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Unity and Duality in Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union"

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Faced with a racialized political crisis that threatened to derail his campaign to become the first African American president of the United States, Barack Obama delivered a speech on race titled "A More Perfect Union." He begins by portraying himself as an embodiment of double consciousness, but then invites his audience to share his doubled perspective, and finally models a doubled mode of speaking and acting that is captioned by the well-known maxim, the Golden Rule. This speech text thus contributes discursive resources required for the productive doubling necessary for the successful negotiation of contemporary public culture.

Keywords: Race; Obama; Duplicity; Public Address; Double Consciousness

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois struck a phrase that has rung with extraordinary cultural resonance for over a century—"double consciousness."¹ Partly, of course, it names a type of alienation, the "peculiar sensation" of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."² Being always forced to see oneself through another's eyes produces "a painful self-consciousness," a sensation of "two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." Yet Du Bois seems ambivalent. He recognizes that attaining a public voice requires African Americans "to merge [their] double self into a better and truer self," but he does not seek to resolve or repair the duality of double consciousness through a transcendence that would meld the self into a seamless totality. "In this merging," he explains, he "wishes neither of the older selves to be lost." The African American, Du Bois argues, would not "Africanize America," and nor would he "bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism." Though Du Bois understood double consciousness as "arising broadly from blacks' contradictory

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and marginal position in American society,”³ “what he wished to eliminate was not the two-fold character of African American life, but rather its most alienating, imposed characteristics.”⁴

Du Bois recognized, perhaps, that a twofold perspective need not inevitably result in a debilitating disintegration. A thoroughly unified point of view might be a liability in a world in which racial division is not only representative of, but also fundamental to, a broader fragmentation. In a disjointed world, it might be best to be doubled. Du Bois developed his concept of double consciousness in response to his conviction that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.”⁵ There is little reason to doubt that it also is the problem of the twenty-first, the historic outcome of the 2008 US presidential election notwithstanding. And while it is a grave error to imagine parity among the varying forms of alienation produced by the color-line, certainly it alienates us one from another; David Frank and Mark McPhail remind us that “the color line has shaped not only the souls of black folk, but the souls of white folk as well.”⁶ Simply put, whites and blacks both have a hard time thinking their way onto the other side of what Du Bois referred to as the “veil” of race.⁷

Part of the problem, as Danielle Allen points out, is the recurrent trope of “oneness” that informs our culture. We are disciplined to imagine that our nation is, or should be, entirely homogenous, that our experiences are interchangeable, and that any hope for understanding across difference depends solely on our ability to achieve and sustain common ground. The dominance of this trope in public discourse is a symptom and reinforcement of the cultural norms against doubled consciousness. The maintenance of our singular selves seems a necessary condition for sustaining a uniform culture. We resist rending our seamless individual identities because fragmentation there would imperil the idealized homogeneity of our collective identity. As a result, we cripple our efforts to engage the color-line productively and are left with twin dysfunctions: we either affect a naïve color blindness that denies the color-line altogether, or we naturalize the color-line as an impossibly recalcitrant barrier. A fitting adaptation, as Du Bois suggests, may be manifest as a doubled consciousness — but to obtain a more proactive political agency, it must be performed as a way of speaking. We lack a language, in other words, for moving ourselves across the racial folds creased into the fabric of our public culture through centuries of distrust and oppression. As Allen puts it, “[w]hen it comes to seeing how strangers are related to each other, we are aphasic.”⁸

In a speech delivered on March 18, 2008, Barack Obama provides some of the rhetorical resources necessary to address this aphasia. Faced with a crisis that threatened to derail his bid to become the first African American major party candidate for president of the United States, sparked by comments from his former pastor that many found objectionable, Obama offers his audience neither defense nor apologia but instead a way of speaking about race in America. Specifically, Obama invites his audience to experience double consciousness, however temporarily. He asks his listeners to view themselves through the eyes of others, a tactic that critiques the cultural limitations of “oneness” by constituting divided selves through which to confront our bifurcated culture. This is a productive alienation that promotes two simultaneous points of view, a “stereoscopic gaze.”⁹ But more than that, Obama invites

his audience not merely to observe the world as doubled selves but also to speak and act in it, in accordance with this doubled perspective; he not only invites his audience to divide themselves, but also models for them a manner of speaking and acting that perpetuates and deploys that division. In this speech, then, Obama gives voice to double consciousness, translating it from sensation or perspective into a political style.¹⁰

Analyses of Obama's rhetoric in general, and of this speech in particular, have focused on the importance of contextualizing his public address within existing traditions or patterns. James Darsey, for example, establishes the "journey" as an archetypal metaphor within American political rhetoric, and then argues that "much of the potency of Obama's rhetoric" lies in his ability to craft a narrative "in which his personal journey ... coincided with America's journey as a nation, especially as that journey involves race."¹¹ David A. Frank reviews the "prophetic tradition" in African American public address, and then argues that in this particular speech, Obama "stands out" within that tradition "as a descendant of [Martin Luther] King's theology and rhetoric."¹² The present essay, however, approaches Obama's discourse with a different purpose in mind. Rather than an attempt to explain its appeal, the concern here is the specific contribution that this speech makes to contemporary public discourse, the ways of speaking that Obama enacts and that he urges his auditors to emulate. The argument in this essay, in other words, is that Obama's speech can be understood as offering an especially potent set of inventional resources through which we might cultivate new ways of thinking and speaking about race and unity in America.

The disposition of the speech outlines the process through which a double consciousness might be translated into a political style. Obama begins by presenting himself as an embodiment of Du Boisian double consciousness; born to a black African father and a white American mother, his own biracial body is an icon of potential racial reconciliation. Obama seems able to transcend the color-line, absorbing into himself all the various fragmented identities divellicated by America's racial frictions.¹³ But then, in the second part of the speech, he does not position himself as a savior whose election would initiate a racial millennium. Presenting an embodied model of a doubled perspective is a first step in mobilizing a way of speaking, but Obama must also enlist his audience as active participants. Thus, he invites his audience to share the doubled perspective that is afforded by his own bifurcated body, making clear that racial reconciliation cannot be had by proxy; while he might embody double consciousness himself, the key to a more perfect union is for his audience to become doubled. Finally, he asks that his audience speak and act in accordance with this doubled perspective, supplying both a handlist of tropes through which a doubled perspective might be articulated and an exemplar of the sort of action toward which its articulation might lead. This extension and emendation of double consciousness is an invitation both to recognize the racial divide and to engage it productively through an ethic of reciprocity represented by the most common of maxims, the Golden Rule.

Firestorm

This speech was given within the context of a political campaign that magnified the significance of the crisis Obama addressed. Though Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton was the presumptive Democratic candidate, Obama quickly became a major contender. He won the Iowa caucuses and the South Carolina primary in January 2008; he won more states than Clinton on Super Tuesday in February (though Clinton won more of the popular vote); he gathered high-profile endorsements, some of which, such as that from Georgia Representative John Lewis, came from people who had originally backed Clinton; and Obama announced a one-month fundraising total of over 55 million dollars — then a record in American politics.¹⁴ It seemed that Obama’s momentum could not be stemmed, and calls began to be heard from inside the Democratic Party for Clinton to drop out.

Then a controversy emerged that threatened to turn the Obama campaign into a footnote to history. Excerpts from the sermons of Reverend Jeremiah Wright were aired on ABC’s *Good Morning America* on March 13. Brian Ross introduced the segment by noting that “Senator Obama has been a member of the same church in Chicago for 20 years, where his pastor has been Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the man who performed the Obamas’ marriage ceremony, and the man Obama credits for the title of his book, *The Audacity of Hope*.” Over video of an African American church choir clapping and singing, Ross continued, “Reverend Wright has built a large and loyal following at his church, the Trinity United Church of Christ, on Chicago’s South Side. With a powerful voice, and his strong words, Reverend Wright can be a mesmerizing presence. And he often uses the Gospel to affirm his strong political views. As in this 2003 sermon, damning the United States for its treatment of blacks.” Wright is shown standing in his pulpit and shouting into a microphone: “The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law, and then wants us to sing ‘God Bless America’? No, no, no. Not ‘God Bless America’ — God damn America! That’s in the Bible, for killing innocent people. God damn America for treating its citizens as less than human!”

