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## Race in Rhetoric: A Textual Analysis of Barack Obama's Campaign Discourse Regarding His Race

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**Race in Rhetoric: A Textual Analysis of Barack Obama's Campaign Discourse  
Regarding His Race**

A Thesis

Presented to the Departments of Strategic Communication and Political Science

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### **Abstract**

This study is a textual analysis of Barack Obama's nine most noteworthy speeches from 2004 to 2009 during his rise to prominence and presidential campaign. Because Obama was considered an inspiring speaker and because he was the first African American to win either a major party's presidential nomination or a general U.S. presidential election, this study examines how Obama's use of language about his race may have contributed to his success. Previous research has shown that use of six rhetorical devices resonates with the American people: abstraction, democratic speech, conversational speech, valence messages, conciliatory messages and imagery. The study analyzed Obama's speeches for use of these devices in relation to his race. In the nine speeches studied, Obama addressed his race twenty-nine times and used all six rhetorical devices frequently when doing so. Recurring themes he discussed using these devices were the American dream, heritage and family, and unity. His overarching message about his race was that racial differences and a negative history of race relations could be overcome because the U.S. is a land of possibility, and he offered himself as proof of that idea. Previous research shows that the rhetorical devices Obama used to present this message about his race are those that would have helped him connect with his audience and appeal to the public. Thus, Obama's use of rhetorical devices and presentation of a positive message about his race may have helped him win votes to become the first African American president of the United States.

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## **I. Purpose of the Research**

During the presidential election of 2008, the candidacy of Barack Obama, a senator from Illinois, incited the interest of many Americans, both because he was one of the first competitive African American presidential candidates in the history of the United States and because he was an inspiring speaker who could move audiences to tears. These two facts led to the development of a study that involved Obama's most significant speeches and messages about his race contained in those speeches. This study is a textual analysis of nine of Barack Obama's most significant speeches that examines how he addressed the issue of his own race before the American public between 2004 and 2009 as part of both his rise to national prominence and his presidential campaign.

As the first African American president of the United States, Obama signifies a turning point in our nation's history. The issue of race was not a platform of his campaign, but he could not avoid talking about a characteristic that set him apart from every other viable presidential candidate in the history of the United States. What made him even more unique was his standing as a biracial candidate. He won the election, so a majority of Americans apparently did identify with him. Obama's identity as an African American could not have been the only reason for his success. Greenberg (2009) says that many people turned to Obama "because of the themes of his campaign. His abiding keyword, 'change,' meant, in policy terms, economic renewal, an end to the Iraq War, and a break from Republican conservatism in general" (p. 72). However, his racial heritage was one obvious difference between himself and all past presidents. This study is significant because there has never before been an opportunity to examine how a minority candidate who went on to win the presidency spoke about his own race.

Determining how Obama addressed the issue of his own race may show how he was able to overcome the racial barrier and the history of American race relations to achieve the presidency.

## **II. Background**

### *a. Race and Politics in the United States*

Obama's election to the presidency defied centuries of racism and African American political inferiority in the United States. Tense race relations have been a part of the U.S. since its birth. According to Mayer (2002), race has been "a dominant theme of the entirety of its history as a nation" (p. 303). Difficult race relations in the United States date back to colonial days, when Africans were forcefully brought to the Americas as slaves. At that time, white supremacy was viewed as an indisputable truth by most white Americans, conditioning people to think of race as central to their identity (King & Smith, 2005). Omi and Winant (1994) described the United States as a "racial dictatorship" from 1607 to 1865 because minority races had no influence in the political realm (p. 65-66).

Even after the Civil War and adoption of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which were meant to free and enfranchise black people, white people did everything in their power to maintain supremacy. Jim Crow laws prevented African Americans from receiving equal treatment in both politics and everyday life. The federal government participated in propagating segregation by using discriminatory hiring practices and segregating the armed forces and prisons (King & Smith, 2005). The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s challenged many of the remaining racist components of American society and created significantly higher levels of political equality for African

Americans and other minorities (Omi & Winant, 1994). With the Voting Rights Act of 1965, minorities gained nearly equal access to the political system for the first time in American history (Mayer, 2002).

The Civil Rights Movement took place in the 1960s; yet, until Obama's success in 2008, no black candidate had ever even won a major political party's presidential nomination. A barrier remained for African Americans. Jesse Jackson unsuccessfully ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in both 1984 and 1988 (Larson, 2006). Gibbons (1993) claimed that Jackson was the first serious African American candidate, yet he also says Jackson was not viewed as a "potential nominee" in either year (pp. 93-94). Obama somehow overcame the barrier that impeded Jackson by winning not only his party's presidential nomination, but also the presidency itself. The repressive political history of African Americans recounted here explains why his victory was so significant.

#### *b. Barack Obama*

According to the biography "Barack Obama" (2009), Obama was born on August 4, 1961, in Honolulu, Hawaii, to a Kenyan exchange student and a Caucasian woman from Kansas. His parents divorced a few years later and his mother married an Indonesian oil company executive. Obama lived in Indonesia with his mother and stepfather for a time before returning to Hawaii to attend college preparatory school. In 1983 he earned a bachelor's degree in political science from Columbia University. He then worked as the director of the Developing Communities Project in Chicago. In 1991, he graduated *magna cum laude* from Harvard Law School and in 1992, he married Michelle Robinson. After graduation, he worked for a small law firm and lectured in constitutional law at the University of Chicago before running for and winning an Illinois

state senate seat in 1996. Obama then lost a Democratic congressional primary race in 2000 before winning a U.S. Senate seat in 2004. That same year he gained national recognition following his speech at the Democratic National Convention. He went on to defeat Hillary Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008 and John McCain in the general election for the presidency.

