

Colorblind Rhetoric in Obama's 2008 "Race Speech": The Appeal to Whiteness and the  
Disciplining of Rhetoric

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Although President Barack Obama is the first black<sup>1</sup> President of the United States, he is considerably mum on issues of race. As authors such as Tim Wise and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva have noted, Obama seems to tread lightly with race-related issues in order to avoid being seen as controversial and threatening. Consider, for example, Obama's veiled response to the shooting of Trayvon Martin, a highly racialized event in public discourse in 2012: "If I had a son, he would look like Trayvon" (Stein). This response, while eliciting considerable media attention, is still quite subtle compared to an earlier comment in 2009, when Obama called white police officers "stupid" for arresting Henry Louis Gates, Jr. for breaking into his own home (Graham). Obama received considerable criticism from the comment and ultimately invited both Gates and the arresting officer for beers at the White House in an attempt to make amends (Feller). The Gates' moment remains one of Obama's few overtly racial comments, even in an environment where every comment and action are considered in light of his race.

Obama's race rhetorics have likely been subtle because appealing to whiteness is necessary for politicians to succeed in such high public office. Bonilla-Silva explains that African American politicians who confront racial inequalities explicitly and often, such as Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, are constantly criticized and reach a glass ceiling related to political office (268). The increase of race-centered comments recently, such as in discussions about the Voting Rights Act and in response to the George Zimmerman verdict (Shapiro), have occurred after Obama secured reelection in 2012. That Obama can be more forthright *after* having

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<sup>1</sup> Obama is the son of a white woman from the U.S. and a black man from Kenya and self-identifies as black; for example, he marked (only) African-American on the 2010 census even though it allowed for more than one option (Harris-Perry).

achieved the highest office in the land *twice* supports that race must be discussed in particular ways, in ways that do not offend white voters, in order for African American politicians to achieve high political office.

Despite race studies work highlighting Obama's colorblind race rhetorics (Bonilla-Silva, Wise), rhetorical studies has not significantly integrated these critiques into their investigations of Obama's race rhetorics. Numerous rhetoricians who analyze Obama's rhetorical prowess utilize theoretical frameworks not incorporating critical race theories. One particular kairotic moment—Obama's 2008 "More Perfect Union" speech—most overtly conveys Obama's colorblind race rhetorics and the colorblind scholarly uptake. Given to diffuse the public outrage about comments made by Obama's pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, the speech elicited a positive response from many audiences. The rhetorical scholarship on this speech offer complimentary readings, such as Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones's analysis of the speech as an effective and uniting appeal to the American Dream myth. However, these readings fail to consider the speech's compliance in colorblindness and white hegemony and thus remain complicit in such ideologies and the racial status quo that both the speech and the resulting analyses claim to disrupt.

In this chapter, utilizing "A More Perfect Union" as an in-depth example, I argue that even Obama's most racialized rhetorics are considerably informed by colorblind racial ideologies that appeal to whiteness and articulate that rhetorical studies perpetuates these ideologies—that it has, in fact, been emotionally disciplined (Worsham) to incorporate these ideologies—and that rhetorical analysis should better incorporate critical race work in order to reveal and intervene in the ramifications of whiteness in our political and scholarly discourses. In this way, this chapter extends examinations of whiteness in rhetoric and composition

(Keating; Kennedy, Middleton and Ratcliffe; Jackson; Ryden and Marshall), into political discourses and problematizes the lack of attention to whiteness into particular rhetorical scholarship.

### **The Rhetorical Situation of the Speech**

Barack Obama, a U.S. Senator from Illinois, was running for the Democratic Party nomination for President in 2007 and 2008. In March 2008, the ABC show *Good Morning America* released several excerpts from 2001 and 2003 sermons from Obama's pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright from the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. The media and public were outraged at remarks that they perceived to be inflammatory, racist, anti-Christian, and anti-American (Frank 168). Statements condemning the U.S. for its treatment of blacks, along with those implicating the U.S. in the 9/11 attacks because of its "terrorism" against other countries, were repeated as sound bites at large in the news (Ross). Obama was implicated by his association with Wright and tried to distance himself from these attacks through public statements, but the media frenzy continued. This was a pivotal moment in Obama's campaign, as a black candidate in need of white voter support, so in a larger, more concentrated response, Obama gave a speech in Philadelphia later in March titled "A More Perfect Union" (an allusion to the preamble to the Constitution). Aside from several conservative critics, most audiences, including the same media outlets that were playing the sound bites, responded positively to the speech (Frank 168). For example, a *New York Times* editorial calls the speech a "Profile in Courage" and lauded Obama for his show of character in the way he handled the controversy ("Mr. Obama's"). Perhaps in part because of this speech, Obama became the front-runner of the Democratic candidates after that speech and ultimately won the Presidency in November.

