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RHETORIC, RACE, AND BARACK OBAMA'S DISCOURSE OF DIVISION

by

Scott Matthew Lynn Anderson

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Communication

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For my father.

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ABSTRACT

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The ascendance of Barack Obama prompted many news media outlets to proclaim the arrival of a post-racial twenty-first century. Although his presidency represents a milestone with regard to equality, Obama has been called to respond to exigencies that have manifested in the form of racial unrest on several occasions across his political career. This dissertation chronologically examines Obama's responses to events that have put racism or the perception of racial inequality on full display. It starts with an analysis of Obama's "A More Perfect Union" address, which followed the media firestorm surrounding Reverend Jeremiah Wright during the 2008 presidential campaign, and ends with Obama's Eulogy for Clementa C. Pinckney in June of 2015 after the slaying of nine African Americans in Charleston, South Carolina. Using the theoretical constructs of Kenneth Burke, this dissertation examines the discourse of Obama through the lens of division. While most scholarship credits Obama for inclusive appeals that tie Americans to shared values, this dissertation argues that Obama establishes a sense of division when addressing issues that stem from racial unrest. By dividing listeners on the basis of their oppositional sentiment concerning racial inequality, Obama provides Americans a pedagogical tool to confront and interrogate their racial differences.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The candidacy of Barack Obama heightened America's racial awareness more strongly than any other presidential election in recent history (Tesler and Sears 52). Over the course of his political career, Obama on several occasions has been called to respond to exigencies that have manifested in the form of racial unrest. While campaigning in March of 2008, controversial remarks from Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Obama's friend and religious adviser, summoned him to respond publically. Then, in 2013, following the verdict in the Trayvon Martin case, which acquitted George Zimmerman of murder, Obama addressed what many perceived as an inherent racial bias in America's criminal justice system. A year later, Obama faced a similar exigency when a federal grand jury acquitted Officer Darren Wilson of killing Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager in Ferguson, Missouri. In 2015, following the racially motivated hate crime that left nine dead in Charleston, South Carolina, Obama delivered a eulogy for Clementa Pinckney, a state senator and senior pastor at Mother Emanuel A.M.E., the site of the mass shooting. Taken together these responses demonstrate the continued punctuation of events highlighting racial unrest across Obama's political career, and could thus be considered his racial moment speeches.¹

The dissertation asks two questions: How has Obama addressed race over the course of his political career, and what are the ways in which Obama has responded to his

¹ It is important to note that the speeches and discourse analyzed in this dissertation represent similar racial moments for America and not just Obama. That is to say, they summoned Obama as chief executive to weigh in on the status of racial equality or the lack thereof in the wake of events that foregrounded racial controversy and shifted the public attention to the progress or disparities that exist between the races.

ascribed post-racial identity? Using the theoretical constructs of Kenneth Burke, I argue that Obama creates a division when addressing issues that stem from racial unrest. In *The Grammar of Motives*, Burke defines division as a negative condition fundamental to human existence, which requires correction (406). While most scholarship on Obama recognizes his attempt to unite America with an inclusive rhetorical approach that transcends the division identity politics and crosses party and demographic lines (Darsey; Rowland and Jones “One Dream”; Terrill), I show how Obama divides listeners and partitions America by its disparate conceptions with regard to racial equality. Rather than attempt to reconcile racial differences and tie Americans to shared values, Obama puts racial sentiment in direct opposition. Moreover, I argue that Obama’s use of division to address matters concerning race stems likely from a disavowal of his ascribed post-racial identity. While this approach initially alienates listeners, it provides a rhetorical catalyst with the potential to help Americans of diverse backgrounds confront the problems that have existed and continue to persist across racial lines. As such, the use of division creates the possibility for America not to transcend its racial problems of past and present but rather to interrogate the status of equality in a venue in which oppositional sentiment is both acknowledged and validated. While this strategy does not imply post-racism for America is guaranteed or even possible, it challenges the notion of Obama’s discourse as inclusionary and complicates his ascribed post-racial identity.

Taken together, Obama’s discourse on race analyzed in this dissertation indicates that America is not the post-racial utopia that many envisioned and associated with his ascent. The speeches, on the contrary, demonstrate that racial inequality continues to exist today, more than half a century after the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Although there is host of scholarship on Obama, few studies examine the intersection of his speeches concerning racial inequality. According to Kevin Coe and Anthony Schmidt, the majority of presidential addresses avoid the topic of race altogether (611). While race sporadically infiltrates presidential discourse on policy, they maintained, it is usually done so only in passing or for brief moments. The “inescapable” conclusion, Coe and Schmidt asserted, is that modern presidents have neglected to give race the amount of attention it would seem to deserve (611). To that end, while many of Obama’s speeches have been examined in isolation, no scholars have provided a comprehensive account of Obama’s discourse across his political career with regard to race. Emphasis on Obama’s racial moment speeches helps us better understand the ways in which his political career has been both defined by and is a product of the racial animus that persists in twenty-first century America.

Examination of Obama’s racial moment speeches provides at least two insights for rhetorical scholarship. First, it challenges the notion of Obama’s discourse as inclusionary. Although most literature on Obama acknowledges his attempt to tie Americans to shared values, thus transcending the racial differences of past and present with a focus on the future, I argue that Obama alienates listeners on the basis of their different attitudes concerning racial inequality. Second, it demonstrates from a theoretical perspective that division does not always require correction through identification. Contra to Burke’s assertion that rhetors must remedy division through identification, Obama’s racial moment speeches demonstrate the ways in which division does not always manifest a limitation or something to be overcome. Rather, division

provides America a foundation upon which to confront and interrogate its racial transgressions in a healthy and productive manner.

The remainder of this chapter proceeds in three parts. First, I provide a methodological discussion of identification that highlights the importance of division. Division, I maintain, is a reoccurring theme that resurfaces in Obama's discourse surrounding racial inequality, and is therefore central to my analysis.² Following my discussion of methodology, I offer a review of literature on Obama that is organized into three categories: the ascription of Obama as post-racial, his preference to use metaphor as a rhetorical strategy, and the scholarly characterization of his discourse as inclusive. My focus on division complicates and extends the literature within each of these three categories. Finally, the chapter concludes with a preview of the subsequent chapters and a preview of the artifacts for analysis.

METHODOLOGY

In this dissertation, I argue that Obama's discourse concerning race originates fundamentally in division. Although division is the reoccurring theme of Obama's racial discourse elucidated in my analysis, I employ more than a Burkean identification framework to analyze Obama's speeches. I borrow an assortment of Burke's theories, which range from identification, dramatism, paradox, and his pedagogical contributions

² For the purpose of my analysis, I employ a broad definition of division that correlates the concept with Burke's notion of the negative. In "Linguistic Approaches to Problems of Education," Burke explains, "negativity, the 'idea of no,' [is] a symbolistic genius that makes itself felt in a variety of manifestations. Examples of such manifestations are sacrifice, mortification, penance, vicarious atonement, conversion, rebirth, original sin, submission, humility, purgation, [and most importantly for my analysis] attempts to resolve social antithesis" (35). Embracing this broad approach to division is central to understanding Obama's discourse concerning racial equality.

in “Linguistic Approaches to Problems of Education,” to show the ways in which division is the unifying thread in Obama’s discourse concerning race. For example, my analysis of “A More Perfect Union” demonstrates the ways in which Obama succeeds through deployment of guilt within the context of the dramatism. In a similar vein, Obama’s remarks following the Martin and Brown verdicts manifest in paradox as Obama validates and acknowledges simultaneously the opposing sentiment that exists between the races with regard to inequality. Both cases, however, demonstrate Obama’s attempt to divide America on the basis of its racial differences rather than unite listeners in shared values.

Rhetorical identification, for Burke, is the foundation for persuasion. He explained, “A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes they are, or is persuaded to believe so” (Rhetoric 20-21). Identification, in short, is both the mode by which individuals establish a sense of identity and the mode by which they establish a relation to each other. But compensatory to identification is the concept of division. “Identification is affirmed with earnestness,” Burke stated, “precisely because there is division” (Rhetoric 22). “If men were not apart from one another,” he noted, “there would be no need . . . to proclaim their unity” (Rhetoric 22). Separating America across racial lines is a reoccurring theme that surfaces in Obama’s racial discourse.

The division between self and other, Burke explained, is the “state of nature” that is the stimulus for identification, and identification’s job is to transcend this natural state of division. But what if division did not need to be transcended for it provided America a

rhetorical catalyst with the potential to help listeners confront and interrogate their racial differences? Diane Davis and John Jones both have argued that division is not a flaw that requires healing through identification. Rather, it is a rhetorical action that assists in the creation of new identifications. For example, in his analysis of the Occupy Wall Street movement, Jones found that the use of a microphone provided protestors a way to express dissenting voices, thus creating the foundation for new identifications to emerge. In the same vein as these scholars, I argue that Obama's use of division to contextualize racial inequality does not require correction. Rather, it creates a foundation upon which Americans of diverse backgrounds can bring their sentiment concerning racial inequality together in juxtaposed form. In turn, while Obama creates identification with one group, he simultaneously divides from another, a process Burke labeled "congregation by segregation" in *Dramatism and Development* (29). Although it alienates initially, the end goal is a pedagogical one for Burke. As he outlined in "Linguistic Approach to Problems of Education,"

although one would be as fair as possible in thus helping all positions to say their say, a mere cult of "fair play" would not be the reason. Rather, one hopes for ways whereby the various voices, in mutually correcting one another, will lead toward a position better than any one singly. That is, one does not merely want to outwit the opponent, or to study him, one wants to be affected by him, in some degree to incorporate him, to so act that his ways can help perfect one's own—in brief, to learn from him. (23)

Obama has been called to shape America's racial awareness on numerous occasions during his political career, and the ascription of him as post-racial has

continued to present an inescapable exigency. Because many in the news media heralded Obama as the candidate who transcended the division of identity politics, a belief that America would embark on a new post-racial era prevailed. Despite this characterization, however, I argue that Obama's use of division to address racial controversy stems from a disavowal of his ascription as post-racial, and serves to polarize rather than transcend racial difference.

BARACK OBAMA AND THE PROMISE OF A POST-RACIAL AMERICA

In recent years, scholars who study race have directed their attention to Obama. In fact, Mark Orbe explained, since 2007, Obama has become the focus of academics who employ a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches that range from the rhetorical, political, cultural, and/or critical. For Anthony Sparks, "Obama's historic election as the 44th President of the United States prompted some to ponder and others to argue that we were finally witnessing the dawn of a new 'post-racial America,'" thus foregrounding the rhetorical problem that Obama faced in the 2008 election and during his tenure as president (21). For sociologists Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Victor Ray, however, it is problematic to associate Obama with post-racism. The Obama presidency, they asserted, holds different meaning for whites and African Americans. For whites, it is a symbol of times changed, whereas African Americans see it as a time in which racial issues are silenced (Bonilla-Silva and Ray 179). In a separate article, Bonilla-Silva clarified this point. He explained that whites liked Obama in 2008 because he refrained from talking about racism and distanced himself from black extremists like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton. For African Americans, even with the silence surrounding racial issues, Obama became a symbol of their possibilities. Orbe echoed Bonilla-Silva, Ray, and

Sparks in his observation, when he claimed that Obama's ascendance presents an unusual paradox. On the one hand, Orbe noted, some see Obama's rise as evidence of a post-racial America. At the same time, however, others have critically examined the ways his presidency has "exposed the degree to which public perceptions are steeped in racialized realities" (349). For these scholars the presidency of Obama does not mean racism will cease to exist.

Despite the continuation of events highlighting the persistence of racial inequality across his political career, Obama has been forced to contend with a media-ascribed post-racial characterization since assuming his executive position. While scholars do not define post-racial in universal terms, they recognize certain commonalities of its discourse. According to Christel Temple, the term "post-racial" and its variations generally refer to an assumption that African Americans have finally achieved racial equality (52). For Bonilla-Silva and Ray, post-racial signals a time in which racial issues are silenced (179). Jasmine Cobb explained this point more eloquently, noting that post-racism asks us to focus on visible accomplishments associated with racial difference, while ignoring obvious instances of discrimination (413). Perhaps Kent Ono said it best, noting that post-racism upholds the "fantasy that racism no longer exists" ("post" 227). To put it another way, post-racism is, for these scholars, the perception of progress without acknowledging that racial inequality still occupies a prominent place in society.

In his analysis of media in the 2008 presidential campaign, Sparks attempted to unpack the discourse that associated Obama with a post-racial America in the twenty-first century. According to Sparks, Obama's opponents characterized him through "seemingly benign" rhetorical appeals that re-circulated notions disseminated originally in popular

culture through blackface minstrelsy (21). Minstrelsy, which included comic skits and performances by white people in blackface, depicted African Americans as stupid, lazy, and sexual, and offered a gathering place for anti-abolitionist sentiment (Sparks 24). The shows became popular after the Civil War and offered whites a way to continue to assert their place in the racial hierarchy through popular culture. The McCain camp's use of words such as "elite," "finicky," and "fancy" to describe Obama holds racial significance and reverberates racial and gendered ideologies of the antebellum and postbellum history of American blackface minstrelsy (Sparks 23). Humor, in this case, did more to affirm than subvert racism in the 2008 election, be it on a conscious or unconscious level.

Jonathan Rossing and Jasmine Cobb echoed Sparks in noting the significant role of racialized humor in the 2008 election. Rossing and Cobb, however, relied on visual rather than textual representations for analysis. During the 2008 election, the *New Yorker* published a controversial cover picture of the Obamas:



According to Rossing, fearful insinuations intensified after Obama secured the Democratic nomination in June 2008. The cartoon coupled symbols of Black Nationalism, through depiction of a militant Michelle, with tropes of Islamic terrorism in a caricature of Obama wearing a turban with a picture of Osama Bin Laden hanging above the fireplace in the background. The cover art, Cobb maintained, suggested to viewers that an African American president embodies racial identities that are subversive to democracy (Cobb 416). Fox News labeled the Obama fist bump the “terrorist fist jab,” and analyst Dick Morris suggested Obama could be “a sleeper agent who really doesn’t believe in our system” (qtd. in Rossing 426). Rossing asserted that the image makes clear the racial othering that sought to undermine Obama’s embodiment of American ideals, and attempted to further characterize him as an outsider (426). The artwork portraying the Obamas catered to stereotypes of African Americans. These depictions, Cobb charged, continue to portray racial difference as overt and in exaggerated form—with accentuated facial features, hair texture, and overall physical appearance (417). Despite the surrounding controversy, the cartoon had a dual effect. Although the *New Yorker*’s satire highlighted the anxiety of many on the right, it also provoked productive discussions about racial stereotypes. In the same vein as Rossing and Cobb, Craig Stewart maintained that as a form of satire the cover art failed for most of its intended audiences. “[S]keptical’ readers,” Stewart asserts, “recognize the image’s pure persuasive potential but ultimately are more concerned about its negative . . . persuasive effects on attitudes about and voting for Barack Obama” (19). As these assessments have shown, the use of humor and satire to stimulate productive conversations on race remains a contested issue among scholars.

Obama's name has continued to present him with a unique problem throughout his political career. Ray Block Jr. and Chinonye Onwunli explained that in the 2008 election, Obama's Islamic-sounding moniker (Hussein) was a liability, because of the nation's hostility toward Islamic extremists and a suspicion of Muslims more generally (476). In their analysis of voter perception, Block Jr. and Onwunli highlighted the various perspectives on the issue held by conservatives and liberals. For those on the right, the moniker solidified the already negative perceptions of Obama. Voters on the left, however, were indifferent about the name issue as it neither bolstered nor detracted from their support for Obama. The republican tactic of vilifying Obama through his moniker backfired with undecided voters, who largely went for Obama. The authors concluded that in the context of the 2008 election the moniker influenced how people perceived Obama, but failed to shape electoral outcomes for partisan voters. The moniker, as such, exacerbated Obama's post-racial challenge, because it was an attempt by the right to undermine and put into question Obama's allegiance to America.

Other scholars have pointed to Obama's disavowal of blackness as an effort to accentuate his whiteness. Christel Temple concurred with Bonilla-Silva and Ray in the danger of assuming the ascendance of Obama signals our arrival in a post-racial society. In this version of racial equality, however, lies an expectation that African Americans should not seek to be culturally distinct, but rather assimilate mainstream white culture. The speeches of Obama deploy a vision of the American past, present and future that values race in its most traditional cultural configuration. Temple's analysis revealed that post-racial and post-cultural rhetoric and public opinion are inaccurate projections and

culturally subversive. Scholars have identified metaphor as one of Obama's preferred rhetorical strategies, one that allows him to bridge the divide between black and white.

METAPHORS THAT UNITE

Much of the rhetorical scholarship on Obama reveals his preference to use metaphor to unite a racially and otherwise divided America. For example, James Darsey argued Obama in his 2008 campaign speeches used the metaphor of a journey to project an experience relating to all Americans. Obama's success, Darsey maintained, centered on the ability to bring his personal journey and America's national journey into one confluent trajectory. Extending Darsey's analysis, Pilar Escudero identified war, construction, and journey metaphors in Obama's first inaugural to underscore an attainable vision of the American Dream. Escudero, like Darsey, acknowledged Obama's ability to unite his journey and America's journey, especially with regard to racial equality. Where these scholars diverge, however, is in their understanding of the end goal. For Darsey, the journey to equality will not end until African Americans achieve full equality. But the journey, for Escudero, terminated with Obama's historic speech at the inauguration of the first African American president.

In the same vein as Darsey and Escudero, Robert Rowland and John Jones argued that Obama's discourse, through a metaphor of hope, balances communal and individual values, which makes the American Dream more attainable for all Americans ("recasting"). David Frank alluded to the archetypal significance of Obama's prose without labeling it as such. He noted Obama's first inaugural begins and ends with references to the weather, as Obama associated the storms and freezing temperatures of his inauguration day with the country's current condition regarding religious tolerance.

To help the audience move beyond its “childish” attitudes about religion, Obama employed juxtaposition and a multifaceted conception of religion that appealed to a diverse audience with differing beliefs and values (Frank “Rhetorical Signature” 623).

Although these scholars converge in the belief that Obama deploys metaphor to unite listeners, I provide a contrary perspective. I agree that metaphor is central to Obama’s success, but my reading of his racial moment speeches demonstrates the ways in which Obama uses metaphor not to unite Americans in shared values but to divide listeners on the basis of oppositional sentiment concerning racial inequality. Obama ultimately succeeds by uniting one group while separating from another. This observation provides an intervention in the literature that characterizes Obama’s discourse as patently inclusive.

AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH

Although not all scholarship on Obama is metaphorical analysis, most literature recognizes his attempt to unite Americans. For Robert Terrill, Obama created unity in his “A More Perfect Union” speech through the embodiment of double consciousness, a Duboisian precept that invites listeners to view themselves through the perspective of others. This strategy enabled Americans to invoke the Golden Rule and allowed them to “find that common stake we all have in one another” (374). In his more recent book, Terrill applied a “*democratic double consciousness*” framework to Obama’s speeches across his political career as an effort to stimulate democratic civic engagement (*Double Consciousness* 19 emphasis in original). Similar to Terrill, I am concerned with Obama’s inventional resources as means to promote the efficacy of democratic engagement. Where I differ, however, is in theory and strategy. For Terrill, the goal centers on shared

acknowledgement, a fundamental precept of double consciousness for Dubois. In contrast, I argue that America's willingness to adopt the other's worldview is idealistically insufficient; rather Obama succeeds by polarizing listeners across racial lines. Rather than confine myself to the utility of one framework, I adopt multiple theoretical approaches, mostly Burkeian, which originate in or foster division. Moreover, while Terrill examines the broad corpus of Obama's political speeches, my work places a premium on the role of division in Obama's racialized discourse.

In their analysis of Obama's 2004 keynote address at the Democratic National Convention, David Frank and Mark McPhail acknowledged Obama's attempt to cultivate racial reconciliation. Although Frank argued Obama links minority and identity groups to shared American values, McPhail elucidated Obama's discourse of whiteness and its dominant rhetorical tropes: innocence, race neutrality, and positive self-presentation. This reality, for McPhail, hinders any possibility for reconciliation. Elsewhere, Frank argued that Obama uses the prophetic tradition, which merges Jewish and Christian faith with the experiences of African Americans, to wage acknowledgement between the races and to emphasize "carnal recognition" ("Prophetic" 167-171). Judy Isaksen concurred about Obama's attempt to unite a racially divided nation. She explained that Obama occupies a middle-of-the-road spot that transcends the "bipolar problem" and puts forth a new position that "calmly" but "substantively" confronts racial progress (457; 468). In the same vein as the existing scholarship, I hold that racial reconciliation is Obama's paramount task. My analysis, however, extends the literature to show how reconciliation originates in Obama's ability to partition America across racial lines rather than his attempt to help listeners transcend their racial differences.

A close reading of metaphors in Obama's racial moment speeches provides an alternative interpretation for his preferred rhetorical strategy. While most critiques have acknowledged the inclusionary nature of Obama's rhetoric, they resigned his metaphors to the symbolic realm. Even Darsey maintained America's journey to equality functions better in aspirational than actual terms, when he noted the "finish line" as metaphorical (100). I take the argument advanced by most scholars and invert it to show how Obama's deployment of metaphor, which originates in division, is alienating rather than inclusive. Rather than attempt to unite listeners in racial acknowledgement, Obama accentuates America's racial differences and places racial sentiment in opposition. A cursory reading of Obama's speeches illuminates this strategy but does not demonstrate its full significance. While these speeches may seem at first glance divisive, this approach, I argue, has pedagogical value. Grounded in division, Obama's metaphorical strategy holds the potential to transcend the symbolic realm and its figurative limitations as a rhetorical catalyst that invites listeners to engage in controversy, the process whereby interlocutors interrogate both pro and contra reasoning to establish the grounds for deliberation (Mendelson 17).

In the chapters that follow, I use the theoretical constructs of Kenneth Burke to analyze Obama's racialized discourse, the unifying thread centers on division. Although Burke maintains that identification's job is to transcend the natural state of division, my reading of Obama's discourse demonstrates that division is not always something to be overcome. Rather, in Obama's case, division represents the sole basis of consubstantiality, that is, the sense of likeness or togetherness that exists and joins different audiences with varying conceptions concerning racial inequality. While I do

make connections across contexts, I attempt from here to provide a chronological analysis of Obama's statements that stem from or address instances of racial inequity.

Chapter two examines Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech of March 18, 2008, also known as the speech on race. In this chapter I use dramatism to analyze Obama's discourse that manifested as response to his controversial pastor and close friend, Reverend Jeremiah Wright. In the midst of the 2008 election season, Wright's inflammatory statements prompted the media to characterize him as racist and anti-American, which prompted many Americans to reconsider their investment in Obama as the Democratic candidate for president. At a time when the characterization of Obama as post-racial was at fever pitch, Obama's deployment of guilt in the speech stemmed likely from disavowal, and it functioned to partition audience members by their disparate conceptions of guilt concerning racial inequality. The deployment of guilt in "A More Perfect Union" thus constitutes a type of division that separates Americans across racial lines rather than an attempt to help America transcend its racial differences.

In the third chapter, I examine Obama's remarks following the killings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown respectively. Analysis of these speeches reveals Obama's tendency to contextualize race through paradox and thus create a sense of disunity. In the context of civic controversy, I argue Obama's use of paradox is fundamentally metaphorical and serves an important pedagogical function, which is to provoke citizens to partake in what Michael Mendelson calls *controversia*, the process whereby speakers present both pro and contra reasoning within one complex argument to establish the grounds for deliberation (17). My analysis also illustrates how a similar strategy surfaces in his earlier "A More Perfect Union" speech. While this strategy

contributed to Obama's success in "A More Perfect Union" and in the Trayvon Martin speech, news media largely deemed his response to Michael Brown a failure. The success and failure of each speech, I argue, hinged primarily on the constraints surrounding each speaking occasion and its intended audience, specifically the status of George Zimmerman, a private citizen acquitted in the Martin case, and Darren Wilson, an officer and representative of the Ferguson Police Department.

Chapter four examines two of Obama's commemoration speeches: his speech of March 28, 2013, which marked the fifty-year anniversary of the historic March on Washington, and his speech of March 7, 2015, when he commemorated those who crossed the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma, Alabama, fifty years earlier on Bloody Sunday. Division manifests in Obama's epideictic speeches albeit in different form. Rather than use paradox as a strategy to divide Americans on the basis of their oppositional sentiment concerning racial inequality as he did in "A More Perfect Union" and following Trayvon Martin, the speech in Washington and the speech in Selma summoned Obama to perform a seemingly contradictory task. That is to say, Obama, on both occasions, had to simultaneously celebrate the accomplishments associated with racial equality of the past and condemn the persistence of inequality in the present. Taken together, the speeches analyzed in chapter four do not hold the same capacity for pedagogy as those analyzed in the earlier chapters.

