Barack Obama’s Neo-Racial Responses TO Black Death

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You know you are a rhetorician when you listen to a political speech and you cannot wait to talk to someone about its response to the rhetorical situation. You know you have found your writing partner when you always want to talk to the same person. That is exactly what happened with us. During one after-work dinner conversation, we animatedly discussed then-presidential candidate Barack Obama’s “race speech” wherein Obama attempted to clarify his relationship with his longtime pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Jr., who had recently been witnessed on video making controversial race-related remarks in his sermons. Amy thought Obama’s speech was great. It masterfully addressed the rhetorical situation and set many worried minds at ease. Ebony disagreed. She argued that the speech was a sanitized discussion of race relations in the United States, that it ignored major structures and histories of inequality, and that it did little to actually challenge racism in American politics and society. It became apparent that together, our subject positions as rhetorical critics, a black woman (who, in the spirit of full disclosure, was a former member of Wright’s church under his pastorate), and a white woman (who, admittedly, never wrote about race or presidential politics before) could inform a depth and breadth of analysis that would not be achievable alone.

The next day, we began our “conceptual conversations” about the essay and decided that the speech contained both rhetorical successes and failures. This decision yielded a clear roadmap for how we would proceed—having trained as a traditional public address scholar, Amy would frame the essay by contextualizing the rhetorical situation and discuss Obama’s rhetorical successes; Ebony would rely
on her training as a scholar of close textual analysis and race to examine Obama’s rhetorical failures, and she would conclude the essay with a discussion and implications. Once we merged our sections and edited the manuscript, we were proud of our work and delighted that it was accepted without revisions for publication in the *Western Journal of Black Studies* in 2009 and reprinted in *Race and the Obama Phenomenon* in 2014.

The present essay is arranged in two major sections. First, we revisit our original essay to detail some of the arguments we made about Obama’s March 18, 2008, “A More Perfect Union” speech and the processes by which we made them. Second, we analyze Obama’s race talk following the deaths of African American men—Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Alton Sterling, and Philando Castile. We argue that although the strategies differ, Obama’s race talk is still part success and part failure.

**BARACK OBAMA’S (IM)PERFECT UNION**

An important lesson that public address scholars learn early in their training is that context is crucial. Rhetorical theorist and critic, Lloyd Bitzer, articulated the theoretical rationale behind this claim when he argued that to understand a rhetorical artifact, a critic must first consider its conditions or rhetorical situation. Rhetorical situations, Bitzer explained, consist of exigence, audience, and constraints. Exigence is “an imperative marked by urgency,” a problematic “defect” or “obstacle” that “calls the discourse into existence.” The audience consists of individuals who are “capable of being influenced and of being mediators of change.” Constraints are forces external to the rhetor—such as beliefs, traditions, attitudes, and motives—that interfere with the advocate’s ability to respond to the exigence. We readily concede Richard Vatz’s challenge to Bitzer—that the “meaning” of an exigence is “not discovered in situations, but created by rhetors” and thus may be perceived as arbitrary. However, we believe that certain material conditions needed to counternumber what “invited utterance” in Obama’s speech.

Obama had been friends with his pastor and spiritual advisor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Jr., for over twenty years. Wright “has been like family” to the Obamas, and according to Obama, Wright not only “strengthened my faith,” but he also “officiated my wedding, and baptized my children.” Wright was a passionate preacher whose sermons at the predominantly black Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago elicited “raucous laughter and sometimes bawdy humor... dancing and clapping and screaming and shouting that may seem jarring to the untrained ear.” The controversy or exigence arose when video of Wright’s more provocative sermons, including one in which he repeatedly shouted, “God damn

America,” began appearing on YouTube and major news outlets. In those recordings, Wright could be heard preaching to his parishioners that

the United States government enacted genocide against Native American and African Americans, helped imprison Nelson Mandela, and manipulated God’s word and will to sanction slavery and segregation. [He] implied that a racist U.S. government supported the infusion of drugs into black communities, frequently planted evidence against people of color, and preferred to imprison African Americans rather than provide them with the best education."10

Even though Obama “vehemently” denounced Wright’s statements on March 14, 2008, his audience of the white news media and many white American voters were unable to concede the factual accuracy of Wright’s statements and remained concerned that Obama embraced what they perceived as extreme and inflammatory opinions. In order to save his campaign and to hopefully set the Wright controversy to rest, Obama delivered “A More Perfect Union” speech on March 18, 2008.

