Barack Obama’s (Im)Perfect Union: 
An Analysis of the Strategic Successes and Failures in His Speech on Race

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Abstract

In the midst of the Jeremiah Wright controversy, 2008 presidential candidate Barack Obama resolved the political-personal crisis surrounding his racial politics by rhetorically presenting himself as a post-racial candidate. After reviewing the strategies of other African American politicians, we posit that Obama’s adoption of race-neutral rhetoric in his March 18, 2008, speech, “A More Perfect Union,” was a strategic rhetorical choice at the time. However, we also assert that his post-racial politics were compromised by 1) his presentation of a sanitized version of the United States’ history of racial injustice and 2) a tendency to reify harmful racist stereotypes.

In March 2008, presidential candidate Barack Obama was engulfed in political controversy. Video recordings of his pastor and spiritual advisor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Jr., were broadcast on every news channel and widely circulated on the internet. The recordings featured snippets from Wright’s most provocative sermons. One of those sermons, originally titled “Confusing God and the Government” delivered on April 13, 2003, was re-titled “God Damn America” on YouTube. Wright preached that the United States government enacted genocide against Native Americans and African Americans, helped imprison Nelson Mandela, and manipulated God’s word and will to sanction slavery and segregation. Wright 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. Wright (2003) was also quoted repeatedly exclaiming, “God damn America.”

On March 14, 2008, Obama issued a statement denouncing his long-time pastor’s proclamations: “I vehemently disagree and strongly condemn the statements that have been the subject of this controversy. I categorically denounce any statement that disparages our great country or serves to divide us from our allies.” In that statement, Obama (2008a) also described a personal relationship with Wright and explained that Wright “has never been my political advisor; he’s been my pastor.” These clarifications, however, failed to satiate the news media and skeptical American voters. Obama hoped to finally put the issue to rest by directly addressing the controversy in a speech delivered in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008, titled “A More Perfect Union.”

In this essay, we argue that Barack Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” was an appropriate and successful

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response to a political-personal crisis. Obama negotiated the controversy surrounding his personal relationship with Reverend Wright by acknowledging racial disparities in the United States without placing blame for those disparities. Through this approach, Obama successfully maintained a post-racial rhetorical stance that appealed to extremely diverse audiences. We further argue, however, that the speech failed to accurately represent a racially differentiated United States of America. By sanitizing the country's histories of chattel slavery and racism, Obama's speech reified many harmful racial tropes. Our essay exposes the potentially damaging strategies Obama employed to resolve his political-personal crisis and considers the rhetorical implications of a post-racial discourse.

The essay proceeds in four sections. In the first section, we explain the rhetorical situation and consider historical and rhetorical antecedents of political-personal crises for African American candidates. The second section is an analysis of the speech for Obama's successful post-racial strategies in addressing the Wright controversy. The third section examines the potentially harmful tropes Obama employed as he addressed the larger issue of American race relations. The essay's discussion of implications concludes with a contribution to the study of post-racial rhetoric.

The Rhetorical Situation and Political-Personal Crisis

Barack Obama entered the political limelight in 2004 with his Keynote Address to the Democratic National Convention. Since then, the man and his messages have become popular subjects of academic study and critique (Asante, 2007; Burnside & Whitehurst, 2007; Clayton, 2007; Dorsey & Díaz-Barriga, 2007; Dumm, 2008; Frank & McPhail, 2005; Fraser, 2009; Harris, 2009; Harris-Lacewell & Junn, 2007; Hill, 2009; James, 2009; Marable, 1990, 2009; Mazama, 2007; McIlwain, 2007; Rowland & Jones, 2007; Walters, 2007). Some rhetorical scholars credit Obama's ecumenical discourse for its ability to "recast the American dream from a conservative to a liberal story" (Rowland & Jones, 2007, p. 425) while others fault him for "ignor[ing] the historical and social realities of American racism" (Frank & McPhail, 2005, p. 583). Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech offers rhetorical critics the opportunity to study his response to a pressing and pivotal rhetorical situation.

The rhetorical situation involving Reverend Wright was as a political-personal crisis for Obama. According to Bitzer (1968), a rhetorical situation is "a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed [by] discourse" (p. 6). In March 2008, Obama's "exigence"—or the "imperfection marked by urgency"—was a political-personal crisis ignited by the circulation of Wright's incendiary remarks about the U.S. government (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6). Candidates and incumbents encounter political-personal crisis situations when a personal event, association, or statement becomes a concern for the public; that is, when the populous becomes skeptical of a politician's ability to govern, lead, or faithfully execute their positions because of a personal happening. Candidates responding to a political-personal crisis may choose to ignore the situation, deny the situation, briefly address and then attempt to move away from the crisis, or appear open and willing to answer all questions and concerns (Tuman, 2008).