As a biracial American growing up in a white family, Obama had to deal with the issue of race his entire life. In his autobiography, he described his grandfather explaining to confused tourists in Hawaii that his grandson was not a native Polynesian and his mother purposefully teaching him about the Civil Rights Movement and great African Americans like Thurgood Marshall (Obama, 1995). For a period during high school, he felt great resentment toward “white folks” as he discovered the amount of racism in the world and the white power structure under which he lived (Obama, 1995, pp. 80-1). During law school, he defeated sixteen other students to become the first black president of the *Harvard Law Review*. A *Law Review* colleague of Obama’s described the magnitude of this victory, saying, “Many of the white editors were, consciously or unconsciously, distrustful of the intellectual capacities of African-American editors or authors. Simply being taken seriously as an intellectual was often an uphill battle” (Mack & Chen, 2004, p.101). His choice to work as a community organizer in Chicago after college stemmed from his desire to enact change for people of color (Obama, 1995). Similarly, after law school, he chose to return to the Chicago community rather than seek a clerkship with a Supreme Court Justice (Mack & Chen, 2004). Obama identifies himself as African American rather than biracial, saying in an interview with *Ebony*, “‘When I’m catching a cab in Manhattan they don’t say, there’s a mixed-race guy, I’ll go

pick him up...Or if I was an armed robber and they flashed my face on television, they'd have no problem labeling me as a black man. So if that's my identity when something bad happens, then that's my identity when something good happens as well" (qtd. in "Barack," 2009, para. 10). Although he is biracial, he has dealt with the same issues that black Americans face and he identifies himself as an African American.

*c. Obama's Presidential Campaign*

Obama's presidential campaign drew national attention as he created what Kellner (2008) called a "media spectacle" (p. 707). After winning the primary, he took an international trip, speaking to enormous crowds and meeting with world leaders. At the 2008 Democratic National Convention, he spoke from a football stadium in Denver to a live audience and a television audience that were some of the largest in election history (Kellner, 2008). In addition to live events, he spent close to 250 million dollars on advertising during the general election and was therefore able to distribute many types of campaign messages that would appeal to different groups of Americans (McClellan, 2008). He molded his image in the media as a reliable and trustworthy candidate who would bring about the changes that Americans wanted. His campaign also utilized the Internet and social media as part of his success, adopting channels such as Facebook, text messaging, emails and YouTube (Kellner, 2008).

The success of his campaign and political communication is largely credited to his media strategist, David Axelrod, who directed all of Obama's advertising and even coined the "Yes We Can" slogan (Hayes, 2007, p. 16). Hayes (2007) claimed that "Axelrod has developed something of a novel niche for a political consultant: helping black politicians convince white voters to support them" (p. 18). Candidates create

spectacles and groom their images in the media because the media attention they receive generates knowledge to voters, which can translate into votes on Election Day.

#### *d. Political Speeches*

Public speeches are a vital part of political campaigns because they are used to introduce politicians to the public and to present issue positions. Speeches also give candidates and presidents some influence over public opinion. Shaw (1999) listed several studies showing that campaign events, including media coverage and policy speeches, do influence voters, and he reached the same conclusion in his own research. In an extensive literature review, Rottinghaus (2006) found evidence that presidents use rhetoric as a governing mechanism by attempting to arouse public support for their policies. A study by Edwards and Wood (1999) showed that a president's attention to certain issues is what brings about media coverage and attention from Congress. Rottinghaus (2006) also claimed that presidents use the "permanent campaign" in an attempt to stay in the public's good graces (p. 729). While in office, they continually utilize campaign-like tactics, including speechmaking, to keep the public focused on issues that are important to them and to maintain a positive image in the media. For these reasons, presidents' and candidates' speeches are significant to their success and are worth examining through academic study.

### **III. Literature Review**

#### *a. Rhetorical Tactics*

Studies have shown that the use of certain themes and rhetorical devices in candidates' and presidents' speeches resonate more effectively with the American public than others. Analyses of past and current presidents' inaugural addresses and campaign

speeches by Lim (2002) showed five trends in modern presidential public speaking. These trends are anti-intellectualism, abstraction, assertion, democratic speech and conversational speech, and together they indicate that presidential speaking is becoming more informal, idealistic, active, strong, egalitarian, emotionally appealing, self-referential and anecdotal. Lim (2002) said these are devices that resonate with the public at large because they make speeches more relatable to all Americans. Instead of speaking formally to an educated audience as they once did, presidents now tend to speak in a way that the average person can understand.

Research by Shaw (1999) found that a valence message is the only type of campaign message that gives a candidate a statistically significant increase in popularity. He described a valence message as a “statement on the values and symbols embraced by a candidate” (p. 392). Research done by Emrich, Brower, Feldman and Garland (2001) found that presidents who used more imagery in their speeches were considered more charismatic. Frank and McPhail (2005) noted that Obama’s 2004 speech to the Democratic National Convention used “a rhetorical strategy of *consilience*, where understanding results through translation, mediation, and an embrace of different language, values, and traditions” (pp. 577-578) in order to encourage everyone listening to remember their common principles. This would have been appropriate since it was in Obama’s best interest to unite racial and ethnic groups to vote for him, a biracial candidate. Therefore, one would expect to find anti-intellectualism, abstraction, assertion, democratic speech, conversational speech, valence messages, imagery and conciliatory messages in the speeches of a winning presidential candidate because using such devices would have helped the public relate to him or her.

*b. Race in Presidential Campaign Speeches*

Recent trends in Democratic candidates' campaigns show that successful Democrats have managed to be supportive of minorities without disconcerting the white majority. From 1965 to 2008, Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter were the only Democrats to win the presidency. Both of them were strongly supportive of movements that benefited African Americans, but they also appealed to racial conservatives because they kept their support for racial policy shifts relatively quiet (Mayer, 2002). Conversely, when Jesse Jackson ran for the presidential nomination in 1984, he vocally focused on building a rainbow coalition of voters from all races. Although this may have seemed like a method of unification, it made race the center of his campaign, which did not appeal to the majority race (Omi & Winant, 1994). Jackson subsequently failed to win the nomination. Mayer (2002) predicted in 2002 that future Democratic presidential nominees would try to downplay racial issues as Clinton did in an attempt to emulate his success. Obama's campaign reflects Mayer's prediction because he did not make race a central driving force of his campaign the way Jackson did. Instead, he mentioned his own race only occasionally in his speeches, usually in reference to his ancestry or when overwhelming media attention to racial issues virtually forced him to do so (Harlow, 2009).