### **Academic Response to the Speech**

Several rhetoricians studying political rhetoric have provided positive explanations for the rhetorical effectiveness of this speech. David A. Frank analyzes the speech as displaying a prophetic tradition mimicking Martin Luther King, Jr., a tradition based on reference to bible stories, to African origins of Christianity, and to a pairing of anger and hope (172-3). Frank notes the difficult challenge that Obama faced in addressing Wright's accusations: "Obama's burden was to place America's sins and promise into relationship, to put black anger and white anxiety into perspective, to offer himself as an embodiment of the country's contradictions, and to narrate a story of hope his audience could adopt better to fulfill a prophetic commitment to others" (Frank 178-9). Frank finds Obama's claim that white racism is not endemic to be unsupported by scholarship (179), but finds Obama's discussion of racial injustice emerging out of the "American republic and its laws" (Frank 182) and legalized discrimination to be progressive (183). Frank also finds Obama's legitimization of white anger and claims of reverse racism to be a unifying tactic and ultimately calls the speech "a masterpiece with small flaws" (190).

Robert E. Terrill analyzes Obama's speech in light of W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of double consciousness, finding that Obama embodies double consciousness and encourages Americans to also do so as a productive means of discussing race. Obama's double consciousness emerges out of his own racial background, while his audience's double consciousness can happen by considering each other's grievances—by whites considering African Americans' anger and African Americans considering whites' feelings on reverse discrimination. Ultimately, Terrill finds the speech and Obama's rhetorical eloquence as holding possibilities for contemporary public discourse.

Robert Rowland and John M. Jones similarly explore why there was “almost universal praise” for Obama’s speech (126). Rowland and Jones claim that Obama was successful because he “contextualized the problem of race in a sacred religious narrative,” and more importantly, connected that narrative to the most powerful narrative of the American Dream (127), which is linked to classic American liberalism (132). Rowland and Jones write that Obama claims that racial problems persist because all Americans do not have access to the Dream and that race problems can be solved by making it universally available. Rowland and Jones find that Obama did not “paper over racial conflict or the racial injustice that remained a major problem in the United States” (134), but rather united people under a universal appeal to the American Dream (147). In a separate article, Paul Lynch also finds Obama’s unification strategies to be the reason for the speech’s success, although Lynch explains Obama as unifying blacks and whites through a rhetoric of friendship.

Next, Judy L. Isaksen discusses the movement of Obama’s campaign tactics from making race invisible earlier in the campaign to critically engaging race during the March 2008 race speech. Before that speech, Obama’s tactics erased and disavowed race (Isaksen 457). Isaksen explains Obama’s behavior with black polarity theory and critical race theory. Black polarity theory details two polar stereotypes for black males: the bad black man and the good black man. Isaksen sees Obama’s initial reluctance to address race as a negotiation of these polarities because Obama wants to be seen as good and nonthreatening and avoid the angry black man stereotype. Critical Race Theory (CRT), which emerges out of critical legal studies, is comprised of legal scholars (primarily of color) who “view the law and its legal rhetoric as complicitous in sustaining both White normativity and White supremacy” and “work to expose the ways in which the law is an interested, ideologically driven force that sustains asymmetric power

relations” (Isaksen 463). Isaksen claims that Obama engaged in CRT because he “did not point an accusatory finger at the citizens of America as the responsible agents, but at our government and the legal system” (464). Isaksen also tracks Obama’s associations with CRT through his work on the *Harvard Law Review*, his professor Derrick Bell who is a well-known CRT theorist, and the courses he taught at the University of Chicago.