In chapter five, I examine Obama's eulogy of Clementa C. Pinckney on June 26, 2015, after the mass killing in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Building on the analysis from chapter four, the Charleston eulogy also represents an epideictic oration, which summoned Obama to

address race. Rather than a celebratory occasion, however, Obama had to address the reality of racism in twenty-first century America. In the speech, I argue, Obama deployed a rhetoric of irony. Irony, as a rhetorical strategy, is aligned closely with division since it is grounded in contradiction. Irony in the speech manifests in numerous ways. Obama first outlined the irony of circumstance surrounding the shooting as the outcome and response to the killings defied the expectation. He proceeded to portray Pinckney as a man of contradiction, rendering his dual status as a preacher and a politician in oppositional terms. I show finally how Obama's comments surrounding the alleged killer, Dylann Roof, challenge our understanding of irony in the Burkean frame.

CHAPTER 2

BARACK OBAMA AND AMERICA'S GUILT IN "A MORE PERFECT UNION"

The candidacy of Barack Obama heightened America's racial awareness more than any other presidential election in recent history (Tesler and Sears 52).¹ With a race neutral approach, Obama in less than four years ascended the highest rank in American politics, becoming the forty-fourth U.S. President (Nagourney n. pag.; Helman n. pag.). In fact, even prior to his success in the 2008 primary election, news media hailed Obama the post-racial candidate who transcended the division of identity politics in the post-civil rights era (Hoagland n. pag.; Schorr n. pag.; Steele n. pag.). Obama's road to Washington, however, did not go unimpeded. In early March he encountered his most critical exigency to date, a media firestorm that erupted around Reverend Jeremiah Wright of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ, Obama's pastor and friend of more than two decades. As snippets of Wright excoriating a "white America" and the "US of KKKK" circulated endlessly on social media, Obama's association with Wright made national headlines (qtd. in Kantor n. pag.).

On March 18, 2008, from the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Obama addressed the Wright controversy in a speech titled "A More Perfect Union." Although media sensationalized Obama's connection to Wright in an effort to thwart his candidacy, most pundits responded favorably to the speech. David Broder proclaimed it "politically ambitious, intellectually impressive, and emotionally

¹ The author published an earlier version of this chapter as a manuscript: Scott Anderson, "A Guilty Conscience: Barack Obama and America's Guilt in 'A More Perfect Union,'" *Discourse: The Journal of the Speech Communication Association of South Dakota* Vol. 2 (2015): 17-34.

compelling,” calling it Obama’s “most important [speech] . . . since his keynote at the 2004 Democratic National Convention” (n. pag.). Eli Saslow sounded a more conciliatory note when he said of Obama’s invocation: “He’s trying to remain loyal to his pastor but also differentiate himself politically” (n. pag.). Charles Krauthammer, in contrast, called the speech a “brilliantly sophistic justification of . . . scandalous dereliction” (n. pag.). Perhaps the fairest assessment came from Sean Carroll, who explained that Obama responded with a “nuanced and honest assessment of race-based resentment in America” (n. pag.). While critiques ranged from laudatory to scathing, nearly all recognized the speech as a defining moment for Obama.

Critical examinations have acknowledged Obama’s attempt to unite America through a colorblind message that crosses multiple demographic lines (Darsey; Terrill; Frank). An alternative interpretation, however, reveals that guilt contributed to Obama’s success in “A More Perfect Union.” That proved key given that guilt, in the context of racial inequality, occupies a prominent place in America’s psyche (Mitchell n. pag.); prior assessments of the speech overlooked that element. Rarely viewed for its positive characteristics and seldom a preferred rhetorical strategy among political candidates, guilt holds motivational value. As Kenneth Burke reminds us, when people experience guilt, they also seek ways to correct it (*Permanence* 284).

Using Burke’s dramatisitic process and other theoretical insight on guilt, I ask: how does Obama purify his and America’s guilt concerning racial in equality in “A More Perfect Union”? I demonstrate how three layers of guilt manifest in the speech: Obama’s guilt, the guilt of European Americans, and the guilt of African Americans. Although the use of guilt divided America across racial lines initially, it helped Obama move beyond

his association with Wright, preserve his candidacy, and provided a foundation for solidarity between white people and people of color on the issue of racial equality. To purify guilt Obama established a foundation for both victimage strategies to operate. Victimage, the process in which people attempt to expel guilt, incorporates a scapegoat whereby one assigns blame to an external source, or mortification, which is self-inflicted sacrifice (Girard 18; Foss, Foss, and Trapp 209). While Obama purified his guilt by scapegoating media and government institutions, America's purification will transpire through mortification. Obama asked listeners to sacrifice their racialized worldviews and invest simultaneously in the modern welfare state to protect and ensure equality for future generations.²

Examining Obama's speech in this way yields at least two insights for rhetorical scholarship. First, it calls for reconsideration of the ways in which guilt functions in the dramatic frame. While the tendency exists to treat guilt as a singular construct, I demonstrate how Obama's speech elicits three separate notions of guilt concerning one topic, racial inequality. A close examination of how they intersect illuminates how guilt can manifest simultaneously for speakers and their audiences, and the ways in which rhetors can deploy different modes of victimage for purification. Although Burke's model asserts that a rhetor may engage in either form of victimage, few rhetorical studies examine the intersection of both strategies. Second, it challenges the characterization of Obama's discourse as inclusive. Although the end goal for Obama and America is equality, Obama first creates a division on the basis of America's guilt concerning racial

² For this essay's purpose, I use Michael Omi and Howard Winant's definition of racialization. They conclude that racialization occurs when a dominant group ascribes an identity, racial or otherwise, to a subordinate group for the purpose of continued domination (71). For an extended conversation, see their book *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*.

inequality. This division, however, has the potential to create what Brian Jackson calls an “alchemic” fusion of two conflicted audiences with different notions of guilt through appeals to a higher value, the assurance of equality for future generations (49).

In pursuing these claims the chapter proceeds in four parts. First, I contextualize Obama’s speech within the history of the Black Church, detail the exigency brought forth by Wright, and demonstrate how Obama’s use of guilt challenges the existing scholarship. Second, I offer a theoretical discussion of the dramatistic process that demonstrates the manifestation of three layers of guilt in Obama’s speech: Obama’s guilt as the “bad conscience” conceived by Friedrich Nietzsche, the membership guilt associated with European Americans, and Martin Buber’s theory of existential guilt experienced by African Americans. Third, I analyze the speech and show how both the scapegoat and mortification are required for Obama and America’s purification. I conclude by discussing how Obama’s use of guilt helped him disavow his ascribed post-racial moniker and explain how my reading of the speech contributes to our understanding of guilt as a rhetorical strategy. To that end, this chapter establishes the foundation for Obama’s use of division as rhetorical strategy to address matters that have stemmed from racial unrest.

OVERCOMING DEFIANCE AND OPPOSITION IN THE BLACK CHURCH

More than Jeremiah Wright, the exigency of Obama’s rhetorical situation materialized from generations of defiance in the black church. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the political and social imperative of slavery caused the black church to operate in defense to oppressive white culture. According to Hans Baer and Merrill Singer, religion in this context provided a source of identification and a form of

self-expression for many African Americans who tried to make sense of their surroundings (xvii). Religious scholar C. Eric Lincoln explained that during its inception, the black church emphasized that African Americans were not God's curse, nor did their existence mean serving white "masters" (qtd. in Billingsley xxiii). Simply put, the black church developed in resistance but also sought a unique place within organized religion. The black church thus found its origin not through established religion in America but in what it meant to be an African American living through slavery (Billingsley 13; Baer and Singer 4).

As European Americans excoriated African American preachers and their clergy during the slavery and post-slavery eras with violence, public lynchings, and economic retaliation, the black church continued to provide sustenance to its constituents and sought ways to counter white oppression (Tribble xvii; Clardy 203). At the dawn of the twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois's vision of pastoral ministry dictated the goal of many black preachers. In this vision, ministers were moral leaders who mobilized people for community involvement and congregational development.

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century discrepancy has represented an integral part of the black worship experience, especially with regard to cultural, political, and socioeconomic policies (Clardy 205). For example, in post-civil rights America a resurgence of blatant racism afflicts African Americans and, for the first time in history, the economic and social distinctions among people of color create tension that previously did not exist (Pinn 28; Billingsley 187). People of color continue to compete with white people but also each other in unprecedented ways. According to Pinn, the struggles of the 1960s produced a black middle class with new advantages in the 1970s and 1980s

(34). The emergence of the black middle class, coupled with the development of black secular institutions and the increase in rivaling black religions, complicate Du Bois's pastoral vision. These new challenges fragmented the black church and hindered its common vision of earlier times (Tribble 8). For these reasons, the black church has experienced difficulty carrying out its dual mission of salvation and liberation (Tribble 87).

At the dawn of the twenty-first century the black church confirmed over 25 million members in more than 63,000 congregations, fragmentation that continues to subvert the need for transformative leadership (Pinn 35; Tribble 88).³ Jeremiah Wright is one pioneer who leads the call for reform. With a message rooted in Black Theology of Liberation, Wright condemns oppressive institutions and urges African Americans to support a vision of faith unlike white evangelical Christianity (Walker and Smithers 31; Saslow n. pag.).⁴ Liberation and salvation, for Wright, will occur when African Americans enjoy full equality. In his capacity as senior pastor at Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ from 1972 to 2008, Wright delivered sermons that articulated tension and unrest in the African American community (Clardy 205). Although media characterized him as a white racist, Wright impacted Trinity's community in positive ways. By 1986, he mentored more than a dozen young preachers through Trinity. In 1990, Trinity founder Reverend Kenneth B. Smith commended Wright's dynamic leadership as a reflection of the pride that people take in the church (Billingsley 172). In 2008, however, Wright reminded America of the long road ahead on the journey to

³ Tribble explains that transformative pastoral leadership encompasses ministry that is engaged in changing people, churches, and communities.

⁴ According to Walker and Smithers, Black Theology of Liberation is a Christian movement created by black ministers in the late 1960s. The movement's leaders believed that the teachings of Jesus Christ held a positive message for people of color, despite the racism they encountered from white Christian Americans.

equality, and his comments reopened wounds thought by many to have healed over time. As the controversy continued to shock, America wondered how Obama would respond.

The exigency brought forth by Wright created a unique rhetorical challenge that summoned Obama to respond publically. According to Clarence Walker and Gregory Smithers, the association to Wright threatened to derail Obama's presidential bid (14), and Obama's chief strategist, David Axelrod, recognized that Wright attenuated Obama's "well-cultivated post-racial image" (qtd. in Tesler and Sears 4). Others corroborated Axelrod's observation and noted that Trinity emphasized Obama's "blackness" (Walker and Smithers 53). Voters showed a similar concern, and in most instances Wright's statements alarmed Americans. Democrats feared that Obama's connection to Wright would cost him the election (Teshamariam n. pag.; Reed 63), and many acknowledged the pastor seemed "a world away from the calm and considerate image that Obama . . . presents" (Broder n. pag.). On March 18, 2008, Obama responded to Wright and the status of racial inequality in America in his "A More Perfect Union" speech.

Critical assessments on Obama have acknowledged his ability to create a message that transcends party and demographic lines. For example, in his analysis of Obama's 2008 campaign speeches, James Darsey argued Obama used the metaphor of a journey to project an experience relating to all Americans. The success, for Darsey, resides in Obama's ability to unite his personal journey with America's national journey (89). In the same vein as Darsey, Robert Rowland and John Jones argued that, through a metaphor of hope, Obama, in his speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, balanced communal and individual values, thus making the American Dream more attainable for every American ("Recasting" 442). David Frank and Mark McPhail

viewed Obama's convention speech as an attempt to cultivate racial reconciliation. Although Frank argued Obama links minority and identity groups to shared American values, McPhail remained skeptical, explaining Obama reinforces a discourse of whiteness through its dominant rhetorical tropes: innocence, race-neutrality, and positive self-presentation (583). In any case, the scholarly focus remains on America's ability or lack thereof to coalesce in order to overcome its differences, racial or otherwise.

The literature on "A More Perfect Union" has reinforced the characterization of Obama's discourse as inclusive. Rowland and Jones recognized Obama's ability to unite America through racial acknowledgement and commended Obama "for honestly confronting the most controversial and emotional issue in American politics, race" ("One Dream" 125). Judy Isaksen concurred, explaining that Obama occupied a middle-of-the-road spot that transcended the "bipolar" problem and put forth a new position that "calmly" but "substantively" confronted racial progress (457; 468). For Robert Terrill, Obama's embodiment of double consciousness, W.E.B. Dubois's invitation for people to view themselves through the perspective of others, enabled listeners to invoke the Golden Rule and helped them "find that common stake we all have in one another" (374-381). David Frank explained that Obama contextualized race in religious terms. He used the prophetic tradition, which merges Jewish and Christian faith with the experiences of African Americans, to wage acknowledgement between the races and emphasize "carnal recognition" ("Prophetic" 167-171). Frank observed a similar strategy at work in Obama's first inaugural address, and claimed Obama employed a "multi-faceted conception" of religion that caters to a diverse audience with differing beliefs and values ("Rhetorical Signature" 619). Most scholars agree that Obama's discourse holds the

potential for America to unite in shared values, whether through deployment of the Golden Rule, the American Dream, or an all-encompassing conception of religion.

My work on “A More Perfect Union” offers a slightly different explanation for Obama’s success and challenges the characterization of his discourse as patently inclusive. While I agree with Terrill that Obama succeeds in enabling listeners to employ the Golden Rule, I remain skeptical that shared optimism about the future is enough to transcend America’s turbulent racial history. America must first acknowledge and work through its guilt concerning racial inequality of past and present before it can focus on preserving the future for subsequent generations. Contra to Isaksen, my reading of the speech has Obama accentuating America’s violent racial history. Rather than “calmly” and “substantively” confront racial progress, Obama, I hold, forcefully and unabashedly illuminates the guilt that exists between the races. While progress narratives have a tendency to downplay discrepancy, an emphasis on guilt brings perceived differences to the fore. I would echo most of the scholarship that claims Obama’s rhetoric holds the possibility for transcendence, but I maintain it is not through universal appeals or inclusive metaphors that Obama’s discourse will help America overcome its differences, nor did it contribute to his success in overcoming the rhetorical problem in “A More Perfect Union.” Rather, Obama deployed a tripartite construction of guilt in the speech to help mitigate the damage caused by Wright, salvage his presidential campaign, and provide a foundation for America to work through racial tension of past and present. While the end goal for Obama and America is equality, it is through the production of racial guilt and inequality that America recognizes its stake in preserving the future. The

potential for transcendence exists not in America's future but in its ability to work through a racialized past and invest in government programs in the present.

In the following section I discuss guilt and victimage in the Burkean frame. First, I outline the three types of guilt that materialize in the speech: Obama's guilt as a result of "bad conscience," European Americans' collective guilt, and the existential guilt of African Americans. I then demonstrate how this multilayered construction requires the simultaneous enactment of the scapegoat and mortification for purification. Although the disparate conceptions of guilt evoked by the speech initially divide America across racial lines, they provide a foundation for solidarity that ultimately allows listeners to sacrifice and purify their guilt, and thus achieving redemption in the Burkean frame

GUILT AND VICTIMAGE

The relationship between rhetoric and emotion has existed since Aristotle. Emotions, for Aristotle, represent the feelings people experience, which have the potential to affect the judgments they make. When people argue they must do more than make a claim worthy of belief, Aristotle maintained; they must also put listeners in the right frame of mind. "[P]ersuasion, he explained, "may come through the hearers, when the speech stirs their emotions. Our judgments when we are pleased and friendly are not the same as when we are pained and hostile" (Book I, Chapter II, Paragraph III). For example, to arouse anger in an audience, a speaker must first understand the nature of anger and what makes the audience angry, because stirring an angry audience is quite different than arousing a friendly audience. Burke, like Aristotle, recognized the need to identify the moods and emotions of listeners. In the Burkean view, a rhetor's success hinges on the ability to know the appetites of the audience and "their being ripe for the

evocation of [the] chosen emotion” (Brown 17). In “A More Perfect Union,” Obama identified guilt as America’s prevailing emotion concerning racial inequality.

Guilt generally reflects the anxiety people experience when they violate and transgress socially established norms (Stein 15). Although guilt, for Burke and others, connotes a type of anxiety, we must proceed cautiously. To ascribe guilt a universal definition is dangerous because guilt is a concept with “blurred edges” (Smith 18). According to Burke, guilt results when people reject the implicit and explicit rules that govern social life, the hierarchies that order the world in which we live (*Religion* 210). For example, a person may feel guilty for shoplifting from a grocery store or for accepting a phone call in a movie theater. While one is a crime and the other merely violates an unspoken social rule, both deviate from the hierarchy that dictates acceptable behavior. Because no person can obey all social rules, everyone fails or disobeys to some extent (Foss, Foss, and Trapp 208). For Smith, guilt manifests in a host of transgressions that range from debt to uncleanness and crime, concepts that individually are far removed. But viewed in the context of guilt such deviations impel us to “restore the boundary,” as Smith observed (20), or what might be called seeking redemption in the Burkean frame. To understand the function of guilt in “A More Perfect Union,” we must embrace this catholic approach, one that is context dependent.

The rhetorical potency of “A More Perfect Union” materializes in the confluence of three separate notions of guilt: Obama’s guilt, the guilt of European Americans, and the guilt of African Americans. While each results from unique circumstances, taken together they underscore the significance of guilt in the speech. Obama’s guilt is understood best in light of Friedrich Nietzsche, who characterized guilt as “bad

conscience” (32-33). Guilt, for Nietzsche, manifests when people default on their contractual obligations. When Obama announced his candidacy, he entered into an unspoken agreement with the American people to uphold the ideals of democracy. The connection to Wright, a staunch and outspoken critic of the American political system, manifested the Nietzschean guilt that Obama may have felt for seemingly voiding the contractual transaction. Guilt for America, however, manifests in different ways.

European Americans experience guilt in the collective sense. Broadly speaking, collective guilt implies that one is a member of a group that has done something wrong (Katchadourian 21). While most of the current generation is not directly responsible, some believe that white people share as a whole some culpability in the racial violence of the past two centuries. Burke noted that the possibility exists for individuals to inherit the guilt of their predecessors (*Permanence* 278), what Margaret Gilbert would characterize as membership guilt (231). Although most white people did not actively inflict violence against people of color, many chose not to intervene, which implicated them for inaction.⁵ As awareness of that inaction transfers from one generation to the next, membership guilt replicates across time (Katchadourian 96-97). In the context of “A More Perfect Union,” membership guilt stems from the shared knowledge of European Americans’ troublesome past. White people then shoulder the burden of guilt associated with their ancestors’ transgressions, wrongdoing that resulted equally from action as inaction.

⁵ Hannah Arendt’s essay details how membership guilt can arise from inaction. Arendt explains that after World War II, many Germans felt guilty because of their heritage. Although the majority of Germans did not contribute to the extermination of Jews during the Holocaust, responsibility laid on the shoulders of those who sympathized with Hitler during the war and aided his rise to power (260).

African American guilt, in contrast, operates in the existential sense ascribed by Martin Buber. Existential guilt manifests through self-assignment when people fail to capitalize on their potential or realize the essence of what they are called to become but fail to achieve it. Under a system of white oppression, people of color could not and have not achieved their full potential, thus making it possible for them to experience guilt existentially. In *Good and Evil*, Buber clarified the effect that existential guilt can have on the psyche: “Their life was ‘set in slippery places’; it was so arranged as to slide into the knowledge of their own nothingness; and when this finally happens . . . the great terror falls upon them and they are consumed” (40). Because elevating oneself to a higher level is naturally embedded in human consciousness, when people do not succeed, whether from societal impositions or their own limitations, they may experience guilt existentially.

The convergence of guilt in “A More Perfect Union” creates the possibility for Obama and America to recognize their individual and collective roles in racial inequality. That is, the speech provided Obama a platform to enable listeners to acknowledge their guilt while simultaneously identifying their collective stake in fixing it. When people experience guilt, Burke reminds us, they are motivated to correct it (*Permanence* 284). Although the impulse to correct our transgressions has always been present, Americans required a rhetorical catalyst to provoke them into action. “A More Perfect Union,” as such, creates the possibility for Obama and America to become consubstantial in not only the problems but also the solutions associated with racial injustice.

People naturally seek to eliminate guilt by victimage through a scapegoat or through an act of mortification (Burke, *Permanence* 286-289). These strategies of

purification serve to excise guilt, promote social cohesion, and restore balance to the social order. Many scholars have explored guilt (Olson; Villadsen; Wood) and victimage in political discourse (Bobbitt; Brummett; Engels; Foy; Moore).⁶ For example, Mark Moore examined the scapegoating and mortification of Illinois Governor George Ryan. At the end of a political career plagued by corruption, Ryan, a lifetime proponent of capital punishment, scapegoated the criminal justice system and then, in an act of mortification, placed a moratorium on the death penalty and commuted nearly two hundred death sentences (Moore 313). David Ling observed a similar phenomenon in Senator Ted Kennedy's address of July 25, 1969, to the people of Massachusetts. Although Kennedy was behind the wheel, he rejected any wrongdoing in the car accident that killed Mary Jo Kopechne, portraying himself as a victim of a helpless scene characterized by a "narrow bridge" and an "unlit road" with "no guard rails" (Ling 368). While Moore demonstrated the ways in which rhetoricians can employ both strategies for purification, Ling's analysis indicated how speakers and their audiences can be jointly implicated in the dramatic process. Neither study, however, offers a clear explanation of how purification happens when multiple and seemingly contradictory notions of guilt manifest in the Burkean frame—the fundamental task of Obama's speech. Obama had to provide the means for his own purification and for two different audiences with conflicting types of guilt with regard to racial inequality. Although these studies examine

⁶ For Nietzsche, victimage is not a curative for guilt; it simply prolongs the feelings associated with guilt by assigning it to another source. Jeremy Engels insightfully details the victimage of Richard Nixon. By transforming the "majority" of Americans into victims of the minority (the tyrannical protestors who undermined democracy), Engels explained, Nixon cultivated a politics of resentment intended to keep America in need of his leadership (315). The resentment the majority felt toward the minority continued to fester without resolution. Using Nietzsche to frame Obama's guilt, I show how Obama's scapegoating of media and government institutions does not purify America's guilt over its racially disruptive past.

the intersection of both purification strategies, they represent the exception to the rule because most analyses focus solely on either the scapegoat or mortification.

Victimhood through the scapegoat mechanism shifts blame for problems onto individuals who are not necessarily responsible. Rene Girard explained that scapegoats may be guilty of their accused crimes, but accusers often select victims because they belong to marginalized groups or communities susceptible to persecution (17).

Scapegoating can then occur in racialized terms. For example, when poor white Southerners scapegoated African Americans for the South's economic woes, they adopted lynching as a physical sacrifice and solution to their problem (Gilmore 15). Once a community assigns a scapegoat they sacrifice it in physical or symbolic terms.

To induce sacrifice, whether physically or symbolically, a community must prepare its scapegoat. One way to make a scapegoat worthy for sacrifice is to prime it fatalistically (Burke, *Literary* 40).⁷ A fatalistic sacrifice positions the scapegoat as something that has fallen out of popular favor. For example, politicians who fall out of favor with their constituents may become scapegoats for their party. If the party faces scrutiny, it may ascribe blame to its unfavorable politicians and bring about fatalistic sacrifice. Girard's characterization of the disabled scapegoat helps clarify this point. According to Girard, while the term "disability" may connote physical limitations, it refers also to individuals who experience difficulty adapting to society, such as foreigners (18).⁸ The aforementioned politicians, if deemed incapable of adapting to their party's

⁷ Burke explains that a scapegoat can be transformed in one of three ways: legalistically, fatalistically, or through poetic justice. A legalistic sacrifice assumes the scapegoat violated the governing rules of its community, and a sacrifice through poetic justice suggests the scapegoat is too perfect for this world, as with Jesus Christ. However, I am concerned with the scapegoat who is sacrificed fatalistically.

