

## Introduction

*...Communication does much more than transmit packets of neutral, pre-existing information or ideas...[Exploring] a rhetorical sense of communication... helps us see the ways communication (including words, signs, symbols, performance, media, pictures, and so on) shapes, invents, forms, creates, influences, [insert other "making" word] the world around us and the way we understand and act in the world. (Rossing)*

As a Communication Studies student, one concept above all has been driven into my head. Reinforced in every class and by every professor, it is one of the fundamental ideas that the field of communication was built upon: the idea that “it is impossible not to communicate.” Every action, or lack thereof, sends a message. This concept, along with many others in the communication scholar’s arsenal, allows for deeper understanding of whatever topic the researcher is interested in. When I was looking to deepen my understanding of race, culture, and communication through an examination of President Obama, it became important to broaden my research from what is viewed as the more traditional sphere of communication studies: written texts or oral speeches. Many times, the most revealing insights were found by examining how a topic was avoided or omitted. In astronomy, new planets are sometimes found by noticing an irregularity in a known planet or comet’s orbit. Scientists can infer that a planet exists, despite being unable to see it through a telescope, based on the gravitational forces altering the orbit of the known heavenly body. So too can we infer the presence of the forces of race, culture, and communication in our society. Like the scientist who can approximate the size, location, and composition of a newly discovered planet based on the forces it exerts, a researcher can examine these invisible forces to infer how race, culture, and communication shape and are shaped in the United States today. In doing so, we further our knowledge and understanding of these concepts,

and fulfill the self-awareness imperative: increasing our conscious awareness of being caught up in political, economic, and historical systems (Martin and Nakayama 31).

In the case of this paper, my topic is the forty-fourth President of the United States: Barack Hussein Obama. Simple to articulate, but difficult to execute, my goal in this paper is to develop a deeper understanding of this accomplished, enigmatic, and charismatic politician. My personal interest in the man was immediate when he began to enter the conversation as a potential Presidential candidate. No doubt much of this interest was due to what Obama wasn't: an old and established white male politician. From the outside, then Senator Obama seemed to be the polar opposite of a major party candidate for the Presidency: young, inexperienced, and African-American. But on deeper investigation, I saw the qualifications and traits that would lead him on a storm into the White House: his cool, rational demeanor; his Columbia undergraduate and Harvard Law School education. But, as a communications student, above all I noticed his articulateness. Clearly, he was a gifted orator and a tremendous communicator.

In this paper I will attempt a greater understanding of Obama's communications, campaign, and Presidency. I stress that I intend this paper only to be *an* understanding of race, culture, and communications today, not *the* understanding of race, culture, and communications today. I have chosen a conceptual organization, rather than focusing on any particular speech or text. I have also mixed elements from different parts of the communication field: a rhetorical analysis might be interspersed with a comment on race or culture. Through writing, I hope not only to develop my thoughts and ideas on paper, but also to make a contribution to the body of knowledge on the subject.

### A Changing America?

Since the election of the United States' first African-American President, Barack Hussein Obama, commentators and pundits have been quick to declare the emergence of a post-racial era. Numerous studies have examined implicit and explicit racial attitudes during the run up to the 2008 Presidential election and the early years of his Presidency. Their experiments have provided mixed results. Ashley Plant et al. found in their 2009 study that exposure to Obama provided "a positive, counter-stereotypic Black exemplar" that resulted in a "dramatic" decrease in implicit anti-Black prejudice (961). In revisiting their study in 2011, Plant and fellow researcher Corey Columb confirmed their results when they found that exposure to Obama can decrease implicit racial bias levels (499). However, Kathleen Schmidt and Brian Nosek observed little evidence for systematic change in implicit and explicit racial attitudes in their 2010 study (308). They concluded that malleability of racial attitudes may be conditional on more features than the mere presence of high-status counter-stereotypic exemplars (314). While it is unclear whether implicit and explicit racial bias has decreased since the election of Obama, it is clear that we are not in a post-racial era. Race has played a significant role in his campaign and during his Presidency: it has been an enormous elephant in the room. Because of this, it is more important than ever to consider race and its role in politics and American society.

Obama and his campaign strategists knew that he would have to "overcome" his blackness in order to make white voters comfortable in voting for him (Staples). He pursued a strategy of post-racial politics and persona (Kamiya). This means he avoided using African-American cultural mannerisms and speech patterns, commonly known as "ebonics." He also avoided race and racial issues as much as possible, especially in front of white audiences. Obama deliberately distanced himself from being associated with many leaders of the civil rights

movement, his reverend, and his church to avoid looking “too black” or “too political” (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 199). This has become a pronounced shift in the United States culture, away from the former idea that we “have to take race into account in order to get beyond it” (Kamiya).

Although he attempted to pursue a post-racial campaign strategy, he was forced to address the race issue he had previously minimized or ignored when Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s inflammatory sermon came to light. Responding to that exigence, he delivered one of the most eloquent speeches ever given. Many credit this “A More Perfect Union” speech with saving his Presidential bid. He attempts to transcend race by promoting the new color-blind American cultural mythos.