It was not the first time that Wright had emerged as a potential political liability, but this time the response was, in Obama’s own words, a “firestorm.”¹⁵ The story was picked up by every major news outlet, and its circulation on the Internet dwarfed the previous controversies by several orders of magnitude. On March 14, the day after the ABC News report, Obama posted a response at the widely read Huffington Post Blog, in which he stated, in part,

I vehemently disagree and strongly condemn the statements that have been the subject of this controversy. I categorically denounce any statement that disparages our great country or serves to divide us from our allies. I also believe that words that degrade individuals have no place in our public dialogue, whether it’s on the campaign stump or in the pulpit. In sum, I reject outright the statements by Rev. Wright that are at issue.¹⁶

Obama also posted a video on YouTube, in which he repeated this statement almost verbatim and ended by asking his supporters to “please forward this video on and get

this message out to everyone you can.”¹⁷ But the controversy continued to build until it became clear that a more dramatic response was required.

On Tuesday, March 18 — the first day of spring, and about a week after the *Good Morning America* story — on the second floor of the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Obama delivered what many said at the time was the most important speech of his career, eclipsing the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic convention that initially brought him national recognition. The Obama campaign had announced that the candidate was preparing a “major” address on race and politics, and David Axelrod, his chief campaign strategist, reported that Obama “had worked on the speech into the early hours Monday morning and planned to continue with revisions Monday night.”¹⁸ One of Obama’s advisors, Jim Margolis, told reporters that “Obama considers the speech a rhetorical end-point to the Wright controversy.” Michael Steele, then chair of the Republican fundraising organization GOPAC and, later, the first African American chair of the Republican National Committee, preemptively dismissed the speech as “a lot of the typical Barack, flowery language on race and so forth.”¹⁹

Double Consciousness

Obama begins by framing the United States as a work in progress, and allusions to Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address are especially vivid. But whereas Lincoln took as his text a phrase from the preamble of the Declaration of Independence — “that all men are created equal” — Obama instead takes a phrase from the preamble to the Constitution: “in order to form a more perfect Union.”²⁰ The Declaration of Independence, as it was formally adopted and circulated, is not troubled by any explicit reference to blacks or to slavery, but the Constitution is.²¹ This citation does not merely acknowledge the immediate venue, then, but more significantly, it signals Obama’s focus on race, and thus marks a contrast to the 2004 DNC speech — and indeed, to almost all of Obama’s many speeches and statements throughout the campaign, in which the topic of race was studiously avoided. McPhail argues that Obama’s 2004 address exhibits a “politics of disavowal” in its refusal to acknowledge “the historical and social realities of American racism.”²² But here, as Lincoln cast the Declaration as a “proposition” being tested by the Civil War, Obama frames the Constitution as “eventually signed but ultimately unfinished,” because it was “stained by this nation’s original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least twenty more years, and to leave any final resolution to future generations.”²³

Obama marks himself as a representative of these future generations through a metonymic logic in which the divisions he is addressing become embedded within himself. In balanced phrases, Obama recounts his personal history as “the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas,” recalling that he has “gone to some of the best schools in America and ... lived in one of the world’s poorest nations” and that he is “married to a black American who carries within her the

blood of slaves and slave owners.”²⁴ Not only can he “never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible,” but his uniquely American story has somehow fused the man and his country, “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.” This does not seem to be a union characterized by the melting-pot trope of “oneness” that insists on an imagined common cultural history: he reminds his audience “that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction — towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren.” In Allen’s terms, this is a union that aspires “to the coherence and integrity of a consolidated but complex, intricate, and differentiated body.”²⁵

This vision of a single entity composed of differentiated parts strains against cultural norms of unity and commonality. Obama describes these norms in terms of his campaign, noting “the temptation to view my candidacy through a purely racial lens,” a one-sided tactic that would fragment his doubled image into separate racial halves: “some commentators have deemed me either ‘too black’ or ‘not black enough,’” and “the press has scoured every single exit poll for the latest evidence of racial polarization, not just in terms of white and black, but black and brown as well.” But it has been only “in the last couple of weeks that the discussion of race in this campaign has taken a particularly divisive turn.” Specifically, he condemns Wright’s comments as being too narrowly single minded and as therefore fomenting division. Wright’s comments, in other words, impede the development and deployment of a productively doubled consciousness. The comments were not “simply controversial,” Obama says, but presented a “profoundly distorted view of this country — a view that sees white racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America.”²⁶ Obama acknowledges that “if all that I knew of Reverend Wright were the snippets of those sermons that have run in an endless loop on the television sets and YouTube ... there is no doubt that I would react in much the same way.” In other words, were Obama himself informed by only a single perspective such as that supplied by the media, then only a single and predictable reaction would be available to him. “But the truth is,” he points out, “that isn’t all that I know of the man.”

Obama does not directly refute the one-sided perspective of Wright “being peddled by some commentators,” but instead places it alongside a second perspective, complicating the picture without making an effort to resolve the two portrayals. “The man I met more than twenty years ago is a man who helped introduce me to my Christian faith,” Obama says of Wright, “a man who spoke to me about our obligations to love one another; to care for the sick and lift up the poor.” Obama’s doubled consciousness is reinforced as he describes the congregation at Trinity United in a series of balanced pairs: “Like other predominantly black churches across the country, Trinity embodies the black community in its entirety — the doctor and the welfare mom, the model student and the former gang-banger... . The church contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and yes, the bitterness and biases that make up the black experience in America.”

Reverend Wright reflects this collective, for he “contains within him the contradictions — the good and the bad — of the community that he has served diligently for so many years.” And when Obama looks down from the Teleprompter to read a passage from his book, *Dreams from My Father*, that describes attending his first service at Trinity United, he asserts that “those stories — of survival, and freedom, and hope — became our stories, my story.”²⁷ The claim being refuted here is not that Wright is a bad man, but that a one-sided view of him enables an adequate appraisal. Yes, what Wright said was wrong; yes, Wright is a good man. There is no contradiction or substitution implied, but merely the presentation of the man, and his congregation, as a doubled amalgam.²⁸

And so, Obama then presents himself, his story becoming theirs even to the extent that his persona seems to absorb the entire dual community. “I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community,” he says, in one of the most often quoted lines, and then — making his own biracial identity explicit and aligning it with the dualities he is absorbing — “I can no more disown him than I can disown my white grandmother.”²⁹ And his grandmother herself cannot be reduced to a unidimensional figure, for though she “loves me as much as she loves anything in this world,” she also “on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.” Identities have multiplied geometrically through this section of the speech, and Obama absorbs all of them into himself without resolving their contradictions, presenting his own doubled body as a metonymy for the divided, yet whole, body politic: “These people are part of me. And they are part of America, this country that I love.”