⁸ "Disability," for Girard, "belongs to a large group of banal signs of a victim, and among certain groups . . . every individual who has difficulty adapting, someone from another country or state, an orphan, an only

needs, would constitute a disabled scapegoat in the Girardian sense. When members of an out-group become scapegoats, they may choose to inflict sacrifice upon themselves to restore balance within their own social hierarchies.

Some scholars have complicated our understanding of the scapegoat mechanism. Matthew Foy, for instance, explained how Steve Barber, a student at University of Virginia's College at Wise, resisted his symbolic death after being scapegoated for writing a "violent and allegedly threatening" short story (94). In an effort to disrupt attempts to sacrifice him for the guilt from the university's 2007 massacre and the continual threat of on-campus killing sprees, Barber created a counter narrative that positioned himself as a "victim of abuse by corrupt school and law officials," thus resisting his symbolic death (Foy 97). According to Robert Westerfelhaus and Diane Ciekawy, when scapegoating occurs across multiple hierarchies, people may capitalize on their advantageous position in one to improve their place in another (269). Young members of Kenya's Mijikenda village utilized resources of the modern state to accuse their elders of witchcraft, they explained, which provided them access to fiscal and land benefits normally reserved for village elders (273).

An analysis of how racial guilt manifests across different hierarchies would seem plausible since white people have benefited at the expense and exploitation of people of color for generations in a variety of contexts. Such an examination, however, would not address the problem of racial inequality in Obama's speech. Rather than absolving guilt across multiple hierarchies, Obama's task is to provide a means to purification for

son, someone who is penniless, or even simply the latest arrival, is more or less interchangeable with a cripple" (18).

different types of guilt within one hierarchy, the racial hierarchy that does not afford opportunity equally to all Americans.

An exercise in self-restraint, mortification suppresses the desires that cause guilt to arise. Mortification, in short, is the process by which we make ourselves suffer for our guilt or sins. For instance, the aforementioned scapegoated politicians may forego a run for reelection, a self-inflicted sacrifice that would remove them from politics altogether. The use of mortification to expiate guilt and restore balance to the social order has proven popular for both political and corporate leaders (Foss; Ling; Moore). For example, Sonja Foss demonstrated how the Chrysler Corporation's request for federal aid as part of a bailout created guilt for the company. In an act of mortification, Foss argued, Chrysler engaged in self-inflicted punishment by issuing a rebate to restore its corporate image (75). Although his connection to Wright created a need for Obama to repair his image, Obama employed the scapegoat mechanism rather than mortification to purify guilt.

From here this chapter continues with analysis of "A More Perfect Union" beginning with a close reading of Obama's guilt as bad conscience and his use of a scapegoat for purification. It then continues with a discussion of the collective guilt of European Americans, addresses the existential guilt of African Americans, and ends by discussing America's mortification to purify its guilt concerning racial inequality.

OBAMA AND THE GUILT OF "BAD CONSCIENCE"

The rhetorical power of "A More Perfect Union" resides in Obama's distribution of guilt. Obama begins with an explanation of his role in the Wright controversy.

"Given my background, my politics, and my professed values and ideals," he explained, "there will no doubt be those for whom my statements of condemnation are not enough"

(3).⁹ Obama continued to propose rhetorical questions: “Why associate myself with Reverend Wright in the first place? Why not join another church?” (3). He charged: “if . . . that [was all] I knew of Reverend Wright, there is no doubt that I would react in much the same way” (3). Obama acknowledged his guilt through prolepsis, the anticipation of America’s objection to his connection to Wright. As the Wright story unfolded, many wondered why Obama would associate with Wright, an outspoken critic of American democracy. Obama’s statements thus reflect the bad conscience of guilt in the Nietzschean frame, which manifests when individuals default on their contractual obligations. Given his response, Obama understood that the association would elicit censure from the American people.

While Obama justified his relationship with Wright, he simultaneously implicated listeners for propagating a racialized worldview. Obama stated, “As imperfect as he may be, [Wright] has been like family to me. . . . I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. . . . no more than I can disown my white grandmother . . . who helped raise me . . . [and] who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe” (4). Obama then indicted listeners: “I’m sure many of you have heard remarks from your pastors, priests, or rabbis with which you strongly disagree” (4). This is not a black problem; this is not a white problem; it is an American problem. Every American holds some responsibility for the problems of the past that continue to inform the present. Audience members, as such, become co-scapegoats who bear some responsibility for allowing racial inequality to persist. But, as Girard pointed out, while the scapegoat shoulders the burden for society’s problems, it is endowed with

⁹ The page numbers correspond to the text of the speech as published on Americanrhetoric.com. Future references to this speech will be made parenthetically by page number.

the power for correction (43). When Obama justified Wright's imperfections as the norm, America recognized its role in racial inequality, that is, everybody is guilty of perpetuating the cycle but they also possess the power to correct it.

To purify his guilt Obama deployed the scapegoat mechanism on two fronts; he blamed government institutions and faulted media for promoting racial inequality. In the proem of the speech, Obama criticized the government for allowing slavery to continue. "The [Constitution] was eventually signed," Obama suggested, "but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery, a question that . . . brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least 20 more years" (2-3). That the forefathers created a malleable document rather than permanent doctrine makes them an easy scapegoat. Obama, however, seemed to vindicate the forefathers for this limitation. "The Constitution," he noted, "should be perfected over time" (2). The chance for redemption, Obama explained, rested on the forefathers' plan "to leave any final resolution to future generations" (2). Subsequent generations would eventually improve any discrepancies set forth in America's founding document.

According to Girard, scapegoats can materialize in disabled individuals or entities (18). More than physical limitations, disability refers also to individuals who experience difficulty adapting to society such as foreigners. The forefathers-as-disabled scapegoats manifested with their inability to forge a permanent document to accommodate America's racial and ethnic others. The forefathers could not provide the stability necessary to free America from the burden of its racial transgressions, a shortcoming Obama calls the current generation to correct.

In addition to implicating listeners and scapegoating the government, Obama blamed media for perpetuating racial unrest. Early in the speech, Obama charged, “At various stages in the campaign, some commentators have deemed me either ‘too black’ or ‘not black enough’” (2). Shortly after, he warned that problems would ensue “if . . . Trinity United . . . conformed to the caricatures being peddled by some commentators” (3). Later, Obama asserted, “Talk show hosts and conservative commentators built their entire careers unmasking bogus claims of racism while dismissing legitimate discussions of racial injustice” (6). In every instance, media become a scapegoat for promoting racial resentment. Media are therefore responsible for widening the racial divide in the election, portraying Wright as a fanatic, and hindering the chance for racial reconciliation.

The characterization of media and government as unequipped to amend America’s racial problems makes them eligible candidates for what Burke called fatalistic sacrifice. This sacrifice is appropriate when a scapegoat has fallen from grace, out of popular opinion so to speak (Burke, *Literary* 40). While the notion of politicians blaming government and the media is far from novel, Obama’s remarks foreground these problems and validate his treatment of them as a scapegoat worthy of sacrifice.

The assignment of blame to media and government institutions is, however, ineffective for purifying guilt in the Nietzschean frame. For Nietzsche, the scapegoat is not a curative for guilt; it simply prolongs the feelings associated with guilt by attaching it to another source. By assigning blame to these entities, Obama did little to resolve his guilt or the guilt that America may feel for its troublesome racial history. The displacement of blame onto a scapegoat, Nietzsche maintained, “concentrates” guilt,

“sharpens the sense of alienation,” and only “strengthens the resistance” (48). Rather than purify his guilt, Obama merely “hardens and freezes” the bad conscience that manifested from his relationship with Wright, an episode that may have called into question Obama’s electability for some Americans (48). If the scapegoat provides Obama any relief, it is temporary, ephemeral at best.

While Obama implicated listeners for promoting a racialized worldview, he did not sacrifice them fatalistically. Contra to government and media, Obama did not cast the audience out of favor for two possible reasons. First, he recognized their role in his ascendance to the executive branch. Second, he understood that America would have to make a different type of sacrifice to purify its guilt, one enacted through mortification that required Americans to sacrifice their racialized worldviews and invest simultaneously in the modern welfare state. Obama’s task in “A More Perfect Union” was to, first, help America recognize its racial guilt and, second, to provide a means through which America could excise its guilt. The expiation of guilt for America rests upon its ability to support the government and its programs to safeguard the future. Before providing America the basis for purification, Obama must first divide listeners into two different camps concerning racial inequality: European Americans and African Americans.

THE COLLECTIVE GUILT OF EUROPEAN AMERICANS

For European Americans, Obama acknowledged the likelihood of collective guilt. Many white people shoulder the collective guilt associated with years of legalized discrimination. For decades they maintained their place in the racial hierarchy through

policies designed to subordinate African Americans and minorities, institutionalized racism essentially. Although many of these policies ceased to exist, the wounds still remain. Obama reminded listeners that

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. (5)

Although most European Americans today do not bear direct responsibility for the policies that sought to subordinate African Americans, the wealth and prosperity they amassed from previous generations came at the expense of racial equality. In *Permanence and Change*, Burke characterized this phenomenon as “*categorical* [emphasis original] Guilt, one’s ‘guilt’ not as the result of any personal transgression, but by reason of a tribal or dynastic inheritance” (278). Thus, Obama assigned guilt to white listeners because of that inherited prosperity, the privileges that were not afforded equally to people of color.

THE EXISTENTIAL GUILT OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

African Americans, on the other hand, may experience guilt existentially. This guilt manifests when people realize they may not achieve their full potential (Buber 66). Obama articulated the way in which these feelings manifested for people of color in earlier generations: “A lack of economic opportunity among black men and the shame

and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one's family contributed to the erosion of black families, a problem that welfare policies for many years may have worsened" (5). As Obama prompted listeners to recognize the possibility for existential guilt, he simultaneously sourced the problems to the welfare state. Although Obama invited African Americans to view the government as a scapegoat, it is not adequate for purifying guilt in this context. For redemption to occur in the Burkean sense, the act of purification must equal the burden of guilt (*Permanence* 290). No amount of blame assigned to the government could ever match the guilt that African Americans may feel for the discrimination of the past two centuries.

This guilt, which stems from civil rights, the Jim Crow South, and dates back to America's inception, continues to afflict the current generation of African Americans. "For the men and women of Reverend Wright's generation," Obama explained, "the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away, nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years" (6). "That anger is not always productive," he said, "[b]ut the anger is real. . . . [T]o condemn it without understanding its roots only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races" (6). "Guilt," Shelby Steele explained, "is the essence of white anxiety [and] inferiority is the essence of black anxiety" (qtd. in Bobbitt 143). This Buberian conception of guilt resonates in Obama's speech and underscores guilt in the Burkean frame. While African Americans possibly feel guilty for not achieving their potential, a byproduct of institutionalized racism and legalized discrimination, some European Americans may feel anxiety about their place in the racial hierarchy, knowing that they have profited at the expense of African

Americans. Thus, an uncomfortable tension exists between white people and people of color in the social fabric of America.

AMERICA'S REDEMPTION

Obama validated the guilt of European and African Americans but beyond the scapegoat mechanism remained passive in suggesting ways for purification. These disparate notions of guilt, he explained, lead to “resentment [that] builds over time” and inhibit America’s ability to work through its racial problems (6). When resentment goes unabated, the result is “a cycle of violence, blight, and neglect that continues to haunt us” (5). Obama’s failure to provide America an adequate way to excise its guilt provokes listeners to consider mortification, a sacrifice that would safeguard America’s future against racial inequality.

The principle of perfection provides one way to understand sacrifice in this Burkean sense. Perfection, Burke explained, becomes recognizable through a master word, “a god-term” that expresses what people aspire (*Religion* 25). Obama deployed the word “perfect,” or some variation, eleven times in his speech. Closer examination reveals that in nearly every instance a discussion of future generations ensues. If guilt is about the past, and sacrifice about the present, then redemption represents America’s future. In the context of racial equality, Obama likely understands that only the future is capable of bringing America together, the one thing that will elicit consubstantiality among disparate groups of listeners with conflicting notions of guilt.

America’s preservation lies in the hands of listeners but change takes time. Obama acknowledged this impediment: “I have never been so naïve as to believe that we

can go beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle or with a single candidate” (7). “But I have asserted a . . . conviction,” he maintained, “that, working together, we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds and that . . . we have no choice—we have no choice if we are to continue on the path to a more perfect union” (7). Although Obama could not solve the problems of the past, he attempted to give America the power to control its future. For better or worse, America’s decisions today will influence tomorrow’s generation. In the pursuit of a more perfect union, Obama explained, justice means that the American people “must always believe that they can write their own destiny” (7). And “[t]he path to a more perfect union,” he continued, starts with acknowledgement “that investing in the health, welfare, and education of black and brown and white children . . . will ultimately help all of America prosper” (7). Obama continued, “It is not enough to give health care to the sick, or jobs to the jobless, or education to our children. But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger” (9). Until America restores its faith in the government, inequality will persist. Restoring faith in the government begins with restoring confidence in Obama and investing in education and healthcare programs that will safeguard America’s future.

Until every American recognizes our political system as both a perpetrator and solution to racial inequality, the government cannot help America achieve perfection. Although disguised as a choice, Obama gave listeners an ultimatum:

For we have a choice in the country. We can accept a politics that breeds division and conflict and cynicism. . . . Or, at this moment, in this election, we can come together and say, “Not this time.” This time we want to talk about the crumbling schools that are stealing the future of black children and white

children and Asian children and Hispanic children and Native-American children. . . . The children of America are not “those kids,” – they are our kids.

(8)

Because America’s preservation depends on action at this juncture, listeners cannot reject Obama’s plea for a discussion on race, one that acknowledges the government’s ability and limitations in the pursuit of equality. Moreover, Obama’s shift in voice articulates a collective concern. He begins with an outward reference, an informal mention to “those” kids. His voice then shifts to the inward turning, possessive pronoun “our,” which illustrates America’s common stake in the future. If the past is any indication of the future, especially with regard to the racial issues of the last two hundred years, the audience has no choice; America must unite and sacrifice the worldviews that promote racial inequality. Such a sacrifice alone, however, does not guarantee redemption. To ensure cultural purification, America must repress its desire to blame government for intensifying racial inequality, the “deliberate slaying of appetites and ambitions” that Burke embedded with mortification (*Religion* 135). To suppress this impulse, and to ensure equality for tomorrow’s generations, America must invest in healthcare and education today.

CONCLUSION

In 2008, when political divisiveness was at fever pitch, many media outlets acknowledged Obama’s ability to unite America (Hoagland n. pag.; Steele n. pag.). In January, nearly two months before the spectacle surrounding Jeremiah Wright, NPR Senior News Analyst Daniel Schorr noted, “Obama’s appeal seems to transcend race”

and indicated the likelihood of America embarking on a “new, ‘post-racial’ political era” (n. pag.). The post-racial characterization continued to mount after “A More Perfect Union” and throughout Obama’s ascendance to the executive office. So why then did Obama choose not to reaffirm this ascribed post-racial identity? The problem with the discourse of post-racism, as Michael Lacy and Kent Ono have pointed out, is that it presents the illusion of progress while significant disparities still exist (1). As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva explained, unequal access to cultural, political, and economic capital perpetuate racism in the twenty-first century (14). A post-racial perspective, these scholars would agree, undermines our ability to recognize the continued existence of racial inequality.

Although Obama could have affirmed his post-racial identity, his use of guilt stemmed likely from a disavowal. Viewed this way, the use of guilt complicates our common understanding of Obama’s discourse and challenges the scholarship that acknowledges his attempt to unite America. Guilt, which holds the potential to divide Americans across racial lines, provided Obama the antidote required to disrupt a progress narrative and help America work through the reality of racism, both of past and present. While this essay examines the function of guilt in “A More Perfect Union,” the possibility exists for a similar strategy to surface in Obama’s other speeches and outside his comments on racial inequality. The use of guilt, which contributed to Obama’s success, may also provide insight into the ways in which politicians and rhetors attempt to subvert the discourse of post-racism. Examinations of guilt in other contexts that have the likelihood to elicit dissenting opinions such as the rhetoric surrounding immigration reform or religion may also prove insightful. For example, as Donald Trump continues to

steamroll his way through the Republican primary for the upcoming presidential election, his calls to build a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border continue to generate widespread support and dissent from those on both sides of the political spectrum. This also comes amid Trump's proposed moratorium on Muslim immigration as Obama continues to welcome thousands of Syrian refugees into the country.

Obama likely understood the motivational power of America's guilt concerning racial inequality. While the tendency exists to treat guilt singularly, "A More Perfect Union" demonstrates the ways in which it can manifest in broad and varied forms that require different modes of victimage for purification. After Obama scapegoated media and government institutions America confronted its guilt through mortification. Obama's plea for America to invest in the welfare state reinforces Girard's contention of the scapegoat's capacity for correction, as the government, while responsible in part for perpetuating inequality, also has the ability to assure equality for future generations of Americans. Within the spectrum of political discourse, "A More Perfect Union" reinforces the notion that politicians attempt to purify their guilt through a scapegoat, while their audiences enact mortification.

As Obama's second term winds down, the continued punctuation of events highlighting racism remind us that America is far from the post-racial utopia that some envisioned. Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, and the shooting in Charleston, South Carolina, more recently demonstrate the complexities surrounding racism and racial inequality in the twenty-first century. While guilt may not provide the solution, or even all the answers, to these problems, an examination of how it manifests

across different contexts has the potential to help America understand and work through its racial differences.

In the next chapter, I examine “A More Perfect Union” alongside two other speeches that Obama delivered in the wake of national unrest that manifested across racial lines. First, I analyze Obama’s speech of July 19, 2013, when he addressed the killing of Trayvon Martin and the federal grand jury acquittal of George Zimmerman, the private citizen responsible for Martin’s death. Then, I analyze Obama’s speech of November 24, 2014, in which he addressed the acquittal of Darren Wilson, the police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, but was acquitted of the charges brought against him. As the chapter will show, Obama first divided listeners on the basis of the oppositional sentiment surrounding the Martin case, similar to the way he characterized Jeremiah Wright in binary form in “A More Perfect Union.” This strategy, I argue, serves an important pedagogical function, which is to invite citizens to partake in what Michael Mendelson calls *controversia*, the process whereby speakers present both pro and contra reasoning within one complex argument to establish the grounds for deliberation. While this strategy contributed to Obama’s success in “A More Perfect Union” and in the Trayvon Martin speech, he departed from this approach following Michael Brown, the news media largely criticizing that speech as a failure. The success and failure of each speech, I argue, hinged primarily on the constraints surrounding each speaking occasion and its intended audience.

CHAPTER 3

BARACK OBAMA AND THE PARADOX OF RACIAL (IN)CIVILITY

On August 27, 2014, Georgetown University professor of history Marcia Chatelain geared up for the upcoming school year.¹ In the wake of national unrest following the grand jury acquittal of Darren Wilson, the police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, Chatelain contemplated how to address the controversy in her own classroom. She knew Ferguson posed a significant pedagogical problem for educators at all levels, which prompted her to start a Twitter campaign under the hashtag #FergusonSyllabus. The goal was simple: reach out to educators on social media and urge them to commit to talking about Ferguson on the first day of class. “I wanted to help other professors find a way to talk about this tragedy,” Chatelain noted, and “[discuss] how it would affect our students’ first day of school” (n. pag.).

As chief executive Barack Obama encountered a similar problem in the aftermath of Ferguson. The trial outcome forced Obama to devise a strategy to publicly address controversy steeped in claims of racism. While Obama’s candidacy prompted America to reexamine the status of racial equality more strongly than any other political contest in recent history (Tesler and Sears 52), his swift ascent to the highest office in the land led many news media outlets to proclaim the arrival of a post-racial twenty-first century (Steele n. pag.; Kelley n. pag.; McWhorter n. pag.). The problem, according to Michael Lacy and Kent Ono, is that the discourse of post-racism presents the illusion of progress while significant disparities still exist (3). Unfortunately the deaths of Trayvon Martin,

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Michael Brown, and more recently Walter Scott and Freddie Gray, demonstrate this case in point and remind us of the persistence of racial inequality today, more than a half-century after the era of civil rights.

The controversy surrounding Michael Brown's death was not the first time racial conflict summoned Obama to respond publicly. In fact a similar exigence manifested for Obama on two earlier occasions: in his "A More Perfect Union" speech during the 2008 presidential campaign, as the previous chapter illustrated, and more recently following the ruling in the Trayvon Martin case in 2013. In the last chapter, I demonstrated how Obama, in "A More Perfect Union," utilized guilt to first divide Americans across racial lines, but then established a foundation for America's redemption through the dual enactment of a scapegoat and mortification. When this speech is viewed alongside his remarks following the killing of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, however, a new pattern emerges: Obama's tendency to characterize racial sentiment metaphorically. A close reading of metaphors in Obama's racial moment speeches reveals his preference to contextualize race through deployment of light and dark imagery—a central feature Michael Osborn ascribes to archetypes in his seminal essay, "Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric: The Light-Dark Family." Binary characterizations of racial conflict in Obama's speeches manifest in the form of paradox, as Obama simultaneously validates oppositional sentiment that exists between the races. This strategy has the potential to exacerbate racial tension by putting conflicting perspectives on race in competition with each other, thus partitioning America across racial lines. Taken together, Obama's use of guilt in the previous chapter and his deployment of paradox here reinforce his rhetorical

strategy for addressing racial controversy. Collectively, the discourse originates in division.

Most news media (Nagourney n. pag.; Helman n. pag.) and scholarship (Darsey 89; Rowland and Jones 442) on Obama have recognized his ability to unite America with an inclusive² rhetorical strategy, one that transcends the division of identity politics and crosses party and demographic lines. Examination of Obama's three racial moment speeches, however, illustrates divergence from such an approach. How, then, does Obama's approach to addressing racial conflict differ from his strategy in other speeches, and what does this say about his preferred rhetorical strategy more generally? Rather than attempt to reconcile racial differences and tie Americans to shared values, Obama puts racial sentiment in direct opposition. While Obama uses these moments to illuminate the existence of racial incivility, doing so has the potential to provoke civilized discussions to help America interrogate and confront its racial differences. This strategy, I argue, has important pedagogical value. Obama's deployment of paradox to contextualize racial sentiment is fundamentally metaphorical, but it manifests a rhetorical catalyst for America to participate in the act of controversia, the process in which speakers present and interrogate pro and contra reasoning simultaneously to establish the basis for deliberation (Mendelson "Everything Must be Argued" 17). To that end, the speeches sustain what Kenneth Burke would call a linguistic approach to education, one that involves "methods that practically *compel* [emphasis original] one to be tentative, at least during the preparatory stage when one is trying to locate all the significant correlations . . . without deciding whether they are 'good' or 'bad,' but trying rather

² For the purpose of this essay, I use the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of "inclusive" as "Not excluding any section of society or any party involved in something."

simply to find out exactly what they *are* [emphasis original]” (17-18). As such, Obama’s racial moment speeches contain within them the possibility for candid discussions about racism to transpire, even while many pundits continue to indict the Obama administration for failing to improve conditions between the races (Condon Jr. and O’Sullivan n. pag.; Prager n. pag.; Lamb n. pag.).

In the remainder of this chapter, I will first provide a review of literature that highlights Obama’s use of metaphor and the inclusive nature of his discourse. I then offer a brief discussion of the context surrounding each speaking occasion and its intended audience. I continue by outlining a methodological approach that bridges paradox with metaphor as a framework to confront civic controversy. I follow with analysis of Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” and Trayvon Martin speeches to demonstrate his departure from what most scholars consider a unifying approach, and show how the speeches reveal a pedagogical capacity for controversia. Building on the conclusions of the last chapter, the analysis here demonstrates the ways in which Obama’s rhetoric in “A More Perfect Union” is grounded not in unity but rather division. By creating a sense of division, however, Obama provides listeners a foundation to confront and interrogate their racial differences. I conclude the chapter by discussing Obama’s response to Michael Brown, and explain how Wilson’s status as a representative of the Ferguson police force impeded his metaphorical and pedagogical approach.