The historical and rhetorical antecedents that are most informative for our analysis are those involving raced candidates whose political-personal crisis was related to their visible identification as nonwhite—an exigence that can be neither ignored nor denied (Hill, 2009, p. 61). Successful raced candidates have dissolved voter concerns about their race and have been elected into office by employing rhetorical patterns of direct addresses in the form of the Jackson model, a neo-accommodationist approach, or a post-racial approach.

Speaking about race in frank yet non-confrontational terms is often referred to as the "Jackson model" and most closely aligns with the political-personal crisis strategy of appearing open and willing to answer difficult questions and concerns (Walters, 2005, p. 16). Jesse Jackson ran for the Democratic nomination for president in 1984 and 1988, and although he did not win, he did succeed in gaining widespread support, especially with middle class blacks who considered Jackson "a symbolic advocate of their own interests" (Marable, 1990, p. 23). Jackson's (1988) now famous appeal to "the real rainbow coalition" (p. 1) allowed him to address tough moral issues like racial equality because he believed that they were the keys to political success and equality for all (p. 9). Walters (2005) argues that Jackson's two campaigns were "the most important mobilizations of the Black community in presidential politics to date," modeling a serviceable rhetorical strategy for raced candidates who followed (p. 16).

Another observable rhetorical strategy of raced candidates is the neo-accommodationist approach (Marable, 1990, p. 25). Accommodation is a strategy
that black politicians from Booker T. Washington in the Reconstruction era to contemporaries like Douglas Wilder and David Dinkins employ to appear “non-threatening” and thereby elect-able to the white middle class (Marable, 1990, p. 24). The cases of Douglas Wilder, the first black governor of Virginia, and David Dinkins, the first black mayor of New York City, are especially significant because they illuminate this rhetorical practice at work: “rather than denying the reality of race, Wilder and Dinkins sought to ‘transcend’ the color line, offering generous platitudes of how racism had supposedly declined in significance during the 1980s” (Marable, 1990, p. 28). While both of these men won their positions, Marable (1990) cautions that the accommodation strategy may do more harm than good: “the strategy of declaring victory against racial prejudice may produce some short-term victories, but it will only reinforce white supremacy within the electoral process in the long run” (p. 28).

The final rhetorical strategy of raced candidates is the post-racial approach. Harris (2009) best explains this “race-neutral” rhetoric:

Fearful that white voters would be turned off by policy positions that steered too closely to black interests, black candidates running before majority or near-majority white constituencies have to adopt campaign strategies that de-emphasize race. These strategies de-emphasize or neglect discussions about racism but take up the banner of racial unity and public policies that appeal to all citizens as a way to allay the concerns of white voters. (p. 43)

Political agents like Harold Washington, Chicago’s first black mayor in 1983, Cory Booker, mayor of Newark, New Jersey in 2006, and Deval Patrick, governor of Massachusetts in 2006, have successfully employed this strategy to win their offices. In his inaugural address, after a viscous campaign season (CBS), Washington (1983) announced, “Racial fears and divisiveness have hurt us in the past. But I believe that this is a situation that will and must be overcome.” Similarly, Booker (2009) adopted a post-racial perspective in his State of the City address in which he repeatedly declared, “we will rise” (p. 1) to the residents of Newark, New Jersey. Patrick summed up his post-racial position in his campaign slogan, “together we can” (as cited in Ifill, 2009, p. 194). However, just as Marable (1990) warns about the long-term impact of a neo-accommodationist perspective, Harris (2009) cautions that “while [the post-racial approach] can be a winnable strategy for black candidates running in state-wide and national campaigns, it often leaves issues that are specific to the concerns of black voters off the public agenda” (p. 43). Unlike the Jackson model, post-racial political rhetoric does not outwardly address the role of race in politics and society, and unlike the neo-accommodationist angle, post-racial discourse does not declare racism defeated. However, both the neo-accommodationist and post-racial approaches mimic the political-personal crisis resolution strategy of briefly addressing race and attempting to transcend it.

