexism affects those who work in the industry as much as infiltrates the entertainment products that make their way to audiences. Additionally, because of the preponderance of narrowcasting (or niche marketing) today, Black women television writers, who largely fail to receive the interracial sponsorship necessary to work outside of their niche, are consigned to Black shows. This chapter draws upon interview data with prolific Black women television professionals in Hollywood in order to understand the ways in which twenty-first century representations of African Americans on television are shaped by segregated spaces. What possibilities do segregated writers’ rooms foreclose? What do they open up? How do television executives produce certain images of African Americans? What happens when discussions of race arise in interracial writers’ rooms and interracial production meetings? By investigating these questions, this chapter illustrates the ways in which television workers negotiate through strategic ambiguity in segregated Hollywood of the Michelle Obama era.

Postracial Resistance is a critical, cultural communication studies book in both methods and content, because visual media are ever more the vehicle by which people make sense of their racialized and gendered world. I chose each moment of postracial resistance in front of, behind, and on screen for its representativeness and popularity, and for challenging postracial ideologies in a different and powerful manner. Each woman picks up on anti-Black woman themes common in discourse throughout U.S. culture. The impact of strategic ambiguity is emphatic: media examples are not just isolated cultural texts but resonate within a broader framework that oddly, persistently, and blatantly stigmatize Black women while arguing that their race and gender are irrelevant. Inequality is propagated in the United States of the new millennium through postracial ideology, driven by mainstream media narratives that all Americans live in an egalitarian, meritorious society. The postracial inflection of this ideology has gone from being the buzzword of the 2008 U.S. presidential election season to the idea at the center of U.S. discourse on difference to, in the Trump era, seeming almost quaint.
Audiences construct their self-images in conversation with their screens. At the same time, if our media—whether in the long-established and venerable New York Times or more newly-formed and community-mobilized Black Twitter—are the means by which we assess humanity, Black women’s representations are forever upheld by our media as should-be role models; they are trapped in the intractable frame of respectability. While I never want to essentialize Black female experiences and take my students to task for deploying such flattening expressions such as “the Black experience” or “the Black community,” I also acknowledge that, for audiences who identify as or with Black women, such mediated images are especially weighty. Black female media representations provide audiences with fantasies of when and how Black women should speak, and when and how Black women should remain silent.

Black women’s bodies and behaviors are scrutinized in public because of the media’s use of racial priming, what political scientist Tali Mendelberg describes as how “racial cues . . . racialize opinion” as “cues in the formation environment activate or deactivate citizens’ racial predispositions.” Popular representations and responses of iconic and everyday Black women, such as the ones I analyze in this book, can also serve another, perhaps unexpected purpose: they are lessons about how to navigate a twenty-first century world that propagates intersectional discrimination while denying the reality of such discrimination and, indeed, intersectionality itself. Black women are rarely interpellated as raced and gendered and classed and sexed and bodied; as a result, scholars, critics, cultural workers, and audiences do not always represent discrimination against Black women as existing across multiple axes. In contrast, understanding performances of postracial resistance and strategic ambiguity allows us to make such intersectional interventions.

This book encourages audiences to move our reading strategies of Black women in media to outside of the frame, to read past the representation, considering not simply text but also contexts, as well as audiences and media executives. Black women’s mediated images, just like all mediated images, are best understood as representations that function for a whole range of specific ends, not singular iterations of “the community.” Freeing Black women’s representations from a limited and limiting frame also frees audiences to understand the intersectional identities that are at stake in representation. Changing reading strategies helps us
to understand why certain Black or female bodies are deemed worthy of representation while others are simply erased. Changing reading strategies helps answer media sociologist Herman Gray’s question as to what happens when representation is not enough in our struggle to create change. Changing reading strategies helps audiences not only understand Black women’s representations as the “mirror moments” communication scholar Beretta Smith-Shomade—in a Black feminist riffing-off of Lacan—smartly reminds us that such representations are, but also as strategic performances of ambiguity, carefully created constructions designed to wink at certain audiences and smile blandly in the face of others. Strategic ambiguity provides space to resist both facets of postracialism: the myth that racism doesn’t exist, and racism itself.