METAPHORICAL TRANSCENDENCE IN OBAMA’S DISCOURSE

Critical assessments on Obama have revealed his preference to use metaphor to unite a racially and otherwise divided America. For example, James Darsey argued

Obama in his 2008 campaign speeches used the metaphor of a journey to project an experience relating to all Americans (89). Obama's success, Darsey maintained, centered on the ability to bring his personal journey and America's national journey into one confluent trajectory (89). In the same vein as Darsey, Robert Rowland and John Jones ("Recasting") argued that Obama's discourse, through a metaphor of hope, balances communal and individual values, which makes the American Dream more attainable for all Americans (442). David Frank alluded to the archetypal significance of Obama's prose without labeling it as such. He noted Obama's first inaugural began and ended with references to the weather, as Obama associated the storms and freezing temperatures of his inauguration day with the country's current condition regarding religious tolerance (619). To help the audience move beyond its "childish" attitudes about religion, Obama employed juxtaposition and a multifaceted conception of religion that appealed to a diverse audience with differing beliefs and values (Frank 619). Although these scholars have converged in the belief that Obama deploys metaphor to unite listeners, I provide a contrary perspective. I agree that metaphor is central to Obama's success, but my reading of his racial moment speeches demonstrates the ways in which Obama uses metaphor not to unite Americans in shared values but to divide listeners on the basis of oppositional sentiment concerning racial inequality.

While not all scholarship on Obama is metaphorical, most literature has acknowledged his attempt to unify America. For Robert Terrill, Obama created unity in his "A More Perfect Union" speech through the embodiment of double consciousness, a Duboisian precept that invites listeners to view themselves through the perspective of others. This strategy enabled Americans to invoke the Golden Rule and allowed them to

“find that common stake we all have in one another” (384). David Frank and Mark McPhail acknowledged Obama’s attempt to cultivate racial reconciliation. Although Frank argued Obama linked minority and identity groups to shared American values, McPhail elucidated Obama’s discourse of whiteness and its dominant rhetorical tropes: innocence, race neutrality, and positive self-presentation (583). This reality, for McPhail, hindered any possibility for reconciliation. Judy Isaksen concurred about Obama’s attempt to unite a racially divided nation. She explained that Obama occupies a middle-of-the-road spot that transcends the “bipolar problem” and puts forth a new position that “calmly” but “substantively” confronts racial progress (457; 468). In the same vein as the existing scholarship, I hold that racial reconciliation is Obama’s paramount task. My analysis, however, extends the literature to show how reconciliation originates in Obama’s ability to partition America across racial lines rather than his attempt to help listeners transcend their racial differences.

A close reading of Obama’s metaphors in his three racial moment speeches provides an alternative interpretation for his use of metaphor and his rhetorical strategy more generally. While most critiques have acknowledged the inclusionary nature of Obama’s rhetoric, they resigned his metaphors to the symbolic realm. Even Darsey acknowledged America’s journey to equality functions better in aspirational than actual terms, when he noted the “finish line” is metaphorical (100). I take the argument advanced by most scholars and invert it to show how Obama’s deployment of metaphor, through a sustained use of paradox, is alienating rather than inclusive. Rather than attempt to unite listeners in racial acknowledgement, Obama accentuates America’s racial differences and places racial sentiment in opposition. A cursory reading of

Obama's speeches illuminates this strategy but does not demonstrate its full significance. While these speeches may seem at first glance divisive, this approach, I argue, has pedagogical value. Grounded in metaphor, this strategy holds the potential to transcend the symbolic realm and its figurative limitations as a rhetorical catalyst that invites listeners to engage in controversia. Understanding the constraints and audience surrounding each speaking occasion helps bring these observations to light.

THREE RACIAL MOMENTS

The last chapter focused exclusively on the first racial controversy that Obama encountered as presidential candidate in 2008: the media backlash surrounding Jeremiah Wright, his allegedly racist comments, and his relationship to Obama. Some review is in order. In early March of 2008, the news media released snippets of Wright's sermons in which he could be seen excoriating a "white America" and the "US of KKKKA" (qtd. in Kantor n. pag.). According to Clarence Walker and Gregory Smithers, the connection to Wright threatened to derail Obama's presidential bid, and Obama's chief strategist, David Axelrod, recognized that Wright attenuated Obama's "well-cultivated post-racial image" (53). Others corroborated Axelrod's observation and noted that Trinity emphasized Obama's "blackness" (Tesler and Sears 4). Voters showed a similar concern, and in most instances Wright's statements alarmed Americans. Democrats feared Obama's connection to Wright would cost him the election (Teschamariam; Reed), and many acknowledged the pastor seemed "a world away from the calm and considerate image that Obama . . . presents" (Broder n. pag.). Jeremiah Wright, as such, prompted America to reconsider its investment in Obama and question his ethos as a presidential candidate.

In addition to the uproar surrounding Jeremiah Wright, this chapter explores two later events that ruptured America across racial lines and summoned Obama to speak publicly: the killings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. If “A More Perfect Union” was Obama’s response to a situation that called into question his own credibility, thus reflecting an inward rhetorical challenge, his comments following the Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown rulings manifested in the need to address an outward but not always visible problem: racial injustice. That is not to say Obama did not use Wright as a platform to discuss the status of race relations in America; he did. Rather, the Wright issue posed a direct threat to Obama’s electability, while Brown and Martin were indicative of the status of race relations in America more generally.

The acquittals of George Zimmerman and Darren Wilson, the two individuals responsible for killing Martin and Brown respectively, continue to fuel the debate surrounding racial profiling and racial injustice in America in the twenty-first century (Dreier n. pag.). Zimmerman, a private citizen moonlighting as a neighborhood watch volunteer, and Darren Wilson, an officer on the Ferguson police force, both claimed to react in self-defense and were acquitted of the charges brought against them. One problem, Jamelle Bouie explained, centers on the inclination to stereotype African American males as criminals. “When people see black men, they think crime,” Bouie noted, and “that cognitive link is so strong that some people will create ‘proof’ to justify the association” (n. pag.). “Rather than treat Trayvon Martin or Michael Brown as typical teenagers turned victims,” he explained, “they’ll work to dismiss them as ‘thugs’” (Bouie n. pag.). When this type of sentiment prevails, it is not surprising to see outcomes similar to the Martin and Brown verdicts.

Although the manifestation of “thug” rationale had the potential to influence trial outcomes, more important is Obama’s response to each incident. While Florida summoned Obama to respond to the acts of a private citizen, Ferguson called on Obama to address not only the actions of one individual, Officer Darren Wilson, but the entire public institution of the Ferguson Police Department in a broader sense. Wilson can then be viewed as a synecdoche for the entire Ferguson police force, which is a synecdoche for police departments nationwide. Since Wilson’s actions could have manifested in a similar fashion for any officer in any city in the country, Ferguson put more at stake for Obama and required a different response.

What is most important about the Ferguson speech is how it demonstrates the limitations of Obama’s rhetorical approach. Because Brown required Obama to address the acts of a public institution, the Ferguson police force, the audience for and message of the speech differed significantly. “A More Perfect Union” and Trayvon Martin allowed Obama to use metaphor to first divide America along racial lines, and then provide listeners the means to engage in controversy, and thereby confront and interrogate their racial differences. This is not wholly dissimilar from the conclusion advanced by the last chapter. When viewed in isolation, the division inherent to “A More Perfect Union” is more amenable to the guilt that manifests in Burke’s dramatic process. In the context of his other comments and speeches concerning racial inequality, however, this division reveals a pedagogical capacity, one that has the potential to help listeners actively confront and interrogate their racial differences. Obama used the events in Ferguson, by contrast, to address a different audience: protestors in Missouri and across the nation. While Obama could have treated Ferguson in a similar manner as the other two speeches,

his divergence freed him from the constraints of criticizing a public institution and condemning in a broader sense the white patriarchal system of which he is part. A brief discussion of metaphor clarifies why paradox is amenable to certain situations and not others.

THE PARADOX OF RACIAL (IN)CIVILITY

Metaphors are regarded as indispensable devices for politicians who want to convey persuasive messages. By drawing analogies and avoiding the central argument route, politicians can manage the impression they make on the audience (De Landtsheer, De Vries, and Vertessen 224). The killing of Michael Brown marked the third occasion that Obama had been called on to shape America's awareness about racial inequality during his political career. Prior to Brown, Obama faced a similar exigency after the death of Trayvon Martin and also when the media exposed Jeremiah Wright for harboring allegedly racist sentiment. On two of those occasions he turned to metaphor. In "A More Perfect Union" and after the ruling in the Trayvon Martin case Obama demonstrated a preference to contextualize racial controversy in dualistic form, through paradox, while he digressed from this strategy in his speech following Brown. Such bifurcations resonate with Michael Osborn's work with archetypes and Kenneth Burke's linguistic approach to problems of education.

As Osborn reminds us, rhetors often place archetypes at critical moments within a speech ("Trajectory" 81). They establish mood and perspective in the introduction, reinforce critical arguments in the body, and synthesize meaning in the conclusion ("Archetypal" 117). Obama's deployment of paradox in his racial moment speeches affirms this characteristic: it appears in the proem, the narration, and epilogue of each

speech. Taken together, the speeches collectively begin to define Obama's political career in archetypal terms with regard to race; he was called to address race during his candidacy, and at two times throughout his second term race has surmounted an inescapable exigency.

Archetypes are grounded in depth experience, such as our susceptibility to light and darkness, our orientation in space, family relationships, or profoundly important and vivid experiences such as war, disease, or travel on the sea ("Trajectory" 81). Because of their strong positive and negative associations with development motives, they express value judgments with the potential to elicit a wide value response from audiences ("Archetypal"). For example, in "A More Perfect Union," Obama solicited value judgments in his binary portrayal of Wright and Trinity. In the absence of a definitive statement, listeners must decide whether to affirm Wright "the saint" or "the demagogue" and "the kindness and cruelty" that reside equally in the congregation. Obama casts light and darkness here as the good and evil he claims both Wright and the congregation embody. This doubled characterization affirms Burke's belief that "[a]ll [ideas] must be kept, and faithfully examined; and not just that it may be approved or disproved, but also that it be considered as a challenge to our prowess in placing it within the unending human dialogue as a whole" (15).

One central feature Osborn attributed to archetypes is the metaphor's ability to manifest a problem/solution. When light and dark images are used concurrently, Osborn explained, they underscore the "simplistic, two-valued, black-white attitudes" which rhetors and listeners prefer ("Archetypal" 117). The preferred situation or outcome a speaker casts upon the audience, he noted, always involves the "acquisition of an attitude

or the adoption of a solution” (“Archetypal” 118). While “the present situation is darker than midnight,” Osborn maintained, “the speaker’s solutions will bring the dawn” (“Archetypal” 117). Although metaphors are typically viewed as abstract constructions, Obama’s racial moment speeches demonstrate the ways in which archetypes can be used to make nonfigurative associations. There is no inherent solution in Obama’s literal formation, however, since both sides are equally valid, which renders the archetype alone inadequate to resolve its fundamental problem, that of lightness and darkness. The binary, which remains unresolved, thus creates the necessary conditions for deliberation.

In the context of civic controversy Obama’s use of metaphor can facilitate *dissoi logoi*, the act of arguing both sides of a contested issue. According to Michael Mendelson, *antilogic*, presenting two sides of a controversy with different outcomes, allows speakers to provide both pro and contra reasoning within one complex argument (“Quintilian” 278). Mendelson refers to this dialogical approach as *controversia*. “[C]*ontroversia* [emphasis original],” he explained, “proceeds by placing multiple claims in juxtaposition and then by negotiating the conflicts among them” (“Quintilian” 278). “[I]n the realm of rhetoric and for the purpose of argument,” Mendelson asserted, “no position is sacrosanct, everything must be argued for there are always two sides . . . [and] we should always . . . examine both” (“Everything Must be Argued” 16). “Such a[n approach],” to borrow Burke’s terminology, “would not in any sense ‘solve’ the issue [because] ‘to an extent, both sides are right’” (26). For Obama, the juxtaposition of competing worldviews with regard to race is represented best through the use paradox and archetypal language. This dialogical approach that Obama adopts originates in

classical rhetorical theory that dates back more than two thousand years to Cicero and Quintilian.

In *De Oratore*, Cicero attempts to “draw out and give shape to” disputed topics by structuring inquiry in *utramque partem*. This process, Mendelson explained, presents “a dialogue among various speakers with opposing views who—in the process of give and take, defense and rebuttal, revision and response—provide for the dynamic interplay of *multiplex ratio* [emphasis original]” (“Everything Must be Argued” 20). This practice, conceived as *controversia* in Rome and *antilogic* by the ancient Greeks, is a Sophistic approach to argumentation that is at the heart of Quintilian’s pedagogy (Mendelson “Quintilian” 280). Quintilian, like Cicero, believed all claims must be argued since more than one position is always likely, that judgment is best deferred in the presentation of alternative arguments, and that judgments arise from the evaluation of multiple opinions (Mendelson “Quintilian” 280). As Burke pointed out, “A mere inculcating of ‘tolerance,’ ‘goodwill,’ ‘respect for the rights of others’ . . . cannot be enough” (14). “Such attitudes are all too airily ‘positive,’” he continued, “[a]nd the educational training here advocated would be in its very essence *negative* [emphasis original] . . . [y]et its negativity would be of a paradoxical sort” (Burke 14). It is this spirit of “friendly contradiction” which is central to both pedagogical approaches. If the goal of *controversia* is to discover the possible basis for cooperative action, it comes as no surprise that Obama prefers this style of oratory to more dialectical routes. By accentuating incivility that exists between the races, Obama provides a foundation for America to engage in civil discourse. Viewed this way, analysis of Obama’s racial moment speeches challenges the common assertion that resigns his metaphors to the realm of the figurative. Although Obama’s use of

metaphor can be viewed symbolically, it should not stop there. In Obama's racial moment speeches, I hold, metaphor has potential to transcend the symbolic realm as a catalyst for America to engage in a spirited conversation about the status of racial inequality.

A PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH TO RACIAL CONFLICT

On March 18, 2008, from the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Obama addressed the Wright controversy in a speech titled "A More Perfect Union."³ In the speech, Obama utilized light and dark imagery through continued deployment of paradox and contradiction. This rhetorical strategy is recognizable when Obama invoked his own story, discussed Jeremiah Wright, and commented on Wright's home congregation, Trinity United Church of Christ. In any case, Obama presented listeners a comprehensive picture that includes the good and the bad, the familiar and foreign characteristics of Obama's narrative, Wright the pastor, and Trinity's congregation. In isolation, such characterizations seem unrelated and irrelevant. When placed alongside each other, however, they reflect the light and dark comparisons intrinsic to archetypes.

Early in the speech, Obama detailed the juxtaposition and contradictions within his own story:

I'm the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's army during World War II, and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I've gone to some of the best schools in America and I've lived in

³ Future references to this speech and others will be made parenthetically by page number.

one of the world's poorest nations. . . . [I]t's a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts—that out of many, we are truly one. (2)

Obama's use of synecdoche here shows listeners how their individual stories, like his own, are part of America's grand narrative. Implementation of the word "seared" conjures the fire characteristic that Osborn attributes to archetypes ("Archetypal"). For Osborn, fire represents both the positive/constructive and negative/destructive qualities that archetypes possess. Fire, on the one hand, can burn. On the other hand, fire has the potential to purify and can bring light and warmth to the darkest situations. In one sense, Obama's metaphor affirms Osborn's characterization in that it illustrates the productive quality of fire. In another sense, it challenges the notion that burning is destructive. While burning is typically viewed in the negative, sear, for Obama, represents something positive; it left a permanent reminder that America's strength resides in the diversity of its individuals. Obama's story is unique and contradictory. He has an African father and a mother from Kansas, a paradox essentially.⁴ Although most listeners do not share this characteristic with Obama, every American is rife with paradox and contradiction. Collectively, these stories are unique and construct the social fabric of American culture.

Shortly after Obama outlined his own story, he characterized Wright in binary form. Obama asserted, "Did I know him [Wright] to be an occasionally fierce critic of American domestic and foreign policy? Of Course. Did I ever hear him make remarks that could be controversial while I sat in the church? Yes" (3). Obama then countered with an alternative perspective: "But the truth is, that isn't all that I know of the man.

⁴ Although it may seem more appropriate to characterize Obama's biography as a perceived and rhetorically constructed incongruity, for this example I use the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of paradox as "A situation, person, or thing that combines contradictory features or qualities."

The man I met more than twenty years ago is a man who helped introduce me to my Christian faith, a man who spoke to me about our obligations to love one another, to care for the sick and lift up the poor” (3). Wright is essentially a juxtaposition; he is the good and the bad, the saint and the demagogue, the light and dark. For example, while news media characterized a white racist in 2008, Wright impacted his community in positive ways during his tenure at Trinity. As the last chapter detailed, Wright, in his capacity as senior pastor from 1972 to 2008, delivered sermons that articulated tension and unrest in the African American community (Clardy 203). By 1986, he mentored more than a dozen young preachers through Trinity. In 1990, Trinity founder Reverend Kenneth B. Smith commended Wright’s dynamic leadership as a reflection of the pride that people take in the church (Billingsley 172). In 2008, however, Wright reminded America of the long road ahead on the journey to equality, and his comments reopened wounds thought by many to have healed over time.

Obama continued to describe the paradox of Trinity United. He explained, “Trinity embodies the black community in its entirety—the doctor and the welfare mom, the model student and the former gang banger” (4). For Obama, diversity makes the church that much more compelling. “The church contains in full,” he claimed, “the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes” (4). Even Wright, Obama contended, “contains within him the contradictions—the good and the bad—of the community that he has served diligently for so many years” (4). With both extremes represented, Trinity’s congregation is a paradox that embodies lightness and darkness in full through the good and evil that, at times, can

reside equally in the church.⁵ Good people are capable of doing bad things, and people who sin attend church to repent and make themselves right in the eyes of God.

Metaphor helped Obama circumvent the limitations associated with a dialectical approach and bolster his pedagogical goal—to provoke a discussion about the status of racism in America in the twenty-first century. “Unlike dialectic,” Mendelson offered, “*controversia* [emphasis original] proceeds by placing multiple claims in juxtaposition and then by negotiating the conflicts among them.” (“Quintilian” 278). Rather than place a premium on the formal development of the claim, Obama prioritizes *controversia* for the exchange that transpires between interlocutors. Given the severity and the inflammatory nature of Wright’s comments, Obama’s choice not to excoriate Wright may seem odd initially. Doing so, however, would prevent listeners from interrogating the inherent tensions within Wright and Trinity. It is this interplay of conflicting realities that allows “the ‘truth’ [to] reveal itself in mixed form as a provisional agreement among the parties involved,” the fundamental task for America (Mendelson “Quintilian” 278).

Obama’s invitation for listeners to interrogate the inherent tensions within Wright and Trinity serves an important pedagogical goal, which is to provide an antidote to an all or nothing mentality. In other words, by acknowledging both the good and bad that can reside equally at times within Wright and his congregation, Obama avoided the trap that renders one characterization superior to the other, one true the other false. While it is natural to seek out “a middle road between the two extremes,” Burke explained, “[w]hat we want is something that avoids the typical vices of either and combines the typical virtues of both [so that] we can readily propose that any troublesome *either-or* be

⁵ It should be noted that good and evil exist as more than polar opposites. They embody the cyclical process inherent to archetypes such as the movement of day into night and the changing of the seasons.

transformed into a *both-and* [emphasis original]" (31). A comprehensive characterization, as such, enables listeners to recognize and appreciate Wright and Trinity in full rather than attempt to drive a wedge between them or favor one perspective over another.

A similar strategy surfaced in Obama's remarks on the verdict in the Trayvon Martin case. In response to the jury's acquittal of George Zimmerman, Obama acknowledged simultaneously those who stood on both sides of the ruling without condemning either position. Although he began with a statement to appease those upset with the trial outcome, Obama continued with remarks that validate the opposition. Obama explained, "The African American community is . . . knowledgeable that there is a history of racial disparities in the application of our criminal laws—everything from the death penalty to enforcement of our drug laws" (1). "And that ends up having an impact," he continued, "in terms of how people interpret the case" (1). Such statements have the potential to resonate with populations that view the ruling as a breakdown in America's criminal justice system. Obama then presented an alternative interpretation: "Now, this isn't to say that the African American community is naïve about the fact that African American young men are disproportionately involved in the criminal justice system; that they are disproportionately both victims and perpetrators of violence" (2). Contra to his original statement regarding the outcome of the case, Obama's subsequent comments reaffirm the beliefs of those who saw Zimmerman's actions as justified, that in fact he reacted and killed Martin in self-protection. Obama's attempt to placate both interest groups through contradictory statements renders the situation ambiguous and open to interpretation, an enthymeme with more than one, fixed conclusion.

A paradox of a similar nature exists in Burke's dramatic approach to religion. An interrogation of religious doctrine, Burke explained, does not ask: "Is such a doctrine literally *true* or *false*? [emphasis original]" Instead, it is concerned with, "what are the prevailing relationships among the key terms of this doctrine?" Moreover: "Can we adapt the terminology to other terminologies, at least somewhat?" (35). In other words, the focus is not on whether the doctrine is right or wrong, correct or incorrect, but rather how its discourse interacts and whether it can be utilized in different contexts. By surveying the diversity of opinion that manifests as a result of trial outcome, Obama avoided positing that one perspective takes precedent over the other, and in turn invited listeners to interrogate both positions to find within them the points of intersection and divergence, agreement and disagreement, to see how one belief informs the other.

The characterization of African American men as both victims and perpetrators of violence in response to the Zimmerman verdict echoes the paradoxical treatment of Wright and Trinity. In a similar vein that positions African Americans on both sides of violent crime, Wright in his sermons is responsible for diffusing and perpetuating racial unrest simultaneously. Although at times responsible for fanning the flames of hatred, Wright brings the community together in positive and constructive ways. As a synecdoche for his constituents, Wright embodies the contradictions of Trinity's members; he, like everyone else, in a metaphorical sense, can be the "doctor" and the "gang banger," the good and the evil, the lifeblood of the congregation in its entirety. Obama's choice to characterize each example in binary form represents a desire to survey "the diversity of opinion on the topic in order to weigh the probabilities on each side," a concept Quintilian advocated in his *Institutio Oratoria* (Mendelson "Quintilian" 281).

Just as Quintilian challenged students to debate the efficacy of a public versus private education, Obama calls on America to interrogate the scope of racial controversy in its entirety.

Obama's deployment of paradox continued in his attempt to contextualize African American sentiment following the Martin verdict. As he validated concerns, however, he simultaneously reinforced the opposition. Obama charged, "I think the African American community is . . . not naive in understanding that, statistically, somebody like Trayvon Martin was . . . more likely to be shot by a peer than he was by somebody else" (2). "But they get frustrated," he maintained, "if they feel that there's no context for it and that context is being denied. . . . I think to a sense that if a white male teen was involved in the same kind of scenario, that, from top to bottom, both the outcome and the aftermath might have been different" (2). In short, Obama first affirmed the stereotype that renders African American men violent, but continued to expose the inherent bias in the criminal justice system that subordinates populations of color. The important point here is that Obama did not merely hold to one side. Instead, he implicated and excused African Americans and the criminal justice system for their roles in the reaffirmation and subversion of racial inequality. A significant function of archetypes, Osborn argued, is their power to create double associations ("Archetypal"). Obama, in this case, invited the audience to associate and he did the legwork for listeners. His acknowledgment of both perspectives makes it easy for listeners to relate on the basis of their individual experiences and worldviews. By juxtaposing one against the other, Obama validated each position in its own right and both sides are perfectly plausible in their own contexts.

The paradoxical nature of Obama's prose in "A More Perfect Union" and in response to the Martin ruling lends itself to the binary nature of archetypes. Whether explaining the contradictions inherent in Wright or Trinity, the divided sentiment of the Martin verdict, or the role of African American men in racial injustice, Obama presented each example dualistically to not favor one over the other. As Mendelson reminds us, universal logic and Truth are problematic from the point of controversy, especially when delivered by a person of authority, because this discourse tends to posit ideas as determinate when in actuality they are dynamic and bear contextual differences (Mendelson "Everything Must be Argued" 21). Viewed this way, Obama's tendency to portray the duality of each situation can be seen as an attempt to create identification with multiple interest groups. Identification, for Mendelson, is central to controversy; it begins with the Ciceronian act "of narrowing the gap between speakers for the purpose of *conciliatio* [emphasis original]" ("Everything Must be Argued" 40). Because of their strong positive and negative associations with development motives, Osborn explained, archetypes express judgments with the potential to elicit varied responses from listeners with regard to values ("Archetypal"). In his continued validation of opposing opinions, Obama succeeded in easing the tension at least temporarily, while failed at the same time to assign blame to a specific individual or institution, whether an isolated incident, as with Martin, or America's more turbulent history with regard to racism and inequality more generally. An extension of the pedagogy of Cicero and Quintilian, Obama's discourse helps us understand that everything must be argued because more than one probable position always exists, and that judgment is best surrendered until alternative arguments are weighed.