A brief comparison with Obama’s 2004 DNC keynote is instructive. As Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones point out, that address emphasized “the essential similarity of the American people” to encourage an “identification” characterized by a “sense of being joined with others and yet separate from them,” an appreciation of “unity despite diversity and a conviction that the sufferings of one are the sufferings of all.”³⁰ Frank offers a consonant reading, noting that Obama’s 2004 address indicates “an ability to integrate competing visions of reality” so that “understanding results through translation, mediation, and an embrace of different languages, values, and traditions.”³¹ Obama exhibits a “refusal to obliterate difference,” Frank continues, which contributes to his modeling of the specific form of identification known as “empathy.”³² To some extent, the Philadelphia speech seems an eloquent restatement of these themes, and it might invite Obama’s audience to gaze on him with renewed appreciation or awe.³³ But this speech has presented something more akin to alchemy than empathy. While Obama’s history is presented as a representative and exceptional American tale, his biracial body is displayed as the material manifestation of racial reconciliation. He has *become* racial reconciliation in a sort of epiphany. He has risen from his own improbable beginnings and has presented a compelling and complex portrait of his former pastor — yet his audience remains relatively passive, bearing witness to the revelation but not yet invited to take an active role in making manifest its promise.

Double Vision

Racial salvation cannot be had on the cheap. Obama's audience cannot be saved through sharing in his double consciousness, but must instead learn to cultivate their own.³⁴ Reflecting this shift in agency, the speech changes suddenly from the active voice that has characterized the first section to a more detached, passive, and academic tone. Obama is thus able to withhold his own body, with its fabulous redemptive powers, and redirect his audience's gaze away from himself and toward one another. To develop a capacity to speak in a doubled manner, we must first cultivate the ability to see each other in a doubled way. He would have his audience avoid making "the same mistake that Reverend Wright made in his offending sermons about America — to simplify and stereotype and amplify the negative to the point that it distorts reality." Wright's error, in other words, was that he saw things from only a single perspective, resulting in monocular distortion rather than stereoscopic clarity. What is called for, instead, is a willingness to address "the complexities of race in this country that we've never really worked through — a part of our union that we have not yet made perfect."

Assuming a professorial voice perhaps honed during his days as a senior lecturer in constitutional law at the University of Chicago, Obama explains that "[u]nderstanding this reality requires a reminder of how we arrived at this point." Citing William Faulkner — "The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past" — sustains the lecture mode, as does the rather affected professorial "we," as in "We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country. But we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist between the African American community and the larger American community today can be traced directly to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow."³⁵ As an antidote to the overheated denigrations that characterized much mainstream reaction to Reverend Wright, Obama guides his listeners through a clinical historical assessment of twentieth-century inequity, his own body and voice conspicuously absent. "Segregated schools were, and are, inferior schools," he reminds us, and this "helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today's black and white students"; "[l]egalized discrimination ... helps explain the wealth and income gap between blacks and whites"; "[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"; and "the lack of basic services in so many urban black neighborhoods ... helped create a cycle of violence, blight and neglect that continues to haunt us."

This detached historical survey provides a backdrop, and establishes the tone, for a peculiarly dispassionate analysis of anger. We must learn to separate ourselves, temporarily, even from our passions. Obama discusses each side of the color-line, without critique; the two points of view are allowed to exist side by side, without conjunction, each offering a view of the world that is comparable to, but not reducible to, the other. As Obama speaks to first his white and then his black audiences — separately, together — introducing each to what Frank refers to as the

“hush harbors” on the other side of the color-line, he induces them to view themselves through the eyes of the other, and thus invites them toward double consciousness.³⁶

Taking his white audience behind the veil, Obama reveals that “[f]or the men and women of Reverend Wright’s generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away; nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years.” He acknowledges that this anger “may not get expressed in public in front of white coworkers or white friends. But it does find voice in the barbershop or the beauty shop or around the kitchen table.”³⁷ “And,” he admits, “occasionally it finds voice in the church on Sunday morning, in the pulpit and in the pews.” This anger is not always productive, because it can distract our attention from “real problems” and can keep us from “facing our own complicity within the African American community in our own condition.” But it is “real,” and “powerful,” and “to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races.” Obama invites his white audience to view their own reaction to Reverend Wright through a black lens; that so many (white) Americans were surprised to hear this anger in Wright’s sermons, Obama notes, “simply reminds us of the old truism that the most segregated hour of American life occurs on Sunday morning.” For whites, the opacity of the color-line precludes double consciousness, making it difficult for them to see themselves as the other does.

He then guides his African American audience, noting that “similar anger exists within segments of the white community,” because “most working- and middle-class white Americans don’t feel that they’ve been particularly privileged by their race.” They have “worked hard all their lives,” and

when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed; when they’re told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time.

The veil falls across white America as well as black, for “[l]ike the anger within the black community, these resentments aren’t always expressed in polite company.” And just as it would be counterproductive to wish away genuine black anger, so also “to wish away the resentments of white Americans, to label them as misguided or even racist, without recognizing they are grounded in legitimate concerns — this too widens the racial divide, and blocks the path to understanding.”

Obama has invited his audience on each side of the color-line to view themselves with others’ eyes, and the resulting “stereoscopic gaze” emphasizes the “interdependency of adversaries,” as Robert L. Ivie puts it — “the rhetorical function of this stereoscopic gaze is to humanise the parties in conflict by raising the image of the damned while lowering the conceit of the self-righteous.”³⁸ As Frank notes, “Obama does not equate the brutal legacies of slavery and segregation with the economic anxieties faced by the white community”³⁹; the point is not to bring the two perspectives into a harmonic equilibrium, but to recognize that both perspectives are

genuine. This is a radical re-visioning of the color-line, not a dismissal nor an elision but an instruction in viewing it differently, and for some, perhaps, in viewing it for the first time. These doubled perspectives present a potentially powerful critique of the unitary, monoscopic tropes that dominate contemporary public discourse.

But still, Obama describes “where we are right now” as “a racial stalemate we’ve been stuck in for years.” If there is to be a more perfect union, it will come into being neither through the marginalization of one of the points of view that Obama has presented nor, as he makes explicit, through the *deus ex machina* of his racially bifurcated and ideologically commodious body. “Contrary to the claims of some of my critics, black and white,” he explains, “I have never been so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidate — particularly a candidacy as imperfect as my own.”⁴⁰ His listeners have been asked first to view Obama’s doubled body as a physical embodiment of racial atonement, and then to imitate Obama’s doubled perspective, yet they remain relatively passive. They have been invited to alter their gaze but have not yet been asked to act in accordance with their altered perspective. To perfect the union, a doubled gaze alone is necessary but insufficient, unable by itself to sustain either a productive engagement with race specifically or a productive democratic culture more generally. Obama’s audiences must be provided the inventional resources that will enable them to speak.

Double Attitude

The first section of the speech was marked by an active voice in the first person, directing Obama’s audience to attend to Obama; the second section, marked by the passive voice, directed the audience to acknowledge the legitimate anger present on either side of the color-line. The third section is characterized by a more richly elevated style, through which he models an attitude of constructive critique, progressive remembrance, and doubled action. In other words, cultivating in the members of his audience a facility for speaking in a doubled manner requires that Obama first urge them to accept a doubled consciousness as a legitimate perspective, and then invite them toward experiencing a doubled consciousness of their own, before providing a stylistic repertoire through which such a consciousness might be enacted. Obama now revisits the two sides of the color-line, providing first his African American audience and then his white audience with an appropriately doubled political style.