Most recently, Susanna Dilliplane finds the speech to be significant because of the rhetorical challenges of the situation, the rhetorical strategies Obama used to address those challenges, and how those rhetorical strategies fit into his campaign as a whole. The primary rhetorical challenges Obama faced were his need to reject Wright’s statements without rejecting Wright’s symbolism to the black community (129) and his need to convey a black perspective without only representing black interests (130). Obama invoked unification themes in order to meet those challenges and those themes were evident in Obama’s campaign overall.

There is some rhetorical studies work critiquing Obama’s race rhetorics in other situations. In a piece on an earlier speech, the 2004 Democratic National Convention speech that introduced Obama to the nation, Mark Lawrence McPhail engages in a dialogue with David Frank. Frank gives a complimentary reading of the speech as demonstrating a rhetorical approach of consilience that can bring reconciliation. McPhail found the speech problematic in its “racelessness” with a message that ignores and obscures America’s racial history and current racial realities (Frank and McPhail 572-3). Further, McPhail notes that Obama invokes the “resources of whiteness and its dominant rhetorical tropes” (583) and actually “eliminates any need for Americans to address the symbolic and social pathologies of white privilege and power” (573). Despite McPhail’s explanation of Obama’s appeal to whiteness, however, McPhail’s critiques do not seem to inform subsequent work on Obama’s race rhetorics.

## Colorblindness and Whiteness

Taken as a whole, this sampling of scholars analyzing “A More Perfect Union” show considerable attention to the “effectiveness” of the speech given the positive public response to the speech and Obama’s subsequent political wins. Most of the scholars also find Obama’s engagement with race to be progressive. However, none of the rhetoricians question these measures of success or the effect of this speech on white racial ideologies, which would be considerably different if they included goals of critical whiteness studies. Critical whiteness studies include efforts to destabilize, deconstruct, and redress whiteness by “examining what it means to be white, how whiteness becomes established legally, how certain groups moved in and out of the white race, ‘passing,’ the phenomenon of white power and white supremacy, and the group of privileges that come with membership in the dominant race” (Delgado and Stefancic 83). This chapter rereads this speech with those goals in mind, analyzing how Obama utilizes rhetorical strategies of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva) in order to keep white voters assured of their power and privilege.

Bonilla-Silva is a sociologist who investigates why whites do not think race has any substantial effect on people’s lives in contemporary U.S. society, despite the significant economic disparities that continue between whites, blacks, and other people of color. Compared to the Jim Crow era where racism was built on biological differences, the current post-Civil rights racial ideology is based on more subtle cultural racism and blame-the-victim tropes. Today, most whites in the U.S. claim that they “don’t see any color, just people,” that discrimination no longer significantly affects minorities’ lives, and that minorities are themselves responsible for any ongoing racial conflicts (1). Bonilla-Silva continues that most whites believe that “if blacks and other minorities would just stop thinking about the past, work hard, and

complain less (particularly about racial discrimination), then Americans of all hues could ‘all get along’ (1). To investigate the frames and linguistic strategies of this colorblind racial ideology, Bonilla-Silva analyzes survey and interview data from two studies, one of college students from three U.S. universities and another of Detroit residents. Ultimately, he determines that “most whites endorse the ideology of color blindness and that this ideology is central to the maintenance of white privilege” (14). The rhetorical tropes that convey colorblindness include abstract liberalism, which invokes liberal tenets of individualism and bootstrap mentality to claim equal opportunity and deny inequities; naturalization, which suggests that race segregation is “natural” and by choice, rather than constructed; cultural racism, which blames cultural differences, such as character failings and social choices, for causing inequalities; and minimization of racism, where whites deny the effect of race because they can.

Colorblindness is one of the primary ideological frameworks supporting the hegemony of whiteness in our society. Whiteness (not synonymous with white people) is a socio-cultural construction that situates whites as superior to other races and entitled to greater benefits (Feagin, Smedley and Smedley). Whiteness emerged out of a historical context privileging wealthy white economic interests (Smedley and Smedley) and today is “associated with the unjust social system and resistance to change, with the denial of accountability, with closure, with silence, with hypocrisy, and with ignorance of other cultures” (Keating 427).

Colorblindness has been taken up in rhetoric and composition in reference to historic presidential rhetoric (Holmes) and Chicano students (Martinez) and this chapter builds upon that work, as well as other inquiries into white rhetorics (Jackson, Ryden and Marshall) by reading Obama’s speech as informed by whiteness generally and colorblindness specifically.