Obama's deployment of paradox to contextualize racial sentiment reflects an attempt to achieve Burke's fourth and highest rung of the educational ladder. Although difficult to maintain, the fourth level "is the most mature . . . and the one that would surely be aimed at, in an ideal world of civilized and sophisticated people" (Burke 23). At this superior stage, Burke explained,

No voice deemed relevant to the particular issue or controversy would be subjected to the quietus, and none would be inadequately represented (as were one to portray it by stating only its more vulnerable arguments). But although one would be as fair as possible in thus helping all positions to say their say, a mere cult of "fair play" would not be the reason. Rather, one hopes for ways whereby various voices, in mutually correcting one another, will lead toward a position better than any one singly. That is, one does not merely want to outwit the opponent, or to study him, one wants to be affected by him, in some degree to incorporate him, to so act that his ways can help perfect one's own—in brief, to learn from him. (23)

It is here, at the fourth level of Burke's educational hierarchy, where the paradox of racial incivility is most exposed. While racial differences are equally validated and acknowledged at this elevated stage, the possibility exists for America to interrogate and confront its contradictory and often divided sentiment concerning the status of racial equality. In order for this pedagogical strategy to succeed, however, listeners must exhibit a heightened sense of maturity and vulnerability. On the one hand, the pedagogy's effect resides on listeners' willingness to surrender their positions as superior, and to be open to entertaining the ideas and perspectives of others. On the other hand,

doing so requires one to be vulnerable, knowing his or her position is susceptible to examination for the merits within. For America to benefit from this pedagogical task, listeners must all equally demonstrate an understanding and willingness to partake in this process.

The manifestation of racial conflict in “A More Perfect Union” and the Trayvon Martin speech were not the only times Obama encountered a pedagogical problem. Robert Rowland explained that Obama’s health care reform plan required him to educate a confused America and divided Congress in 2010. As Rowland pointed out, Obama’s “reasoned” discourse subordinated pro and contra arguments to “stubborn facts,” which ultimately failed to shift public opinion or persuade Republicans to work toward bipartisan reform (719). And “[a]lthough Obama achieved a measure of success in educating a portion of the American people,” Rowland noted, “he did not succeed in producing authentic dialogue” (719). Given his failure with this strategy in 2010, it should come as no surprise that Obama abandoned a reasoned approach when called to address and educate America on racial inequality.

What is most striking about Obama’s treatment of racial conflict in both speeches is how it challenges the notion of his discourse as inclusionary. News media have, by and large, commended Obama’s depolarizing approach, one that seems to transcend the division of identity politics (Nagourney n. pag.; Helman n. pag.). Most scholars have sounded a similar note. For example, Rowland and Jones attributed Obama’s success to his ability to invoke American values of “inclusiveness, universality, progress, and empowerment” (“Recasting” 427). They went on to say, Obama’s appeal resides “not with metaphors of separation . . . but with a narrative based in shared identity as

Americans” (Rowland and Jones “Recasting” 442). Other scholars have gone so far as to label Obama the “people’s interlocutor” (Ivie and Giner 360). Viewed within the corpus of his political discourse, however, Obama’s remarks in both speeches challenge this characterization, one that is ubiquitous among scholars and the news media alike. Rather than attempt to unify a racially divided America, Obama’s rhetoric polarizes listeners across racial lines. Illustrating racial controversy in dichotomized form is, however, a strategic choice that enabled Obama to validate the oppositional sentiment that exists among various groups, while it holds the possibility for Americans to partake in a healthy and productive debate to interrogate their racial differences.

LIMITATIONS OF OBAMA’S PEDAGOGY

While metaphor helped Obama emotionally validate the concerns of many Americans in “A More Perfect Union” and the Trayvon Martin speech, news media largely criticized his “more cautionary” and “less empathetic” response to Michael Brown (qtd. in Pickler n. pag.; Parsons and Hennessy n. pag.; Williams n. pag.). Obama’s remarks following the acquittal of Darren Wilson demonstrate the contextual constraints and limitations of each speaking occasion. While “A More Perfect Union” called into question Obama’s own personal ethos, and Martin concerned the actions of a private citizen, George Zimmerman, Obama had to tread carefully following the events in Missouri. With less at stake, it was easy for Obama to respond to Wright and Zimmerman more directly. Zimmerman, a private citizen, and Wright, a religious official, did not represent government institutions. While controversy would be an appropriate and desirable outcome of the Ferguson speech, Obama could not employ a pedagogical approach without implicating wrongdoing of a government official and

institution. That Obama has more recently remained mum about Walter Scott and Freddie Gray provides reaffirmation as both incidents involved state and local police forces.⁶ Ferguson, like Baltimore, presented a conflict of interest for Obama, because to indict Wilson or law enforcement in Missouri and Maryland more generally would undermine the actions of a democratic institution and the white patriarchal system that orders our government.

Despite Obama's choice to avert a pedagogical approach, the Ferguson speech began with the possibility for controversia. In the proem of the speech Obama acknowledged the potential for dissent: "It's an outcome that, either way, was going to be subject of intense disagreement not only in Ferguson, but across America" (1). While these opening remarks affirm the Ciceronian requirement for "argumentation that accommodates multiplicity" (Mendelson "Everything Must be Argued" 17), Obama quickly digressed from producing a dialogical exchange. Rather than acknowledge and validate the specific variance in opinion elicited by the trial outcome as he did after Martin and in response to Wright, Obama characterized Ferguson as a more general and ambiguous problem for America. Shortly after his initial remarks, he stated, "[w]e need to recognize that this is not just an issue for Ferguson, this is an issue for America" (1). This strategy allowed Obama to generalize without condemning the actions of Wilson or lawmen and women in Ferguson.

Rather than condemn state and local authorities, as with Florida, Obama defended government institutions and America's criminal justice system: "First and foremost, we

⁶ It should be noted that Obama did make a public statement following Gray's death and the ensuing violence in Baltimore on April 28, 2015. His comments, however, resonate with his speech following Brown as Obama used both occasions to condemn violent protest rather than validate and acknowledge racial sentiment.

are a nation built on the rule of law. And so we need to accept that this decision was the grand jury's to make" (1). Shortly after, he stated, "our police officers put their lives on the line for us every single day. They've got a tough job to do to maintain public safety and hold accountable those who break the law" (1). While it would have been appropriate to indict Wilson's protocol for lack of judgment, Obama sympathized with the hasty decisions law enforcement sometimes makes.

The entire Ferguson speech can be read as a polemic against the likelihood of local violent protest and as an attempt to diffuse America on a broader level. Early in the speech, Obama noted, "I join Michael's parents in asking anyone who protests this decision to do so peacefully" (1). Soon after, he continued, "I also appeal to the law enforcement officials in Ferguson and the region to show care and restraint in managing peaceful protests that may occur" (1). In this proleptic moment, Obama foresaw the likelihood of contempt beyond Ferguson, which his statement about "the region" suggests. In turn, he advocated peaceful protest, nonviolent resistance, as King would have it.

Most striking is Obama's optimism about racial progress. "We have made enormous progress in race relations over the course of the past several decades," Obama argued, "I've witnessed that in my own life" (1). "And to deny that progress," he continued, "is to deny America's capacity for change" (1). While he started to acknowledge the sentiment of many populations of color, he reduced Ferguson to an isolated incident. "[T]here are still problems and communities of color are not making these problems up," Obama charged, and "there are issues in which the law too often feels as if it is being applied in discriminatory fashion" (1). However, Obama stated, "I

don't think that's the norm. I don't think that's true for the majority of communities or . . . law enforcement officials" (1). His solution is vague at best: "What we need to do is understand them and figure out how do we make more progress" (1). While progress may be the objective, Obama's response to Ferguson fell short in comparison to "A More Perfect Union" and the Trayvon Martin speech. While Obama acknowledged oppositional sentiment, he resigned the notion that police engage in discriminatory practices to the realm of minority opinion. Obama's failure to remain objective complicated the possibility for controversia, and thus failed to provide listeners a catalyst for deliberation.

At a time when the continued punctuation of events that expose racial unrest seems inevitable, it is likely that even in the twilight of his presidential career Obama will again be called to publicly weigh in on the status of racial inequality. Rather than indict Obama for failing to institute racial progress, however, we should use these moments to examine his discourse as a pedagogical and rhetorical heuristic that holds the capacity for meaningful and productive conversations to transpire. Even in the absence of pedagogy in Obama's response to Ferguson, the speech helped illuminate the limitations of controversia as a rhetorical strategy. Taken together, the racial moment speeches revealed that controversia is a strategy ill equipped to address racial controversies that occur under the oversight of public and democratic institutions.

Obama's pedagogical approach in his racial moment speeches is insightful for citizens and scholars. On the one hand, it demonstrates how metaphors, which we typically resign to the figurative realm, have the potential to create instructive and educational ends for audiences. On the other hand, it provides a new and under-utilized

critical framework through which to view Obama's and other racialized discourse. Obama's use of paradox to address racial conflict challenges the characterization of his discourse as inclusive and can help us better understand how metaphor functions through binaries. When employed rhetorically paradox demonstrates the ways in which metaphor can transcend the symbolic realm as a conduit to facilitate public dialogue. Obama's use of metaphor does more than teach us about the existence of racial sentiment that manifests in binary form, and more than simply guide the ways in which audiences think about racial inequality; it opens up a dialogic space in which deliberation becomes possible. "Admittedly," Burke explained, a linguistic approach to problems of education "is not enough to resolve specific issues that lead to blunt, head-on collisions. One cannot ask an educational method to do the impossible" (36). "But one can ask that it provide a positive equivalent for the area of commonality which even opponents must share," he continued, "if they are to join the same battle" (Burke 36). Once we step back and approach Obama's discourse with a critical understanding of what it can do, the potential for change becomes a reality.

Although Obama's comments on race appear most frequently in times of unrest, or during periods when the country seems racially divided, certain moments in his presidency have called on him to acknowledge America's progress with regard to equality. In the next chapter, I examine two of Obama's epideictic orations that celebrate the sacrifices and accomplishments associated with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Obama delivered the first speech, "Let Freedom Ring," in 2013 to commemorate King and those who participated in the March on Washington. The second speech, Obama gave in 2015 in Selma, Alabama, to celebrate the fifty-year anniversary

of Bloody Sunday. Until now the speeches analyzed in this dissertation have centered on Obama's discourse as a result of events that created a breakdown in race relations in America. The speeches in Washington and Selma, by contrast, created a different rhetorical problem for Obama. Rather than respond to instances that foregrounded racial inequality, these occasions summoned Obama to acknowledge and celebrate the accomplishments of the past. At the same time, however, he had to draw listeners' attention to the persistence of inequities that continue to manifest across racial lines in the twenty-first century. In Washington, Obama focused the audience's attention on economic inequality, while in Selma he raised our awareness about the efforts to disenfranchise African Americans and other populations of color through imposed voting restrictions. Rather than deploy paradox as a rhetorical strategy to divide Americans across racial lines, and in turn provide a catalyst for listeners to interrogate and confront the entire scope of the debate surrounding racial equality, Washington and Selma, taken together, created a unique paradox in itself—the need for Obama to simultaneously celebrate the past and condemn the present with regard racial inequality.

CHAPTER 4

CELEBRATING THE PAST, CONDEMNING THE PRESENT: BARACK OBAMA'S EPIDEICTIC ORATIONS IN WASHINGTON, D.C., AND SELMA, ALABAMA

On August 28, 2013, fifty years after the historic March on Washington, Barack Obama commemorated Martin Luther King, Jr.'s iconic "I Have A Dream" speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial at the culmination of the "Let Freedom Ring" ceremony. A little more than year later, in Selma, Alabama, Obama celebrated the fifty-year anniversary of Bloody Sunday and those who marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge to fight for equal voting rights. The speeches, taken together, called on Obama to acknowledge the achievements made since the era of civil rights, while drawing America's attention to the racial disparities that continue to persist in the twenty-first century. Unlike previous speeches discussed, Obama's commemoration speeches in Washington, D.C. and Selma articulated two separate but related issues concerning racial equality: the speech in Washington focused America's attention on the need for economic equality, while in Selma Obama directed our attention to the need for equality at the ballot box.

In Washington, Obama detailed the controversy surrounding economic inequality by acknowledging the discrepancies in wage earning between the races. This sense of fragmentation, which has persisted since civil rights, prompted Obama to call for unity in the speech. The speech in Selma, by contrast, resembles more closely Obama's rhetorical and pedagogical strategy outlined in earlier chapters. Obama, in this speech, invited listeners to interrogate the dual and conflicting realities of policies designed to disenfranchise populations of color from our political process and a disaffected and

uninvolved populace of voters. Because the context surrounding Washington and Selma differed from the rhetorical challenge brought forth by the Jeremiah Wright fiasco, and the killings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, Obama utilized a different rhetorical strategy, one that allowed him to more directly call our attention to the need for change with regard to economic equality and equal access to the ballot.

As the last chapter demonstrated, Obama, in “A More Perfect Union” and after Trayvon Martin, used paradox to divide Americans across racial lines, and then provided listeners a foundation to confront and interrogate their racial differences. The chapter also showed how Obama, in the speech following the killing of Michael Brown and the verdict that acquitted Darren Wilson of murder, departed from this approach largely because of Wilson’s status as a representative of the U.S. government. The subject of Brown’s death resurfaced in the speech in Selma, which Obama delivered nearly four months after his original Ferguson statement. The second time, however, Obama treated the fallout surrounding the killing paradoxically, therefore inviting listeners to interrogate the controversy in comprehensive terms.

Obama’s rhetorical shift, I argue, centers on the context and constraints surrounding each occasion. While the original Ferguson speech, the focus of the last chapter, manifested an exigence that would have required Obama to indict and condemn the actions of a democratic institution, the setting in Selma was different. Selma was an epideictic occasion that summoned Obama to both celebrate the achievements of the last half-century with regard to equality, while still drawing listeners’ attention to the inequities that plague America in the post-civil rights era. Because Obama did not have to respond to one specific incident, like he did in his original speech following Ferguson,

he could speak more generally regarding the work that America must do to attain equality.

Building on the conclusions of the previous chapters, this chapter examines Obama's use of paradox and archetypal language to address racial inequality in Washington and in Selma. It asks, how does Obama celebrate the accomplishments of past while still drawing America's attention to the inequities that persist in the present? I argue that Obama refrained from using paradox to divide America across racial lines in these two speeches initially, but rather deployed light and dark imagery to illustrate the struggles endured on the journey to equality. While distinct moments in the speeches lend themselves to controversy, the speeches taken together, as a whole, largely depart from the pedagogical approach outlined in earlier chapters. Rather than use paradox to create the conditions necessary for deliberation, and thereby provide a rhetorical catalyst for listeners to confront and interrogate their racial differences, paradox in these speeches manifests in Obama's need to celebrate the achievements of the past while condemning inequality in the present.

In what follows, I provide first the media response to both speeches and then discuss the two rhetorical problems that Obama confronted in each address: the continuation of economic inequality in twenty-first century America and the ongoing efforts to undermine the Voting Rights Act, two issues that continue to afflict America and reaffirm the reality of racial inequality. Taken together, these inequities represent what Michael Lacy and Kent Ono refer to as "inferential" racism, the more subtle "mundane, everyday, and routine cultural practices" that subordinate minority populations but go largely unquestioned (3). I then analyze Obama's "Let Freedom

Ring” address in Washington and his speech in Selma to illustrate the ways in which Obama abandoned the rhetorical strategy utilized in his other speeches concerning racial inequality. Paradox, as my analysis will demonstrate, manifests in altered form in these speeches. Rather than use paradox as a rhetorical strategy to divide America across racial lines, the unique rhetorical challenge in Washington and Selma created a paradox in itself, which forced Obama to celebrate and condemn simultaneously the accomplishments and continued setbacks associated with racial equality.

BARRIERS TO EQUALITY

Over the course of his presidency, the news media has remained critical of Obama’s silence surrounding race. Writing in the *Examiner*, Bonnie K. Goodman acknowledged that Obama “has not spoken much about race throughout his presidency,” which has led some to criticize his administration for not improving conditions for minorities (n. pag.). As Christi Parsons explained, “Obama has often been expected to serve as a bridge himself, for America’s racial divide. . . . [but] has struggled to help define and guide a civil rights movement for the next generation” (n. pag.). As the nation’s first African-American president, some expected Obama to more assertively confront the inequities that persist across racial lines.

Some historians, on the other hand, cite the Obama presidency as evidence of racial progress. Anthony Sparks, for example, claimed that Obama challenges us to consider whether we are beyond racism. “Obama’s historic election,” for Sparks, “prompted some to ponder and others to argue that we were finally witnessing the dawn of a new ‘post-racial America’” (21). Some news media outlets agreed. Matt Bai in *The New York Times* proclaimed, “Obama’s candidacy represented a kind of racial milestone,

the natural next phase of a 50-year movement” (n. pag.). Obama even acknowledged the reality of progress just five days before his speech to commemorate King and the March on Washington, when at a town hall meeting he declared, “we’ve made enormous strides—I’m a testament to it, you’re a testament to it” (qtd. in O’Brien n. pag.). However, for every positive assessment remains an opposing view, one that does not associate Obama with equality and still recognizes a persistence of racial disparity.

Despite the media’s claim of Obama’s inability to institute progress with regard to racial equality, most news outlets lauded Washington and Selma as defining moments for Obama. Goodman explained that the speech to commemorate King and the March on Washington “stirred the crowd and is bound to be remembered as a decisive speech of his presidency” (n. pag.). Others recognized it as Obama’s attempt to urge listeners to “become . . . modern-day marcher[s] for economic justice and racial harmony” (Gamboa and Benac n. pag.). CBS news anchor Scott Pelley heralded the speech as one of Obama’s “great” addresses, calling it “a seminal moment . . . very beautifully written” that raised awareness about the lack of America’s economic and moral justice (qtd. in Goodman n. pag.). Most agreed that Obama eloquently celebrated the past achievements, but directed listeners’ attention to America’s continued work.

Obama’s speech in Selma elicited similar accolades. Like his earlier speech Obama’s task here was twofold. As Charles Blow explained, Obama had “to honor the heroes of the past but also motivate the activists of the moment, to acknowledge how much work had been done but to remind the nation that that work was not complete” (n. pag.). He went on to say, the speech “was emotional and evocative” and watched as some people cheered and others cried (n. pag.). After hearing the speech, Samford

University professor Jonathan Bass acknowledged that equal voting rights “continues to be a ‘sacred fight’ for Americans” (qtd. in Parsons n. pag.). However, he echoed Matt Bai’s “racial milestone” comment in saying of the invocation, Obama’s ascendance and presence on the stage “speaks as a partial fulfillment” of the dream envisioned by King a half-century earlier (qtd. in Parsons n. pag.). Although America’s work was not complete, most agreed that Obama’s journey to the oval office represented a turning point with regard to race relations.

In both speeches, however, Obama, did not resist pointing out the discrepancies that continue to affect a disproportionate amount of African Americans and other populations of color: economic inequality and the structural impediments that threaten the right to vote for minorities. According to Tom Shapiro, many of the same economic issues that plagued African Americans during civil rights continue today. In the summer of 1963, March on Washington organizers rallied for an increase in minimum wage from 85 cents to two dollars an hour. The \$1.15-per-hour wage increase translates with inflation to \$8.80 by today’s standards, but in 2013 minimum wage was only \$7.25 an hour (Fletcher n. pag.). In 2011, African Americans earned 66 cents for every dollar earned by whites. Similarly, the unemployment rate for African Americans averaged 11.6 percent between 1963 and 2012, nearly double the white jobless rate over that time (Plumer n. pag.). This imbalance in wage earning is an issue that minorities have dealt with since the era of civil rights and is something they continue to contend with in the twenty-first century.

Fifty years after the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s, economic division continues to demarcate America across racial lines. White people today continue to

eclipse people of color in nearly every social, economic, and political indicator.

Sociologists Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Victor Ray explained the problem of associating Obama with racial equality. In post-civil rights America, they explained, a new type of racism emerged, one characterized by discriminating practices that are subtle and covert, institutionalized, and defended by white hegemony (177). Shapiro would agree about the existence of clear economic divide. Discriminatory mortgage-lending practices, lower incomes, and lack of access to credit continue to complicate homeownership for African Americans (Shapiro 3). White homeownership is nearly a third higher than homeownership for minorities (Fletcher n. pag.). Not only do African Americans and other minorities face income inequality in the workplace, they are subject to a host of other covert economic practices that threaten their livelihood on a variety of fiscal matters that range from unequal access to credit to mortgage discrimination. In light of these discrepancies, it is no wonder Obama made economic equality central to his Washington speech.

In addition to fair pay, the right to a proportional stake in a democratic government was an equally salient concern for proponents of civil rights. Imposing voting restrictions in regions with large minority populations has long been recognized as a way to disenfranchise African Americans and other minority groups from our political process (McElwee n. pag.). Following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, discrimination in voting on the basis of race was prohibited. Although the act would ultimately pave the way for desegregation of the public sphere, African Americans who initially attempted to register to vote in southern states faced fierce resistance and were largely underrepresented. For example, in Dallas County, Alabama, only two percent of

Selma's eligible African American voters had registered successfully, 300 out of 15,000 in sum, largely due to Governor George Wallace, a "notorious opponent" of desegregation ("Selma to Montgomery March" n. pag.). Despite their legal right to vote, most African Americans in the South encountered literacy tests and excessive poll taxes that undermined their ability to participate in the electoral process (Stewart and Escobedo n. pag.).

On Sunday, March 7, 1965, nearly 600 marchers attempted to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge at Selma en route to Montgomery, the state capital, to protest their right to the ballot. Led by King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, marchers were met by state troopers who wielded nightsticks, whips, and tear gas. As they attempted to cross, the marchers were rushed and beaten, forcefully pushed back ("Selma to Montgomery March" n. pag.). The following morning *The New York Times* recalled the chaos: "The first 10 or 20 Negroes were swept to the ground screaming, arms and legs flying and packs went skittering across the grassy divider strip and on to the pavement on both sides" (Reed A1). "Negroes cried out as they crowded together," The *Times* went on to say, "and the whites on the sideline whopped and cheered" (Reed A1). Two days later, on March 9, King led a symbolic march through Selma, but not until Saturday, March 21, did marchers successfully cross the bridge to reach the state capital five days later. CBS News reporter Bill Plante, who was present for the marches in 1965 and also at Obama's invocation in 2015, recalled, "[t]here was singing, there was cheering, clapping, signs held aloft, and a sense among all of these people that this was a great victory" ("Reporter's Notebook" n. pag.).

Five months after the events that unfolded on Bloody Sunday, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law. The legislation, which was signed and took effect on August 6, 1965, was designed to restrict racially discriminatory voting practices, and sought to reinforce the fifteenth amendment to the Constitution, which granted African Americans the right to vote. Even since passage of the Voting Rights Act, however, conservative lawmakers continue to look for loopholes and ways to restrict access to the ballot for minority groups. For example, in 2014, a federal district court overturned a voter identification law in Texas that accepted concealed weapons permits as a valid form of identification but rejected student ID cards. While opponents of the law, which included the U.S. Department of Justice, claimed it violated the federal Voting Rights Act and sought to diminish the strength of the state's growing population of minority voters (Ramsey n. pag.), proponents argued that Texas was well within its authority and that the law was motivated across partisan rather than racial lines (Hasen 2). Laws of a similar nature continue to be implemented as a way to silence minority voters.

Obama delivered his speech in Selma less than two years after the landmark Supreme Court case, *Shelby County v. Holder*. The plaintiff, Shelby County, Alabama, sought a permanent injunction of two provisions in the Voting Rights Act of 1965: section 4(b), which contained a coverage formula to determine which jurisdictions must achieve preclearance based on their histories with regard to discriminatory voting practices, and section 5, which required certain local and state governments to obtain preclearance from the federal government before making changes to their voting laws. In a 5-4 ruling, the Supreme Court on June 25, 2013, ruled section 4 unconstitutional, which

essentially invalidated section 5, thereby allowing the states and local governments to implement changes to voting laws at will. In his majority opinion, Justice John Roberts explained, “things have dramatically changed” in the South since implementation of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 (qtd. in Reilly, Sacks, and Siddiqui n. pag.). Roberts went on to say that the provision was “based on obsolete statistics and that the coverage formula violates the constitution,” calling it an outmoded tool for measurement essentially (Reilly et al. n. pag.). Justice Ginsburg issued a dissent on behalf of herself and Justices Breyer, Sotomayor, and Kagan, saying “[t]he sad irony of today’s decision lies in its utter failure to grasp why the VRA has proven effective” (qtd. in Berman n. pag). “The Court appears to believe that the VRA’s success in eliminating the specific devices extant in 1965 means that preclearance is no longer needed,” she continued, “[i]n truth, the evolution of voting discrimination into more subtle second-generation barriers is powerful evidence that a remedy as effective of preclearance remains vital to protect minority voting rights and prevent backsliding” (qtd. in Berman n. pag.). The decision, either way, elicited widespread support and condemnation. In turn, it continued to polarize America across racial lines.