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. . . . I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave owners—an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible. (Obama, “A More Perfect Union”)

In the same vein, during his election-night speech, he opines: “If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer” (Obama, “Election Night Victory Speech”).

Obama couldn’t acknowledge the real racial tensions and inequalities that still exist in the United States. Instead, he was pushed into pursuing an alternate route: emphasizing unity and legitimizing the myth of the United States as a uniquely special place. In doing so, he obfuscates

the real issues and misses out on a chance to start a conversation about race. This fits Obama's campaign strategy of racial minimization. The overall uplifting tone and attitude contained within Obama's remarks aligns with the main themes of "hope" and "change" in his campaign, and he paints an idealized picture of American society: one that has moved beyond race into a post-racial era.

### Color-Blind Ideology

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Dietrich argue that by pushing a post-racial ideology in his rhetoric, Obama reinforces the "new racism" (191). While the culture of the United States has shifted from one of open discrimination, overt racism, and explicit prejudice, racism is still a structural and institutional problem. It has evolved to become much more subtle: a significant shift from the days of Jim Crow laws, but no less salient. Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich have dubbed the ideological anchor of new racism "color-blind racism" (191). The ideology of the Jim Crow era consisted of blunt explanations such as biological and moral inferiority for the inequality of minority groups (Lipsitz). In contrast, new racism is characterized by color-blind explanations for inequality: market dynamics, appealing to the capitalist nature of our society, naturally occurring phenomenon, appealing to chance, and "cultural deficiencies," appealing to the myth in our society that anyone is capable of upward mobility (Lipsitz). In essence, the old overt racism has been replaced by a new subtle and covert form of racism. But despite the shift in society, racism is not just a problem of the past; it is very much an issue in the modern world, and its impact is visible on Obama.

Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich lay out four components to color-blind racism. These components are color-blind frames: set paths for interpreting information that provide the contextual standpoint from which one explains racial matters (191). The first component of

color-blind racist ideology is abstract liberalism: framing race-related issues in the language of liberalism (Bonilla-Silva). The second is cultural racism: presenting cultural practices as fixed features that are used as justification for racial inequality (Taguieff). The third is minimization of racism: framing inequality as anything but racism (Bonilla-Silva). Bonilla Silva in *Racism Without Racists* adds a fourth frame, naturalization: explaining away racial phenomena by suggesting they are natural occurrences. All four of these frames are central to understanding discourse both about and from Obama.

These frames are visible in Obama's rhetoric, including his speeches "Selma Voting Rights March Commemoration" and "A More Perfect Union," his book, *The Audacity of Hope*, and in television interviews (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 200). The first frame is visible in "A More Perfect Union," in which Obama avoids addressing the need for structural solutions to racial problems and instead advocates an abstract liberal resolution to racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 201):

For the African-American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances - for better health care, and better schools, and better jobs - to the larger aspirations of all Americans -- the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man whose been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family. (Obama, "A More Perfect Union")

In his speech, Obama eschews any concrete or actionable plans for addressing racial tensions and inequalities. Instead he ties black problems to the larger problems of American society and

prescribes a vague set of solutions for the entire group. He fails to address the problems of the African-American community: problems that are decidedly different than those faced by the majority of Americans.

Abstract liberalism is also embedded in *The Audacity of Hope*. Rather than address issues of structural racial inequality with structural solutions, he advocates for class-based solutions. He explains that he is in favor of, “emphasis on universal, as opposed to race-specific, program... [which] isn’t just good policy; it’s also good politics” (Obama, “The Audacity of Hope” 247). In adopting this frame, he is implicitly assuming that white privilege has been minimized or eliminated, and laws such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act have created an equal playing field (McCarthy). By abstaining from mentioning disparities in life-chance because of race, he removes an important issue from the table of American public discourse (McCarthy). Robert Staples argues that this is a calculated strategy in order to earn the white vote. By reframing racial issues through an abstract liberal lens, Obama minimized the issues of race in his campaign which subsequently made him more acceptable to white voters. While adopting this rhetorical strategy was undoubtedly beneficial to him politically, it came at the cost of helping to legitimize myths and reinforcing the framework of color-blind racism.

Michael McCarthy argues that Obama maintains a “near religious ferocity” towards the frame of abstract liberalism, which can be seen in the individualist, personal aspirational style he displays, as well as the labels he uses for identification. He labels himself a “free-trader,” appealing to the capitalistic pulse of our culture, “who can look back on his promise to renegotiate NAFTA as a bit of irrational campaign exuberance” (McCarthy). His devotion to classical liberalism is also evidenced in his close relationship and support for Wall Street, and in his continued adherence to the “free-market” principles of George W. Bush (McCarthy).

The second frame, cultural racism, is evident in his “Selma Voting Rights March Speech.” Obama frames the problems of the black poor as cultural pathology or “black blame” (Price).