It has been widely argued that Barack Obama is a post-racial candidate who speaks in universal terms so as to have the greatest rhetorical appeal (Burnside & Whitehurst, 2007; Frank & McPhail, 2005; Fraser, 2009; Hill, 2009; Ifill, 2009; Mazama, 2009; Roediger, 2008; Rowland & Jones, 2007; Walters, 2007). Obama himself affirmed this perspective. In an interview on National Public Radio, Obama explained that “there has always been some tension between speaking in universal terms and speaking in very race-specific terms about the plight of the African American community. By virtue of my background, I am more likely to speak in universal terms” (as cited in Walters, 2007, pp. 13–14). When describing how Obama addressed his background, journalist Gwen Ifill (2009) notes, “He did not deny his race, but he generally didn’t bring it up either” (p. 54). In 2007, another reporter, Tom Baldwin for the Times of London, observes that Obama “did not make a single reference to the color of his skin….Not once did the words ‘black’ or ‘African-American’ pass Mr. Obama’s lips” in his announcement of candidacy speech (as cited in Walters, 2007, p. 19). Perhaps best summing up the perspectives on Obama as a post-racial candidate, though, was a black Obama pollster who once mused, “‘A black man can’t be president of America. However, an extraordinary, gifted, and talented young man who happens to be black can be president’” (as cited in Ifill, 2009, p. 54).

While effective in some spheres, the post-racial approach is roundly criticized in other camps because the perspective ignores the unique concerns of the black community. It attempts to transcend race without transcending racial inequality (Roediger, 2008, p. 3). Mazama (2009) argues that the notion of transcending race may be inherently racist because non-raced candidates are never asked or expected to do so (p. 3). Frank and McPhail (2005) read Obama’s 2004 conciliatory Democratic National Convention (DNC) speech, for example, as “an old vision of racelessness” that appealed to “rhetorics of whiteness and modern racism” (pp. 572–573). Professor of Religion and African
American Studies Eddie Glaude is also disappointed with Obama’s stance:

Why is it the case that he can’t simply say, when we talk about health care, we know it disproportionately affects poor people and black people? Why can’t he begin to talk about these issues in ways that identify black communities, without trying to sound like Reverend Jesse Jackson and Reverend Al Sharpton? The thing is, the very way that Jesse and Al have exploited the theater of racial politics, he’s doing it from a different vantage point. We haven’t changed the game. That’s what makes me so angry. He hasn’t stepped outside of the game.

(as cited in Ifill, 2009, p. 69)

The rhetorical situation of the political-personal crisis presents an opportunity to step outside of the game. A measured and appropriate response that addresses the exigence, (seemingly) divulges all information, and satisfies all concerned audiences, then, could take the form the Jackson model, accommodation, or a post-racial position.

Shortly after winning the Iowa caucus in January 2008, “the race controversy brought race to the forefront” (Fraser, 2009, p. 31) and challenged Obama’s post-racial rhetoric. In what has now been dubbed “the race speech,” Obama was forced to openly and directly discuss race relations with the American public rather than in one of his carefully edited autobiographies (Dumm, 2008). While directly speaking about race, Obama remarkably managed to retain his post-racial stance. As Darsey (2009) observes, “Obama’s ‘race speech’...one of the most important and most highly publicized speeches of the campaign, illuminates the nexus at which Obama seeks to transcend the limits of racial identification and to identify his narrative with the American narrative” (p. 98). Similarly, Fraser (2009) adds that, “while to many academics and liberals the issues Obama raised were not ground-breaking, the speech was remarkable in its ability to speak to those white voters in Middle America, who may not have given serious thought to racial inequalities before, while maintaining his postracial message of unity” (p. 32). Even though Obama has been cast by others and often casts himself as a post-racial candidate who transcends race, he acknowledges racial divides. When, how, and why he acknowledges race issues are important to scholars of race during the post-racial Obama presidency because Obama’s discourse paradigmatically represents conversations about race and racism in our society. In the following section, we posit specific ways that the post-racial rhetorical strategy was successful in gaining political power for Barack Obama.

**The Rhetorical Successes of a Post-Racial Candidate**

After Wright’s incendiary indictments of the U.S. government became public, Obama’s exigence was his relationship with Wright. Wright’s discourse threatened Obama’s favor with voters, particularly independent voters, who might have associated his politics and decision-making with Wright’s perceived racism. Openly admitting his relationship with Wright, Obama asked for the public’s understanding and their continued support of his candidacy. To ultimately regain favor with the voting public, Obama employed a master strategy of identification that included 1) directly asking and answering questions, 2) situating Wright as a member of the Obama family, the community, and the American people, and 3) limning Wright within the parameters of the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s.

Rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke (1969) describes identification as a strategy of building common ground between individuals in order to reduce the division amongst them. This strategy is a hallmark of post-racial rhetoric as the rhetor attempts to unite his/her listeners and move them past race. Obama (2008b) attempted to bridge the racial divide by asserting that “working together, we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union” (p. 5). Calling for all Americans to “find that common stake we all have in one another,” Obama asked his diverse audiences to band together, put race aside, and work towards common goals (p. 6). Implicit in his appeal was the suggestion that voters also “move beyond” the Wright controversy and elect Barack Obama president (Obama, 2008b, p. 6).

Obama first attempted to build identification with his audience by directly asking and answering questions about his relationship with Wright. These were questions he imagined still remained in the minds of skeptical Americans even after the release of his statement. Such a strategy cast the rhetor as open and honest, as someone who seriously considered tough questions and answered them plainly. In other words, Obama (2008b) did not avoid or ignore the concerns of voters; he directly addressed them: “I supposed the politically safe thing to do would be to move on from this episode and just hope that it fades into the wood-
work” (p. 4). But Obama would not do that; instead, he would stay and answer the tough questions. Obama (2008b) explained,

For some, nagging questions remain. Did I know him to be an occasionally fierce critic of American domestic and foreign policy? Of course. Did I ever hear him make remarks that could be considered controversial while I sat in church? Yes. Did I strongly disagree with many of his political views? Absolutely—just as I’m sure many of you have heard remarks from your pastors, priests, or rabbis with which you strongly disagree. (p. 3)

Obama’s answers were simple—“of course,” “yes,” and “absolutely”—which are uncommon and perhaps refreshing responses from a political rhetor. Obama appeared to fully disclose his knowledge of Wright by bluntly responding to the doubts against himself. It could be argued, though, that Obama’s answers were too simple. Perhaps this is why the next part of his speech was devoted to elaborate and detailed responses.

While the next questions were not so simply answered, Obama presented himself up to that point as someone who frankly replies to tough questions, so his listeners were more likely to trust and believe his longer and more in-depth responses. Put simply, his straightforward responses to the previous questions boosted his ethos. Now imagining what his inquisitors would like to know, Obama (2008b) queried, “Why associate myself with Reverend Wright in the first place, they may ask? Why not join another church” (p. 3)? Obama (2008b) began his response by building identification with his inquisitors: “I confess that if all that I knew of Reverend Wright were the snippets of those sermons that have run in an endless loop on the television sets and YouTube, or if Trinity United Church of Christ conformed to the caricatures being peddled by some commentators, there is no doubt that I would react in much the same way” (p. 3). This statement presented the concerns of his skeptics as valid and worthy of serious attention, and therefore deserving of thoughtful, honest answers.

Once identification with his audience had been solidified through the construction of his ethos, Obama attempted to transfer positive credibility to Wright. Obama explained that judging Wright based on the media representations of him was a mistake, especially because Wright “is a man who served his country as a United States Marine; who has studied and lectured at some of the finest universities and seminaries in the country, and who for over 30 years has led a church that serves the community by doing God’s work here on Earth—by housing the homeless, ministering to the needy, providing day care services and scholarships and prison ministries, and reaching out to those suffering from HIV/AIDS. (p. 3)

Obama answered the question—why associate myself with Reverend Wright—by presenting comparable ethos for both men. They associated because they shared the same faith and the same passion for their country and their communities.

Obama’s second identification strategy situated Wright within the Obama family, the black community, and the American family. By placing Wright within these groups, Obama reframed the image of Wright as a demagogue into a family man/community member/typical American. This strategy is characteristically post-racial as Obama attempted to transcend Wright’s racial identity into universal terms. Obama (2008b) explained, “As imperfect as he may be, he has been like family to me. He strengthened my faith, officiated my wedding, and baptized my children” (p. 4). Obama expounded in greater detail his familial relationship to Wright: “I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can disown my white grandmother” (Obama, 2008b, p. 4). Obama could not disown Wright who was part of the Obama family and an important member of the larger the black community. Obama (2008b) took the next step and rhetorically identified his family, his pastor, and the black community within the larger American public: “These people are a part of me. And they are part of America, this country that I love” (p. 4). Because his audience was also “part of America,” Obama could no less disown Wright as he could disown any American.