Some of the greatest thrills of teaching and researching similar topics together is making new connections and discoveries, as well as developing a storehouse of rhetorical tools and knowledge. At the time we began working on our original essay, Amy was teaching an undergraduate course on campaign persuasion and had recently discussed “typologies of political campaign speeches” with her students.10 When it came time to articulate how Obama’s speech successfully responded to the exigence of the rhetorical situation, she immediately remembered the classroom discussion on “candidate-personal crisis speech” and knew it would help her explain Obama’s address. Ebony was concerned about labeling Obama’s speech a “candidate-personal crisis” because being black is not a crisis for a candidate and Obama should not need to answer or apologize for his race. After reviewing the historical and rhetorical antecedents of other African American political actors (such as Booker T. Washington, Jesse Jackson, Douglas Wilder, and David Dinkins), we found that racial candidates face political dilemmas because of “their visible identification as nonwhite—an exigence that can be neither ignored nor denied.”12 With this in mind, we reenvisioned this type of speech “political-personal crisis” to emphasize that race can be deemed a “political” constraint for racial candidates, not a “personal” crisis. We were also careful to identify Obama’s “relationship with Wright” as a political exigence in terms of the election and not a personal one in terms of his identification as a black man.

By further reviewing the scholarly literature on the political-personal crisis speeches of other racial candidates, such as Deval Patrick and Cory Booker, we encountered the concept of “post-racial rhetoric” which we adopted as the theoretical framework for our analysis. Fredrick Harris captured the essence of post-racial or “race neutral” rhetoric with his explanation:
Second, by portraying Reverend Wright as a close friend of the Obama family and as an engaged community member, “Obama attempted to transfer positive credibility” to his pastor. Recall earlier when Obama explained his familial relationship with Wright—that the pastor officiated his wedding and baptized his children. Obama also noted that Wright “served his country as a United States Marine” and supported his community by “housing the homeless, ministering to the needy ... and reaching out to those suffering from HIV/AIDS.”

Talking about Wright this way added depth and complexity to Wright’s character which had been portrayed as one-dimensional by the news media. Overall, we argued that “this strategy is characteristically post-racial as Obama attempted to transcend Wright’s racial identity into universal terms.”

Third, by depicting Reverend Wright as a devotee of the civil rights movement, Obama attempted to explain the “imperfect” mindset of Wright and his entire generation while also situating Wright within an important historical moment. As Obama explained, “For the men and women of Reverend Wright’s generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away; nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years.” In other words, Wright was not alone in his feelings; in fact, he was representative of a community still reeling from “the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.” The implication was that we should reserve our judgment of Wright unless we are willing to malign the entire generation that fought for racial equality and opportunity.

THE STRATEGIC FAILURES OF A POST-RACIAL PERSPECTIVE

In the second part of our analysis, we turned our attention to the rhetorical failures of Obama’s post-racial perspective. We noticed four trends: 1) Obama deemphasized his African influences, 2) he elided African American rhetorical traditions, 3) he presented a sanitized history of racial injustice, and 4) he (mis)represented black and white Americans’ experiences in stereotypical ways. As a result of these rhetorical choices, we argued that Obama potentially “failed to maintain commensurate identification among his black audiences” and to engage in a serious discussion of race relations in America. Again, we provide salient exemplars of each strategy.

First, Obama downplayed his and his family’s African heritage. Early in the speech, he identified himself as “the son of a black man from Kenya,” but such a statement failed to “geographically situate Kenya in Africa” thus strategically distancing Obama from his African roots. Similarly, Obama described his wife Michelle as a “black American” who “carries within her the blood of slaves and slave owners,” failing to distinguish these slaves as Africans. Instead, Obama highlighted Michelle’s mixed ancestry which served to “dilute her experiences as a black woman of African ancestry.” Together, these statements formed the backbone of
a post-racial perspective that ignored such realities as “the horrors of the African slave trade and the beauty of the linguistic, spiritual, and cultural Africa Diaspora that has contributed to diversity around the globe.” This universalized perspective worked its way through the rest of the speech.