Given the persistence of income inequality and the continued efforts to disenfranchise populations of color through discriminatory voting laws, Obama’s call for listeners to take proactive roles in his Washington and Selma speeches should come as no surprise. Obama’s task, however, was more complex than simply rousing the audience and issuing a call to action. Obama had to first celebrate the accomplishments of the past with regard to equality over the last half-century and then raise awareness about the persistence of inequality in the present. As my analysis will show, Obama employed

light and dark imagery to characterize the achievements of the past. Rather than invite listeners to interrogate the inherent tensions associated with the struggles and successes associated with civil rights, however, Obama's discourse presented the past as a problem-solution through self-correcting binaries.

After Obama detailed the past, he addressed the present. In his discussion of the present, however, some inconsistencies materialize. While he abandoned his paradoxical approach when addressing Michael Brown in the first Ferguson speech, Obama implemented a doubled approach to address the Brown controversy in Selma, thereby providing listeners a rhetorical catalyst to engage in controversy. This strategy did not appear in Washington. When he addressed the current issue of economic inequality in D.C., Obama used the sense of division generated by the struggle over the past fifty years to call on listeners to unify in a common goal and purpose—prompting the audience to “stand together” in the pursuit of equality. In Selma, however, Obama returned to his doubled approach when he addressed equal access to the ballot, and provided listeners a foundation for deliberation.

STRUCTURAL DYNAMICS OF OBAMA'S ORATIONS

Obama's speeches in Washington and Selma are similar in style and in form. In the first half of both commemorations, Obama celebrated the accomplishments and achievements of King and those who marched in each respective location. His treatment of these accomplishments, however, differed significantly from the ways in which he addressed the Jeremiah Wright controversy, and the killings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, the focus of the previous chapters. On most occasions when speaking about matters that stem from racial unrest, Obama has employed a binary rhetorical

strategy to divide listeners initially. In the second chapter, I demonstrated Obama's tripartite construction of guilt in "A More Perfect Union" that divided listeners across racial lines, but ultimately created a foundation for America's redemption. The third chapter illustrated Obama's use of paradox in "A More Perfect Union" and after Trayvon Martin to first partition America by race, but then provide a catalyst for listeners to engage in what Michael Mendelson calls *controversia*, the pedagogical practice whereby speakers interrogate both pro and contra reasoning to establish grounds for deliberation ("Everything Must be Argued" 17). While Obama did create binaries in Washington and in Selma, neither speech holds the same pedagogical capacity as the earlier speeches analyzed in this dissertation. Rather, the binaries in these speeches materialize in light-dark imagery (Osborn "Archetypal" 117). Instead of inviting listeners to survey and interrogate the opinions elicited by the events associated with each speech, Obama's light and dark prose to celebrate America's achievements with regard to equality manifests a problem-solution binary that resolves itself, therefore rendering deliberation unnecessary. That is to say, Obama juxtaposed the struggles endured (the problem) against the marchers' willingness to persevere (the solution). Placed alongside each other, these two alternate realities manifest a problem-solution that does not lend itself to interrogation or deliberation.

Halfway through each speech, Obama's focus shifted to the present and future. In Washington, he directed listeners' attention to the need for economic equality. In Selma, Obama focused the audience's attention on equal voting rights. Unlike his treatment of the past, his discussion of the inequities in the present resembles more closely his discourse concerning Wright, Martin, and Brown insofar as Obama created a

division that provides a catalyst for listeners to deliberate in Selma. In short, Obama used binaries to create self-correcting problem-solutions when he characterized the past, while his treatment of the future incorporated a doubled approach more amenable to controversy.

When the Washington and Selma speeches are viewed against each other and the others speeches analyzed in this dissertation, some inconsistencies become recognizable. For example, Obama's remarks on Michael Brown in Selma contradicted his initial statement on Ferguson 2014. While initially Obama chose not to employ controversy as a rhetorical strategy to address Brown, he utilized this pedagogical approach for a brief moment in Selma. Another contradiction concerning technology materializes in Obama's commemoration speeches. In Washington, Obama blamed technology for its role on a diminishing labor force. In Selma, by contrast, he championed technology for innovating "every aspect of our lives" (6).

From here, the analysis in this chapter begins with a discussion of the first half of Obama's Washington and Selma speeches. It will show how Obama used light and dark imagery to create reconcilable binaries, which reflect the courage and sacrifices made by marchers. It continues with a discussion of the inconsistencies among Washington, Selma, and the speeches analyzed the previous chapters. The analysis concludes with a discussion of the second half of each commemoration speech as Obama addressed economic inequality and equal voting rights respectively.

COMMEMORATING THE PAST

Obama, in the proem of each speech, used light and dark imagery to acknowledge the sacrifices made by the marchers in Washington and Selma who fought to assure

equality for future generations. The speech in D.C. begins with an ode to King. “We rightly and best remember Dr. King’s soaring oratory that day,” Obama charged, “how he gave mighty voice to the quiet hopes of millions; how he offered a salvation path for oppressed and oppressors alike” (2). The dual qualities that Obama ascribed to King here sets the tone for the first half of the address. That is to say, Obama cast King and the subsequent sacrifices made by the marchers in a problem-solution format.

Obama continued to celebrate the sacrifices of the ordinary Americans who marched in 1963. He began by acknowledging the struggles they endured: “Many had gone to segregated schools and sat at segregated lunch counters. They lived in towns where they couldn’t vote and cities where their votes didn’t matter” (2). “They were couples in love who couldn’t marry,” he continued, “soldiers who fought for freedom abroad that they found denied to them at home” (2). Obama then proceeded to characterize their response as a solution. He said, “they had every reason to lash out in anger, or resign themselves to a bitter fate. . . . And yet they chose a different path” (2). “In the face of hatred, they prayed for tormentors,” he asserted, “[i]n the face of violence they stood up and sat in, with the moral force of nonviolence” (2). Obama addressed these sacrifices in binary form, initially as a problem and then their response as a solution.

Obama deployed a similar strategy in Selma to commemorate the sacrifices of those who marched on Bloody Sunday. After issuing introductory remarks to honor John Lewis, the life-long civil rights activist and U.S. Representative of Georgia who was instrumental in the march, Obama turned to the ordinary Americans who marched for equality. Obama asserted, “[w]e gather here to honor the courage of ordinary Americans

willing to endure billy clubs and the chastening rod; tear gas and the trampling hoof; men and women who despite the gush of blood and splintered bone would stay true to their North Star and keep marching towards justice” (2). Obama created a binary here through his portrayal of the courage the marchers possessed. He juxtaposed the pain they endured against their perseverance to continue, which presents the struggle as a problem-solution for listeners. He continued to acknowledge the contradictory nature of their stories: “The Americans who crossed this bridge, they were not physically imposing. But they gave courage to millions. They held no office. But they led a nation” (3). This last example represents a paradox. The juxtaposition between “not physically imposing” and giving “courage to millions” presents a contradiction in the same way that many of the marchers “held no office” yet “led a nation.” The difference between Obama’s use of paradox here and in the previous chapters, however, centers on the current example’s inability to stimulate a dialog that would allow listeners to interrogate the inherent tensions between the two claims. Rather, the paradox Obama employed here presents itself as more of a problem-solution, or as an enthymeme, which invites listeners to recognize the sacrifices of the previous generation as Obama prepared and urged them to continue the march in 2013 and 2015.

The culmination of the first half of the Washington speech ends with Obama’s deployment of an archetypal metaphor. To reinforce the importance of sacrifice, both those made by the marchers in 1963 and also the sacrifice Obama asked listeners to make at the time of his speech, Obama used Psalm 30:5 to invoke the chronology intrinsic to archetypes. “[P]eople . . . could have given up and given in, but kept on keeping on,” he asserted, “knowing that ‘weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the

morning” (3). According to Osborn, light and dark imagery evokes a sense of confidence and optimism because it is rooted in the fixed chronological movement of day into night and night into day. When speakers present the past as dark and the present or future as light, a subtle element of determinism comes into focus, which the speaker can use to shape the audience’s awareness about a particular topic (“Archetypal” 118).

Obama’s depiction of sacrifice as a reflection of perseverance through a chronological metaphor suggests a latent sense of optimism with regard to economic equality, the subject of his “Let Freedom Ring” speech. That is to say, it can be inferred that despite setbacks, Obama remains optimistic in Washington about America’s future and equality.

Obama’s characterization of the courage and sacrifice exemplified by the marchers in Washington and Selma both reaffirms and diverges from his doubled strategy outlined in the preceding chapters. Similar to his portrayal of the controversy surrounding Jeremiah Wright, and the killings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, Obama used a binary to illustrate the marchers, their courage and sacrifices, and the struggles they endured, in dichotomized form. The difference, however, resides in the latter’s inability to provoke or generate a discussion in the pedagogical sense associated with controversia. While Obama used the exigencies brought forth by Wright and Martin to first divide America across racial lines, doing so had the potential to spark a meaningful conversation in which Americans could confront and interrogate their racial differences. When celebrating past achievements with regard to racial equality, however, such a strategy is rendered unnecessary. Whereas in the earlier chapters the binaries remain unresolved, and therefore present an opportunity for listeners to interrogate and

deliberate the competing claims with regard to racial inequality, Obama here utilized a problem-solution.

RHETORICAL INCONSISTENCIES

Viewed alongside “A More Perfect Union” and his remarks following the killings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, a close reading of Obama’s speech to commemorate the March on Washington and his speech in celebration of Bloody Sunday reveal some contradictions. Inconsistencies materialize between the speeches that are the focus of this chapter—Obama’s speech Washington and his speech in Selma—but also among the speeches analyzed in the earlier chapters. In the previous chapter, I detailed how Darren Wilson’s status as government official impeded Obama’s pedagogical approach, a constraint that would have required Obama to indict an American democratic institution if he had chosen to censure Wilson for any wrongdoing or acknowledged a breakdown in our criminal justice system. Rather than use the killing of Michael Brown as an opportunity to provoke a discussion on the status of racial inequality, the strategy that helped Obama succeed in “A More Perfect Union” and in his response to Trayvon Martin, Obama used the occasion to condemn violent protest in Ferguson and America more generally. Less than four months later, in March of 2015, the topic of Michael Brown resurfaced in Obama’s speech to commemorate Selma, and his tone changed dramatically. In Selma, Obama characterized the divided sentiment surrounding Ferguson in dual form, when he acknowledged the viewpoints of those who stood on both sides of the ruling through paradox. In this way, he employed an approach similar to how he characterized the dissent following Trayvon Martin and the verdict that acquitted George Zimmerman of murder. While Obama’s initial comments following

Brown did not promote deliberation, when he addressed the issue in Selma the opportunity arose.

In Selma, Obama couched his comments on Brown within a call for Americans to be neither complacent nor discouraged in the pursuit of justice. “Just this week,” he asserted, “I was asked whether I thought the Department of Justice’s Ferguson report shows that, with respect to race, little has changed in this country” (4). “And I understood the question; the report’s narrative was sadly familiar,” he noted (4). “It evoked the kind of abuse and disregard for citizens that spawned the Civil Rights Movement,” he continued (4). His initial statements reflect the emotions of many who feel that little has changed with regard to the white on black violence perpetuated by figures of authority that occurred before and during civil rights, and has continued to persist over the past fifty years. Obama then provided an alternative perspective: “But I rejected the notion that nothing’s changed. What happened in Ferguson may not be unique, but it’s no longer endemic” (5). “It’s no longer sanctioned by law,” he argued, “[a]nd before the Civil Rights Movement, it surely was” (5). “We do a disservice to the cause of justice by intimating that bias and discrimination are immutable,” he declared, “that racial division is inherent to America” (5). Although Obama started to acknowledge those listeners who see Ferguson as evidence of a continuation of racial prejudice among law enforcement and more generally in America today, he countered with comments to validate the opposition, the people who in fact believe we are on the right path and think America is a world away from the era of civil rights of the 1950s and 1960s with regard to racial inequality.

Obama continued to point out achievements our country has made concerning civil rights over the past fifty years. Progress, he explained, has occurred in material ways: “If you think nothing’s changed in the past 50 years, ask somebody who lived through the Selma or Chicago or Los Angeles of the 1950s. Ask the female CEO who once might have been assigned to the secretarial pool if nothing’s changed. Ask your gay friend if it’s easier to be out and proud in America now than it was thirty years ago” (5). Obama then provided an alternative interpretation of America’s progress with regard to equality. “Of course,” he explained, “a more common mistake is to suggest that Ferguson is an isolated incident; that racism is banished. . . . We don’t need the Ferguson report to know that’s not true” (5). “We just need to open our eyes, and our ears, and our hearts,” he continued, “to know that this nation’s racial history still casts its long shadow upon us” (5). Obama’s tendency to portray the duality and diversity of the situation reflects an attempt to survey the controversy in its entirety, the conditions necessary for the audience to partake in *controversia*.

A major argument of this dissertation is that Obama, by establishing a sense of division when addressing matters that stem from racial unrest, provides a foundation for Americans to participate in the pedagogical act of *controversia*. *Controversia*, to review, proceeds by placing multiple claims in juxtaposition and then by negotiating the conflicts among them (Mendelson “Quintilian” 278). A cornerstone of the pedagogy of Cicero and Quintilian, *controversia* presumes that different frames of reference can enable us to recognize what had been obscure to our own view and that through the emergence of these differences we become more aware (Mendelson “Everything Must be Argued” 38). According to Mendelson, “in the realm of rhetoric and for the purpose of argument—no

position is sacrosanct, everything must be argued for there are always two sides, or more to every question [and] we should always be prepared . . . to examine both sides of the case” (“Everything Must be Argued” 16). When opposite perspectives are brought to the fore, we in turn have an opportunity to debate the efficacy of both claims, and through such an interrogation we aim to reach a consensus about what is correct or desirable.

Although controversia helped Obama succeed in “A More Perfect Union” and after Trayvon Martin, as the last chapter detailed, he averted a pedagogical approach when addressing Michael Brown initially in 2014. Then, less than four months later, Obama created a sense of division among audience members when addressing Brown in his speech in Selma, thereby establishing a foundation for listeners to confront and interrogate the diversity of opinion surrounding the event. Why did Obama employ this rhetorical strategy in Selma but not in his initial speech after Ferguson? While Obama delivered his first speech in the aftermath of Darren Wilson’s acquittal, Selma, by contrast, was an epideictic occasion. That is to say, each speech had a unique context and produced a different set of constraints. Since Selma summoned Obama to celebrate the lives and accomplishments of those who marched on Bloody Sunday, he had more latitude to place Ferguson within a much broader and more general context concerning racial inequality. The initial speech from 2014, however, required Obama to respond to the direct actions of Darren Wilson and the Ferguson Police Department, which constrained his ability to stimulate a dialog on race among audience members without implicating wrongdoing of a federal government official.

Viewed from a rhetorical-pedagogical standpoint, Obama’s response to Brown in Selma has the potential to enable Americans to interact at what Burke called the fourth

and highest rung of the educational ladder in his “Linguistic Approach to Problems of Education.” At this advanced stage, all voices are deemed equal but scrutinized for their inherent flaws and vulnerable arguments (Burke 23). In the process, interlocutors engage in a collaborative discussion, mutually correcting one another, in the hope that they reach a conclusion better than their own. At this level of interaction, Burke explained, “one does not merely want to outwit the opponent, or to study him, one wants to be affected by him, in some degree to incorporate him, to so act that his ways can help perfect one’s own—in brief, to learn from him” (23). Obama’s invitation for listeners to entertain both perspectives—one that sees racism as no longer endemic and another that places Ferguson within a larger context of police killings, and alongside the structural inequities that afflict African Americans and other populations of color—affords the audience an opportunity to converse at this stage of Burke’s educational hierarchy. That Obama made these comments in Selma, on an epideictic occasion, reinforces Osborn’s claim that a “qualitative condition [is] more [amenable] to ceremonial or inspirational speeches,” and Burke’s assertion that the fourth principle is difficult to sustain “except in glimpses and at happy moments” (“Archetypal” 118; Burke 23). Because the speech in Selma marked a celebration, it provided a “happy moment” in which Obama could use pedagogy to incite a meaningful discussion.

While Obama’s treatment of Michael Brown in his commemoration of Bloody Sunday contradicted his initial statements on Ferguson, another inconsistency materialized with regard to Obama’s description of technology in the speech in Washington and the speech in Selma. When Obama addressed the financial hardships that continue to burden America in the twenty-first century, nearly fifty years after

African Americans and civil rights activists made economic equality central to their endeavor, he assigned blame to technology for perpetuating the problem. “Since 1963,” he asserted, “the economy has changed. The twin forces of technology and global competition have subtracted those jobs that once provided a foothold into the middle class – reduced the bargaining power of American workers” (5). Recall in the second chapter Obama utilized a similar strategy when he scapegoated the news media and government institutions for his guilt concerning the Jeremiah Wright controversy.

Although Obama in Washington criticized technology for its role in diminishing the labor force, in Selma he remained optimistic. “Fellow marchers,” he extolled, “so much has changed in 50 years” (6). “We’ve seen technological wonders that touch every aspect of our lives,” he continued (6). “We take for granted conveniences that our parents could have scarcely imagined,” he argued (6). When both these speeches are viewed in isolation, Obama’s comments about technology do not yield any pedagogical gain for listeners. Placed alongside each other, however, the technology comments in both speeches create the conditions necessary for controversy.

AMERICA’S FUTURE

The second half of the Washington speech and the speech in Selma follow a similar progression. Obama began by drawing listeners’ attention to the issue at hand: economic equality in Washington and equal access to the ballot in Selma. In both speeches, he utilized a doubled approach to illustrate the complexity of each problem. The opportunity for pedagogy, however, exists only in Selma and not in Washington. In D.C., Obama detailed the division that has materialized across racial lines as a result of the ongoing struggle for economic equality, which in turn prompted his call for unity as

America continues its pursuit. In Selma, the opportunity for deliberation developed when Obama portrayed the controversy surrounding equal voting rights in dual form, both blaming and absolving the government and American citizens for their roles in the issue.

In Washington, Obama first summarized the ways in which America's progress with regard to economic equality over the last half-century has stalled. He declared,

we'll admit that during the course of 50 years, there were times when some of us claiming to push for change lost our way. The anguish of assassinations set off self-defeating riots. Legitimate grievances against police brutality tipped into excuse-making for criminal behavior. Racial politics could cut both ways, as the transformative message of unity and brotherhood was drowned out by the language of recrimination. And what had once been a call for equality of opportunity, the chance for all Americans to work hard and get ahead was too often framed as a mere desire for government support -- as if we had no agency in our own liberation, as if poverty was an excuse for not raising your child, and the bigotry of others was reason to give up on yourself.

(5)

In this passage, Obama associated America's stalled progress with the sense of division that the struggle for equality created. The doubled reality of America's struggle becomes apparent in his prose. In addition to King, a number of civil rights activists including Medgar Evers and Malcolm X were assassinated, which set off riots in cities and towns across the country; the reality of police brutality cascaded into an excuse to break the law; and the message of "unity and brotherhood" was often juxtaposed by anger and calls for retaliation. Although justified, the anger and discord created by America's struggle

stunted our progress. Rather than divide Americans by their oppositional sentiment concerning racial inequality, as he did with Wright, Martin, and Brown, Obama in this passage showed listeners how division impeded the journey to equality.

America's future, Obama maintained, would be dependent upon listeners' actions at this juncture. "All of that history is how progressed stalled," he said (5). "That's how hope was diverted," he acknowledged, "[i]t's how our country remained divided" (5). He then proceeded to offer listeners a choice: "We can continue down our current path, in which the gears of this great democracy grind to a halt . . . [o]r we can have the courage to change" (5). Given America's turbulent history with regard to economic equality, and the inequities that exist across racial lines more generally, listeners can infer Obama's preference for the second option. Obama utilized anaphora to help the audience recognize its common stake and to provoke listeners into action. "And with that courage," Obama argued, "we can stand together for good jobs and just wages. With that courage we can stand together for the right to health care. . . . With that courage, we can stand together for the right of every child" (6). The repeated reference to the inclusive pronoun "we" reflects Obama's attempt to unite rather than divide listeners. The repetitive "with that courage" and "we can stand" statements demonstrate Obama's effort to prepare the audience to act. According to Osborn, speakers can prepare listeners for action through a deployment of figures of repetition such as alliteration, anaphora, and antithesis ("Trajectory" 85). Obama's utilization of anaphora provides America a catalyst for unified action in the pursuit of economic equality.

In Selma, Obama utilized a different strategy to provoke America to work together to attain equal voting rights. First, Obama outlined the efforts of conservative

lawmakers to undermine the Voting Rights Act. “Right now, in 2015, 50 years after Selma,” he asserted, “there are laws across this country designed to make it harder for people to vote” (6). “As we speak,” he continued, “more of such laws are being proposed” (6). As a result, Obama argued, “the Voting Rights Act stands weakened, its future subject to political rancor” (6). He then juxtaposed the efforts of the preceding administrations to renew the act against the lack of citizens to fully exercise their constitutional right. He argued, “[t]he Voting Rights Act was one of the crowning achievements of our democracy, the result of Republican and Democratic efforts” (6). “President Reagan signed its renewal when he was in office,” Obama explained, and “President George W. Bush signed its renewal when he was in office” (6). Despite political efforts to protect the act, Obama illuminated citizens’ lack of involvement in our political process. “Of course,” he acknowledged, “our democracy is not the task of Congress alone, or the courts alone, or even the President alone” (6). Obama continued to indict listeners for neglecting their citizenly obligation. “If every new voter-suppression law was struck down today,” he explained, “we would still have, here in America, one of the lowest voting rates among free people” (6). The act itself has created an unusual paradox. Despite the ongoing presidential effort to renew the Voting Rights Act, citizens continue to relinquish voluntarily their right to vote.

Obama juxtaposed the irony between the hard-fought political battles and sacrifices made to assure equal access to the ballot during civil rights against the apathy of many American citizens today. “Fifty years ago,” Obama said, “registering to vote here in Selma and much of the South meant guessing the number of jellybeans in a jar, the number of bubbles on a bar of soap” (6). “It meant risking your dignity, and

sometimes, your life,” he declared (6). Obama continued to pose rhetorical questions: “What’s our excuse today for not voting? How do we so casually discard the right for which so many fought? How do we so fully give away our power, our voice, in shaping America’s future? Why are we pointing to somebody else when we could take the time just to go to the polling places? We give away our power” (6).

While the speech in Washington demonstrates the ways in which division across racial lines has continued to undermine America’s ability to achieve equality, the speech in Selma resembles more closely Obama’s earlier strategies. In Washington, Obama showed listeners how the sense of division that exists in America has subverted the possibility for change. Although he acknowledged and validated sentiment across the entire spectrum, he maintained “that is how progress stalled” and “how hope was diverted.” His voice then shifted as he called for unity through repeated use of the inclusive pronoun “we,” which indicates that listeners must reject the impulse to get caught up what divides us and instead coalesce around the shared goal of equality.

The treatment of equal voting rights in Selma, by contrast, reflected more closely Obama’s earlier pedagogical strategy. He articulated the controversy surrounding imposed voting restrictions through a deployment of paradox to enable listeners to examine both sides of the case, a fundamental task of controversia. He started by acknowledging the doubled role of our political system in assuring and restricting voting rights to all citizens. On the one hand, he noted, there are laws that make it more difficult for citizens to vote, more of which are currently being proposed. He then presented an alternative perspective, which absolved the government for its role in imposing restrictions when he argued that his administration, along with George W. Bush and

Ronald Reagan, renewed the Voting Rights Act. While the government at times has been responsible for worsening the problem, many presidents have sought to renew the act since it took effect in 1965. By presenting the issue in its full complexity, Obama provided listeners an opportunity to interrogate the value of both claims.