**IV. Methods**

For this study, a textual analysis of nine of Barack Obama's most significant speeches was conducted to determine how he addressed the issue of his own race before the American public between 2004 and 2009. The purpose of the textual analysis was to determine how often and in what manner Obama spoke about his race and how his rhetoric may have helped him win votes.

Textual analysis is a qualitative research method used to “describe, interpret, and evaluate the characteristics of a recorded message” to determine how the author conveyed meaning to the audience (Morris in Iorio, 2004, p. 163). Potter (1996) rephrased this goal, describing textual analysis as an attempt to understand how texts “define culture” (p. 62). Using this method, a researcher attributes meaning to an entire work by finding meaning in small pieces of it, like language units. Interpretation of the overall text is done solely by the researcher without using quantitative analysis or seeking others’ opinions through interviews or observation (Potter, 1996).

The researcher first read the selected speeches in their entirety, taking note of when Obama directly mentioned or alluded to his race. For this study, messages about race included any reference that Obama made to his race, family heritage or upbringing. A message about his race was defined as a direct statement about his race or an allusion to his race along with the entire sentence or anecdote that housed the mention.

The messages were examined for three of the five trends in modern presidential speaking that were described in the literature review: abstraction, democratic speech and conversational speech. The other two trends, anti-intellectualism and assertion, were not studied because Lim (2002) associated these trends with policy issues, so they would not be relevant to what a presidential candidate said about himself personally. The messages about Obama’s race were also examined for valence messages, conciliatory messages and use of imagery. These devices were studied because all of them are tactics that modern presidents and candidates use to relate to American voters, so it is possible that Obama used them for the same reasons. Table 1, below, defines the rhetorical devices considered.

*Table 1: Definitions of Rhetorical Devices*

<b>Rhetorical Device</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Abstraction	"An expansive rhetoric that makes religious, poetic, and idealistic references" (Lim, 2002, p. 334).	Religion (God), Time and Space (ancient, eastern, surround), Nature and its Processes (born, gravity, instinct), Abstract Concepts (ideal, dream, freedom)
Democratic Rhetoric	"A rhetoric that honors the people (and their visionary leader), is compassionate, inclusive and egalitarian" (Lim, 2002, p. 338).	Kinship (brother, family), Non-Adult (baby, children), Inclusive self (our, us), Affiliation or Supportiveness (agreement, trust, friendship), Reaping affect (care, devote, love), Concern for Well-Being (poverty, happiness)
Conversational Speech	"Uses a language that engenders an intimacy between the rhetor and his audience, focuses on the trustworthiness of the rhetor, and is highly anecdotal" (Lim, 2002, p. 346).	Self (I, mine), The Other (you, your), Direct Verbal Communication (say, tell), References to the Trustworthiness of the Rhetor (I tell you the truth), Anecdotes
Valence Messages	"Statement on the values and symbols embraced by a candidate" (Shaw, 1999, p. 392).	Affirming support for a value (Pledge of Allegiance, honesty, equality)
Rhetoric of Consilience	Encouraging audience to "‘jump together’ out of their separate experiences in favor of a common set of values or aspirations" (Frank and McPhail, 2005, p. 572).	Emphasizing what different groups have in common (comparing bigotry faced by homosexuals and Arab Americans, stating that all men are created equal)
Imagery	"Words that evoke pictures, sounds, smells, tastes, and other sensations" (Emrich et al., 2001, p. 529).	Image-based words (sweat, explore, sweet, dream, heart)

Finally, the researcher analyzed the results to determine how Obama presented the issue of his race through speeches made during his five-year rise to national recognition and the presidency, and how those messages may have played a part in his success.

Speeches were selected that marked milestones in Obama's national political career or that focused on major national issues because these were the most widely heard and would therefore have dispersed his messages to the most people who then did or did not vote for him. Transcripts of these speeches were obtained from national news sources' websites. The speeches this study analyzes are as follows:

- Keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention; July 27, 2004
- Declaration of intention to run for president in 2008; February 10, 2007
- Victory speech following the Iowa Caucus; January 3, 2008
- Speech following the Super Tuesday primaries; February 5, 2008
- Speech on race following media attention to Rev. Jeremiah Wright; March 18, 2008
- Speech in Berlin, Germany; July 24, 2008
- Nomination acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention; August 28, 2008
- Victory speech following the general election; November 4, 2008
- Presidential inaugural address; January 20, 2009

Conducting a textual analysis of these speeches was the best way to determine how Obama presented the issue of his race because he was known throughout the country for his oral presentations. When he spoke on the campaign trail, the nation listened. Thus, messages in his major speeches were what most Americans heard. These are the messages that may have helped persuade many people to vote for an African American candidate for the first time.

## **V. Results**

Examination of the speeches showed that President Obama directly addressed or alluded to his race in seven of the nine speeches. He did not mention it in his speech

declaring his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination or in the speech he gave at the conclusion of the Super Tuesday primaries, February 5, 2008. He did mention or allude to his race in all seven of the other speeches studied. His speech in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008, about racial issues and Reverend Jeremiah Wright included by far the most mentions of his race. Overall, Obama addressed his race twenty-nine different times in seven speeches, including fourteen times in his Philadelphia speech. Below are examples of how Obama used each of the six rhetorical devices in his speeches. Some messages contain more than one device and will be included in multiple sections.

*a. Abstraction*

Obama repeatedly used abstractions when addressing his race. Abstractions are intangible ideas, concepts or processes that are not concrete objects and can be interpreted differently by different people. The most common abstract themes that appeared in his messages were dreams that parents have for their children, idealism about the United States, heritage and inheritance, spaces around the globe and the natural processes of birth and growing up.