...but I'll tell you what -- even as I fight on behalf of more education funding, more equity, I have to also say that , if parents don't turn off the television set when the child comes home from school and make sure they sit down and do their homework and go talk to the teachers and find out how they're doing, and if we don't start instilling a sense in our young children that there is nothing to be ashamed about in educational achievement, I don't know who taught them that reading and writing and conjugating your verbs was something white. (Obama, “Selma Voting Rights March”)

Here he frames racial inequality on a lack of cultural values. He engages in blaming the victims. By framing the issue in this manner, racial inequality seems to be the equal fault of both parties: whites and nonwhites. The biological and genetic inferiority explanations that were previously held as reasons for racial inequality are slightly altered and euphemisms are employed to perpetrate new racism. Instead of genetic inferiority, it is more softly labeled as a “problem with cultural values.” This strategy played down Obama’s blackness and emphasized his whiteness to voters, reducing any potential association with the stereotypical “radical, angry black male”.

Cultural racism is often manifested through Cultural Deficit Theory. Attitudes grounded in a deficit perspective attribute the lack of educational success of minority students to characteristics rooted in the minority culture or communities (Irizarry). According to this theory, students of color and poor students enter school with a lack of “cultural capital”: cultural agents

that are affirmed by schools and often shared by school agents and therefore considered valuable (Bourdieu). Examples of cultural deficiencies include, “language, family values, cycle of poverty, lack of motivation, inclination to violence, and proclivity to unplanned pregnancy” (Kahn). This model frames the victims of structural oppression as fully responsible for their lack of success. In doing so, the theory overlooks the root causes of the oppression, and shifts the burden from schools to the individuals and their families, absolving the schools of at least part of their educational responsibility (Irizarry).

Unacceptably prejudicial attitudes in mainstream society are thus repackaged in societally acceptable racism: against “culture” not “race,” despite the former merely being a proxy for the latter. This is easily seen when cultural deficit arguments are taken to an aggressive level and enter the sphere of biology, where minorities aren’t simply culturally deprived but rather “mentally retarded,” “semi-lingual,” or “linguistically handicapped” (Kahn). Deficit rhetoric is also uncomfortably similar to the “soft-line” arguments used to justify the systematic enslavement of blacks and their subsequent segregation in earlier times, such as blacks’ character defects or Native-Americans’ “savagery” (Kahn). The point is cultural racism often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Minority students are disadvantaged by prejudicial attitudes, leading to an overall lack of success compared to their white students, which is then used as justification for the holding of cultural deficit attitudes in the first place.

The third frame, minimization of racism, was prominent in “A More Perfect Union.” According to McCarthy, this speech turned on Obama contrasting his own minimization of racism to Reverend Wright’s failure to follow suit.

But the remarks that have caused this recent firestorm weren't simply controversial. They weren't simply a religious leader's effort to speak out against perceived injustice. Instead, they expressed 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; a view that sees the conflicts in the Middle East as rooted primarily in the actions of stalwart allies like Israel, instead of emanating from the perverse and hateful ideologies of radical Islam. (Obama, "A More Perfect Union")

Obama thus distances himself from the strong rhetoric of Reverend Wright. Rather than acknowledging that Wright did make legitimate criticisms of the United States, he instantly and completely condemns his speech. He characterizes Reverend Wright's viewpoint as a "profoundly distorted" perception of the country thereby denying it legitimacy. While racism is still an important issue in this country, Obama handled the issue lightly, assuming implicitly that white racism is not endemic. He minimizes the role of racism in causing Reverend Wright's remarks, and instead ascribed different, internal and personal issues that lead to these remarks.

The biggest consequence of the use of minimization is that it prevents an open dialogue and adult conversation about race. When a public figure and leader like Obama minimizes racism, people listen and follow his example. Minimization also leads to lack of support for programs designed to aid minorities, such as affirmative action; these programs are rebranded as "reverse discrimination" and held as evidence that whites are victims of "reverse discrimination." When a minority speaks out against an injustice, they are derided as "playing the race card" to get their way. The lesson is clear: communication, explicitly and by omission, holds power. Obama, as a leader and an ethnic minority, needs to wield his communicative

power responsibly and avoid minimizing racism. Minimization of racism leads to stagnation of racial progress.

The fourth frame, naturalization, is most prominent in discourse aimed at attacking Obama or denying racism. Naturalization often times interacts closely in connection with the third frame, minimization . On multiple occasions, newspapers or media organizations have published distasteful political cartoons that depict Obama, and sometimes his family, as apes or chimpanzees. Here is an example of one from the New York Post in February 2009:



<sup>1</sup> Image cited as "Chimpanzee Cartoon."