Second, Obama bolstered his post-racial worldview by not recognizing the rhetorical traditions that are hallmarks of African American religious history. For example, he evoked the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, and the Christians in the lion’s den “without identifying David, Moses, and the Christians as the oppressed populations persecuted by a power structure that discriminated against them because of their difference.” This religious history “has been adopted by African Americans primarily because it mimics their social position and the potential for the pursuit of justice;” thus, for Obama to not locate that rhetorical convention within black liberation discourse served “to maintain the division from the concept of an oppressive power structure from which blacks must be liberated.”

Third, by representing a sanitized history of racial injustice in the United States, Obama eschewed a serious discussion about the consequences of structural racism. Even though he insinuated the presence of structural racism in his speech by noting “inferior education,” “legalized discrimination,” and “a lack of economic opportunity” for African Americans, we argued that he presented those realities “as unfortunate consequences of a bygone era of segregation that is steadily improving and not the result of centuries of oppression and power distributions that remain unchanged despite his mantras of hope and change.” Typical of a post-racial rhetor, Obama instead focused on the inherent goodness of the American people and championed racial unity to transcend race and racism.

Fourth, Obama represented the experiences of black and white Americans in problematic ways, sometimes deploying stereotypical tropes to do so. At one point, Obama equated Reverend Wright’s racially charged rhetoric with that of his own white grandmother. He described her as a woman who “once confessed her fear of black men who passed her by on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.” Seemingly meant to illustrate that white and black Americans can be equally bigoted in their thinking and discourse, we agreed with Frank and McPhail’s argument that such conflations can minimize or even erase the struggles of African Americans by ignoring the power differential at play: “the rhetorical strategy of conflating the experiences of white ethnics with persons of African descent, and of denying the role of white power and privilege on the demoralizing conditions that continue to disproportionately affect the lives of black folk in America... ignores the historical and social realities of American racism.” These conflated experiences, along with the tropes of the “welfare recipient” and the “white liberal,” failed to craft the unity that Obama wanted for our “more perfect union.”

We concluded our essay by citing public responses to Obama’s political-personal crisis address, most of which praised the speech for its “intelligence, eloquence, and courage,” with one commentator lauding it as “the most honest speech on race in America in my adult life.” The post-racial rhetoric Obama employed in his address successfully calmed the fears of nervous voters by encouraging identification between himself and his audience; it boosted Obama’s ethos; it removed the Reverend Wright controversy from the news headlines; and it helped propel Obama closer to winning the Democratic presidential nomination. The speech failed, however, to include a productive analysis of race because it downplayed his and his family’s African heritage, did not acknowledge African American speaking traditions, omitted details of some of the worst realities of structural racism, and minimized African Americans’ experiences with racism by conflating their experiences with those of whites. Paradoxically, we argued that those absences “may have [actually] contributed to the text’s success.” In other words, our essay contributed to the conversation regarding the negative effects of race-neutral discourse “by showing which aspects of post-racial rhetoric may help the rhetor but be detrimental to a productive discussion about race.”

Candidate Obama’s post-racial strategies were necessitated by the racial exigence of Wright’s incendiary commentary on racial injustice. In contrast, second-term President Obama’s racial exigence moved beyond conversations about black life to mourning the repeated loss of (innocent) black life due to racial injustice. Weighing the exigence of Reverend Wright’s commentary against the exigence of dead black Americans, the rhetorical situation was certainly graver and demanded a serious assessment of racial injustice and possible solutions from our president. We maintain that Obama’s previous post-racial strategies of understating race and emphasizing progress were insufficient to address this new rhetorical situation. Instead, we characterize Obama’s responses to the exigence of black death as neo-racial rhetoric.

In our struggle to characterize and name what we regard as a new rhetorical posture in President Obama’s race talk, Ebony suggested the term “neo-racial,” because, as she observed, racism is certainly not new, police brutality is certainly not new, black death is certainly not new, but Obama’s rhetoric is. Our research revealed only a few sources that discuss such a concept, most referencing an article published in the Harvard Black Letter Law Journal. In that article, Ralph Richard Banks argued that “neo-racial” describes “the current state of our society” with its “entrenched and pervasive” racial inequalities that are not “as formidable a barrier to racial justice” as they once were. Banks advised “we should resist the reflexive tendency to simplistically depict contemporary controversies as yet further evidence
of racism. Racial inequality persists as a consequence of a complicated interplay of historical and contemporary factors, and our analysis should reflect that complexity." Furthermore, "the neo-racial sensibility would prompt race and law scholars to approach race-related controversies in a pragmatic manner that both takes seriously competing views and interests and seeks resolutions that reflect widely shared values." We see the value of neo-racial rhetoric in its ability to initiate meaningful and productive discussions of race that were absent in "A More Perfect Union."