Dreams and beliefs were a major abstract theme that Obama included when discussing his race. He referred to the dreams his grandparents had for his parents and the dreams his parents had for him, usually in spite of minority racial status or lower-class status. In his 2004 speech to the Democratic National Convention, he said about his Kenyan grandfather, "...my grandfather, was a cook, a domestic servant to the British. But my grandfather had larger dreams for his son." He made a similar reference to his maternal grandparents before saying that his parents gave him an African name because they believed that in the United States, his name would not be an obstacle to the success

they hoped he could achieve. He went on to say that he was “aware that my parents’ dreams live on in my two precious daughters.” Thus, when speaking about his race, he stressed the fact that his family members have always had hope of their children achieving success despite minority racial status or lower-class status. Even when his grandfather was a black African serving white Britons or when his parents gave him a name that set him apart as having African heritage, his ancestors always believed that the next generation could outperform the previous one, Obama stressed. A dream is an abstraction because it is an ideal, something intangible that has yet to be achieved.

Related to this idea of parents having dreams for their children is the idealistic view of the United States that Obama frequently espoused when addressing his race. One of the reasons his grandparents and parents were able to dream big dreams for their children was because they believed America was a place where anything was possible and where there were no barriers to who could be successful. Obama mentioned this in his 2004 DNC speech, saying that his father saw America as a “magical place” and a “beacon of freedom and opportunity” where he could succeed despite his ethnicity and humble beginnings. In his speech in Berlin, he rephrased this thought, saying that his father was drawn to America because it was ideally a place where anyone could have aspirations while living free from fear, poverty or oppression. Obama said his parents believed “that in a tolerant America, your name is no barrier to success” when they named him Barack. He repeated this idea in his 2008 DNC speech, saying that his parents “shared a belief that in America their son could achieve whatever he put his mind to.” An idealistic view of America encouraged his ancestors to believe that their children’s race would not be a barrier to their success in the United States. These ideals about America

are abstract because they are a state of mind of Obama and his parents and are based on imaginings, not necessarily fact.

Obama also discussed the abstract concepts of heritage and inheritance, placing an emphasis on how racial identity is passed on through generations. In his 2004 DNC speech, Obama claimed that he was “grateful for the diversity of my heritage,” indicating that his mixed-race and multinational ancestry had left an imprint on his life. In his Philadelphia speech, he noted that the blood of both slaves and slaveowners runs in his wife’s veins, which is “an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters.” Race is an aspect of identity that parents cannot avoid bequeathing to their children. These references are abstract because Obama was not talking about a physical inheritance. He was discussing heritage and inheritance as abstract ideas, values and characteristics that are passed between generations.

Obama used the abstract concept of space when he continually referred to the global nature of his racial identity. In his Philadelphia speech, Obama remarked that he has relatives of every color “scattered across three continents.” He also alluded to his global heritage when trying to help his audience visualize certain concepts. For example, his speech in Berlin reminded the audience that, “As we speak, cars in Boston and factories in Beijing are melting the ice caps in the Arctic, shrinking coastlines in the Atlantic, bringing drought to farms from Kansas to Kenya,” while in his inaugural speech he said “to all other peoples and governments who are watching today, from the grandest capitals to the small village where my father was born: know that America is a friend of each nation....” He referenced the broad expanse of space that has contributed to his identity in order to remind people that the same issues affect all people no matter where

on the globe they reside or what their racial or ethnic heritage is. He used his own background as an example to make the concept more explicit to his audience. Spatial reasoning is considered abstract here because Obama was not describing concrete facts like the distance between two places. Instead, he was making a connection for his audience between two places that are distant geographically by pointing out their situational similarities.

Similarly, while speaking about the spaces that are a part of his global heritage, Obama repeatedly referenced two abstract natural processes, birth and growing up. He stated where his parents were born and grew up in his 2004 DNC speech, his Berlin speech and his inaugural speech, and he mentioned the country or state of his parents' heritage and residence in nearly every speech in which he addressed his race. He seemed to be saying that the places where his parents were born and raised had a formative impact on them that in turn had an impact on his life. These natural processes are abstractions because the definitive moment when someone is born or grows up is interpreted uniquely by individuals.

Of the four categories of abstractions listed in Table 1, Obama used three. While he referred to space, nature and its processes and abstract concepts, he did not allude to religion in an abstract way when speaking about his own race.

#### *b. Democratic Rhetoric*

Democratic speech appeared many times in Obama's references to his race. Democratic speech is focused on people and their values, beliefs, needs and emotions. Obama used this rhetorical device by discussing his family and emphasizing collectivity among three groups: the black community, his campaign supporters and all people.

In fourteen of the twenty-nine times that he broached the subject of his race, Obama also mentioned his family, whether his ancestors, children or distant relatives. In his 2004 DNC speech, he told a detailed story of his heritage that included his mother and father's upbringings in Kansas and Kenya, respectively. He later used much shorter versions of his family story, shortening it to, "Hope—hope is what led me here today. With a father from Kenya, a mother from Kansas and a story that could only happen in the United States of America," in his speech after the Iowa caucus and to, "My mother was born in the heartland of America, but my father grew up herding goats in Kenya," in his Berlin speech. He used many slight variations, but he referred to the same phenomenon of having parents from two different continents in five of these nine speeches. Regarding family, he also stated that he has "brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins...scattered across three continents," in his Philadelphia speech and he mentioned his daughters and the familial legacy he was passing to them twice. Family is something highly valued by most people, making reference to family members a democratic form of speech.

Obama used the idea of the inclusive self to emphasize shared ideals and beliefs between three groups of people. In his Philadelphia speech, he quoted from his book *Dreams from My Father*, describing the commonality that he experienced with his fellow black Christians during his first service at Trinity United Church of Christ. He said, "'Our trials became at once unique and universal, black and more than black; in chronicling our journey, the stories and songs gave us a means to reclaim memories that we didn't need to feel shame about...with which we could start to rebuild.'" By using words like "our"

to describe this experience, he put himself on the same level with the other people in that church, and thereby honored those people in a democratic fashion.