Obama continued to characterize the role of citizens' participation in our government in binary form. He explained first that during the era of civil rights registering to vote was an imperfect process; skewed statistics and gerrymandering negatively affected the ability for many African Americans to participate in the electoral process. Yet many jeopardized their safety and their lives to secure this fundamental right guaranteed by the Constitution. Despite the hard-fought political battles, however, Americans continue to remain largely uninvolved in both local and national elections. The dualistic portrayal of this controversy enables deliberation on two levels. First, in a society in which so many who came before us sacrificed to ensure equality for future Americans, Obama invited the audience to consider, what is the current generation's excuse to not get out to the polls and vote? The second point of introspection centers on the tension between laws that restrict access to the polls for many Americans, on the one hand, and a generally uninvolved populace on the other. Through validation and acknowledgment of both sides, Obama placed a premium on the potential for Americans to survey the scope of the issue in its entirety.

CONCLUSION

As this chapter has demonstrated, Obama utilized a similar yet different rhetorical strategy when he commemorated the March on Washington and Bloody Sunday at their respective fifty-year celebrations. While he maintained a doubled approach on both

occasions, the discourse as a whole, did not possess the same capacity for pedagogy as the speeches analyzed in the preceding chapters. Much of this can be attributed to the context and constraints surrounding each speech. The previous chapters examined Obama's discourse concerning isolated instances in which America's racial awareness has been amplified, largely due to a perceived breakdown in the criminal justice system or from events that have perpetuated a sense of division between the races, thus widening the sense of alienation between white people and people of color on the topic of equality. On these occasions, Obama has succeeded, in part, I argue, not because of his ability to call for unity but rather by bringing these divisions to the fore. In the process of polarizing the country across racial lines, Obama affords citizens the chance to confront and interrogate their differences, racial and otherwise. This was the case with Jeremiah Wright in "A More Perfect Union," Trayvon Martin, and Michael Brown in Obama's speech in Selma.

Obama's speech in Washington and the speech in Selma created a different rhetorical problem. Not only did he have to address the persistence of inequality today in the twenty-first century, he also had to acknowledge and celebrate the accomplishments since the era of civil rights. The problem in these speeches, therefore, presented a paradox. On the one hand, the occasions summoned Obama to address the gains and achievements with regard to equality. On the other hand, economic inequality and unequal access to the ballot represent two of the structural impediments that populations of color continue to contend with more than fifty years after the March on Washington and Bloody Sunday. His task in these speeches centered on addressing these two contradictory realities.

When addressing America's past, especially with regard to the achievements concerning equality, a pedagogical approach is rendered unnecessary. Pedagogy, which for Obama is executed best through division, can only occur in times of unrest as when he responds to particular events that illuminate the reality of inequality. Since Washington and Selma addressed the failures and successes of the entire Civil Rights Movement, the speeches called on Obama to speak more in general terms and less about specific instances associated with equality.

The next chapter culminates the analytical chapters of this dissertation with an examination of Obama's eulogy in June of 2015 for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney in Charleston, South Carolina. The speech, which followed a racially motivated hate crime in which a lone gunman took the lives of nine African Americans in a Charleston church, represents another epideictic occasion that positioned race as the presiding exigency. In contrast to Washington and Selma, however, Charleston was not a celebratory occasion. Instead, Obama had to speak out against the reality of racism in twenty-first century America.

To extend the analysis of the previous chapters, I demonstrate how division manifests in Charleston albeit in altered form. In the eulogy, I argue, Obama deployed a rhetoric of irony in three ways: First, he illustrates thematically the ways in which the general response to the shooting created an irony of circumstance whereby the outcome defied its expectation. Second, Obama characterized Pinckney as a man of contradiction. His status as both a preacher and a politician marked him in ironic and somewhat oppositional terms. Finally, I demonstrate how Obama's comments on the alleged killer, Dylann Roof, complicate our understanding of irony in the Burkean frame by showing

how Roof embodied both the romantic and dialectic brands of irony that Burke treated in discrete and oppositional terms.

CHAPTER 5

IRONY IN CHARLESTON: BARACK OBAMA'S EULOGY FOR CLEMENTA C. PINCKNEY, JUNE 26, 2015

On the evening of June 17, 2015, twenty-one-year-old Dylann Roof arrived at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston, South Carolina. Shortly after 8:00 p.m., Roof entered the church through a side entrance, and sat down with twelve parishioners during a weekly Bible study meeting for nearly an hour before pulling out a concealed handgun and allegedly killing nine people. Roof came to the church with a clear motive: to “kill black people” and incite a race war (qtd. in Liptak n. pag.). “You are raping our women and taking over our country,” Roof exclaimed as he opened fire, witnesses later recalled and told police (qtd. in Apuzzo A12). In a matter of minutes, the alleged killer had unleashed an incomprehensible amount of carnage. The victims, all African American, ranged in age from twenty-six to eighty-seven, and came from all walks of life. Among the deceased was Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney, Democratic member of the South Carolina Senate and senior pastor at Mother Emanuel. Contrary to the alleged killer’s attempt to intensify America’s racial divide, the country unified in support of the victims and against racism in the aftermath of the Charleston shooting.

A week after the shooting, on June 26, Barack Obama delivered the eulogy for Pinckney at TD Arena at the College of Charleston, a short walk from Emanuel AME. The news media lauded the speech as a defining moment in Obama’s presidential career. *The Guardian* called it one of Obama’s “most searing speeches” on race to date (Pilkington n. pag.). Writing for CNN, Kevin Liptak acknowledged that Obama

delivered a “touching eulogy,” and called the speech “a thoughtful meditation on race” (n. pag.). Charleston’s *Post and Courier* recognized Obama’s “soaring” oratory, and acknowledged the killings provided a grieving country an opportunity “to find our best selves,” an ironic antidote to “the nation’s enduring racial divide” (Kropf and Bartelme n. pag.).

Spectators started to line up in the middle of the night to see the president speak, and by 11:00 a.m. the venue had reached maximum capacity, close to 6,000 people; 5,000 more were turned away due to lack of available seating (Kropf and Bartelme n. pag.; Sack and Harris A1). Notable attendees included first lady Michelle Obama, Vice President Biden, a bipartisan host of congressional members, and Hillary Clinton. In addition to eulogizing Pinckney, Obama made America’s racial divide central to his Charleston speech. He called for a removal of the Confederate flag from the state capitol in Columbia, and addressed the “inferential” forms of racism that Michael Lacy and Kent Ono have claimed continue to afflict America in the twenty-first century (3).

Examination of Obama’s eulogy in Charleston culminates the analytical chapters of this dissertation. The constant theme throughout my research has focused on Obama’s preference to establish a sense of division when addressing matters that have stemmed from racial unrest. Contrary to most scholarship on his discourse, which asserts that Obama deploys an inclusive rhetorical strategy that ties Americans to shared values (Darsey; Rowland and Jones; Terrill), my contribution has centered on the illumination of Obama’s tendency to abandon inclusive appeals and create a sense of division when speaking about issues that have fractured America across racial lines, or simply raised awareness about the persistence of inequality between the races.

In chapter two, I argued that Obama separated Americans by their disparate conceptions of guilt concerning racial inequality in his “A More Perfect Union” address, a strategy that initially had the potential to create a divide between Americans of different races but ultimately provided a foundation for solidarity. Chapter three extended the analysis of “A More Perfect Union” to show how, when placed alongside Obama’s statements about Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, the speeches revealed the pedagogical capacity for controversia, a strategy in which speakers place ideas in opposition to provoke listeners to interrogate the efficacy of both, or multiple, claims (Mendelson “Quintilian” 278). In chapter four, I investigated Obama’s commemoration of the March on Washington and Bloody Sunday to show how both speeches created a unique paradox that required Obama to simultaneously celebrate achievements of the past while drawing listeners’ attention to the persistence of inequality in the present. To that end, the reoccurring pattern throughout these chapters has centered on Obama’s preference to establish a sense of division when addressing racially contested issues.

In the same vein as the previous chapters, division manifests in Obama’s Charleston eulogy albeit in different form. In Charleston, Obama maintained the use of division through a rhetoric of irony. The question can then be asked, how does Obama use irony as a rhetorical strategy in the Charleston eulogy, and what is the relationship between irony and division? In Charleston, Obama utilized irony to describe the outcome of the tragedy, characterize Clementa Pinckney, and detail the alleged killer’s turn from perpetrator to ironic victim. In *A Grammar of Motives*, Kenneth Burke defined irony as the master trope, which reigns superior to all other poetic perspectives—metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche—because of its ability to reveal the whole rather than a

partial or limited frame (503). Because of its ability to portray a subject in complete terms, irony is both dichotomous and oppositional. Irony, Wayne Booth explained, creates “a basic contradiction . . . a fundamental and irremediable absurdity” (218). To extend his preferred strategy of division Obama utilized irony to create contradictions in his Charleston eulogy.

Irony in the eulogy, I argue, manifests in three ways. First, the speech demonstrates thematically an irony of circumstance, in which the outcome of a situation defies the expectation. Though Roof intended to perpetuate hatred and animosity between the races, the reverse occurred when the country united in opposition to the alleged killer and racism more generally. Second, Obama used irony to characterize Pinckney as a contradictory figure. Pinckney’s role as both a pastor and a politician created a doubled portrayal of a man involved in two seemingly contradictory vocations, religion and politics. Third, Obama’s comments on the alleged killer reflect Burke’s notion of romantic (dissociative) and dialectic (associative) irony. Although Burke treated these variations discretely as oppositional terms, Obama’s eulogy creates an inconsistency that situates Roof as both a source of romantic and dialectic irony simultaneously. On the one hand, the American people dissociated from the heinous act and racism more generally. At the same time, however, listeners have what Burke would call a “fundamental kinship” with the enemy since his act was the catalyst for America’s ability to form a union that transcended its racial divisions (*Grammar* 514). That is to say, without Roof and the Charleston tragedy, Americans would not have been afforded the opportunity to coalesce around a shared opposition to racism.

In pursuing these claims, the chapter proceeds in three parts. I begin first with examination of the history surrounding Charleston's Emanuel AME Church, Roof's attempt to widen America's racial divide, and the ironic outcome, which united rather than divided the country across racial lines. Then I continue with a theoretical discussion of irony that demonstrates its predisposition for contradiction and, therefore, its similarity to division. I then proceed with analysis of Obama's eulogy to illustrate how irony manifests in the speech. Obama's use of irony to create contradictions in the eulogy, I argue, resembles more closely the rhetorical situation he faced in his commemoration speeches. Although Obama maintained a doubled approach in Charleston, the eulogy, like his commemoration speeches analyzed in the previous chapter, does not possess the same potential for pedagogy as his discourse surrounding Jeremiah Wright, Trayvon Martin, and Michael Brown. Taken together, Obama's commemoration speeches analyzed in the previous chapter and the Charleston eulogy represent epideictic occasions that rendered the need for deliberation unnecessary.

AN UNEXPECTED OUTCOME

The historical significance of Charleston's Emanuel AME Church made it a prime target for the perpetration of a racially motivated hate crime. The congregation first formed in 1791, comprised mostly of freedmen and women and slaves (Payne n. pag.). Among the oldest black churches in the South, Emanuel AME separated from Charleston's Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816 after a dispute over burial grounds ("Bridge Builder n. pag.; Payne n. pag.). During its formative years, ministers of the church were arrested regularly for violating laws that prohibited slaves and freedmen and women from gathering without white supervision. Following an unsuccessful slave

revolt in 1822, the church was burned down after suspicion that slaves had used the church as a central location to plan the uprising. Authorities suspected Denmark Vesey, former slave and founding member of the congregation, as the architect behind the rebellion (Williams n. pag.). In addition to Vesey, police arrested 312 alleged participants, and executed 35, including Vesey (Payne n. pag.).

Members of the congregation rebuilt the church and continued to meet there until 1834, when the state legislature outlawed all-black churches. Despite the law, parishioners continued to hold clandestine gatherings until the Civil War ended in 1865 (Payne n. pag.). During the height of the Civil Rights Movement, Emanuel hosted Dr. King (Scott n. pag.), and the church itself, Reverend Norvel Goff noted, is responsible “for bringing about change and working together to build bridges, not only in the Charleston community, but across [the] nation and [the] state” of South Carolina (qtd. in “Bridge Builder” n. pag.). Today, the church continues to be a fixture in Charleston. With seating capacity of 2,500, AME remains the largest black church in the Holy City (Payne n. pag.).

The triumph and tragedy embedded in the history of Emanuel AME serves as a representation for a city that today is still marked by contradiction. J. Ryan Lister, Professor of Theology at Western Seminary, explained Charleston’s conflicting realities:

Contradiction is everywhere in Charleston. Hers is a dangerous beauty. Her refinement is rough around the edges in a desperate, but somehow, persuasive way. Charleston is a city, both old and new. She is marked by history and progress. The city rose from . . . the ashes of the antebellum South by embracing its past and selling tickets to its dark history. . . . The city is black

and white, precariously teetering on the racial fault-lines the New South tries so hard to forget. . . . Once the Holy City, Charleston is now the place where congregational prayer is silenced by gunfire. (n. pag.).

Given the church's role in providing sustenance to its constituents and the greater community, and Charleston's history with regard to race relations more generally, it is no wonder the alleged killer zeroed in on Emanuel AME as the perfect location to unleash a racially motivated hate crime.

Shortly after Roof's arrest in North Carolina, Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch announced federal hate crime charges against him. She addressed his intent: "He was looking for the type of church and the type of parishioners whose death would in fact draw great notoriety for his racist views" (qtd. in Apuzzo A12). Dalton Tyler, an acquaintance of Roof, confirmed Lynch's suspicion, when he told ABC News that Roof "was big into segregation and . . . said he wanted to start a civil war" (qtd. in Campbell n. pag.). He was "planning something like that for six months," Tyler explained. He said he was going to do something like that and then kill himself" (qtd. in Campbell n. pag.). Lynch further noted that Roof hoped his attack would "fan racial flames" and pay retribution for what he believed were wrongs that people of color committed against white people (qtd. in Apuzzo A12). As Roof's arrest made national headlines, more people came out of the woodwork to help authorities create a composite of the alleged killer.

Those who knew Roof characterized him as an individual motivated by hate. His uncle described him as a "shut-in with no job and plenty of anger" (qtd. in Campbell n. pag). Derrick Pearson, a friend of the alleged killer, who posted on Facebook a picture of

Roof sitting on the hood of a black car with a license plate that reads “Confederate States of America,” warned people to stay away from Roof, saying “lives do not matter to him” (qtd. in Campbell n. pag.). Roof outlined his intent in an online manifesto:

I have no choice. I am not in the position to, alone, go into the ghetto and fight. I chose Charleston because it is the most historic city in my state, and at one time had the highest ratio of blacks to Whites in the country. We have no skinheads, no real KKK, no one doing anything but talking on the Internet. Well someone has to have the bravery to take it to the real world, and I guess that has to be me. (qtd. in Apuzzo A12)

Although Roof had carefully planned an attack he was certain would evoke hate and further alienate the country across racial lines, he could have never imagined the outcome. Ironically, families of the victims responded to Roof with love and compassion, and Americans of all races unified in support of the nine victims and the greater Charleston community.

Within hours of the shooting, people rallied support on social media under the hashtag #PrayforCharleston. Politicians, public figures, and average Americans began to weigh in. Hillary Clinton called the incident “heartbreaking,” while Jeb Bush sent his “thoughts and prayers . . . [to] the individual families affected by the tragic events” (“Reaction Swift” n. pag.) Musician John Legend said simply, “Charleston. My heart hurts” (“Reaction Swift” n. pag.). Some news media outlets acknowledged the difference between the reaction to Charleston and earlier incidents that exposed latent forms of racism. *The Washington Times*, for example, called the response a “stark contrast” to the protests and chaos that followed Ferguson and Baltimore (Williams n. pag.).

South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley delivered an impassioned statement that called for the community to unite in support rather than respond with outward displays of anger. Acknowledging the solemnness of the situation, Haley stated, “we have some grieving to do, and we’ve got some pain to go through. . . . [Y]ou are going to see all of us try to lift these nine families up in prayer, because they need us” (qtd. in Milligan n. pag.). “These nine families need us,” Haley continued, “the Emanuel AME church needs us . . . and the people of South Carolina need us to come together and be strong” (qtd. in Milligan n. pag.). As citizens of Charleston continued to reel from the confusion surrounding the tragedy, Haley sought to bind the community together through a message of support and compassion.

The killings spurred bipartisan political support. Mike Johnson, a Democratic senator from Colorado, for example, composed a support letter to the senior pastor of his local AME chapter. Johnson drove to the church in the middle of night and taped the letter to its door “to make sure this note was the first thing you saw when you walked in the church tomorrow” (qtd. in Urbanski n. pag.). Johnson filled the letter with sympathy and gratitude, promising to “stand arm in arm with you today in your grief” (qtd. in Urbanski n. pag.). On Facebook, the senator later called for white Americans to help by stopping by their local AME church and volunteering to “sweep a walkway or pull some weeds,” or to simply “offer a hug” (qtd. in Urbanski n. pag.).

Perhaps most ironic was the response from family members of the victims. After Roof’s arrest on Thursday, June 18, relatives of the deceased had the opportunity address the alleged killer in court via videoconference. Most refrained from vitriol and instead approached Roof with forgiveness. Anthony Thompson, whose relative Myra Thompson

was killed, said, “I forgive you, my family forgives you . . . take this opportunity to repent . . . and you’ll be better off than you are right now” (qtd. in Collins n. pag). Bethane Middleton-Brown, who spoke on behalf of her deceased sister, explained, “We have no room for hate. We have to forgive. I pray God on your soul” (qtd. in Collins n. pag.). Alana Simmons, who lost her grandfather, spoke of love’s ability to transcend hate: “Although my grandfather and the other victims died at the hands of hate—everyone’s plea for your soul is proof they lived in love and their legacies will live in love, so hate won’t win” (qtd. in Collins n. pag.). Despite Roof’s attempt to perpetrate an act that he believed would deepen America’s racial divide, most Americans, including victims’ families, reacted exactly opposite.

Given the deep racial divisions that have continued to plague America since our country’s inception, through the antebellum and post-bellum eras, during the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s until today, a troublesome twenty-first century in which racial animus and the persistence of racial inequality lingers and has been put on display following the killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, and Walter Scott more recently, the outcome in Charleston was ironic to say the least. To better understand the significance of Obama’s speech, I now turn to a theoretical discussion of irony.

IRONY, CONTRADICTION, AND DIVISION

In *A Grammar of Motives* Kenneth Burke described irony as a rhetorical strategy that allows a speaker to present the whole rather than a part of an object in question. While metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche illustrate a partial or limited perspective, irony incorporates all “sub-perspectives,” thus leading Burke call it the “perspective of

perspectives” (512). Take, for example, the disease-cure binary. While the aim of a cure is to counteract disease, in the absence of disease we have no concept of a cure.

Therefore, we can only think of one in terms of the other and vice versa. In Charleston, Obama deployed the word “infect,” or some variation, three times with regard to racism or racial inequality. The cure, ironically, is the act perpetrated by the alleged killer, which allowed listeners to, as Obama put, “see where we’ve been blind” (4). With irony, no perspective is deemed superior, Burke maintained, as all positions affect one another. In order for irony to be recognized as such, both terms must participate in a joint development, and both the speaker and audience must understand that all “sub-certainties” are neither true nor false, but contributory [emphasis original]” (*Grammar* 513). In the context of the Charleston speech, both the shooting and racism in a broader sense worked together to enable America to recognize the work it must do in order to erase racism and achieve equality.

Irony, as a rhetorical strategy, provides a speaker the resources necessary to create identification between two seemingly incompatible groups. Successful irony, Wayne Booth explained, “reveals in . . . participants a kind of meeting with other minds that contradicts a great deal that gets said about who we are . . . and whether we can know each other” (13). Obama’s use of irony in the eulogy, for example, provided a foundation for solidarity between white people and people of color to coalesce around a shared opposition to the alleged killer, his motives, and racism more generally. Rather than perpetuate hate between the races as Roof envisioned his act would achieve, Americans of all creeds and colors unified in support of the victims, their families, and the greater Charleston community. Roof, as such, became the ironic victim of his own act,

representing both the disease and cure for racism in America. But even when irony implies a victim, its end is aimed at something more productive. Irony “inevitably builds a community of believers even as it excludes,” Booth asserted, or what might be called “congregation by segregation” in the Burkean frame (*Dramatism and Development* 29).

Romantic irony emerges when audiences develop a sense of superiority to and distance from the victim. This type of irony, for Burke, arises out of opposition and rejection. In the presence of romantic irony audiences will consider themselves “*outside of and superior to*” the source (*Grammar* 514). Romantic irony is characterized by dissociation, and is also known as situational irony or irony of circumstance in which the outcome contradicts the expectation. The shootings in Charleston, for example, demonstrate this case in point. While Dylann Roof intended to incite a race war by killing nine African Americans in Emanuel AME, the opposite occurred. The American people unified in opposition to the alleged killer, therefore demonstrating this situational or romantic brand of irony. While the deployment of irony in the speech aligned Obama with listeners who, as Booth explained, “share his superior values, intelligence, and . . . sensibility,” both Obama and the American people united in opposition to Roof and the tragedy that unfolded at Emanuel AME.

Dialectic irony, by contrast, seeks “humility” and does not allow auditors to develop a sense of superiority to the enemy (*Grammar* 514). Burke referred to this second variation as “true” irony, which is characterized by association and unity rather than division. “Superiority,” for Burke, can only manifest in the sense that auditors may feel “a need of *more characters*” than those “foolish characters under consideration [emphasis original]” (*Grammar* 515). But Auditors can never be superior, Burke argued,

because they also “*need this particular foolish character as one of the necessary modifiers [emphasis original]*” (*Grammar* 515). It took Roof’s heinous act for Americans to coalesce and form a union in opposition to the alleged killer, the shooting, and racism in America. Viewed this way, Obama’s speech in Charleston also creates dialectic irony, which, as Burke explained, provides a “technical equivalent for the doctrine of original sin” (*Grammar* 515).

Similar to the way in which Burke prioritized identification over division, he also preferred dialectic irony to its romantic counterpart. As Diane Davis has noted, “identification’s job is to transcend this natural state of division” (128). Division, therefore, is a condition that we generally seek to correct. “True [dialectic] irony, humble irony,” Burke noted, “is based upon a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, as one *needs* him, is *indebted* to him, is not merely outside him as an observer but contains him *within*, being consubstantial with him [emphasis original]” (*Grammar* 514). Given the focus on unity and cohesion, it is no wonder Burke endorsed dialectic rather than romantic irony, which seeks alienation and division. Dialectic irony can, therefore, be viewed as a cure for romantic irony in the same way we understand identification’s role in remediating division.

Although both variations manifest in Obama’s speech, I argue that romantic irony, which is dissociative in nature, is not a condition to be overcome nor should it be rendered less desirable to dialectic, or humble irony in Charleston. That is to say, Charleston created a context in which romantic and dialectic irony cohabitate symbiotically; irony that is romantic is at the same time dialectic, and both propel an equal effect on each other, which creates an inconsistency in the theoretical frame.

Incongruity, Booth argued, is intrinsic to irony. “[W]hat is not incongruous viewed locally,” he asserted, “will be found so when placed in a larger context” (236). In Obama’s speech, both types of irony are in compliance with each other. Roof, as such, represents an anomaly insofar as Americans are consubstantial with him and dissociate from him at the same time. Although the speech demonstrates romantic irony in the sense that listeners unite in a shared opposition to the tragedy and racism in a broader sense, it is also dialectical because without Roof there would be no basis for America’s union.

My analysis proceeds in three parts. I begin first with an examination of thematic elements of the eulogy that illuminate Obama’s preference for ironic contradiction, inconsistencies that surface in his acknowledgment of the nine victims, the unexpected outcome of the tragedy, and his comments regarding racial inequality. The thematic elements of irony in the eulogy, I argue, are similar to the contradictory nature of Obama’s rhetorical situation in his commemoration speeches analyzed in chapter four, which required him to simultaneously celebrate the past and condemn the present with regard to racial inequality. Second, I put Obama’s comments on Pinckney in conversation with his treatment of Jeremiah Wright, a central focus of chapter two and chapter three. Although Obama portrayed both reverends in doubled form, I argue the contradictions surrounding Pinckney do not afford listeners the same pedagogical opportunities as Wright in “A More Perfect Union.” The analysis concludes with an examination of Dylann Roof as I explain how Obama’s discourse surrounding the alleged killer created an inconsistency that positioned Roof in romantic and dialectic terms simultaneously.