The third identification strategy Obama utilized in his speech associated Wright with not just a group of people, but with an important period of time in U.S. history. Wright’s connection with the American Civil Rights Movement helped Obama (2008b) explain the mindset of a generation who “came of age in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s, a time when segregation was still the law of the land and opportunity was systematically constricted” (p. 5). Wright was not the only black man to feel angry about injustices such as racism. In fact, “for those blacks who did make it, questions of race and racism continue to define their worldview in fundamental

ways. 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” (Obama, 2008b, p. 6). In other words, Wright was just one of many black people who still felt angry about the violent racism they endured in the 1950s and 60s; therefore, the American public should not single him out and scapegoat him for merely identifying with what so many others had felt.

The rhetorical choices Obama made in “A More Perfect Union” appropriately addressed the biggest rhetorical crisis of his campaign by promoting identification with and among his audiences. By directly asking and answering the questions of concerned voters, Obama painted himself as an open and honest candidate who was unwilling to ignore or skirt past the controversy in front of him. Obama also chose to identify Wright with the Obama family, the community, and the American people, effectively explaining why Obama could not completely extricate himself from their relationship. Also, by associating Wright with the Civil Rights Movement, Obama argued that Wright was consubstantial with the numerous African Americans who remembered racist policies like segregation.

Taken together, these identification strategies helped Obama maintain his post-racial stance, appropriately address the concerns of the American people, and ultimately transform the rhetorical situation from a specific controversy about Wright to a larger discussion about U.S. race relations and the role of race in American politics. Identification, however, is a Janus-faced rhetorical strategy. It is always accompanied by division (Burke, 1969). The following section on Obama’s strategic failures addresses how his identification strategies held the potential to progressively alienate black audiences.

The Strategic Failures of a Post-Racial Perspective

Obama’s post-racial stance ostensibly increased identification among his non-African American audiences but potentially failed to maintain commensurate identification among his black audiences by 1) de-emphasizing his African influences, 2) eliding African American rhetorical traditions, 3) sanitizing the United States’ history of racial injustice, and 4) problematically representing black and white Americans’ experiences. Careful to not disturb the racial hierarchy, Obama failed to engage serious discussions of race relations in the United States partially by alienating himself from African and African American history and also by reifying revisionist versions of race talk that hegemonically maintain the status quo.

Obama’s first strategic failure was the de-emphasis of his African influences. He began his racial genealogy by describing himself as “the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas” (Obama, 2008b, p. 2). He did not identify his father as an African man neither did he geographically situate Kenya in Africa. By describing his father as a black man, Obama extracted him from an African heritage. Furthermore, when he described his wife as a “black American” instead of an African American, he removed her from African influences as well (Obama, 2008b, p. 2). He admitted that she “carries within her the blood of slaves and slave owners,” but at no point in the speech were these slaves referred to as Africans (Obama, 2008b, p. 2). Obama emphasized Michelle Obama’s mixed ancestry in order to dilute her experiences as a black woman of African ancestry. By acknowledging the slave owner ancestors in her blood line, Obama simultaneously acknowledged the unique aspects of the black American experience, celebrated the diversity of mixed black ancestry, and distanced himself and his wife from African influences by choosing not to use the term. Obama used his personal history to create identification between himself and his diverse audiences, but by understating his and his family’s African heritage, he ignored the horrors of the African slave trade and the beauty of the linguistic, spiritual, and cultural African Diaspora that has contributed to diversity around the globe.

Obama’s second strategic failure of his post-racial perspective was his elision of African American rhetorical religious traditions. Obama chastised Wright for expanding the racial lacuna without considering whether there was some measure of truth to some of his words. By refusing to cite anything spoken by Wright, audiences could not be sure which of Wright’s inflammatory comments Obama condemned. One might assume that all of them should be condemned. Wright was certainly controversial, but his subject position was rooted in a black liberation preaching tradition that condemns injustice in society and urges God’s people to resist it. Obama ignored what Frank and McPhail (2005) called a “spiritually inspired militancy” (p. 582) when he described Trinity United Church of Christ’s virtues in terms of social welfare projects like “housing the homeless, ministering to the needy, providing day care services and scholarships and prison ministries, and reaching out to those suffering from HIV/AIDS” and not identifying the Church with social justice projects like boycotting discriminatory establishments, protest-
ing police brutality, and holding one’s elected officials accountable for their misrepresentation and misdeeds (Obama, 2008b, p. 3).