Merging some of Banks's principles of legal analysis with our own observations of Obama's race talk, we propose that neo-racial rhetoric is a strategy that black politicians employ when addressing predominately white audiences about an exigence that is indisputably a form of racial injustice against African Americans. It is a rhetoric that acknowledges the raced identity of the rhetor, regards racial inequality as the complex "interplay of historical and contemporary factors," is "pragmatic" in that it "seeks solutions," and "takes seriously competing views and interests ... that reflect widely shared values." When racially motivated deaths are the crux of the exigence, and when racial regression is a more accurate descriptor than progressive racial unity, neo-racial rhetoric is a strategy that responds to all aspects of the rhetorical situation—exigence, audience, and constraints. With the balance of this essay, we outline and discuss some of the successes and failures of Obama's neo-racial rhetoric.

BARACK OBAMA'S NEO-RACIAL RESPONSES TO BLACK DEATH

To begin this analysis, we started at the same place we started in 2008—the rhetorical situation. In February 2012, national attention to violence against African American citizens surged following the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. Since then, our nation has witnessed numerous heinous acts of police brutality against African American citizens, including the shooting deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio; the suspicious hanging death of Sandra Bland in Waller County, Texas; the beating death of Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York; and the "rough ride" death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland. At the time of this writing, we must sadly include the fatal shootings of black men Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Philando Castile in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, Keith Lamont Scott in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Terence Crutcher in Tulsa, Oklahoma by white police officers, as well as the retaliatory assassination of five police officers in Dallas, Texas, and the ambush and shooting of three police officers in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In response to these and other publicized acts of racialized violence—such as the 2015 Charleston, South Carolina, church shooting where Dylan Roof hoped to start a race war by praying with parishioners at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church before murdering nine of them—the first black president of the United States was expected to respond, not just to black America, but to white America and blue America as well. This neo-racial situation is an important rhetorical and historical moment for the United States.

We chose to review the president's official speeches and remarks following the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Alton Sterling, and Philando Castile because they are direct responses to the exigence of black death delivered to an audience of all Americans. We continue to identify Obama's rhetorical successes and strategic failures as he negotiated the constraints of his blackness and presidential-ness in a country that is decidedly not post-racial. Obama's neo-racial rhetorical successes include: 1) African American identification, 2) racial injustice awareness that underscores the complex "interplay of historical and contemporary factors," and 3) a pragmatic, solution-oriented approach. His strategic failures include: 1) presenting victims as problems instead of people, 2) downplaying the lived experiences of racial injustice, and 3) redirecting attention away from the exigence of black death. Certainly, these are not the only successes and failures identifiable in President Obama's neo-racial discourse, but they are consistent and persistent enough to merit analysis.

OBAMA'S NEO-RACIAL SUCCESSES IN RESPONSE TO THE EXIGENCE OF BLACK DEATH

In contrast to "A More Perfect Union," wherein candidate Obama deemphasized his African influences with post-racial rhetoric, President Obama successfully identified himself as part of the African American community with neo-racial rhetoric. With the strategy of African American identification, Obama evoked his personal vulnerability as a black man—including his own "experience of being followed when ... shopping in a department store" and "hearing the locks click on the doors of cars" when walking across the street—to convey to all of America the pain, anger, and frustration experienced by many if not most African American men. The most obvious example is his infamous comment regarding the acquittal of George Zimmerman for killing unarmed black teenager, Trayvon Martin: "You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot I said that this could have been my son. Another way of saying that is Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago." For some conservative pundits, and for George Zimmerman himself, the president should have been admonished for making such a personal connection to a boy portrayed by conservative media outlets as a "gangsta" and a "thug." Yet, for many African Americans, it was a significant moment in Obama's presidency as he explicitly stated that he was part of the black community susceptible to racialized profiling and violence.
In later speeches, the president employed other strategies to inform the ignorant of racial bias and to create identification with those who live that reality. For instance, in his statement regarding the police shooting deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, Obama presented a series of statistics to demonstrate how much more likely African American men are to be pulled over, searched, shot, arrested, and imprisoned. In his Facebook version of this same statement, Obama personally identified with the exigence of black death while exhorting his audience: “all Americans should recognize the anger, frustration, and grief that so many Americans are feeling … Michelle and I share those feelings.” Here again, we witness Obama’s direct identification with the African American community as he also encouraged identification between the “many Americans” who feel the same way. Thus, by providing personal references and anecdotes, along with jarring statistics regarding racial injustice in America, Obama’s neo-racial rhetoric increased his consubstantiality with the African American community as well as anyone concerned about black death.