### **A Rereading of the Speech**

Since the rhetoricians listed above review Obama's speech in detail, this analysis will be a focused re-reading of the speech, rather than an extensive analysis. To begin, Obama appeals to one of the strongest ideologies in U.S. history—liberalism. Sharon Crowley explains that liberalism is a “set of political beliefs and practices” emerging from capitalism in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries focusing on freedom, tolerance, reason, and the rule of law, which lead to political values of equality, liberty, freedom, and rights that maintain hegemonic status of common sense in the U.S. today (6).

Obama's speech resounds of liberatory rhetoric, such as his reference to the Constitution and its “ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty and justice” (Obama). Obama also speaks to a deep-seated ideology in American culture that all Americans are equal and deserve equal opportunities. The rhetoric scholars, and particularly Rowland and Jones, find the speech rhetorically effective largely because of Obama's liberatory tropes, such as his appeal to the mythical American Dream, without recognizing the underbelly of liberatory rhetoric. Bonilla-Silva agrees with the pervasiveness of liberalism throughout the U.S. but notes its hypocritical nature in that it existed alongside occurrences such as Native American genocide. Today, abstract liberalism uses ideas such as “equal opportunity” and “choice” to justify race relations (Bonilla-Silva 28). Whites can oppose affirmative action because everyone already has equal opportunity and they can explain segregated housing as a cultural choice in order to maintain their hegemonic privilege without seeming racist (Bonilla-Silva 28). Obama's heavy focus on liberalism is one of its strongest appeals to whiteness.

Part of Obama's liberatory rhetoric is his individual approach to solving racial discord, which includes each individual “taking full responsibility for [their] own lives” (Obama). Colorblind racial ideology includes the idea that individuals are responsible for their own

destinies and denies systematic or institutional influences. Even in discussing the history of racism, Obama focuses on the individual: “What’s remarkable is not how many failed in the face of discrimination, but how many men and women overcame the odds; how many were able to make a way out of no way, for those like me who would come after them” (Obama). Even the anecdote that concludes the speech reinforces individualism. Obama offers an emotional appeal by describing a young white woman named Ashley who participated in his campaign because she wanted to improve conditions for low-income people (Obama). As a child, Ashley told her mother that she preferred mustard and relish sandwiches because she knew her mother could not afford better food (Obama). After hearing this story, an older black man claimed that he was participating in the campaign “because of Ashley,” which illustrates how two individuals can transcend race (Obama). Regardless of the rhetorical effectiveness of this emotional appeal, it nonetheless appeals to whites’ value of liberalism without confronting racism as systematic.

Obama actually denies existence of systemic white racism in the speech. Obama says that Wright’s remarks “expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country—a view that sees white racism as endemic” (Obama). As some of the rhetoric scholars discussed above admit, race scholars have written extensively on the endemic nature of white racism. Bonilla-Silva writes that Obama’s comment “should be surprising to race scholars around the nation who regard racism as indeed ‘endemic’ and know that race has been a ‘divisive’ matter in America since the 17<sup>th</sup> century!” (220). Obama acknowledges that systemic discrimination exists, but within the legal system and other institutions in a way that keeps prejudice at a distance without blaming any particular racial group (and individual voters). Resisting placing blame here is a political tactic that should not be mistaken for progressive rhetoric on race.

Another aspect of colorblind ideology is claims of reverse racism, and this, too, is evident in this speech as Obama grants legitimacy to whites' feelings of reverse discrimination. He says, "[m]ost working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race...And in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense...resentment builds over time" (Obama). Instead of acknowledging white racism, Obama blames white resentment on "a corporate culture rife with inside dealing, questionable accounting practices and short-term greed; a Washington dominated by lobbyists and special interests; economic policies that favor the few over the many" (Obama). Although not all whites experience privilege to the same degree, if at all, race scholars identify such institutional factors as maintaining white privilege rather than causing white resentment. The effect of naming such factors refocuses discussions from race to class, a tactic that creates differences between whites rather than acknowledges white racism (Beech 173). Furthermore, Obama's phrase conveys that race is getting in the way of focusing on "real" problems that prevent everyone from achieving the American Dream, a maneuver evident throughout Obama's campaign (Bonilla-Silva 219). Minimizing the impact of race on social outcomes in the U.S. adheres to the minimization of racism frame of colorblind racial ideology, one that appeals to whiteness by denying white participation in racism.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Rhetorical Studies**