Obama used the inclusive self similarly in his Philadelphia speech to equate himself with his campaign supporters by saying, “we won commanding victories in states with some of the whitest populations in the country,” and, “we’ve heard the implication that my candidacy is somehow an exercise in affirmative action.” Using the word “we” in these statements put him on the same level as his audience, thereby elevating them in importance and honoring the common man.

Finally, Obama used the collective self to equalize all people and emphasize their shared beliefs. In his Berlin speech, Obama used words like “us,” “our” and “all people” to describe the similarity of his beliefs to those of people who are not even American citizens. He said, “What has always united us—what has always driven our people; what drew my father to America’s shores—is a set of ideals that speak to aspirations shared by all people: that we can live free from fear and free from want; that we can speak our minds and assemble with whomever we choose and worship as we please.” In this way, he used democratic speech to honor the people by emphasizing the nobility of their shared ideals and the fact that those ideals are indeed shared around the world.

Of the six categories of democratic speech, Obama used only two repeatedly when speaking about his race, kinship and the collective self. He did not use words related to concern for well-being. He used one or two words related to each of the other three categories, non-adults, reaping affect and affiliation or supportiveness. However, use of these types of language was too minimal to include in the analysis.

*c. Conversational Speech*

Obama used conversational speech frequently when talking about his race. Use of this device creates a sense that the speaker and the audience are involved in a two-person conversation, giving the message a level of intimacy. Obama created a conversational atmosphere through self-reference, direct address of the audience and anecdotes.

Obama directly referenced himself by using the words “I” or “me” in twenty-three of the twenty-nine messages. In the other six messages he referred to himself in the third person or alluded to himself and his race indirectly. Repeated reference to himself was expected since this study examined messages in which Obama spoke about himself and his race. He directly mentioned himself when telling the story of his heritage, analyzing his candidacy, discussing his beliefs, referring to his past actions and more. For example, he said, “It’s a story that hasn’t made me the most conventional candidate,” and “I know I don’t look like the Americans who’ve previously spoken in this great city” in his Philadelphia and Berlin speeches, respectively. Self-reference is a form of conversational speech because it gives the audience insight into the speaker as a person, which creates intimacy, and because people tend to spend a great deal of time talking about themselves in conversations.

Obama directly mentioned the audience as a collective entity separate from himself only twice when speaking about his race. Both times he referred to the fact that he was standing or had stood before them giving a speech. At the 2008 DNC, he said, “Four years ago I stood before you and told you my story.” Similarly, in his inaugural address he said, “[That’s] why a man whose father less than 60 years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath.”

Using the words “you” or “your” acknowledges the audience as a separate entity that is being addressed, which is a vital component to conversation.

Anecdotes were sprinkled throughout Obama’s speeches, and often encompassed his references to race. The use of anecdotes familiarizes the audience with the speaker, especially if the stories are of a personal nature. They are also a common conversational tool that help conversers bond. Obama told three anecdotes that related to his race. The first, in his 2004 DNC speech, was the story of his grandparents, parents and him and how the progression of his ancestors’ lives affected his life. Obama gave his audience the mundane details of his grandparents’ and parents’ lives, emphasizing their hard work and dreams of a better life. He told shorter versions of this story in a few other speeches as well. His second anecdote was about his first experience at Trinity United Church of Christ and the connection he felt with the Biblical stories being shared and with his fellow African American Christians. His third anecdote was found in his victory speech on Election Day. He told the tale of Ann Nixon Cooper, an African American woman in Atlanta who was 106 years old at the time. He described the difficulties and prejudices she faced and the progress and changes that she witnessed in America throughout her life span. Finally, he said, “And this year, in this election, she touched her finger to a screen, and cast her vote, because after 106 years in America, through the best of times and the darkest of hours, she knows how America can change. Yes we can.” This anecdote emphasized the monumental nature of an African American’s name being on the presidential ballot in a general election. Tales like this help the audience more clearly understand the speaker’s perspective in a way that is conversational rather than pontifical.

Obama's language about his race included a significant number of examples from three of the five categories of conversational speech. He relied heavily on references to self, references to the other and the use of anecdotes to make language about his race conversational. He mentioned a form of direct verbal communication only once and he did not refer to his own trustworthiness at all when discussing his race.

*d. Valence Messages*

A valence message affirms support for a value or symbol that the candidate finds important. In his speeches, Obama discussed his belief in the United States as a land of opportunity and confirmed his support for diversity, unity and the U.S. Constitution. These are general values that are probably supported by most American voters, so by espousing them, Obama may have connected with voters.

Obama's emphasis on America as a land of opportunity was a valence message that demonstrated his belief in the greatness of America and the possibilities that exist here. This message was a common theme found in many of his references to his race. In his speech following the Iowa caucus, he said that his story of having parents from Kenya and Kansas and growing up to run for president "could only happen in the United States of America," an idea that he repeated in his Philadelphia speech. Obama also chastised Reverend Wright in his Philadelphia speech for believing that American society has remained static regarding race rather than realizing that this nation "has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land." He reaffirmed the idea that America is a land of opportunity for everyone, including those who feel as out of place as he once did, by calling his hope, "the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him too." In spite of his race, he experienced

prospects and fulfillment of dreams in the United States, and these valence messages demonstrated his continued belief that the United States provides opportunity for all and that the American dream does exist.

Obama's messages about his race also pointed out that he believed unity and diversity were important values. At the 2004 DNC, he claimed to be "grateful for the diversity of my heritage." In his Philadelphia speech, he spoke particularly about unity in spite of racial diversity, saying that his racial ancestry "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." He went on to mention that his campaign's coalition of different racial, socioeconomic and age groups demonstrated the progress that society had made in fostering unity in spite of differences. While Obama was proud of his diverse background, he also made it clear that he valued unity.