When forced by public pressure to issue an apology or a statement denying any racist intent or effect, organizations rely primarily on a combination of naturalization and minimization. Here is the statement released by the New York Post about the above political cartoon:

Wednesday's Page Six cartoon - caricaturing Monday's police shooting of a chimpanzee in Connecticut - has created considerable controversy. It shows two police officers standing over the chimp's body: "They'll have to find someone else to write the next stimulus bill," one officer says. It was meant to mock an ineptly written federal stimulus bill. Period. But it has been taken as something else - as a depiction of President Obama, as a thinly veiled expression of racism. This most certainly was not its intent; to those who were offended by the image, we apologize. However, there are some in the media and in public life who have had differences with The Post in the past - and they see the incident as an opportunity for payback. To them, no apology is due. Sometimes a cartoon is just a cartoon - even as the opportunists seek to make it something else. ("That Cartoon")

This non-apology starts by invoking the naturalization frame: portraying the cartoon as merely a standard political cartoon, one of many published every day by newspapers around the world (Rosenberg, "Let's Stop"). It then transitions to minimization, implying that any offense caused must not be due to racism but rather because the people offended must have had a personal agenda (Rosenberg, "Let's Stop"). Al Sharpton criticized the cartoon explaining: "The cartoon in today's New York Post is troubling at best, given the racist attacks throughout history that have made African-Americans synonymous with monkeys" ("Sharpton Blasts Post Cartoon Linking Stimulus Bill to Chimp"). Color-blind racism works by veiling racist attitudes in a societally acceptable form and then denying any racist intent; in this example, racism is denied

by explaining the cartoon through the frames of naturalization and minimization. Whether or not any racism was intended by this cartoon, any offense taken would be justified by the long history of denigrating African-Americans in this country by labeling them as primates. Portraying this cartoon as a perfectly natural political cartoon leads to a lack of recognition of its small role in perpetrating a racist narrative in this country's public sphere. While one cartoon's effect is likely trivial, naturalizing racism downplays the significance of racism in today's world, especially when multiple discourses or texts express the same attitude. Naturalization plays a key role in many similar non-apologies and denials.

One important consideration that we have not discussed so far is: to what extent is Obama at-fault for perpetrating color-blind racial rhetoric? As a politician, it is almost certain that this was a deliberate, calculated choice. He is following the basic principles that any good communicator should follow: know your audience and tailor your message to them. White fear of a powerful black leader (as opposed to a non-racialized leader) and subsequent reluctance to vote for him was one of the biggest hurdles that Obama would ultimately have to sufficiently address in order to be elected President of a largely white country. I believe it is fair to say that Obama was forced to take this angle in his rhetoric. Without doing so, he would not have carried enough of the white vote to be elected president. The famous antiracist speaker and author Time Wise explains:

The extent to which Obama's white support has been directly related to his downplaying of race issues simply cannot be overstated, as evidenced by the kinds of things many of these supporters openly admit, possessing no sense of apparent irony or misgiving. So, consider the chant offered by his supporters at a recent rally—and frankly, a chant in which whites appeared to be joining with far greater enthusiasm than folks of color—to the

effect that ‘Race Doesn’t Matter, Race Doesn’t Matter,’ a concept so utterly absurd, given the way in which race most certainly still matters to the opportunity structure in this country, that one has to almost wretch at the repeated offering of it.

His election was a double edged sword for racial progress. For the first time a black man assumed the highest office in our land, but at the same time, he became a symbol of a post-racial era, someone people could point to as evidence that “racism is dead.”

In order to win the nomination of a major political party and eventually the Presidency, Obama was forced to portray himself as nonracial. This was successfully accomplished by utilizing color-blind rhetoric. Through the frames of abstract liberalism, cultural racism, minimization, and naturalization, he was able to package issues of race and racism as anything but. In doing so, he came off non-threatening to the white majority in this country, allowing him to be electable in a way that fellow African-American Al Sharpton never was in his Presidential bids. The consequences of this strategy are non-trivial, however, as it legitimizes the false claims that “race doesn’t matter anymore” or “we’ve moved past race.” Without the acknowledgement that race is still an important, a dialogue can never be opened.

In today’s society, only Obama has the public stature, respect, and pulpit to initiate a national discussion on race. Based on the principle that if there is only one person has the ability to make a change, it becomes their duty to do so, I believe that Obama has a responsibility to begin the initiation of that change. However, in his first term he has major limitations on what he can do and say because of the impending 2012 election. If he wins re-election, it is my hope that with no further elections to be won, he can dedicate himself to racial progress.

## Identity

An understanding of race, culture, and Obama is not complete without an engagement with the concept of identity. As communication scholars we understand that, "... 'race' is not a fixed term or identity. Instead it is a fluctuating, decentered complex of social meanings that are formed and transformed under the constant pressures of political struggle" (Rossing). It is important to recognize that "race" is a human invention: a social construction with no basis in biology (Schweingruber). A social construct exists only because of collective acceptance, imposition, or agreement (Lusca). This is markedly different from things that "actually" exist, like a mountain, that will exist regardless of people accepting or agreeing it exists (Lusca). However, race is still real in our society, with real consequences and effects (Lusca).