My reading of "A More Perfect Union" contrasts sharply with the previously cited rhetoricians. Rowland and Jones's contention that Obama did not "paper over racial conflict" is unfounded by in my reading; further, their valuing of liberalism is problematic when viewed in light of colorblind racial ideology. Terrill, who values Obama's use of African American

rhetorical traditions, neglects to consider how the speech maintains rather than challenges existing racial structures. Isaksen, who actually incorporates critical race theory in her analysis, falls short in identifying Obama's appeals to whiteness. Although Obama does indict legal and government practices for present racial inequalities, he cites institutional practices to legitimize white resentment rather than expose the systematic nature of white racism. Furthermore, Obama's legal background and associations with critical race theory outside of this speech are not evidence of ethical or progressive rhetoric on race as a presidential candidate or President, except to evidence that Obama should know better.

While Dilliplane's analysis discusses race directly, such as by explaining how the rhetorical situation of the speech required Obama to address the racial accusations of Wright's statements as well as Obama's own racial identity, she reports on these challenges without problematizing them. For example, she explains that Obama had to distance himself from being the "black candidate" focused on "black interests" in order to appeal to white voters (132) but does not critique the political and social culture that makes being black and having black interests a problem. She does not note the hypocrisy of white candidates not needing to disavow white interests in order to achieve public office. In this way, Dilliplane reports on these events from a raceless standpoint, one that comments on race rhetorics without considering how those rhetorics support racism and racial inequalities.

These rhetorical analyses and their common oversights together demonstrate an affective disciplining of the field of rhetoric. Julie Jung discusses disciplinary debates in rhetoric and composition and outlines how those debates discipline scholarly identity. She explains, "conventional readings of reflections on the debate sponsor an economy of emotion whereby teacher-scholars working in rhetoric and composition are repeatedly hailed to recognize

themselves as subjects who are identifying ‘correctly’” (n.p.). I offer that a similar disciplining is evident in the rhetorical analyses on the Obama speech that emerge primarily in rhetorical work on political discourse. This disciplining is related to Lynn Worsham’s concept of the schooling of emotion, where people are pedagogically disciplined to have particular affective responses to certain events, often including a denouncement of emotion in favor of liberal rationality (216). The schooling of emotion also causes us to perceive acts of violence as individualized, aberrational events rather than as emerging from particular social, political, and economic structures (219).

The rhetorical analyses on “A More Perfect Union” suggest that rhetoric studies has been affectively disciplined to see any political discourse on race, especially that by a minority politician, and especially that which attempts to unite rather than divide, as progressive. Obama symbolically represents progress for race relations in this country, so rhetoricians may be emotionally schooled to support such progress, even though the details of his campaign and presidency might not be that progressive in practice.<sup>2</sup> The analyses also suggest that rhetoricians are disciplined to focus on analyzing rhetoric that was judged to be successful by an external metric (in this case, numerous media outlets). By taking the success of the speech for granted, rhetoricians focus on explaining how Obama’s rhetoric was effective for a broad, hegemonic audience (read: white voters) without considering how the speech might effect marginalized populations. The assumption of success also excuses rhetoricians from a more thorough inquiry into whose opinion counts in labeling the speech a success...or even who gets to speak within political discourse.

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<sup>2</sup> Bonilla-Silva argues that, in addition to fitting a manufactured minority politician persona, Obama’s politics reveal that he is quite conservative, or at least a centrist (214-5).

It is considerably difficult for African American politicians and other politicians of color to attain high political office, but I advocate that we can celebrate the U.S. electing a black President while still problematizing the race rhetorics influencing and emerging from a political and social system placing such successes neatly within white racial ideologies. Rather than analyze race rhetorics in a whitewashed framework, we should examine how such rhetoric supports white hegemony through increasingly covert means. Exposing those means opens possibilities for redressing whiteness and its stronghold in our social and political landscape. In this way, rhetorical studies can engage in racial justice rather than remaining complicit in existing race relations.

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