Obama further depoliticized black religious rhetoric by downplaying the struggles between the oppressed and their oppressors. He ironically cited 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. Obama appreciated the Biblical stories yet failed to historically situate them within black liberation traditions to maintain the division from the concept of an oppressive power structure from which blacks must be liberated.

In addition to Obama’s lack of recognition for black speaking traditions, his third strategic failure was including a sanitized version of the United States’ history of racial injustice. Marable (2009) praised Obama for “refusing to be defined or restricted by that history” (p. 9), but we argue that historical omissions compromised Obama’s pleas for racial unity. For instance, Obama opened the speech with a reference to the U.S. Constitution and described its preamble as “ultimately unfinished” but answering “the slavery question” by promising a more perfect union of liberty and justice for all American people (Obama, 2008b, p. 1). Obama neglected to mention that all American people have not wholeheartedly embraced the Constitution as an anti-slavery document. Garrisonian abolitionists refused to abide by the Constitution because they believed it to be inherently flawed as a pro-slavery document (Schrader, 1999). Contemporary philosophers are still debating whether or not the intent behind the Constitution will allow it to truly benefit black Americans (Mills, 1999), but Obama adduced a forgone conclusion.

Obama continued to champion the decency, generosity, greatness, and goodness of the American people without acknowledging Americans’ less charitable characteristics. If the country is indeed great and good, one must consider the unpaid labor and lives of those whose were sacrificed for it to become that way. Obama wanted to celebrate and identify with what is great about the United States of America without accounting for the exploitation of American Indian, African American, and immigrant populations who made it that way. His nods to “inferior education,” “legalized discrimination,” and “a lack of economic opportunity” for African Americans were depicted 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 (Obama, 2008b, p. 5). Obama (2008b) criticized Wright for describing our country as “still irrevocably bound to a tragic past” (p. 7) without considering how traces of this tragic past shape reality for many of the country’s citizens. Obama maintained his post-racial stance by not mentioning how whites benefit from racism.

Racism includes institutional forms of discrimination against a group of people based upon their physical characteristics—primarily their skin color. Hill (2009) describes racism as “[giving] framework to the superstructural, substructural, and infrastructural processes and institutions that practice racial exclusion, circumscription, and proscription” (p. 62). Racism is a privilege of those with power and access to resources. African Americans cannot be racist in the way whites have the potential to be racist because they do not control the institutions that maintain systematic privileges for whites (Asumah, 2004; Hill, 2009). Obama (2008b) described how the Reagan Coalition, politicians, and media personalities wielded their power at the expense of the black community, but failed to identity those actions as legitimate, sanctioned forms of institutionalized racism. Every individual harbors prejudices. Any individual can discriminate against another, but racism is connected to power. Obama’s grandmother’s racial stereotypes cannot be equated with Wright’s identification of how privileges continue to benefit those in power. His grandmother most likely harbored prejudices and spoke out of ignorance. Wright spoke about power in his articulation of the ways in which blacks have systematically been exploited by their government’s racist practices.

Similar to his comparison of his grandmother and Wright, Obama’s fourth strategic failure was a problematic representation of black and white Americans’ experiences by equating their frustrations and reifying racial stereotypes. Frank and McPhail (2005) note Obama’s penchant for conflation in his 2004 DNC speech when he used

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. Obama’s rhetoric, while stylistically
appealing, nonetheless ignores the historical and social realities of American racism…. (p. 583)

Specifically in his “race speech,” when Obama equated black and white frustrations, he effectively likened apples to apple pickers. African Americans who are struggling are not frustrated because they haphazardly fell on hard times. These individuals are oftentimes frustrated because many white Americans have benefited from their misfortune. A white American who loses a job today is not equally frustrated as the African American who has been discriminated against for years and was never able to work a job commensurate with her skills and education simply because of the color of her skin. An immigrant who is disappointed by the lack of opportunities is not on equal footing with an African American who is not considered equal even though his stolen, traded, and purchased ancestors made this country prosperous.

Obama also equated the black and white “middle class squeeze” experience, but the facts belied his optimism. According to the most recent calculation, the median household income for blacks is $33,916 whereas the median income for whites is $52,115 (Orozco & Tomarelli, 2009, p.26). United for a Fair Economy reports that “existing trends would not equalize black and white median household wealth for more than half a millennium” (as cited in Roediger, 2008b, p. 2). Despite talk of economic parity, Patillo (2000) describes the white and black middle class as two separate and unequal entities.