Race is also typically thought of as if its meaning and categories were fixed, however through time people and groups have moved from one racial category to another (Schweingruber). New immigrant groups such as Italians, Irish, and Slavs were not always thought of as "white" like they are today, but they have successfully become white (Schweingruber). In the United States, the racial system has chiefly focused on the white-nonwhite dichotomy (Schweingruber).

For previous presidents, proficiency in intercultural communication was a useful skill, but not a required one. But for Obama, skill in intercultural communication is a necessary condition for a successful Presidential campaign and Presidency. Indeed his communication style is at the heart of the debate over Obama's identity. When people comment on his "articulateness" it often a comment on his "white" communicative style.

Applying Edward Hall's work on situational frames can help us understand how Obama communicates so successfully. Situations are "the building blocks of individual lives, institutions, and culture" (Hall). Situational frames then, are "...the smallest viable unit of a culture that can be analyzed, taught, transmitted, and handed down as a complete entity. These frames contain linguistic, kinesic, proxemics, temporal, social, material, personality, and other components" (Hall). People master hundreds of "situational dialects," appropriate for a variety of situations, including working, eating, governing, and campaigning (Hall). On the campaign trail and in the Presidency, Obama needed to adjust his communication patterns to an array of situations as diverse as the United States itself. In the situation of an African-American church, the appropriate dialect may include being loud and gregarious, while giving moderate personal space, strong eye contact, and speaking at will. When visiting an eastern culture on a mission of good-will, perhaps the appropriate dialect includes being quiet and serious, while giving wide personal space, averted eye contact, and specific turn-taking conversational behavior.

Obama's situational adeptness no doubt was a prerequisite for his election. He recognized that the situation of governing a country of predominantly white voters called for a dialect that is often considered as "white" dialect, including proper English and an avoidance of slang. Much of what we view as "good communication" is truly analyzing the situation, having the necessary dialect in one's repertoire, and applying it as necessary. Not only does this help him communicate effectively with multiple groups, necessary in the "salad bowl"<sup>2</sup> that is our country, but it also builds good-will for the speaker. It is important to recognize that the situational

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<sup>2</sup> "Salad bowl" replacing "melting pot" as the preferred metaphor to describe the diversity of the United States; "salad bowl" recognizes an America where different cultures mix but remain distinct, rather than assimilate to become one homogenous culture (Millet).

adeptness that Obama possesses is necessary for a person of color to win the American Presidency.

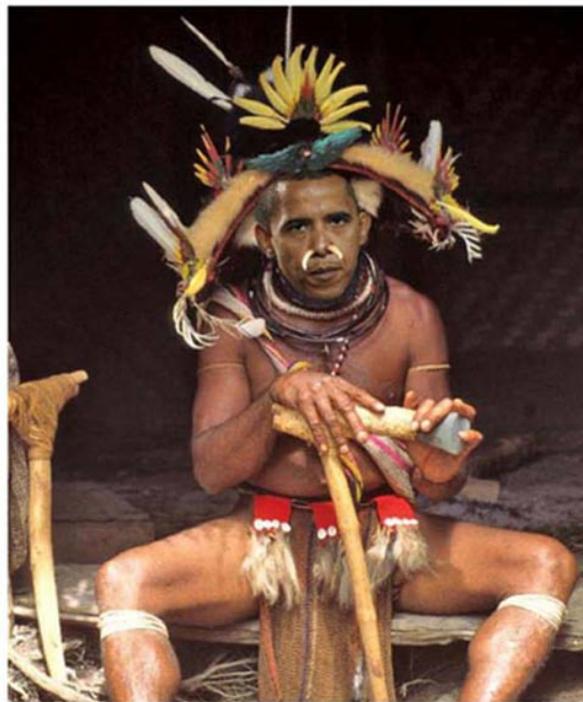
As a man of African descent, Obama holds burdens that no American President has ever borne before. Many of the items listed by Peggy McIntosh in her article, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” are useful to help understand how cultural and racial factors affect the Obama Presidency, including his rhetorical and communicative choices. McIntosh explains the privilege that a white candidate is afforded: “I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world’s majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion” (McIntosh). A white candidate could win the nomination of a major party and general election without anything more than a superficial, stereotypical knowledge and understanding of minority cultures. The same is certainly not true for a black candidate, who would need to acquire an absolute fluency in the majority culture. A majority candidate faces at worst, a level field, while a minority candidate is almost certainly looking a disadvantaged playing field and an uphill battle. Being raised by his white maternal grandparents likely helped Obama develop a fluency in white culture from a young age, which helped level the playing field for him to some degree.

Even his own eventual running-mate and Vice-President, Joe Biden, provided evidence of the inherent uphill battle Obama was against when he said, “I mean, you got the first sort of mainstream African-American who's articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy. I mean, that's a storybook, man” (Williams). In *Game Change*, the authors write, “He [Harry Reid] was wowed by Obama's oratorical gifts and believed that the country was ready to embrace a black presidential candidate, especially one such as Obama -- a 'light-skinned' African American 'with no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one’” (Halperin and Heilemann).