“For the African American community,” Obama explains, the path toward a more perfect union “means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past.” The parallelism and near alliteration enhance the twofold nature of this attitude, setting “embracing” and “becoming” in apposition so that their distinction is emphasized; while *becoming* entails total conversion, *embracing* suggests simultaneous closeness and differentiation. The phrase not only endorses a doubled attitude, then, but also provides a linguistic form through which that attitude might be expressed. This two-ness similarly is evident in Obama’s argument that perfecting the union

“means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life” while at the same time “binding our particular grievances ... to the larger aspirations of all Americans.” The phrasing suggests a balanced narrowing and then expanding of scope — from “full measure” to “every aspect,” and then from “particular grievances” to “larger aspirations” — that models the doubled attitude required to maintain a balance between individual aspiration and community norms.⁴¹ African Americans must learn to see themselves as comparable to “the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man who’s been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family,” but must also learn to take “full responsibility for our own lives — by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism.” And though he has acknowledged that limitations are imposed by the dominant culture on African Americans, black children “must always believe that they can write their own destiny.” “Now in the white community,” Obama continues, “the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination — and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past — that these things are real and must be addressed.” Again, parallelism brings phrases into apposition, in this case aligning the ailments of the African American community with the legacy of discrimination. This would be in contrast to those who might instead assert that the problems are caused by the inherent failings of persons of color, including the tendency to imagine affronts where there are none. That is, while white Americans may never completely share the perspective of African Americans, they must recognize that racial injustice is not a mere specter. Obama’s audience is not asked here merely to acknowledge the visibility of the color-line, but is urged to speak and act in doubled ways as an appropriate response to a divided culture — to *address* the ailments of the African American community that have been revealed through this doubled gaze.⁴²

Obama’s use of the pronoun “our” throughout this second section of the speech introduces a particularly productive ambiguity. When addressing the black community, his references to “our past,” “our fathers,” and “our children” mark his identification with that group. After crossing the veil to address the white community, however, it is not entirely clear whether his calls for investment in “our schools and our communities” and for “enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system” address a broader collective or enjoin his white listeners specifically. In his insistence that perfecting the union “requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams; that investing in the health, welfare, and education of black and brown and white children will ultimately help all of America prosper,” the pronouns are particularly bimodal, their references oscillating between groups in ways that are thoroughly difficult to track. This would be a public that, as Allen puts it, “despite its diversity [is] a coherent, integrated body to which citizens willingly give their allegiance.”⁴³ Though perhaps the public Obama is imagining does not cohere *despite* its diversity, but *because* of it.

Situated like a wedge that prevents this community from achieving coherence, however, is Reverend Jeremiah Wright. After Obama tells his African American audience that their children should “believe that they can write their own destiny,” but before he addresses “the white community,” Jeremiah Wright makes his third significant appearance in the speech. Through the disposition of the text, then, Wright is located precisely in the chasm that separates the races, and as the embodiment of racial stalemate. His portrayal is no longer tempered by the image of an eccentric uncle whose sometimes embarrassing comments must be tolerated because he is family, nor that of a misunderstood relic from a passing generation. Rather, Wright now is simply an obstacle, possessing the specific attitude that prevents the productive doubling that Obama is advocating.

“What my former pastor too often failed to understand,” Obama explains, “is that embarking on a program of self-help also requires a belief that society can change.” Wright’s “profound mistake,” he continues, is “that he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress had been made; as if this country ... is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past.” Wright speaks inappropriately, voicing a unidirectional orientation and a rigid perspective. In contrast, the doubled attitude that Obama is modeling is directed toward both the past and the future, appreciating the continued influence of history without becoming immobilized by it, and encouraging a flexibility without which the union can never be perfected. Wright’s discursive style has become, then, an impediment that must be overcome if the stalemate is to be resolved and if Obama’s doubled discourse is to gain cultural traction.

Obama chooses to caption this attitude with the so-called Golden Rule. Of course, in most circumstances, relying on this old chestnut to summarize a central argument would risk reducing the speech to schmaltz. But in this context, the maxim is thickened considerably by emphasizing the doubled entailments of doing unto others:

In the end, then, what is called for is nothing more, and nothing less, than what all the world’s great religions demand — that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Let us be our brother’s keeper, Scripture tells us. Let us be our sister’s keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well.

At its most fundamental, of course, the Golden Rule provides a thumbnail sketch of the ethic of reciprocity, and as Allen reminds us, “democratic citizenship consists primarily of reciprocity.”⁴⁴ And stylistically, it presents perhaps one of the most recognizable tropes of doubleness and balance in the English language, *chiasmus*. When reciprocity is enacted in this way, it cannot be reduced to a simple mimetic mirroring, in which one gives to another precisely what has been given, for chiasmus, like all tropes, but perhaps particularly, *turns*. As the “we” who are agents become the “us” who are objects, the Golden Rule requires us to see ourselves as the potential recipients of our own potential actions. Obama does not advise us to *become* our brothers or sisters, or even to become *like* them; he urges us to recognize our “common stake” in one another, and to experience the sometimes uncomfortable sensation of seeing ourselves through their eyes. Jeffrey Wattles, in tracing the

provenance of the Golden Rule to Isocrates, notes that the rule encourages understanding others as being “comparable” to the self, not identical.⁴⁵ To see others as comparable is to understand their perspectives as legitimate, even as they differ from your own.

And importantly, the Golden Rule as Obama deploys it presents in compressed form the relationship between doubled consciousness and doubled agency that is demonstrated in this speech. We must first work to develop and sustain a double consciousness, and then we must recognize within it the incipient action of a double attitude.⁴⁶ Understanding another’s anger necessitates understanding our own, understanding one’s own interests entails looking out for the interests of others, demanding social justice does not negate the need for personal responsibility, and understanding that opportunities and limitations are cultural need not diminish the fact that destiny is personal. Inhabiting an unfamiliar perspective does not require abandoning our own, and while moving forward requires understanding the past, understanding the past does not require stubbornly clinging to it. To move toward a more perfect union, we must then incorporate this interstitial perspective into our speech, talking in ways that constitute and sustain this “whole” public culture. To “find that common stake we all have in one another” requires a doubled consciousness; to “let our politics reflect that spirit” requires a doubled attitude.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Obama won the election. The importance of this historic event cannot be overemphasized — less than half a century after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stood before approximately 250,000 people and declared from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial that he had a dream, Barack Hussein Obama stood before nearly that many people on a stage in Grant Park, along the Chicago lakefront, as the president-elect of the United States. He refigured the electoral map, winning states not only in the northeast and along the west coast but also throughout the Midwest, including Ohio and Indiana, as well as Florida, Colorado, New Mexico, Virginia, and North Carolina. He won 95 percent of the black vote, 66 percent of the under-thirty vote, 66 percent of the Latino vote, and over 40 percent of the white vote. One interpretation of these results might be that Obama’s doubled discourse encouraged groups with divergent backgrounds and experiences to see themselves as parts of something larger, to understand that though they will never be the same as their neighbors — nor the same as Obama — that they were comparable, and thus able to sustain a provisional form of stranger relationality.⁴⁸ These voters perhaps were able not only to enact a stereoscopic gaze but also were motivated to act — specifically, to vote — in accordance with that divided point of view. One way of interpreting these results, in other words, would be that the union indeed is becoming more perfect.

On the other hand, there is little question that we remain a deeply divided nation with respect to race. More than half of the whites who voted, men and women, voted for John McCain; McCain won handily across the former Confederacy, receiving, for example, at least 85 percent of the white vote in Mississippi; McCain lost North

Carolina and Indiana by just one percentage point, lost Florida by two points, and won Missouri by one. In each case, McCain fared far better in precincts that were overwhelmingly white. And many whites believed that blacks were voting for Obama simply because he was black, rather than as the result of any rational judgment; conservative talk radio host Rush Limbaugh even attributed this irrationality to former Secretary of State and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell, a Republican, who endorsed Obama late in the campaign.⁴⁹ Bob Hepburn, a columnist for the *Toronto Star*, reminds us as succinctly as anyone that

[o]ver the years, many in the US have come to believe their country is more integrated than ever, that blacks and other minorities are becoming more and more part of mainstream America. But the US is still a nation where blacks and other minorities are poorer on average than whites, where working blacks earn less money and suffer higher unemployment rates than whites, where fewer blacks on average attend university institutions than whites.