When Obama said in his Philadelphia speech that "out of many, we are truly one," he was not only professing support for unity, but he was also referencing a national motto that is printed on American coins, "E pluribus unum," meaning, "Out of many, one." Emphasizing support for national symbols is an important type of valence message because it has the potential to arouse patriotic sentiment in listeners. Similarly, in his Berlin speech, Obama emphasized the greatness of the American Constitution, saying that it had drawn people from all over the world, including his African father, to the United States because it "is a set of ideals that speak to aspirations shared by all people: that we can live free from fear and free from want; that we can speak our minds and assemble with whomever we choose and worship as we please." By mentioning some of

the freedoms found in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, he was declaring his belief in the words of the Constitution and thus in the American form of government.

Obama used valence messages when speaking about his race to confirm his belief in several values, including the U.S. Constitution and its freedoms, diversity, unity, the American dream and the national motto. Notable values for which he did not affirm support include moral codes, traditions and cultural norms.

#### *e. Rhetoric of Consilience*

Conciliatory rhetoric is used to unite groups of people by emphasizing what they have in common. Obama used the rhetoric of consilience in two ways when mentioning his race. First, he reminded people from around the world of their common dreams, ideals and problems. Second, he emphasized commonalities like belief in the Bible and in his candidacy to bring together Americans from diverse backgrounds. Uniting groups of people in this way is beneficial to a candidate, because a candidate's goal is to create a coalition of voters from many types of backgrounds in order to win the election.

Obama first attempted to unite people around the world by mentioning problems and desires that people around the world share. By describing the lives of his parents in his 2004 DNC speech, he reminded his audience that people everywhere have the same dreams of success for their children. He noted that one parent was an African from Kenya, the other a Caucasian from Kansas, but that both sets of his grandparents had the same dream of success for their children, what he calls, "a common dream born of two continents." In his Berlin speech, Obama emphasized a shared set of human aspirations that included having needs met and having freedom of speech and religion. The promise of this dream's fulfillment is what encouraged his own father to move to the United

States, he said. Problems that affect people worldwide are also mentioned as a point of commonality in his Berlin speech. Obama said that “cars in Boston and factories in Beijing are melting the ice caps in the Arctic, shrinking coastlines in the Atlantic, bringing drought to farms from Kansas to Kenya.” With this subtle reference to the global diversity of his heritage, Obama pointed out worldwide problems that were both caused by and affecting nations in every corner of the world.

Next, Obama sought to unite Americans from varying backgrounds by reminding them of shared experiences in his Philadelphia speech. He first described his experience in Reverend Wright’s church, a predominantly black institution with membership that encompassed professionals, the working class and the poor. He portrayed Scripture-reading experience that united black people from various classes through emotion about their “trials and triumphs” that were “at once unique and universal.” He described these Biblical images as “memories that all people might study and cherish.” In a predominantly Christian nation, Biblical stories and the emotions attached to them are something with which many Americans can identify. Obama then put forth his candidacy as something that had united all types of Americans. He said he built “a coalition of white and black, Latino and Asian, rich and poor, young and old” and that his candidacy as an African American was a sign of the progress that had been made in the United States. Through his rhetoric of consilience, Obama himself became the point around which Americans could rally despite their differences.

#### *f. Imagery*

Imagery is the use of words that invoke the listeners’ five senses by referencing sights, sounds, smells, tastes and feeling. It is created and developed using action verbs

and descriptive words. Obama invoked imagery fifteen times in five of the seven speeches that include references to his race. He used it particularly often when telling the story of his family, describing contentions about his race, and mentioning problems and opportunities in the United States.

Obama referenced his race by describing his ancestry and the lives that his parents and grandparents led in significant detail during his 2004 DNC speech. This anecdote lent itself to imagery because when Obama related the story, he told it in a way that let the listener visualize what was happening. He said his father “grew up herding goats, went to school in a tin-roof shack.” His maternal grandfather “marched across Europe” in General Patton’s army while his grandmother “went to work on a bomber assembly line.” These phrases all created active images in the mind of the listener. In his inaugural speech, Obama used imagery to reference his father once more, saying that he himself was “a man whose father less than 60 years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant.” This conjured up a mental picture for the audience that reinforced the significance of Obama’s victory and inauguration.

Imagery also came into play when Obama referred to the contentions and triumphs surrounding his racial standing, both as a person and as a presidential candidate. On a personal level, he used imagery to help the audience powerfully envision he and his family’s race and what it meant in their lives. In his 2004 DNC speech, he described his brand of hope as “the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him too.” He said in Philadelphia that his wife “carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners” while he has relatives “of every race and hue scattered across three continents.” He then described the love he has for his white grandmother but

disclosed that she “once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and...on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.” Instead of merely telling the audience about what his race meant in his life, Obama’s language encouraged them to envision him as a skinny kid with an African name who has relatives across the globe and a now has a wife whose blood testifies that her ancestors were slaves. He let them feel the discomfort and confusion of loving a grandmother who made degrading remarks about people with whom he shared a racial identification.

When speaking about how his race impacted him as a presidential candidate, Obama again turned to imagery. In his Philadelphia speech, he mentioned the accusations that his candidacy “is based solely on the desire of wide-eyed liberals to purchase racial reconciliation on the cheap,” but then described his success in building “a coalition of white and black, Latino and Asian, rich and poor, young and old.” He first helped the audience visualize what he saw as the ridiculousness of that accusation by describing it as a physical business deal, and then he overcame the accusation by letting the audience envision his national coalition of diverse supporters. Finally, in his victory speech on Election Night, Obama used imagery to stress the momentousness of his candidacy by telling the story of a very old woman who had lived through slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. He said that “in this election, she touched her finger to a screen, and cast her vote, because after 106 years in America, through the best of times and the darkest of hours, she knows how America can change.” As the audience visualized an elderly, African American woman lifting her finger to vote for a black president for the first time in her life, they understood the gravity of the situation more clearly. This powerful

example of imagery helped the listeners grasp the historical significance of Obama's election as they pictured such a meaningful moment in the elderly woman's life.