Certainly nothing of the sort was said about his opponents, John McCain or Sarah Palin. Criticisms of the Republican candidates took multiple forms, including policy and personal, but they were afforded the advantage of white privilege. They never had to worry that they represented an entire race of people. They came free from racial baggage and were allowed to be their own individuals. McIntosh explains this phenomenon in her knapsack: "I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race." For Obama, on the other hand, race was never far from the minds of voters. He was linked to the history and struggles of African-Americans in this country, whether he wanted to be or not. McCain could simply be McCain, but Obama was forced to be Obama: the black candidate. At minimum, this was an additional volatile variable that Obama was forced to successfully navigate that McCain would not have to be concerned with.

Another privilege whiteness affords that is important to our understanding is: "I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider" (McIntosh). It seems that not a day goes by without some conservative commentator questioning Obama's religion or his birth certificate. A not-insignificant percentage of our country falsely believes that our President is everything from a socialist, to a "secret Muslim," or that he was born in Kenya. Of course, these are all racially tinted communicative codes: a way to perpetrate contemporary racism while still maintaining plausible deniability. Protesting Obama because he is Muslim, or not born in America, is seen as culturally acceptable, although certainly frowned upon in many circles. But protesting Obama because he is African-American would not be seen as culturally acceptable by mainstream society.

The President is also at a disadvantage because of his identity when it comes to implementing change in our current society. A significant portion of anti-health care protests took the form of ad hominem attacks against Obama. He was accused of “hating America” and being a “communist” or “socialist.” Some even went so far as to create imagery that depicted Obama as an African witch-doctor. The extent to which Obama is withheld the privilege of not having to be attacked as a cultural outsider is even more clear when compared to a similar health care reform that took place in Massachusetts. Then Governor Mitt Romney, a white politician, signed a similar universal health care law without having to endure the vitriol spewed by Obama’s opponents.



 **BAMA-GARE**

Coming soon to a clinic near you

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<sup>3</sup> Image cited as "Obamacare: Coming Soon to a Clinic Near You."

The rhetorical racial battlefield has shifted from the explicit to the coded, but nonetheless has remained very much a present feature of our country. The overt racism of advocating for segregation and viewing African-Americans as second-class citizens no longer occurs publicly, but racist feelings and attitudes persist. The country at large still does not view blacks on an equal footing to whites, at least in their qualifications for leadership. One only has to look at current poll numbers for evidence of this. In a February 2011 poll of GOP primary voters, 51% indicated that they believed that Obama was born in a foreign country, despite the state of Hawaii posting Obama's certificate of live birth (Barr). An August 2010 CNN poll of all Americans found that 11% believed that Obama was "definitely" born outside the United States, and an additional 16% believed that Obama was "probably" born outside the United States ("CNN Opinion Research Poll"). Again for the GOP, it was even higher, with 14% in the "definitely" category and a further 27% in the "probably" category ("CNN Opinion Research Poll"). These statistics provide evidence against Obama's own post-racial rhetoric: if we were truly in an era where the races are on an equal footing, the polls wouldn't show such a high level of support for viewing Obama as a cultural outsider. It is a testament to the tenacity of racial attitudes that many still do not believe that Obama was born in the United States, in direct contradiction to a state-validated birth certificate.

Certainly Obama's identity as articulate, youthful, intelligent, and light-skinned helped him win over voters on the way to the White House. Patricia Williams argues, however, that unlike his white opponents, his appeal rested on what they perceived he was *not*. "He's not a whiner; he's not angry. He doesn't hate white people. He doesn't wear his hair like Al Sharpton. He is not the whole list of negatives that people like Chris Matthews or Joe Biden or a whole generation of fucked-up middle-class college students identify as 'blackness'" (Williams).

Because he was not afforded the privilege of race normalization and instead was racialized, Obama needed to negotiate with the stereotypes associated with African-American men. So in contrast to white candidates, Obama was forced from day one to show that he did not fit in with negative stereotypes, rather than receive the benefit of the doubt as to his character and ability.

Identity managed to be one of the biggest rhetorical battlegrounds of the campaign and Presidency. According to a study conducted by Pew Research Center published in August 2010, 18% of Americans believe that Obama is a Muslim. It is a curious phenomenon, particularly when one considers the criticism leveled against him for his association with the Christian preacher, Reverend Jeremiah Wright (Kassem). While Obama has publicly reached out to the Muslim world saying, “I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect” (“Obama reaches out to Muslim world”), his predecessor George W. Bush described Islam as a “noble faith” and “a peaceful religion” (Kassem).

