Do Model Minorities Drink Wine or Beer? 
The Representation of Race, Elitism and American Identity*

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Introduction

In August 2008, NPR and ABC political analyst Cokie Roberts criticized then-Democratic Presidential Candidate, Barack Obama, for choosing to vacation in Hawai‘i, the state of his birth and where his late-grandmother and other relatives lived. Roberts argued that Obama should have chosen to vacation in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, stating, “I know Hawaii is a state, but it has the look of him going off to some sort of foreign, exotic place.”1) The implication, as New York Times editorial

* A version of this article appears in The Obama Effect: Multidisciplinary Renderings of the 2008 Presidential Election Campaign, eds. Heather Harris, Kimberly Moffitt and Catherine Squires, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2010).

writer Lawrence Downes noted, was that “Hawaii is elitist while South Carolina is not, and that Mr. Obama was foolishly squandering votes by walking on the wrong beach in the wrong state.” Indeed, Roberts’s comments suggest that Hawai’i, a state that is predominantly Asian, Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian in history, culture and population, is dissonant with mainstream America and that a trip to Hawai’i would be a mistake for the first minority Democratic Presidential nominee. I find this episode interesting for its inter-articulation of elitism, exoticism, race and the meaning of American identity. Throughout the campaign and even into his presidency, Obama faced charges of elitism and questions about his citizenship. Pundits and political opponents alike questioned his ability to connect with everyday Americans. Obama was called the choice of “wine drinkers,” a vernacular description for educated and affluent voters that is used in opposition to “beer drinkers,” working-class, less educated and less