The second rhetorical success of Obama’s neo-racial perspective is his contextualization of racial injustice at the intersection of historical and contemporary factors. While the details may be sparse—as we discuss later in this essay as a strategic failure—Obama successfully reframed African Americans’ relationship with violence and dispelled the persistent stereotype that “African American boys are more violent” and thereby deserve the violence enacted against them. We first encountered this strategy in Obama’s speech regarding Trayvon Martin when he pointedly noted that the racial double standard still exists and “frustrate[s]” the African American community: “if a white male teen was involved in the same kind of scenario [as Trayvon Martin] … from top to bottom, both the outcome and the aftermath might have been different.” Later in the speech, Obama posed a similar hypothetical question, again inviting his audience to consider how a racialized context yields unjust treatment under the law: “if Trayvon Martin was of age and armed, could he have stood his ground on that sidewalk? And do we actually think that he would have been justified in shooting Mr. Zimmerman who had followed him in a car because he felt threatened?” In both of these examples, simply being a young, black man in America contextualized Martin’s murder and the broader issue of disparity under the law.

Acknowledging racial injustice as the result of historical and contemporary realities helped Obama frame the distrust that continues to exist between communities of color and law enforcement. In Obama’s remarks after the grand jury decision in Ferguson, Missouri, in which the jury decided against indicting the white police officer who shot and killed an unarmed Michael Brown, Obama described a contemporary reality: “We need to recognize that the situation in Ferguson speaks to broader challenges that we still face as a nation.” Focusing on a historical truth, he continued, “The fact is, in too many parts of this country, a deep distrust exists between law enforcement and communities of color. Some of this is the result of the legacy of racial discrimination in this country.” Combining both historical and contemporary realities when responding to the protests that erupted in Baltimore, Maryland, following Freddie Gray’s “rough ride” killing by police officers, Obama characterized the distrust as a “slow-rolling crisis.” The president stated:

This has been going on for a long time. This is not new, and we shouldn’t pretend that it’s new. The good news is that perhaps there’s some newfound awareness, because of social media and video cameras and so forth, that there are problems and challenges when it comes to how policing and our laws are applied in certain communities and we have to pay attention to it.

Together, these statements contextualized the reactions to Brown’s and Gray’s deaths by connecting those singular moments to historical and current structural inequalities.

Obama’s final neo-racial success is his pragmatic, solution-oriented approach for grappling with racism in social as well as legislative arenas. On the social front, Obama called for “thinking,” “soul-searching,” “care,” and honest conversations “in families and churches and workplaces” in order to confront racism at the heart of where it lives. But beyond “soul-searching,” Obama called for legislative action designed to decrease racism within legal, economic, and political structures. We see evidence of this commitment in his Trayvon Martin speech in which he proposed programs that “bolster and reinforce” African American kids, likely referring here to the My Brother’s Keeper Alliance that would soon follow. Additionally, Michael Brown’s death in Ferguson, Missouri, inspired the president to create the 21st century Task Force on Policing, a program comprised of community leaders and law enforcement officials designed to “rebuild trust between communities and the police departments that serve them.” He alluded to that program in his speech on Ferguson in which he instructed Attorney General Eric Holder to “work with cities across the country to help build better relations between communities and law enforcement.”

Across his neo-racial discourse, Obama posed solutions for the black community, law enforcement, congress, and everyday citizens; yet compared to “A More Perfect Union,” he did so with a tempered optimism. Consider Obama’s “hope and change” rhetoric that characterized his 2008 campaign and served as the conclusion to “A More Perfect Union,” particularly his assertion that, “what gives me the most hope is the next generation—the young people whose attitudes and beliefs and openness to change have already made history in this election.” Contrast that hopeful tone with his Sterling and Castile speech wherein Obama reported, “there are some jurisdictions out there that have adopted these recommendations. But there are a whole bunch that have not.” In another instance, after discussing his proposed solutions to racism in America, Obama stated, “Each successive
generation seems to be making progress in changing attitudes when it comes to race. It doesn't mean we're in a post-racial society. It doesn't mean that racism is eliminated." These lines in particular are significant because they mark the rare occasion where the man for whom pundits created the phrase post-racial denied that society has reached that plateau, and that hope is simply not enough. Further, these lines are significant for their tempered optimism, adjusted expectations, and acknowledgment that any solutions are indeed imperfect.