Obama also invoked imagery twice to discuss opportunities and problems related to the United States. In his 2004 DNC speech, he called America "a beacon of freedom and opportunity" for his father and many other immigrants before him. Associating the U.S. with light helped the listener picture immigrants being drawn to American shores by figurative light shining from the U.S. borders. Obama used a different tone in Berlin when he said that "cars in Boston and factories in Beijing are melting the ice caps in the Arctic, shrinking coastlines in the Atlantic, bringing drought to farms from Kansas to Kenya." Here he was actively showing his audience the world's challenges to make them more aware of the situations that needed to be fixed. Finally, in his inaugural speech, Obama called America "a friend of each nation and every man, woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity." Obviously, America is not a literal friend to every person who seeks peace. However, this use of imagery reinforced the idea that America also longs for peace by portraying the nation as a caring companion to people who hold similar ideals.

Obama used imagery to invoke two of the five senses in his audience when he spoke about his race. He used words that helped listeners visualize images of his history, problems in the world, a triumphant moment for an African American voter and America's appeal to immigrants. His imagery also invited the audience to feel the confusion he felt at being biracial and having a white grandmother who feared black men. He did not use imagery that appealed to the senses of hearing, smelling and tasting.

## VI. Discussion

### *a. Themes*

A close examination of the results shows several themes that appeared frequently in Obama's discussions of his race. Obama used more than one of the analyzed rhetorical devices when speaking about each recurring idea. These themes helped the researcher discover what Obama was saying about his race throughout the campaign. Notable themes include the American dream, heritage and family, and unity.

Obama repeatedly used rhetorical devices to discuss the American dream and the opportunity that is available to all in the United States. He used abstraction and imagery when he called America a "magical place" and a "beacon of freedom and opportunity" in his 2004 DNC speech. He used democratic language about his family in the Iowa caucus speech to claim that only in the U.S. could a man come from a background like Obama's and become president. Each time he stated his belief in opportunity in America, he sent a valence message. Throughout these nine speeches, Obama revealed his belief in the American dream and demonstrated that he, as the first African American major party presidential candidate, was living proof of the opportunities America holds.

Family and the inheritance of dreams and identity was also a resounding theme in Obama's discussions of his race. Several times he described the abstract idea of dreams parents have for their child's success, dreams that lived in his grandparents and his parents and now live in him as well. He claimed that the blood of slaves and slaveowners had been passed from his wife to his children as an inheritance, while he bequeathed to them an identity of diversity. He used anecdotes to tell the story of his family and how their lives, identities and ideals had influenced him. Each mention of his family was also

an example of both democratic speech and conversational speech. This theme demonstrates how influential Obama's family was in forming his personal and racial identities.

Obama often focused on unity, the commonalities people share in spite of their differences. In Berlin he used abstraction to tell the audience that everyone "from Kansas to Kenya" has to deal with similar problems. He used democratic speech in Berlin to remind listeners of the aspirations and ideals shared by people everywhere. In Philadelphia he used consilience and a conversational anecdote to describe the concord between people of all backgrounds at church. Finally, in Philadelphia he used a message of consilience when describing the diverse set of people who came together to support his campaign. Obama made it clear that he appreciated diversity but felt unity was necessary for overcoming racial tensions.

These three overarching themes were interlocking and interwoven throughout Obama's speeches and messages about his race. Together, they formed one idea that resounded throughout his speeches—the belief that racial differences and a negative history of race relations in the U.S. could be overcome because the U.S. is a land of possibility that finds unity in the face of diversity. This was Obama's resounding message when he discussed his race, and he offered himself as proof that it was true. He made it clear that his parents held this same conviction and passed it on to him. A quote from Obama's Berlin speech best demonstrates the interconnectivity of these three concepts. He said, "What has always united us—what has always driven our people; what drew my father to America's shores—is a set of ideals that speak to aspirations shared by all

people: that we can live free from fear and free from want; that we can speak our minds and assemble with whomever we choose and worship as we please.”

*b. Implications*

Obama's consistent use of the six analyzed rhetorical devices and his overall message about his race drawn from the themes he discussed reveal how Obama addressed the issue of his own race before the American public from 2004 to 2009. The answer is twofold.

First, he addressed his race by skillfully employing six rhetorical devices that appealed to the public and united the audience. His use of abstraction, democratic speech, conversational speech, valence messages, conciliatory messages and imagery lead to the conclusion that he addressed his race thoughtfully and purposively. He may have realized that his race could be a point of contention for some voters, so he did his best to use tactics and language that would smooth the issue over and encourage the audience to emotionally connect with him.

Second, the overall message he put forth about his race—his belief that racial differences could be overcome because the U.S. is a land of opportunity where people unify despite diversity—further defines how he discussed his race. He used a message of hope and positivity to address the issue. This message emphasized a strong belief in the integrity of the United States and its ability to move forward and learn from the mistakes of the past. Furthermore, he talked about his race by portraying himself, an African American presidential candidate, as a symbol of the hope and strength of America. As part of his hopeful message about race, he described himself as proof that America has

moved forward and is continuing to move beyond its difficult history of race relations. He depicted himself as an icon of what makes America great.

When Frank (2009) studied Obama's speech on race in Philadelphia, he drew similar conclusions, stating that Obama referred to himself as evidence of both America's difficult contradictions and the hope that it holds and equated his heritage with America's heritage. Frank (2009) also noted that Obama focused on moving forward from the past and creating "multiracial alliances" and unity in the future (p. 185). This study finds that Frank's conclusions about Obama's Philadelphia speech also apply to many other speeches Obama gave from 2004 to 2009.

### *c. Significance*

How Obama addressed his race is important because both what he said about it and how he chose to say it may have helped him connect with the American people, win votes on Election Day and ultimately become the first African American President of the United States. Campaign events, including speeches, do have an effect on how the public votes (Shaw, 1999). Obama's hopeful message about his race was one that would have generated a positive response from most Americans and the rhetorical devices he used to deliver the message are those that help speakers connect with their audiences.