And, most tellingly, he reminds us that “[b]lacks, much more than whites, are fully aware of these differences.”⁵⁰ Not only is the color-line still vivid, but the degree to which it is vivid is itself a symptom of racial division. The color-line marks not only a division between black and white, but also a division in the degree to which blacks and whites are able (or willing) to perceive that there is a color-line. If the union is becoming more perfect, it also remains shackled by an excruciating inertia.

The duality that Obama presents, in this speech, as a compensatory critique of the persistent divisions that cleave our union is brought into relief through an implied contrast between the singular figure of Reverend Wright and a doubled figure introduced in an anecdote that Obama tells near the end of the speech. Wright makes three significant appearances in the speech — first as a misunderstood member of Obama’s extended family who said some objectionable things, second as a relic trapped within the confines of an outdated racial politics, and third as a failed leader characterized by rigidity and obstinance. These three portrayals mark a linear expulsion of Wright — first absorbed as an integral element of Obama’s self, then regarded objectively as a historical artifact, and then finally rejected outright as an impediment to progress. A political style defined entirely within the confines of Wright’s narrow attitude is anathema to the doubled style that Obama is modeling for his audience and would not provide the resources that encourage productive relations among citizens.

The more productively divided perspective is given shape in the peroration, where Obama tells the story of “a young, twenty-three-year-old woman, a white woman, named Ashley Baia.” When Baia, who worked for Obama’s campaign in Florence, South Carolina, was young, Obama recalls, her mother was diagnosed with cancer, and then lost her job and then, with it, lost her health insurance. Money was tight, and to stretch their savings, Ashley told her mother that she wanted to eat only “mustard and relish sandwiches.” Her mother got better, and Ashley later shared this story at a roundtable with other volunteers working for Obama’s campaign. When it came time for an “elderly black man” in the room to tell why he had volunteered, he said, according to Obama, “I am here because of Ashley.” The story asks the audience

to divide their attention so that they might identify with both the black man and the white girl; it also asks the audience to witness the mutual recognition of these two characters, who seem to understand that they are “comparable” without being compelled to imagine that their experiences are interchangeable or are reducible to one another. Obama recognizes that “by itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is not enough,” but he concludes that “it is where we start,” that it is “where our union grows stronger,” and that “that is where the perfection begins.”

Perfecting the union depends, then, not on the iconic doubled self that Obama presents at the beginning of this speech, but on the performative doubled style that has supplanted it in the end. It is difficult to name this agency or attitude, because most of the terms that might apply carry negative connotations: duplicity, double-talk, equivocation, two-facedness, speaking with a forked tongue, and so on, all suggest deceit or dissembling. We expect our interlocutors to possess a single and coherent view of the world, and we expect them to speak and to act in accordance with that perspective. We expect, in other words, that our fellow citizens be *sincere*. “Sincerity” derives from the Latin *sincerus*, meaning clean, pure, or honest. The first syllable, *sin-*, is likely from the Indo-European root *sem-*, meaning “one,” connecting sincerity to English words such as “single” or “simple.” To be sincere is to present oneself as singular, both in the sense of being entirely original, rather than a copy, and in the sense of being whole, unitary, undivided. As Elizabeth Markovits puts it, “because the [ideally] sincere speaker is unitary, there is no split self, no self-consciousness that would allow the speaker to manipulate her own words for greatest effect.”⁵¹ Sincerity, and thus access to the public sphere, requires the presentation of this unified self and the disavowal of double consciousness. Woe unto any public figure or private person who would address a public, who speaks in a manner that suggests that they are of more than one mind on a controversial matter. A tendency to see things from more than one perspective, and to talk in ways that recognize that an undifferentiated, homogenous unity is both impossible and undesirable, would defy our expectation that “the sincere speaker is one with an authentic, unitary self.”⁵²

A facility in rhetoric generally presents a critique of sincerity, at least to the extent that it fosters a self-conscious, strategic use of language, what Mark Backman refers to as “sophistication” — a set of discursive habits that are “the antithesis of naturalism and the opposite of naivete,” with the potential to “make things appear to be quite different from what had originally been thought to be the case.”⁵³ A plain discourse, characterized by “zero-degree tropes” which declare themselves to be no tropes at all, lacks the self-conscious *copia* through which alternative perspectives might be developed. Its narrow confines cultivate the unity essential to sincerity, and it is for this reason that “plainly styled language has long been the hallmark of speakers professing their sincerity.”⁵⁴ In a discourse more explicitly marked as rhetorical, in contrast, it is evident that the speaker is standing to one side of her or his own verbal performance, seeing herself as the audience might, so that the speech is crafted with an eye to outcome and effect rather than merely flowing as an authentic conduit of unmediated expression. Such discourse allows space for, and in fact is marked by, the

elaboration and incorporation of multiple points of view. It is this sophisticated critique of sincerity that is largely responsible for the fact that, as Bryan Garsten points out, in “both theory and practice today, the reigning view of rhetorical speech is that it is a disruptive force in politics and a threat to democratic deliberation.” The chief dangers of rhetoric that Garsten notes — manipulation and pandering — are both manifestations of insincerity.⁵⁵

Rhetorical skill has always been dangerous, but it is perhaps especially so within a culture governed thoroughly by a norm of sincerity that privileges “a style that explicitly claims to lack any rhetorical flourishes, in which words and reasoning stand alone.”⁵⁶ Because Obama’s speaking style does not adhere to these norms, his public address attracts perhaps more than its share of suspicion. During the primaries, for example, Hillary Clinton repeatedly reminded her followers that “words are not action,”⁵⁷ and his detractors often suggested that Obama the man was a cipher masked by his discourse, that he was “largely a stage presence defined mostly by his powerful rhetoric,” and that there was a “huge and deceptive gap between his captivating oratory and his actual views.”⁵⁸ The apotheosis of such critique might have been George Will’s essay in *Newsweek*, in which he referred to Obama’s election as the “final repudiation” of the founders’ suspicions of rhetoric. Discerning a “long march away from the Founders’ intent” regarding the sequestering of rhetoric from politics, Will declares that Obama’s campaign represents the culmination of that trajectory; because it was “powered by the ‘popular art’ of oratory, [it] was the antithesis of the Founders’ system.”⁵⁹ With rhetoric ascendant, it seems that the collapse of the republic is imminent.

But Obama’s central argument in this speech is that the single-minded and monologic discourse apparently favored by those who are suspicious of rhetoric is simply not up to the task of perfecting the union. The sort of eloquence Obama exhibits does not merely make existing data clearer, and does not merely invite emotional responses to that data; it rather expands the discursive field, multiplying the possibilities that might be articulated and, thus, the personae that might be considered. The differing perspectives must be rounded out so that they can be brought before the eyes of the audience; the balanced tropes that can place them into juxtaposition must be fully developed so that conclusions are not too hastily drawn. This sort of rhetorical action, encompassing the personification, *pro ommaton poiein* (bringing-before-the-eyes), chiasmus, isocolon, antithesis, and the various figures of parallelism and antimetabolism that characterize a doubled style, would be pinched by the cramped confines of a “cult of plain speaking” policed by “a kind of adulation of the unaffected vigor of the one-syllable words in which ‘real people’ express themselves.”⁶⁰ A discourse of productive duality requires the capacious and fecund conceptual space afforded by an elevated stylistic register.