**OBAMA'S NEO-RACIAL FAILURES IN RESPONSE TO THE EXIGENCE OF BLACK DEATH**

Despite all the praise we can laud upon Obama's neo-racial rhetorical successes, there are strategic failures. First, Obama presented victims as problems instead of people. One of his solutions within the Trayvon Martin remarks was to "bolster and reinforce our African American boys"77 as if they were the crux of the problem. In his remarks regarding the grand jury decision in Ferguson, Missouri, Obama claimed, "deep distrust" in law enforcement is tragic because "nobody needs good policing more than poor communities with higher crime rates." The implication is that people in poor communities are problems who need police more than they need economic resources. Moreover, such remarks threatened to undermine Obama's success in debunking the "African American boys are more violent"79 stereotype that we discussed earlier.

Additionally, we found that all too often, Obama's neo-racial rhetoric failed to humanize the victims. Although he used the victims' full names and offered condolences to the families, audiences failed to learn anything about their lives or deaths. They simply became an impetus for the president to advocate respect for the rule of law and peaceful protest. Quoting Michael Brown's father, Obama declared, "Hurting others or destroying property is not the answer. No matter what the grand jury decides, I do not want my son's death to be in vain." Sharing the words of a parent who lost a child under such tragic circumstances is, on the surface, sincerely humanizing, except that Obama used the quote to patronizingly chastise protesters into behaving. Potential protesters became a greater problem than a potentially unjust legal system.

Obama's second strategic failure is downplaying racial injustice. When Obama described the lived experiences of black men during the Trayvon Martin statement, he opted to emphasize racialized incidents like purse clutching that are psychologically damaging while failing to mention the physical violence that African American men have experienced, and continue to experience, at the hands of whites. He did remember, however, to include black on black violence in his discussion: "African American young men are ... disproportionately both victims and perpetrators of violence." In a promising neo-racial move, Obama attempted to explain that "black folks do interpret the reasons for that in a historical context," which would have pointed to a successful contextualization of racial injustice. But instead, all Obama provided was this: "They understand that some of the violence that takes place in poor black neighborhoods around the country is born out of a very violent past in this country, and that the poverty and dysfunction that we see in those communities can be traced to a very difficult history." African American history was "difficult" as opposed to tragic or oppressive, and he connected violence within the African American community to historical violence enacted upon said community without naming the perpetrators.

Finally, Obama redirected attention away from the exigence of black death by emphasizing class over race, and by avoiding the explicit language of "racism" and "murder." For instance, in his Gray speech, Obama mentioned "impoverished communities" and how most of the people in "conflicts" with the police live in "abject poverty" and struggle with "substance-abuse problems or incarceration or lack of education," but he failed to connect these problems of class to race.80 In addition to redirecting specific attention away from African Americans, Obama rarely used the term "racism" in his public discourse; instead, he spoke of "racial discrimination," "broader challenges," "racial disparities," and "the appearance or reality of racial bias." Similarly, in his remarks on Trayvon Martin, Obama characterized Zimmerman's actions as "altercations and confrontations and tragedies" not racially inspired murders or executions or slayings.

Moreover, Obama celebrated the legal system and its enforced over black life in a final failure of his neo-racial rhetoric. The President praised the "professionalism" of the judge who conducted Martin's trial and of the U.S. Department of Justice during their investigations. He depicted police misconduct as "the handful who may be not doing what they're supposed to be doing," rather than racist or even bad cops.80 He reiterated, "And as I've said before, [police officers] have a right to go home to their families just like anybody else on the job" without comparable acknowledgement of a black man's right to come home from his means of providing for his family, come home from running errands with his family in the car, or come home after purchasing an Arizona juice and a bag of Skittles. Obama praised "the overwhelming majority of police officers who are doing a great job every single day and are doing their job without regard to race." Taken together, Obama depicted police misconduct as an exception not a systemic problem. He also characterized colorblind policing as the best case scenario when ideally officers who are conscious of racism within the legal and law enforcement systems would be more, not less, aware of their racial bias. By celebrating judges, the department of justice, and law enforcement officers, the successes of the legal system received more attention than its failings even when those failings manifested as dead black bodies.
CONCLUSION