Ramzi Kassem explains that the root cause of this oft debunked myth is a commentary on Obama’s cultural and racial “otherness.” Historically, the black male has been the most reviled and oppressed group in our society (Kassem). Since the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, however, the Muslim male has become the ultimate “other” in our American *zeitgeist* (Kassem). Kassem explains, “What could be decried as hateful if directed at other communities is common currency today for politicians and pundits commenting on Islam. Islamophobia remains socially acceptable where other forms of bigotry have been suppressed.” Obama opponents can circumvent the taboo against racial prejudice by using Islam as a proxy for race (Kassem).

### Two-Ness

The first African-American to earn a Ph.D from Harvard University, W.E.B. Dubois, explained how race is experienced in America in 112 powerful words.

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense 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. One ever feels his two-ness, — 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 (Clark).

No prominent figure has ever embodied this “two-ness,” a diverging and at times conflicting dichotomy of race, culture, and communication better than Senator and President Obama.

Obama skillfully drew upon his multicultural upbringing and existence in the narrative of his “More Perfect Union Speech,” portraying himself as the “bridge-builder” of America’s racial divide (Clark). This approach, focused on unity, was a turning point in African-American political rhetoric, which previously had been tailored instead to cultural solidarity. Before Obama, for generations of older African-Americans, public and private spheres of communication were strictly separated (Smith). Their view was that the “dirty laundry” of the black community stays in the black community, with a goal of presenting a united and monolithic block of people (Smith). It is no surprise that older blacks held and continue to hold

this view: during the slavery era, the Jim Crow era, and even during the post-segregation era, this mindset was necessary for the survival of the black community.

As a man of multiracial heritage, Obama needed to convince white voters to vote for him while still maintain his credibility with the black community. During his bid for President in 1984 and 1988, Jesse Jackson failed to maintain this balance and as a result never had a chance at winning a plurality of the white vote. While it seems surprising now, considering that Obama carried the vast majority of the black vote, he was initially viewed with suspicion for his rhetorical positioning. Here comes this Ivy-League educated black man that explicitly addressed white fears, hopes, and desires. This made many members of the older black community, which dogmatically held onto the cultural precept that one should speak to their cultural allegiance's first and the truth second, very suspicious (Smith).

In his memoir, Obama takes care to ridicule a composite figure, a mixed-race girl named Joyce who is constantly mentioning her whiteness: "I'm not black...I'm *multiracial*.... Why should I have to choose between them?... It's not white people who are making me choose.... No—it's *black people* who always have to make everything racial. *They're* the ones making me choose. *They're* the ones who are telling me I can't be who I am...." (Smith). The mixed-race individual who tries to pass for white, along with the "Uncle Tom" and "House Nigger" are the most serious boogeymen of black life (Smith). Obama managed to overcome these suspicions on his way to the Presidency. His "two-ness," while ultimately a significant factor in garnering enough white votes to win the Presidency, also presented a significant burden to be overcome in order to win the full support of the black community.

Perhaps in no other way is his two-ness and identity better understood than in the examination of the most intimate label one has: their preferred name. Obama was named after his

father, Barack Obama Sr., who went by “Barry.” The younger Obama too took on this identity-concealing nickname. “Part black, part white, raised in Hawaii and Indonesia, with family of different religious and spiritual backgrounds — seen by others in ways he didn’t see himself — the young Barry was looking for solid ground” (Wolffe et al.). Obama was uncertain of his identity for plenty of reasons: he was the son of a white mother from Kansas and a black father from Kenya, raised in Hawaii until his mother remarried and went to Indonesia with his stepfather, before finally returning to Hawaii to live with his maternal (white) grandparents.

The man we all know as Barack today went by Barry for the beginning of his life. His name change came as a conscious decision during his college years. Newsweek speculates, “It’s clear that he was trying to fit in somehow, but not in the way of his father’s generation. He wanted to be taken seriously, perhaps to rebel against the compromises blacks and others were expected to make in a white-dominated society. But more generally, he was also looking for a community that would accept him as he was, inside and out” (Wolffe et al.).

We can trace Obama’s identity development through his preferred name. According to Martin and Nakayama, minority identity development typically has four steps: 1) Unexamined Identity: characterized by the lack of exploration of identity (164). 2) Conformity: characterized by the internalization of values and norms of the dominant group and a strong desire to assimilate into the dominant culture (Martin and Nakayama 164). 3) Resistance and Separatism: a period of dissonance often precedes this stage, where the individual’s identity shifts away from the dominant group (Martin and Nakayama 165). 4) Integration: an achieved identity (Martin and Nakayama 166). Examining and understanding these four stages of identity development is quite important and beneficial. A person does not exist as a snapshot in a moment in time or in a vacuum, rather they are the culmination of a long process of development through life

experience. To better understand a man now, we must examine what events and contexts turned Obama into the person he is today. Studying the label Obama gives himself clues us into his internal thoughts and sense of self, which would otherwise remain concealed.