This stylistic requirement and its limitations were brought into focus in another race-related media firestorm. On July 22, 2009, at the end of a press conference on health care reform, Lynn Sweet, of the Chicago *Sun-Times*, was given the opportunity to ask President Obama about the recent arrest of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. Gates had returned from the airport to find the front door of his home

jammed and asked his cab driver to help force it open. A passerby called 911, and police sergeant James Crowley soon arrived to ask Gates for identification. Accounts vary as to what happened next, but the upshot was that Gates was arrested for disorderly conduct. The charges were quickly dropped, and the entire incident likely would have gone largely unnoticed had it not been for Obama's response to Sweet's question: "What does that incident say to you and what does it say about race relations in America?" After acknowledging that Gates "is a friend" and that "I don't know all the facts," Obama stated that "the Cambridge Police acted stupidly in arresting somebody when there was already proof that they were in their own home" and reminded the press corps that "that there is a long history in this country of African Americans and Latinos being stopped by law enforcement disproportionately."⁶¹ Public outcry was immediate and unrelenting, with many believing that the president's comments indicated a debilitating fixation on one side of the color-line; radio and television talk show host Glenn Beck, for example, declared that Obama is a "racist" with a "deep-seated hatred for white people or the white culture."⁶²

A few days later, Obama made an unannounced appearance in the White House briefing room to clarify his remarks. He did not apologize, but he acknowledged that his comment had "obviously helped to contribute [to the] ratcheting ... up" of media attention to the incident and suggested that he "could have calibrated those words differently." Explicitly straddling the color-line, Obama offered the parallel assessments that "there was an overreaction in pulling Professor Gates out of his home to the station" but that "Professor Gates probably overreacted as well." Deploying an ambiguous pronoun, Obama reminds the press corps that "because of our history ... African Americans are sensitive to these issues" and that "interactions between police officers and the African American community can sometimes be fraught with misunderstanding." "My sense," he continued, framing the event firmly in the terms of his Philadelphia speech, "is you've got two good people in a circumstance in which neither of them were able to resolve the incident in the way that it should have been resolved and the way they would have liked it to be resolved."⁶³ All the parties involved failed to see the events adequately from the others' points of view, which resulted in bad behavior all around.

Like Obama's initial responses to the Reverend Wright controversy, however, these brief, direct statements did not quiet the widespread discontent; his handling of the incident was widely perceived as contributing to a mid-summer slide in his approval rating.⁶⁴ Perhaps this is because such statements lack the stylistic density and rhetorical coherence of Obama's speech in Philadelphia and, as such, are unable to manage the uneasy union of sincerity and doubleness. Those offended by his seemingly off-the-cuff statement that the Cambridge police acted "stupidly" did not question his sincerity; when he later proclaimed all parties involved partly right and partly wrong, on the other hand, he was found cynical or inauthentic — in the blogosphere, Obama's reaction to these events often was characterized as "duplicitous."⁶⁵ Keeping sincerity and duplicity in productive solution requires an elevated register and a sustained development, which in turn catalyzes the bilateral transfiguration of doubled body and attitude. When the sincere and the doubled are disconnected, as perhaps through

the limitations imposed by press conferences and plain speaking, the productive potential of this political style is depleted; it is perceived as superficial, as mere style, as expressing a lack of commitment, and as such risks seeming a dodge or maneuver.⁶⁶

The successful deployment of a doubled political style may depend, then, in part on the ability to seem sincere while presenting a doubled self. As Martin J. Medhurst points out, when Obama is delivering an address, he “seems like he’s actually thinking about what he is saying rather than just reading from a script.”⁶⁷ Informed commentators on Obama frequently recall Cato the Elder’s aphorism, *rem tene, verba sequentur* (grasp the matter; words will follow). As Tom Palaima, for example, reminds us, “Cato’s advice does not mean, either in Roman or Modern American politics: ‘Size the situation up and honest words will come to you.’ It means: ‘Develop the skill to be able to do political calculations instantaneously and then with commensurate skill say the words best suited at the moment to your immediate and long-term political interests.’”⁶⁸ This is the ability to seem unified and sincere while engaged in a doubled and self-consciously strategic use of language. It is the ability to see your own words and actions from another’s perspective, while at the same time also seeing them from your own, keeping both perspectives constantly in view and tacking between them.

A doubled political style also addresses a doubled public. Du Bois articulates a central experience for many persons of color: “One ever feels his twoness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” But Obama broadens the application. In a perceptive op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, David Brooks describes Obama as a “sojourner,” being continually “in ... but not of “ the institutions and organizations with which he is associated. Another form of insincerity, this “ability to stand apart accounts for his [Obama’s] fantastic powers of observation,” Brooks observes, “and his skills as a writer and thinker. It means that people on almost all sides of any issue can see parts of themselves reflected in Obama’s eyes. But it does make him hard to place.”⁶⁹ Obama would have his multiracial audience feel their own two-ness, not only to become doubled in emulation of his own dark body but also to hone their powers of observation, to see parts of themselves reflected in the eyes of the other without collapsing that other point of view into their own — and thus to become themselves perhaps harder to place. This is a particularly potent form of rhetoric and as a result also is potentially subversive; it is perhaps partly for this reason that his eloquence came under such intense and unusual scrutiny. Though Obama’s rhetorical style often was compared to John F. Kennedy’s, for example, Medhurst notes that during the 1960 campaign “there was no criticism of his [Kennedy’s] eloquence or speaking ability.”⁷⁰

In his analysis of this speech, George Lakoff suggests that it is not a speech on race, but “a speech on what America is about, on what American values are, on what patriotism is, on who the real culprits are, and on the kind of new politics needed if we are to make progress in transcending those flaws that are still very much with us.”⁷¹ But of course this *is* a speech on race, because race is so much of what America is about. Discursive practices that model ways of speaking that encourage and sustain the sort of productive division that is fundamental to addressing the color-line might

be deployed in addressing the multiple divisions and “stalemates” that characterize our current milieu. Racial division is a representative anecdote, “a part of” our public culture rather than “apart from” it, and as such presents an opportunity for the invention of such discursive practices.⁷² Critique of the color-line is not supplemental, but essential, to a broader critique of democratic practice. Indeed, the exemplars of rhetorical eloquence that might provide the necessary resources for rhetorical invention can best be produced when a public actor is required to address “all” the people on a divisive topic, such as race. Continued attention to public address, then, is essential not merely as a way to understand the past or future and not only as a site wherein to critique the manifestation of power; a rhetorical analysis of public discourse that aims to locate within that discourse the inventional resources that enable cultural critique and political action is fundamental to our continued democratic practice.

In this speech, as Obama shifts the burden of double consciousness from himself to his audience, he provides an especially powerful rhetorical resource that strains against the monoscopic and monovocal norms that currently cripple democratic life. A political atmosphere fused by an insistence on the unitary selves that result from rejecting doubled and self-conscious language would be rigid and impermeable, lacking the flexibility fundamental to democratic culture. We must be able to imagine others as comparable to ourselves so that we might accept their points of view as justifiable and legitimate; we must be able to appreciate the past without becoming paralyzed by it; we must be able to see ourselves as a union without becoming essentially unified, to see that we might share a common stake without sharing common experiences. In short, if we are to achieve a more perfect union, we must become able to divide ourselves.

Notes

- [1] Du Bois did not actually coin the phrase; it was used by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his 1841 essay “The Transcendentalist.” Du Bois’s professor at Harvard, William James, explored closely related ideas concerning the “divided self.” Indeed, similar ideas were rampant in turn-of-the-century discourse, both academic and popular. See Shamoan Zamir, *Dark Voices: W. E. B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1888-1903* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 153-54, 163-64.
- [2] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (1903; repr., New York: Bantam Classics, 1989), 3.
- [3] Adolph Reed Jr., “Du Bois’s ‘Double Consciousness’: Race and Gender in Progressive Era American Thought,” *Studies in American Political Development* 6 (1992): 135.
- [4] Ernest Allen Jr., “Ever Feeling One’s Twoness: ‘Double Ideals’ and ‘Double Consciousness’ in the Souls of Black Folk,” *Critique of Anthropology* 12 (1992): 261-75. See also Dickson D. Bruce Jr., “W. E. B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness,” *American Literature* 64 (1992): 299-309; Ernest Allen Jr., “Du Boisian Double Consciousness: The Unsustainable Argument,” *The Black Scholar* 33 (2003): 25-43. Paul Gilroy, similarly, argues that Du Bois — and Richard Wright, in drawing on Du Bois — viewed double consciousness as “neither simply a disability nor a consistent privilege.” Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 161.
- [5] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, xxxi, 10.
- [6] David A. Frank and Mark Lawrence McPhail, “Barack Obama’s Address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention: Trauma, Compromise, Consilience, and the (Im)possibility of Racial Reconciliation,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8 (2005): 589.
- [7] Du Bois does say that African Americans are “gifted with second-sight in this American world,”

which as Zamir points out suggests “a higher understanding, born of ... alienation, of political and social realities.” Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 3; Zamir, *Dark Voices*, 146. I am discussing race as a predominantly black/white issue because this is how both Du Bois and Obama discuss it.