Despite his tendency to gloss the differences in black and white lived experiences, Obama was not ignorant of the historical discrimination against African Americans. He conceded:

Legalized discrimination, where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African American business owners, or black homeowners could not access FHA mortgages, or blacks were excluded from unions, or the police force, or the fire department meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations. (Obama, 2008b, p. 5)

Unfortunately, Obama’s description of discriminatory effects in his “race speech” paralleled Frank and McPhail’s (2005) prior observation of his DNC speech: that is, Obama’s rhetoric “fail[ed] to address in substantive [italics added] terms the material realities of African American trauma” (p. 587). Some of those substantive distinctions included the facts that “African Americans remain twice as likely as whites to be unemployed, three times more likely to live in poverty and more than six times as likely to be incarcerated (Wilson, 2009, p. 15). Wilson (2009) continues, stating that “an economic downturn only amplifies the existing gaps between black and white America” (p. 15). Nearly twice as many African Americans lack health insurance compared to whites (Orozco & Tomarelli, 2009, p. 31). Smith (2009) reports: “Over fifty years after Brown v. Board of Education, nearly half of our nation’s African-American students, nearly 40 percent of Latino students and 11 percent of white students attend high schools in which graduation is not the norm” (pp. 45–46). Additionally, Obama (2008b) limned injustice to “the reality in which Reverend Wright and other African Americans of his generation grew up…in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s, a time when segregation was still the law of the land and opportunity was systematically constricted” (p. 5). In his attempt to envision a better future, Obama strategically regulated the non-specific racial disparities he did mention to a distant past.

Obama (2008b) further misrepresented black and white frustrations by reifying racial stereotypes. He sanitized the conditions in which many blacks live by characterizing the problems as “injustice and inequality” instead of oppression, exploitation, and degradation. Furthermore, Obama perpetuated a bias when he depicted blacks as charismatic, emotional, bawdy, bitter, biased, and angry. Whites were not characterized in similarly unflattering terms. They merely “have…resentments” (Obama, 2008b, p. 6). Since Obama was advocating for equality, both blacks and whites should “have resentments,” but instead he depicted blacks as stereotypically angry, emotional, and bitter. Obama also seemed comfortable perpetuating the stereotype of black “economic dependency and laziness” as often portrayed in the welfare recipient (Mendelberg, 2001, p. 29). When explaining to his listeners how Trinity United Church of Christ “embodied the black community in its entirety,” Obama (2008b) listed the “welfare mom” along side the “doctor” and the “former gang banger” (p. 3). Hardly a passing mention, Obama (2008b) went on to cite “welfare and affirmative action” as sources of white anger (p. 5), “welfare policies” as a problem for black families (p. 4), and the myth about “blacks who were on welfare and too lazy to work” as potentially infecting the mindset of a white woman (p. 7). Racist depictions of black welfare recipients have been perpetuated in this country from the individual to the halls of congress as warrants for welfare reform (Collins, 2000; Gring-Pemble, 2001, 2003). Obama’s use of
the welfare trope brought him into a potentially racist realm of political discourse. Despite acknowledging the "complexities of race in this country that we've never really worked through," Obama's speech made clear that he was not going to heal that divide at the expense of his more perfect union (Obama, 2008b, p. 5).

In addition, Obama's general tendency was to hold blacks responsible for racial progress. When he described Americans who were willing to "do their part," protesting and struggling "on the streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience," images of primarily African Americans likely came to mind (Obama, 2008b, p. 2). Those who risked their lives for equality and justice during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements were primarily young black people. Throughout U.S. history, the oppressors—that is, the slave owners, the slave traders, the segregationists, and the variously biased representatives of the U.S. government—were not part of this power struggle. They were not identified and they were not held accountable here. The responsibility for justice continues to lie with those who have been oppressed. Obama (2008b) actually urged the African American population to "bind our particular grievances...to the larger aspirations of all Americans" (p. 7). Does that mean racial injustice should be overlooked for the greater good? Is racism less important than the concerns of all Americans? Obama suggested that focusing on better health care, schools, and jobs was more important than the racial divisions that create disparities in health care, education, and employment.