At root, the strategic failure of both Obama's post-racial and neo-racial rhetoric is his refusal to explicitly identify "white racism and privilege" as the problem. When he stereotypes victims as problems, downplays racial injustice, and redirects attention away from black death, he further minimizes the ubiquity of white racism. Even Obama's successes of African American identification, racial injustice awareness, and a solution-oriented approach fail to define racism as a systemic form of institutional power and oppression maintained by whites against people of color in the United States. It is possible that these failures mark Obama's attempt to appeal to a large and diverse American audience by "taking[s] seriously competing views and interests ... that reflect widely shared values." Or perhaps he is following Banks's advice to "resist the reflexive tendency to simplistically depict contemporary controversies as yet further evidence of racism." Either way, we see this as a weakness in Obama's race talk and possibly a weakness with neo-racial rhetoric in general.

The neo-racial contours of Obama's rhetoric include accurate depictions, personal anecdotes, and heartfelt acknowledgments of his and Michelle's feelings about the exigence of black death. His identification with black audiences is stronger than that of "A More Perfect Union." We assume his refusal to name white racism and privilege is due to the constraints of the presidency, a hostile Congress, his impending legacy as America's first black president, and his own blackness. We concede that he has done what he thought best to do. He has also done more than previous presidents and likely done more than the next president will do. Ironically, the crux of "A More Perfect Union" was celebrating America's progress. And while racially the country seems to be regressing, the president's rhetoric did progress. A little. Perhaps, the new futuristic vision of "a more perfect union" requires more focus on how white racism from the past continues to permeate our present.

Truth be told, coming to this conclusion was difficult for us. In fact, writing this entire essay was difficult at times. We found ourselves emotionally drained as we mourned the tragic and unjust deaths/murders of our fellow citizens, several of which occurred while we were still writing. Our experience with writing this essay reminds us that, as rhetorical critics, we are not scientists striving for objectivity—we are analysts who may (deliberately or unwittingly) write our feelings, biases, and personal perspectives into our work. Co-authoring, we found, can minimize or amplify that tendency as one person's checks or reinforces the other's work. For example, Amy described the tragedies of black death as "death" whereas Ebony described them as "murder." As we debated whether or not we should attempt to maintain some degree of objectivity by sticking to the relatively innocuous term "death" versus the more emotionally-loaded (and perhaps more accurate) term "murder," we struggled with our personal feelings about the subject. Ultimately, we

employed both terms. We admit that our personal feelings are woven throughout the essay—but we are okay with that, because we, free from the restraints of the presidency, can stand firmly behind our outrage.

NOTES

8. Ebony A. Utley and Amy L. Heyse, "Barack Obama's (Im)Perfect Union: An Analysis of the Strategic Successes and Failures in His Speech on Race," Western Journal of Black Studies 33 (2009): 153. We cite this version of our essay throughout this essay.
13. Ibid., 156.
15. Utley and Heyse, "Barack Obama's (Im)Perfect Union," 155.
16. Ibid., 156.
17. Obama, "A More Perfect Union."
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Utley and Heyse, "Barack Obama's (Im)Perfect Union," 158.
25. Ibid.
27. Utley and Heyse, "Barack Obama's (Im)Perfect Union," 158.
29. Utley and Heyse, "Barack Obama's (Im)Perfect Union," 158.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Obama, "A More Perfect Union."
35. Ulrey and Heyse, "Barack Obama's (Im)Perfect Union," 159.
38. Ulrey and Heyse, "Barack Obama's (Im)Perfect Union," 160.
39. Ibid., 161.
42. Ulrey and Heyse, "Barack Obama's (Im)Perfect Union," 162.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
47. Banks, "Beyond Colorblindness," 42.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. We also noted patterns in Obama’s nonverbal delivery in his remarks to all Americans about race, and encourage future research in this direction.
51. Banks, "Beyond Colorblindness," 42.
53. Obama, "Trayvon Martin."
58. Obama, "Trayvon Martin."
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.