[8] Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 49.

[9] I borrow the phrase “stereoscopic gaze” from Robert L. Ivie, “Finessing the Demonology of War: Toward a Practical Aesthetic of Humanising Dissent,” *Javnost — The Public* 14 (2007): 37-54.

[10] The key text for understanding political style is Robert Hariman, *Political Style: The Artistry of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). He defines political style as “a coherent repertoire of rhetorical conventions depending on aesthetic reactions for political effect” (4).

[11] James Darsey, “Barack Obama and America’s Journey,” *Southern Communication Journal* 74 (2009): 89.

[12] David A. Frank, “The Prophetic Voice and the Face of the Other in Barack Obama’s ‘A More Perfect Union’ Address, March 18, 2008,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 12 (2009): 168. Both Darsey’s and Frank’s essays were published after I had submitted the initial draft of this essay to the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*; I have integrated references to their insights where they are consonant with my own. Similar approaches to Obama’s rhetoric are ubiquitous. Ekaterina Haskins, for example, characterizes Obama as “summoning the ghosts of previous leaders and presidents who Americans have learnt to revere,” showing that he “has certainly studied all of his predecessors,” is “quite aware of the rhetorical heritage that he draws on,” and that he sees himself particularly “as a descendant of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King” (quoted in Stephanie Holmes, “Obama: Oratory and Originality,” BBC, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/us_elections_2008/7735014.stm); Garry Wills provides a side-by-side reading of Obama’s speech with Lincoln’s Cooper Union Address (Garry Wills, “Two Speeches on Race,” *New York Review of Books*, May 1, 2008, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/21290>); Tom Palaima notes that “besides Lincoln, parallels can be drawn with John F. Kennedy and Franklin Delano Roosevelt,” though Palaima himself “would argue that Obama combines the oratorical talents of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King” (Tom Palaima, “The Tools of Power,” *Times Higher Education*, April 2, 2009, 35); and Charlotte Higgins suggests a longer view, terming Obama’s rhetoric “Ciceronian” and arguing that “to understand the next four years of American politics, you are going to need to understand something of the politics of ancient Greece and Rome” (Charlotte Higgins, “The New Cicero,” *Guardian*, November 26, 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/nov/26/barack-obama-usa1>).

[13] Though Obama is literally half (black) African and half (white) American, some have argued that he is not “African American” because his personal ancestry does not include the distinctive history of subjugation and discrimination associated with American chattel slavery.

[14] Christina Bellantoni, “Cash-Flush Obama Steamrolls McCain in Ads,” *Washington Times*, October 20, 2008.

[15] For example, the February 2007 issue of *Rolling Stone* published a profile of Obama that featured some of Wright’s more incendiary remarks and noted that “this is as openly radical a background as any significant American figure has ever emerged from.” Ben Wallace-Wells, “Destiny’s Child,” *Rolling Stone*, February 22, 2007, http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/story/13390609/campaign_08_the_radical_roots_of_barack_obama.

[16] Barack Obama, “On My Faith and My Church,” March 14, 2008, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/barack-obama/on-my-faith-and-my-church_b_91623.html.

[17] The video is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_7piGy0u43c.

[18] Mike Dorning, “Obama to Give Rare Race Speech,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 18, 2008.

[19] “Under Pressure, Obama Prepares for Race and Unity Speech,” March 17, 2008, <http://elections.foxnews.com/2008/03/17/under-pressure-obama-prepares-for-race-and-unity-speech>.

[20] The prepared text of Obama’s speech is supplied by his campaign at Barack Obama, “Obama

Speeches,” *Organizing for America*, <http://www.barackobama.com/speeches/index.php>. Obama’s actual delivery varied slightly, and I have corrected the delivery text to correspond to the video of the speech available at “Barack Obama: ‘A More Perfect Union’ (Full Speech),” *YouTube*,

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrp-v2tHaDo>. Throughout this essay, quotations from Obama’s speech are drawn from my corrected text. Video of the speech, and a transcription from the video, also are available at “Barack Obama — A More Perfect Union (Philadelphia Speech),” *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobamaperfectunion.htm>.

[21] Jefferson’s original draft of the Declaration did contain references to slavery, but these were struck by the Continental Congress during its editing of Jefferson’s draft. See Stephen E. Lucas, “Justifying America: The Declaration of Independence as a Rhetorical Document,” in *American Rhetoric: Context and Criticism*, ed. Thomas W. Benson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 104-7. It might be argued that the Constitution is itself a doubled document, in that it seems both to condemn and institutionalize slavery. The Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution both are available online at Independence Hall Association, *ushistory.org*, <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/index.htm>, <http://www.ushistory.org/documents/constitution.htm>.

[22] Frank and McPhail, “Barack Obama’s Address,” 583. McPhail borrows the phrase “politics of disavowal” from Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 279-80.

[23] The relevant sections of the Constitution include article I, section 2, which established that “three fifths” of slaves were to be counted for the purposes of representation and taxation (this was changed in 1868 with the ratification of Fourteenth Amendment); article I, section 9, which allowed for the “importation of such persons as any of the states now existing shall think proper to admit” until 1808; article IV, section 2, which required that escaped slaves be returned to their owners (this was changed in 1865 with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment); and article V, which prohibited altering article I, section 9, until 1808.

[24] Frank similarly notes Obama’s use of “elegant pairing of contraries” that challenge “the binary thinking at the root of racism and other pathologies.” Frank and McPhail, “Barack Obama’s Address,” 579. Significantly, such balanced phrases are much less prominent in Obama’s speeches that do not explicitly address race.

[25] Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 17.

[26] On April 29, 2008, after Wright made another set of controversial comments to the National Press Club, Obama formally cut all ties with his former pastor. A video of Obama’s press conference is available at “Obama Press Conference: April 29, 2008,” *YouTube*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4EKY7rCF_c.

[27] Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995), 294.

[28] George Lakoff describes Obama’s stance toward Wright in parallel terms, casting it as a form of judgment. George Lakoff, “What Made Obama’s Speech Great,” *AlterNet*, <http://www.alternet.org/story/80549/>. Frank, similarly, notes that Obama’s critique of Wright is “twofold,” in that he both embraces the prophetic tradition within which Wright was preaching and recognizes that it is ill-suited to the public sphere. Frank, “Prophetic Voice,” 184.

[29] Obama’s maternal grandmother played a significant role in his upbringing; he lived with his grandparents in Hawaii during his early teen years, while his mother did fieldwork in Indonesia, working toward her PhD in anthropology. See Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, especially 72-91.

[30] Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones, “Recasting the American Dream and American Politics: Barack Obama’s Keynote Address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 93 (2007): 435.

[31] Frank and McPhail, “Barack Obama’s Address,” 577-78.

[32] On this speech as empathic, see also Lakoff, "What Made Obama's Speech."