Although Obama depicted blacks as primarily responsible for righting racial wrongs, in his final anecdote, the powerful dénouement of the speech, Obama portrayed whites as overseers of the struggle. According to Davis (2000), the trope of white liberal saviors who sacrifice themselves to help blacks become more like whites is legendary in African American literature and in practice. Obama revived this trope as he told the story of Ashley's commitment "to organize a mostly African American community" and narrated her struggles against injustice (Obama, 2008b, p. 9). After privileging Ashley's lived experiences, Obama included the response of a nameless elderly black man to her plight. The man said, "I am here because of Ashley" (Obama, 2008b, p. 9). Obama's more perfect union was premised upon a nameless subservient black man who shared the desires of his white female organizer. Historically black men were conditioned to acquiesce to white women out of fear of being lynched. For fifty years black men were systematically murdered for infractions as slight as preparing to glance in the direction of a white woman. The racial paranoia of the black brute's "sexual retribution" for victimizing pure white womanhood was the foundation for Restoration, mob violence, de facto, and de jure segregation and yet Obama proudly alluded to it within the context of a more perfect union (Mendelberg, 2001). Obama (2008) urged his audiences to move beyond race "in the same direction: towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren" (p. 2). We urge our audiences to understand that this better future was compromised by Obama's perpetuation of racist tropes.

Despite his attempts at unity and universality, Obama's speech ultimately failed to build a more perfect racial union because of his over-identification with non-African American audiences through the elision of black history and the use of raced stereotypes at the expense of black audiences. As a raced candidate running a post-racial campaign, Obama may have resolved his personal crisis but the perpetual socio-political crisis surrounding race and racism remained unresolved in his speech and possibly in his presidency.

Conclusion

Public discussions of race in the United States are rarely afforded the wide exposure or support that Obama's speech has enjoyed. In fact, the speech was instantly lauded as "perhaps the most important political speech since John Kennedy's in the 1960 presidential campaign, when he took on the issue of his Catholic faith before an audience of Protestant ministers" (Dumm, 2008, p. 318). The speech has received many accolades for meeting its rhetorical exigencies and effectively calming the nation's fears about Obama's potential racialized radicalism. A New York Times (2008) editorial states, "It is hard to imagine how he could have handled it better." James Fallows of The Atlantic asserts, "It was a moment that Obama made great through the seriousness, intelligence, eloquence, and courage of what he said. I don't recall another speech about race with as little pandering or posturing or shying from awkward points, and as much honest attempt to explain and connect, as this one." Andrew Sullivan (2008) of "The Daily Dish" similarly celebrates the speech:

I do want to say that this searing, nuanced, gut-wrenching, loyal, and deeply, deeply Christian speech is the most honest speech on race in America in my adult lifetime. It is a speech we have all been
waiting for for a generation. Its ability to embrace both the legitimate fears and resentments of whites and the understandable anger and dashed hopes of many blacks was, in my view, unique in recent American history.

And yet this masterfully given speech belied the contours of race and the effects of racism in the United States.

A speech of this caliber deserves careful critical interrogation because of its rarity and because of its impact on how the country will address issues of social justice. Can we assume that those voters and political pundits who gushed over the speech are also gushing over the idea of a post-racial society? Are they comfortable with erasing African influences from the black American experience? Are all black people who talk about endemic racism and social justice merely angry people from the Civil Rights era? Do they believe that all Americans share the same frustrations? Do they expect black men to remain subservient to white women? Answers to these questions lie in an analysis of reactions to the speech which is outside of the scope of this essay. We can conclude from our analysis, however, that these perspectives are possible and permissible within the context of the speech.

Obama’s political-personal crisis was colored by race, but his response failed to include a productive analysis of race and that absence may have contributed to the text’s success. A speech this effective at negotiating a political-personal crisis is misleading because it looks, on its surface, as if it met all of its goals. This is not the case. Obama’s more perfect union was peppered with imperfections in its sanitized history of race and racism in the United States. The speech failed to equally identify with the distinct experiences of black and white Americans. It is impossible to be fully post-racial in a society with such stark racial disparities. Although scholars have cautioned against the negative effects of race-neutral discourse, this essay contributes to the conversation by showing which aspects of post-racial rhetoric may help the rhetor but be detrimental to a productive discussion about race.

"A More Perfect Union" was not the incontrovertible word on race but a significant contribution towards understanding the role of identification in discourse about race to mixed race audiences. Specifically, we find that identification can be an invaluable rhetorical resource for raced candidates as they seek to build racial unity as long as they do not over-identify with select audiences. Our balanced reading of Obama’s successes and failures provides an alternative perspective on the speech that contributes to more complex analyses of the merits and disadvantages of post-racial discourse.

References


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