IRONY IN CHARLESTON

As Obama opened his invocation in Charleston, he cited scripture to acknowledge the victims who lost their lives. Quoting Hebrews chapter 11 verse 13, he extolled, “They were still living by faith when they died. . . . They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on Earth” (1). This passage, inherent with contradiction, sets the ironic tone for the forty-minute eulogy. The contrast between the victims not receiving what they were promised coupled with their status as strangers on earth marks their situation in oppositional terms. “Irony,” Wayne Booth reminds us, “needs and looks for contradictions and dualities” (275). Obama’s use of contradiction to characterize the tragedy in the proem of the speech establishes irony as the dominant rhetorical theme of the eulogy.

Perhaps Obama’s eulogy will be remembered best for the final moments in the peroration when he led the audience in singing “Amazing Grace.” In an article for *ABC News*, Arlette Saenz called it “one of the most emotional moments of his presidency” (n. pag.), while Peter Manseau, writing in *The Guardian*, explained, Obama’s “singing seems to be a release of the collective tension that had been building for a week after the . . . shooting” (n. pag.). Prior to the speech, Obama even acknowledged the possibility for singing. On the way to Charleston aboard Marine One, he reviewed a draft of the eulogy and revised it to include lines from his “favorite hymn” as a refrain, telling his advisers that he might sing some lines “if it feels right” (Kakutani C1).

Halfway through the speech, Obama alluded to the significance of the hymn in relation to the tragedy. “This week,” he explained, “I’ve been reflecting on this idea of

grace” (4). “The grace described in one of my favorite hymnals,” he continued, “the one we all know: Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I’m found, was blind but now I see” (4). The juxtaposition between once lost and now found and was blind but now I see establishes the passage in contradictory terms. Irony, for Booth, can be summed up as a “basic contradiction” (218). In the context of the Charleston eulogy, Obama channeled “Amazing Grace” to reflect the positive change in condition effected by the shooting.

Obama continued to detail the irony of the tragedy. The outcome, he explained, was unexpected:

As a nation, out of this tragedy, God has visited his grace upon us, for he has allowed us to see where we’ve been blind. He’s given us the chance, where we’ve been lost, to find our best selves. We may not have earned it, this grace, with our rancor and complacency, and short-sightedness and fear of each other – but we got it all the same. (4)

To extend the juxtapositions brought forth in “Amazing Grace,” Obama explained how the killings enabled “us to see where we’ve been blind,” the opportunity to, “where we’ve been lost . . . find our best selves.” Rather than view the tragedy in negative terms, the situation becomes “necessarily ironic,” Burke would argue, since it requires the auditor to consider all “sub-certainties,” or all factors involved, as “neither true nor false, but *contributory* [emphasis original]” (*Grammar* 513). That is to say, the racially motivated killing of nine African Americans enabled the country to stand united in opposition to racism, and at the same allowed listeners to recognize other deficiencies that have and continue to manifest in racial terms.

The passage also demonstrates the ability of irony to provide a foundation for identification, and therefore a bridge, between two divided groups. Obama's reference to our "short-sightedness" and "fear of each other" reveals the underlying sense of separation that exists between the races, qualities that keep America divided. The shooting, however, was the catalyst for a union that would transpire across racial lines, an alliance that formed not only in opposition to the alleged killer but also allowed the country to recognize its limitations with regard to racism and racial inequality. When irony succeeds, Booth maintained, it facilitates a "meeting with other minds" that contradicts how we are thought to interact and "whether we can know each other" (13). Despite the expectation that such an event could potentially create more division, the outcome disrupted conventional wisdom.

Obama's use of irony continued with his characterization of the Confederate flag and the persistence of inferential racism in twenty-first century America. "For too long," he claimed, "we were blind to the pain that the Confederate Flag stirred in too many of our citizens" (5). "[T]he flag," he continued, "has always represented more than just ancestral pride. For many, black and white, that flag was a reminder of systematic oppression and racial subjugation. We see that now" (5). Obama continued to outline America's inability to recognize its shortcomings. "For too long," he charged, "we've been blind to the way past injustices continue to shape the present. Perhaps we see that now" (5). The tragedy, Obama acknowledged, has forced us to recognize the structural and institutional forms of racism that do not afford opportunity equally to all Americans. "Maybe we realize the way racial bias can infect us even when we don't realize it," he explained, "so that we're guarding against not just racial slurs, but we're also guarding

against the subtle impulse to call Johnny back for a job interview but not Jamal” (5).

Through the production of racism in Charleston, America came to recognize its deficiencies with regard to racial inequality.

Placed alongside Obama’s comments on racial inequality in the previous chapters, the irony of Charleston resembles most closely the rhetorical situation of his “Let Freedom Ring” speech in 2013 to commemorate the March on Washington and his speech in Selma in 2015 to celebrate Bloody Sunday. Although each address foregrounded a different exigency, all three were epideictic orations with ironic undertones. In the last chapter, I explained how paradox materialized in altered form in his commemoration speeches in Washington D.C. and Selma. Rather than use contradictions to establish the necessary conditions for deliberation, paradox in these speeches manifested in Obama’s need to celebrate the achievements of the past while condemning inequality in the present. In this sense, both speeches created an irony that required Obama to undertake two seemingly contradictory tasks. Similarly, the outcome of Charleston was ironic in nature. While the context surrounding “Let Freedom Ring” and Selma arose from contradiction, the outcome of Charleston created an incongruity that defied the expectation.

A MAN OF CONTRADICTION

Early in the speech Obama commemorated Clementa Pinckney, his accomplishments, and his dedication to a life of service. Irony manifested here again in Obama’s deployment of contradiction. “As a senator,” Obama explained, “he represented a sprawling swath of the Lowcountry, a place that has long been one of the most neglected in America” (2). “His position in the minority party,” Obama continued,

“meant the odds of winning more resources for his constituents were often long. His calls for greater equity were too often unheeded, the votes he cast were sometimes long” (2). Here Obama juxtaposed Pinckney’s status as a senator and a politician against his representation of a politically disaffected area, two conflicting realities that render Pinckney’s situation in ironic terms.

To extend the characterization of Pinckney as an ironic figure, Obama used contradiction to explain his role as both a pastor and public servant. “After a full day at the capitol,” Obama noted, “he’d climb into his car and head to the church” (2). Individually, Pinckney’s political and pastoral achievements are remarkable. Taken together, however, they create a perceived incongruity. Most people pursue one career; Pinckney chose two and excelled at both. According to Burke, “Irony arises when one tries, by the interaction of terms upon one another, to produce a *development* which uses all the terms [emphasis original]” (*Grammar* 512). These dual roles, Burke would argue, “are all voices, or personalities, or positions, integrally affecting one another” (*Grammar* 512). Irony, moreover, solidifies the relationship, or lack thereof, between both vocations. Although we typically try to remove politics from government and government from politics, Pinckney’s status as preacher and politician complicates the notion of “separation of church and state.”

Obama continued to use contradiction to explain the nature of Pinckney’s ministry. Quoting the late pastor, Obama asserted, “‘Our calling,’” ‘Clem once said,’ “‘is not just within the walls of the congregation, but . . . the life and community in which our congregation resides’” (2). Pinckney believed “that the ‘sweet hour of prayer’ actually lasts all week long,” Obama continued, “that to put our faith in action is more than

individual salvation, it's about our collective salvation" (3). The oppositional features of a congregation not confined to church walls and a prayer hour that lasts all week create a "disjunctive" connection that Booth associated with irony (128). This strategy continued when Obama described the unlikely outcome of Emanuel AME, calling it "a church . . . burned to the ground because its founder sought to end slavery, only to rise up again, a Phoenix from these ashes" (3).

In chapter three, I argued that Obama in his "A More Perfect Union" address characterized Jeremiah Wright in binary form. After the news media exposed Wright in 2008 for allegedly harboring racist and anti-American sentiment, Obama's connection to the pastor made national headlines, and Obama had to clarify to the American people the nature of his relationship to Wright, whom he had known for more than two decades. In the speech, Obama asserted, "Did I know him [Wright] to be an occasionally fierce critic of American domestic and foreign policy? Of Course. Did I ever hear him make remarks that could be controversial while I sat in the church? Yes" (3). Obama then provided an alternative perspective: "But the truth is, that isn't all that I know of the man. The man I met more than twenty years ago is a man who helped introduce me to my Christian faith, a man who spoke to me about our obligations to love one another, to care for the sick and lift up the poor" (3). Wright, I argued, is a juxtaposition; he is the good and the bad, the saint and demagogue, the "doctor" and the "gangbanger" that, in a metaphorical sense, comprise him as a synecdoche for his congregation.

Although Obama's treatment of Wright and Pinckney are similar insofar as he characterized both individuals in doubled form, his deployment of paradox in "A More Perfect Union" and irony in Charleston served different ends. In "A More Perfect

Union,” paradox and contradiction functioned as a rhetorical catalyst for listeners to partake in the act of *controversia*, the pedagogical practice whereby interlocutors confront and interrogate seemingly irreconcilable claims in an attempt to reach an outcome that transcends any one perspective singly (Mendelson “Quintilian” 278). By characterizing Wright comprehensively, and not holding to one side, Obama provided listeners the necessary resources to survey the diversity of opinion, deliberate, and then come to their own conclusion.

In Charleston, by contrast, Obama used irony in the situational sense in which an outcome contradicts the expectation. The circumstances surrounding Pinckney’s status as both a politician and a preacher create the “fundamental and irremediable absurdity” intrinsic to irony (Booth 218). Since Pinckney’s character was not in question, Obama did not have to utilize pedagogy to help listeners interrogate the tensions therein. Within the context of Obama’s racial discourse, paradox as a doubled strategy would then find itself at home in deliberative settings in which speakers call their audiences to action, while irony as a mode of contradiction would thrive on epideictic occasions or settings not traditionally intended to provoke action. To that end, Obama’s use of irony in Charleston reflects more closely his speeches to commemorate the March on Washington and Bloody Sunday, two celebratory occasions that required Obama to simultaneously acknowledge the victories of the past and condemn inequality in the present.

THE CONFLUENCE OF ROMANTIC AND DIALECTIC IRONY

After Obama portrayed Pinckney in doubled form and familiarized listeners with the history of Emanuel AME, a contradictory story of triumph and tragedy, he proceeded to address the alleged killer, Dylann Roof. He explained, “[w]e do not know whether the

killer of Reverend Pinckney and eight others knew all this history. But he surely sensed the meaning of his violent act. . . . An act that he imagined would incite fear and recrimination; violence and suspicion. An act that he presumed would deepen divisions that trace back to our nation's original sin" (4). Similar to the statements in Roof's manifesto recovered by authorities after his arrest, Obama acknowledged here Roof's intent to perpetuate a sense of hatred between the races.

Obama's remarks concerning Roof reflect both the romantic and dialectic variations of irony in the Burkean frame. Although Burke treated each type discretely, the eulogy demonstrates how both can be subsumed into one category. On the one hand, the killings place listeners, as Burke would say, "outside of" Roof and "superior to" racism, thus reflecting a romantic brand of irony (*Grammar* 514). At the same time, however, Obama's statements, and the event more broadly, represent a true or dialectic irony, in the sense that listeners are, to borrow Burke's terminology, "indebted" to Roof for solidifying their opposition to him and racism more generally (*Grammar* 514). Roof, as such, becomes the victim of an ironic situation in which the outcome of his actions defied the expectation. The passage demonstrates also how listeners can associate and dissociate from him and racism simultaneously.

Despite his intent to disseminate hate, the American people responded to the tragedy with compassion. As Obama acknowledged, "God works in mysterious ways. God has different ideas" (4). Roof, Obama continued, "didn't know he was being used by God. . . . The alleged killer could never have anticipated the way the families of the fallen would respond when they saw him in court – in the midst of unspeakable grief, with words of forgivingness" (4). A similar phenomenon occurred in Charleston and

across the nation. “The alleged killer,” Obama extolled, could not imagine how the city of Charleston . . . how the United States of America would respond – not merely with revulsion at his evil act, but with big-hearted generosity and . . . a thoughtful introspection and self-examination we so rarely see in public life” (4). Given the country’s fragile condition concerning race relations, it is surprising on some levels that the event did not, as Roof intended, create more division. Instead, the tragedy created a wealth of love and support, what Obama would refer to later in the speech as a “reservoir of goodness,” that transcended all demographic barriers (7). When the outcome defied the expectation, Roof in turn became an ironic victim.

Although Burke treated romantic and dialectic irony as binary or oppositional terms, Obama’s eulogy demonstrates how both can be subsumed into the same category. Romantic irony, which exudes feelings of superiority, rejection, and an external dislike for the enemy, is dissociative (*Grammar* 514). The acknowledgement of Roof’s intent coupled with the “revulsion” elicited by the act created a division between the alleged killer and the American people. And the country’s ability to unite in support, rather than enact racial violence following the shooting, branded the irony in romantic terms. The killings, as such, facilitated the “joining . . . and communing with kindred spirits” that Booth associated with irony (28). Americans, as such, united in opposition to Roof and a rejection of racism in broader terms.

At the same time, however, the irony is dialectic in nature. Dialect irony, which is humble and associative, acknowledges the enemy as essential. Superiority to the enemy, Burke explained, cannot exist in dialect irony, because one “*must realize that [s]he also needs this particular foolish character as one of the necessary modifiers*

[emphasis original]” (*Grammar* 515). In the absence of Roof and his heinous act, unity would cease to exist. While the unity that emerged after the killings placed the American people in a superior role to the alleged killer and the “revulsion [of] his evil act,” listeners also “*need him,*” are “*indebted to him,*” and are “*consubstantial with him*” in the sense that he was the catalyst for their coming together (Obama 4; *Grammar* 514). Ironically, the “big-hearted generosity and . . . thoughtful introspection . . . we so rarely see” would not have been possible without Roof.

In the previous chapter, I detailed the way in which Obama’s use of light and dark imagery to portray the limitations and achievements associated with civil rights in his speech in Selma and “Let Freedom Ring” created a problem-solution for listeners that rendered deliberation unnecessary. When he explained the binary situation of activists and marchers, for example, he used juxtaposition to detail their circumstances, claiming “they were not physically imposing . . . [b]ut gave courage to millions” and saying “[t]hey held no office . . . [b]ut . . . led a nation” (3). The difference between Obama’s use of contradiction in these speeches compared to his comments on Jeremiah Wright, Trayvon Martin, and Michael Brown, I argued, centered on the current example’s inability to stimulate a dialog that would allow listeners to interrogate the tensions between both claims. Instead, the doubled nature of Obama’s prose manifested a problem-solution, or enthymeme, which invited the audience to recognize the sacrifices of the previous generation as he prepared them to continue the march toward equality.

Similar to the speech in Selma and “Let Freedom Ring,” Obama’s comments on Roof manifested a problem-solution for listeners. On the one hand, the acts perpetrated by the alleged killer reaffirm the reality of racism in the twenty-first century. On the

other hand, the tragedy “allowed us to see where we’ve been blind,” Obama stated, a chance for Americans to unite in shared opposition. Roof, as such, represents the problem and the solution, the disease and the cure to racism. With irony, Burke argued, “the developments that led to the rise will . . . ‘inevitably’ lead to the fall” (*Grammar* 517). Dylann Roof and the tragedy in Charleston represent what Burke would call the “internal fatality” intrinsic to irony, which in the context of racism demonstrates how hate has the potential for self-defeat (*Grammar* 517).

CONCLUSION

Viewed across his political career, from his candidacy to two-term president, the Charleston eulogy for Clementa Pinckney demonstrates how Obama’s discourse concerning racial unrest has, in a sense, come full circle. Although the news media and the majority of scholarly critiques touted Obama as a great unifier, especially during his candidacy and first term, I hope to have shown that his discourse concerning racial unrest presents more than meets the eye. Instead of tying Americans to shared values of hope and prosperity, and thereby erasing any racial or demographic barriers, Obama, I have argued, established a sense of division that partitioned the country by its divided sentiment concerning racial inequality following the fallout concerning Jeremiah Wright, Trayvon Martin, and Michael Brown. Doing so, however, had the potential to stimulate a conversation in which Americans could confront and interrogate their differences, racial or otherwise, in hoping that they would reach a conclusion that transcends any one standpoint in isolation.

The outcome surrounding Charleston, however, rendered the need for pedagogy unnecessary. Obama even acknowledged this fact in his speech, when he said, “Every

time something like this happens, somebody says we have to have a conversation about race. We talk a lot about race. . . . And we don't need more talk" (6). Controversia, as a rhetorical strategy, thrives best in settings in which topics are contested and elicit multiplicities of opinion. In this context, separating an already unified populace across racial lines would not yield a beneficial or desirable result.

Rather than confront an audience of Americans with conflicting ideas about racial inequality, a reoccurring source of contention in his earlier speeches, by the time Obama delivered the Charleston eulogy he addressed listeners who stood united in opposition to racism. That is not to say that inequality does not continue to persist, nor does it imply that America has or ever will reach its post-racial potential. Rather, it demonstrates that, as a country, America has reached a point in which the majority of its citizens recognize the persistence of disparities that manifest across racial lines. The sad albeit ironic reality centers on the fact that it took an act so unthinkable and atrocious to allow America's deficiencies to come to the fore. Placed alongside his earlier speeches that addressed racial unrest, Charleston signifies Obama's evolution from dividing listeners on the basis of their oppositional sentiment concerning racial inequality to consoling to a racially diverse audience united in opposition to racism. Regardless of context, however, division represents the thread that binds together Obama's discourse concerning race.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Nearly a decade has passed since Barack Obama delivered his seminal “A More Perfect Union” speech in the wake of the Jeremiah Wright fiasco during the 2008 presidential election. Obama has since served two executive terms and encountered a host of racial exigencies along the way. As this dissertation has shown, Obama has been summoned to both celebrate and condemn events associated with racial equality. Contrary to the majority of scholarship that heralds Obama as a great unifier, I provided an alternative interpretation. Rather than invoke inclusive appeals grounded in shared values, as much of the literature has recognized, I have argued that Obama’s preferred rhetorical strategy originates in division when he is called to address issues that stem from racial unrest. Such a strategy, I argued, holds significant pedagogical value. It allows listeners to confront and interrogate competing worldviews and perspectives in an open forum in hoping that, through deliberation, both or multiple parties reach a conclusion that transcends the beliefs held by any one group or individual.

In chapter two, I argued that Obama’s utilization of guilt in “A More Perfect Union” served to alienate initially white people and people of color on the topic of racial inequality, but ultimately provided a foundation for solidarity. Viewing the speech dramatically, Obama’s tripartite construction of guilt helped him overcome the rhetorical problem brought forth by Wright’s inflammatory discourse, helped to preserve his candidacy, and provided listeners a catalyst to undertake an act of mortification by investing in the modern welfare state. Most important, Obama’s use of guilt originated from a disavowal of his ascribed post-racial identity. In doing so, Obama effectively

disrupted the progress narratives associated with post-racial discourse, and provided listeners the opportunity to interrogate their racial differences.

Chapter three extended the analysis of “A More Perfect Union” to show how Obama employed a doubled, paradoxical approach when he addressed the divided sentiment following the Trayvon Martin verdict. When Obama explained the fallout surrounding the acquittal of George Zimmerman, Martin’s killer, in comprehensive terms, he provided listeners the opportunity to partake in controversia. Controversia, a pedagogical practice that dates back to Cicero and Quintilian, proceeds by placing multiple claims in juxtaposition so that interlocutors can interrogate the efficacy of each side. After the acquittal of Darren Wilson, Brown’s killer, Obama refrained from a pedagogical approach. Rather than acknowledge the difference in opinion, Obama used the occasion to condemn violent protest in Missouri and the country on a broader scale. Wilson’s status as police officer constrained Obama’s pedagogical approach, since condemning Wilson would also undermine a democratic institution and the white patriarchal system of which Obama is part.

The fourth chapter signaled a turning point in the analysis. From there, the speeches analyzed were epideictic in nature. In Washington D.C., Obama in 2013 commemorated the fifty-year anniversary of the March on Washington. Then, in 2015, he celebrated the fifty-year anniversary of Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama. While Obama refrained from a doubled approach for the majority of both orations, and the speeches taken together did not hold the same capacity for pedagogy as his earlier addresses, both occasions manifested division in altered form. Washington and Selma created a paradox that required Obama to simultaneously celebrate the accomplishments

of the past with regard to racial equality and condemn the persistence of inequality in the present. When these speeches were viewed alongside each other and those analyzed in the previous chapters, some rhetorical inconsistencies emerged. For example, although Obama chose to initially forego a pedagogical approach following Michael Brown following Wilson's acquittal, when the issue came up again in Selma he characterized the sentiment in dichotomous form so to allow listeners to engage in controversia. The difference in strategy Obama employed in the two speeches centered on constraints of each occasion. While the initial speech came as a result of Wilson's acquittal, therefore impeding Obama's ability to indict Wilson or law enforcement in Ferguson for any wrongdoing, in Selma Obama was able to couch Brown within a more general discussion concerning racial equality.

In chapter five, I argued that Obama's use of irony in his eulogy for Clementa Pinckney extended his preferred rhetorical strategy of division, and also contributed to his success in the speech. Irony in the eulogy materialized in three ways. First, Obama used irony to explain the contradictory outcome of the shooting. Obama's remarks surrounding the response in Charleston and across the nation represent an irony of circumstance insofar as the outcome of the shooting defied the expectation of the alleged killer, and differed dramatically from the backlash and riots that followed the earlier racial killings that summoned Obama to speak. Second, Obama characterized Pinckney as a man of contradiction, in doubled form. Pinckney's status as a politician and a preacher created a perceived incongruity that rendered him in ironic terms. Finally, Obama's treatment of the alleged killer demonstrated the ways in which irony can be both dialectic and romantic, even though Burke treated the two brands discretely.

When the speeches outlined in this dissertation are viewed chronologically in light of their respective exigencies, it is not difficult to see why some have indicted the Obama administration for worsening conditions between the races. Not only do populations of color continue to trail white people on most socioeconomic indicators, but white on black violence has arguably increased across Obama's political career and during his tenure as president. The rhetorical problem brought forth by each speaking occasion analyzed in this dissertation illustrates this trajectory. In 2008, the association to Reverend Wright's undermined Obama's ethos as a presidential candidate. Many wondered why Obama would associate with someone as divisive as Wright. Then, the killings of Trayvon Martin in 2013 and Michael Brown in 2014 were two incidents that exposed the reality of racial profiling and the bias and discrimination that continues to afflict America's law enforcement agencies. Although Martin and Brown were two high profile cases that captured America's attention, a host of similar killings have occurred including Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, and Sandra Bland. With the exception of Trayvon Martin, all individuals lost their lives under the oversight of local police forces, and most at the hands of white officers.

By the time of the Charleston eulogy, conditions had escalated to the point of overt displays of racism in the most obvious form. The Charleston shooting was heinous, even by Jim Crow standards, and further demonstrates how far America must go to achieve what it set out to do—assure equality for all its citizens regardless of race, religion, or creed. As Obama enters the twilight of his presidential career, the events that have transpired over the past eight years demonstrate how fragile America remains with

regard to racial equality, nearly two-hundred years after Jim Crow and more than a half century after the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s.

Despite the persistence of events that would have us believe otherwise, Obama's remarks on race present a latent sense of optimism about the prospect of equality. For example, his deployment of a light-dark metaphor in his commemoration of the March on Washington served to show listeners that sacrifice through perseverance would help listeners attain economic equality. This would suggest that he believes in the possibility of a level playing field for all Americans. At the same time, however, his use of division to separate Americans by their oppositional sentiment concerning racial inequality can be viewed as a rejection of his ascribed post-racial identity. Here again, an interesting paradox emerges. While Obama remains optimistic about the possibility of equality, when he addresses issues that stem from racial unrest he partitions listeners across racial lines. While the future remains a mystery, it is ironic at least at face value that Obama, who believes in an equal America, would reject the ascription of a post-racial identity and refrain from post-racial, inclusive appeals when addressing the issue of race. Whether America reaches its potential remains to be seen. But we should view Obama's attempt to cultivate a sense of division between the races as also a means of bridging the racial divide. When differences are accentuated and brought to the fore, the opportunity exists for us to confront and interrogate the worldviews that divide the country across racial lines. Perhaps division holds the key to a more perfect union.

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