[33] Throughout the primaries and into the general election, a recurrent critique was that Obama's followers, and perhaps Obama himself, suffered from a messianic complex. See, for example, Wesley Pruden, "The Faith Healer for Our Time," *Washington Times*, June 10, 2008; Mary Zeiss Stange, "Obama's Believers: There's a Theological Underpinning to What's Going On with the Illinois Senator's Campaign," *USA Today*, April 7, 2008; Christina Bellantoni, "Oprah Hails Obama for 'New Vision,'" *Washington Times*, December 9, 2007.

[34] Zamir notes the close association, for Du Bois, "of self-consciousness to seeing and being seen," and argues that this association between double consciousness and double perspective represents a significant innovation of Du Bois's in relation to the many conceptions of the "divided self" that were salient in the late nineteenth century. Zamir, *Dark Voices*, 144.

[35] The prepared text reads, "But we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow." It may be that the references to disparities *within* the African American community was an error that Obama corrected in delivery. But in any case, referring to inequalities *between* whites and blacks better fits the theme of the text.

[36] Frank, "Prophetic Voice," 181. Frank is borrowing the phrase "hush harbor" from Vorris Nunley, "From the Harbor to Da Academic Hood: Hush Harbors and an African American Rhetorical Tradition," in *African American Rhetoric(s): Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Elaine B. Richardson and Ronald L. Jackson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 221-42.

[37] The prepared text does not mention the beauty shop.

[38] Ivie, "Finessing the Demonology of War," 51.

[39] Frank, "Prophetic Voice," 185.

[40] In the prepared text, the reference is to Obama's "single candidacy" rather than to Obama as the "single candidate."

[41] Rowland and Jones note that this theme is present in Obama's 2004 DNC address as well, though they do not point out the supporting stylistic cues. Rowland and Jones, "Recasting the American Dream," 435.

[42] When addressing his white audience, Obama makes less use of doubled tropes than when he is addressing his black audience. It may be that whites must first learn to recognize that other consciousnesses exist before they can productively cultivate double consciousness, and perhaps only then can they make productive use of the stylistic cues associated with a double attitude.

[43] Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 87.

[44] Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 105.

[45] Jeffrey Wattles, *The Golden Rule* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 31. The term "comparable" is especially useful, as it complements the visual emphasis in Du Boisian double consciousness that is less obvious in the idea of "consubstantiality" that Rowland and Jones borrow from Kenneth Burke. Rowland and Jones, "Recasting the American Dream," 435.

[46] Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), 348; Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 242-43.

[47] Jeffrey Wattles puts it this way, just before he quotes the passage from Du Bois with which I began this essay: "The mature practice of the golden rule involves an identification with others that includes understanding plus an appropriate level of shared feeling plus an appropriate practical response." The understanding and shared feeling necessitates a doubled consciousness; the practical response finds its foundation in a doubled attitude. Wattles, *Golden Rule*, 121.

[48] This interpretation of the election results would belie, to some extent, Adolph Reed's prediction that "Obama's style of being all things to all people threatens to melt under the inescapable spotlight of a national campaign against a Republican." Adolph Reed, "Obama No," *The Progressive*, May 2008,

http://www.progressive.org/mag_reed0508.

[49] Kate Zernike and Dalia Sussman, "For Pollsters, The Racial Effect that Wasn't," *New York Times*, November 6, 2008.

[50] Bob Hepburn, "US Still a Nation Deeply Divided," *Toronto Star*, November 6, 2008.

[51] Elizabeth Markovits, *The Politics of Sincerity: Plato, Frank Speech, and Democratic Judgment* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 34.

[52] Markowitz, *Politics of Sincerity*, 33.

[53] Mark Backman, *Sophistication: Rhetoric and the Rise of Self-Consciousness* (Woodbridge, CT: Ox Bow Press, 1991), 5-7.

[54] Markovits, *Politics of Sincerity*, 32. In referring to "zero-degree tropes," Markovits is following (and critiquing) Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), 21.

[55] Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 3.

[56] Markovits, *Politics of Sincerity*, 31.

[57] Anne E. Kornblut and Dan Balz, "Underdog Clinton Goes after Obama," *Washington Post*, January 6, 2008.

[58] Robert J. Samuelson, "The Obama Delusion," *Washington Post*, February 20, 2008.

[59] George F. Will, "The Final Repudiation," *Newsweek*, November 17, 2008, 124. Excellent responses to Will's essay include Tom Frentz, "Ravaged by Rhetoric," *Communication Currents* 3 (2008); Jennifer R. Mercieca, "Don't Fear Oratory," *Communication Currents* 3 (2008); David Levasseur, "To Trust or Distrust the Electorate," *Communication Currents* 3 (2008). All are available online at <http://www.communicationcurrents.com/index.asp?bid=15&issuepage=120>.

[60] John Haiman, *Talk Is Cheap: Sarcasm, Alienation, and the Evolution of Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 101.

[61] "News Conference by the President," East Room, White House, July 22, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/News-Conference-by-the-President-July-22-2009.

[62] Video and commentary are available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/07/28/fox-host-glenn-beck-obama_n_246310.html.

[63] "Statement by the President," James S. Brady Briefing Room, White House, July 24, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Statement-by-the-President-in-the-James-S-Brady-Briefing-Room.

[64] These polls also reinforce the racial divisions emphasized in the election results: Jon Cohen, "Obama Involvement in Gates Flap Hurt Image, Poll Finds," *Washington Post*, July 31, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/30/AR2009073004097.html>; Paul Steinhauer, "Poll: Obama Approval Drops 7 Points over Last 100 Days," *CNN.com*, August 6, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/08/06/obama.poll>.

[65] Indeed, conservative bloggers and commentators often refer to Obama's "duplicity" with regards to many different issues, as any simple Internet search will reveal.

[66] As the intended "rhetorical end-point" of the Reverend Wright crisis, which had threatened to derail his campaign, Obama prepared and delivered the speech in Philadelphia which, as I have argued, supplies inventional resources for productive ways of speaking and thinking about race. As the intended end-point of the Professor Henry Louis Gates crisis, which in turn threatened to derail the president's agenda for health care reform, Obama invited Gates and police sergeant Crowley to share a beer at the White House. This was to be a "teachable moment," as Obama put it, but it was a peculiarly quiet lesson. The three principals in the matter (and Vice President Joe Biden) sat around a table at the edge of the Rose Garden and drank their beers, a small group of multiracial bodies well out of earshot of the gathered press. What they said, or how they said it, was not reported; no ways of speaking in public about race were modeled. Indeed, the implied message was that discussions about race, even and perhaps especially in highly visible public spaces, should be entirely private affairs, presumably

- conducted in a plain-spoken vernacular. See John Louis Lucaites, "President Obama's Teachable Moment," blog post, *No Caption Needed*, August 2, 2009, [http:// www.nocaptionneeded.com/?p=3538](http://www.nocaptionneeded.com/?p=3538).
- [67] Quoted in Alec MacGillis, "Finding Political Strength in the Power of Words," *Washington Post*, February 26, 2008. Ekaterina Haskins concurs: "Rhetoric always has the connotations of being about appearances rather than reality, but he [Obama] doesn't sound false." Quoted in Stephanie Holmes, "Obama: Oratory and Originality," BBC, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/us_elections_2008/7735014.stm.
- [68] Tom Palaima, "The Tools of Power," *Times Higher Education*, April 2, 2009, 32.
- [69] David Brooks, "Where's the Landslide?" *New York Times*, August 5, 2008. See also Higgins, "New Cicero."
- [70] Quoted in Alec MacGillis, "Finding Political Strength in the Power of Words," *Washington Post*, February 26, 2008.
- [71] Lakoff, "What Made Obama's Speech."
- [72] Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 59-61; Robert Wess, "Representative Anecdotes in General, with Notes toward a Representative Anecdote for Burkean Ecocriticism in Particular," *K. B. Journal* 1 (2004): <http://www.kbjournal.org/node/54>.