The overall message Obama put forth about his race, as described above, was both a valence message and a message of consilience. It was a valence message because through it he embraced the U.S. as a symbol of opportunity and he embraced family as a value. It was a conciliatory message because he advocated unity and a focus on shared experiences and ideals. Shaw's (1999) research showed that valence messages are the only type of campaign message that significantly increases a candidate's popularity

among voters. According to Frank and McPhail (2005), Obama used the rhetoric of consilience during his political career in Illinois and his conciliatory messages contributed to his political success there. Encouraging voters to unify around an idea is a useful strategy for a candidate because a candidate's goal is to bring people together from many backgrounds to vote for him or her. Beyond his overall message, Obama also used many other conciliatory and valence messages when addressing his race throughout his speeches. Thus, by putting forth valence messages and messages of consilience when talking about his race, Obama appealed to voters and increased his popularity. The overall message he put forth about his race using valence messages and the rhetoric of consilience may have earned him votes and contributed to his win on Election Day.

Obama's substantial use of abstraction, democratic speech and conversational speech to deliver his messages about his race may have also encouraged Americans to vote for him. A study by Lim (2002) showed that presidential rhetoric in the twentieth century has included more abstractions, democratic speech and conversational speech than ever before, and the results show that Obama conformed to this trend even as a candidate. Lim (2002) claimed that "abstract rhetoric has great political value. Its focus on elemental ideas and concepts easily engenders feelings of approbation" (pp. 334-335). Using abstractions can produce positive results for a candidate because abstractions focus on intangible concepts upon which the speaker and the audience will likely agree, thus creating a sense of identification. A speech that uses democratic rhetoric is "people-oriented," a style that is embraced by audiences (Lim, 2002, p. 338). For example, Lim (2002) says that references to family have an "endearing effect" on listeners (p. 339). Audiences respond positively when a speaker focuses on them in an egalitarian manner.

Similarly, conversational rhetoric engenders “an intimacy between the [speaker] and his audience and a certain chattiness” (Lim, 2002, p. 344). Conversational speech closes the gap between speaker and audience, creating an aura of equality and intimacy (Lim, 2002). Overall, Lim (2002) says that these three trends in modern presidential speaking allow the rhetor to speak the same language as his audience instead of speaking at a level that is above them. Together, they help a speaker connect with the audience. Thus, the use of these three devices may have helped Obama’s audience identify with him because when he put forth messages about his race, he spoke like them, in a way they could understand.

Furthermore, his use of imagery also helped him appeal to the American people. Emrich et al. (2001) found that presidents who use more imagery in their speeches are considered more charismatic, which is a positive trait in the eyes of Americans. According to Emrich et al. (2001), “the skillful use of imagery and rhetoric is critical to presidents’ abilities to persuade the public to help them enact their visions” (p. 529). It follows that the use of imagery would also help a presidential candidate persuade his audience that they should support his policies and thus elect him. Therefore, the use of imagery in Obama’s campaign speeches strengthened his appeal to the public and may have helped persuade Americans to vote for him.

The results show that Obama used valence messages, rhetoric of consilience, abstractions, democratic speech and conversational speech when speaking about his race in his campaign speeches. Previous research shows that these are all devices that would help Americans identify with him and encourage Americans to vote for him. Thus, Obama’s use of rhetorical devices when discussing his race may have helped him win

votes and defeat John McCain to become the first African American president of the United States.

Furthermore, these findings may be useful for other minority candidates for national public office. It is particularly interesting that Obama did not make race a focal point of his campaign, as Jesse Jackson did, but boldly offered himself as a symbol of hope and progressing American race relations when he did speak about his race. He did not articulate this idea outright but subtly used rhetorical tactics and imagery to convey it. This suggests that minority candidates should not use their race as a major platform issue but should not be afraid to address it, provided they use skillful language and messages of hope and positivity to do so. However, because race relations and demographic trends continue to evolve and change in the United States, these tactics may not be useful for future candidates because they may be campaigning in circumstances different from Obama's.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Overall, this study showed that when Barack Obama discussed his race in public speeches between 2004 and 2009, he spoke about America's ability to overcome diversity and create unity, an appealing message of hope and positivity. Through his speeches, he depicted himself as an iconic symbol of American progress. He employed six rhetorical devices when speaking about his race, including abstraction, democratic speech and conversational speech, which are all devices frequently used by modern presidents in their speeches. These devices help audiences identify with a speaker and understand his messages because he is speaking to them in a way they can easily understand. Obama also used imagery, a device that persuades listeners and causes them

to view the speaker as more charismatic. Obama's overall message about his race was both a valence and a conciliatory message. Valence messages, statements on the symbols and values a person embraces, increase a candidate's popularity. The rhetoric of consilience seeks to remind people of their commonalities and thus unite them for a common purpose, such as voting for a particular candidate. Together, these six devices probably increased Obama's popularity and enabled Americans to identify with him. Therefore, it seems that Obama spoke about his race in a very skillful and purposive manner when he entered the national political scene and was able to discuss it in a way that helped him persuade voters and win the election.

Some limitations exist in this study. The research did not cover all of the speeches Obama gave during his rise to national prominence and presidential campaign, but only studied a sample of them. Including all of Obama's speeches in the study could either solidify the results or bring them into question if Obama did not use the above rhetorical devices to speak about his race in most or all of his speeches. Furthermore, the study of Obama's speeches did not include a comparative study of the defeated candidate's speeches. Comparing rhetorical devices used by the winning and losing candidates could help determine whether these rhetorical devices actually were helpful in winning the election. Finally, because this was a qualitative study, results and conclusions cannot be empirically proven as definitive.

This study leaves ample room for future research. As already mentioned, the researcher could extend the study to all of Obama's speeches between 2004 and 2009 or could extend the study to John McCain's campaign speeches to compare their rhetorical tactics. The researcher could also conduct the same study on Jesse Jackson's presidential

campaign speeches to determine how the devices and messages he used to speak about his race compare to those Obama used. Since Jesse Jackson was an African American who did not win his party's presidential nomination and since he made race a focal point of his campaign unlike Obama, a comparison of Obama's and Jackson's messages about their race would be particularly useful in determining whether the manner in which an African American candidate discusses his race affects his ability to win an election.

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