Obama's own writings provide us with an interesting case study in understanding both him and the stages of minority identity development. Growing up in Indonesia, race was not as salient an issue as in the United States. He didn't have to confront the legacy of racial relations in the United States. In his own words, Obama described his youngest years, before identity became a central question for him as, "a stretch of childhood free from self-doubt" (Wolffe et al.) But in Indonesia, the foundations of identity began to be laid. It was in that foreign land that Obama first began to understand the burden of growing up with dark skin in a world of normalized white privilege (Wolffe et al.). At the library of the U.S. embassy there, a young Obama was reading magazines. He came across a picture of a black man who had tried to "erase the darkness of his skin using chemicals," leaving himself with a "ghostly pallor, as if he had suffered from radiation poisoning" (Wolffe et al.). Obama explained the significance of the photograph to him: "But that one photograph had told me something else: that there was a hidden enemy out there, one that could reach me without anyone's knowledge, not even my own" (Wolffe et al.). This incident contributed significantly to making Obama aware of race and its significant in today's world, and started his shift from an innocent child to a self-aware youth.

The second stage, conformity, took place after Obama's mother sent him to live in Hawaii with his maternal grandparents. The more he became aware of his blackness, the more he wished to "fit in." At his new school, people wanted to touch his hair, asked him if his father ate people, and he even shoved a black girl when someone taunted him about being her boyfriend (Wolffe et al.). When he started high school, and a teacher stumbled on pronouncing Barack,

Obama coolly asked to be called Barry (Wolffe et al.). While outwardly appearing to conform to the dominant group, it is clear that Obama's identity was still in turmoil. He loved to read black authors: James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, and Malcolm X, searching for clues to his heritage (Wolffe et al.).

The transition to the third stage, resistance and separation, occurred when Obama left Hawaii for Occidental College in Los Angeles and later Columbia University in New York City. Sometimes the transition to the third stage results from meeting someone from that group who exhibits a strong identity (Martin and Nakayama 165). In Obama's case, he met Eric Moore, an African-American from the mostly white town of Boulder, Colorado, who had come to Occidental in part to expose himself to African-American culture (Wolffe et al.). During the course of their friendship, they engaged in conversations that proved powerful to Obama. One of these conversations centered around a trip Moore had made as part of a program that sent teens abroad to do volunteer work (Wolffe et al.). Moore had gone to Kenya, the home of Obama's father, and was moved by the experience, and explained to Obama that, "It helped me find my own identity...I think for an African-American to go back to Africa is a powerful experience. It's like going to Israel if you're Jewish" (Wolffe et al.). On another occasion, Moore asked Obama what kind of name Barry was for "a brother" (Wolffe et al.). Obama responded that his name was actually Barack, but he didn't want to have to explain his name; Barry was his way of simplifying things, his way of smoothing into society (Wolffe et al.). He still went by his nickname, again asking his professors to call him Barry when they asked what he would like to be called (Wolffe et al.).

While Moore helped Obama continue to deepen his identity quest, it wasn't until he transferred to Columbia University in New York City that Obama fully began to enter stage four:

integration. It was only then that he began to ask people to call him Barack, a transition that he characterizes not as racial but as “coming of age” (Wolffe et al.). During this period in New York City, marked by isolation, meditation, and a quest for identity, Obama began to figure out who he truly was. He stopped drinking and partying, and engaged in much self-reflection, keeping journals that would later form the raw materials for his first book (Wolffe et al.). This is where the journey of Barry the adolescent, searching for his identity, becomes the journey of Barack the adult: ambitious and with a bright future.

Dolores Tanno explains, “Each ‘name’ is a rhetorical device insofar that as it communicates a particular story” (38). What first name Obama chose to go by helps us understand his story. “Each name reveals a different facet of identity that allows symbolic, historical, cultural, and political connectedness” (Tanno 40). In “Barry” we recognize a desire for inclusiveness in line with a “melting pot” America. But in “Barack” we see a duality: a desire for identification as someone of black ancestry, but simultaneous as a citizen of the United States, reflective of the “salad bowl” America. “Each name implies a narrative of experiences gained in responding to circumstance, time, and place and motivated by a need to belong. As such, they possess great rhetorical force” (Tanno 40). These names do not just represent self-identity, but also self-in-group-identity (Tanno 38), and a transition from one to another can give us insight into personal development.

The choices we make in labeling ourselves serve as ways of orienting ourselves to the world and as ways for the world to understand us. The rebellious teenager may choose to use piercings and hairstyle to communicate their orientation to others. In the same way, one can use a name to send a message to others about themselves. But it isn’t merely about communicating externally, but also shaping how one views themselves internally. Going through life in the United

States as “Barry” is going to be a significantly different experience than going through life as “Barack,” both in other’s thoughts and attitudes towards you, as well as your own thoughts and attitudes.

### Code-Switching

One of the real world manifestations of the concept of two-ness, or double-consciousness, is code-switching. Code-switching is defined as:

...the practice of selecting or altering linguistic elements so as to contextualize talk in interaction. This contextualization may relate to local discourse practices, such as turn selection or various forms of bracketing, or it may make relevant information beyond the current exchange, including knowledge of society and diverse identities. (Nilep 1)

One of the key points of code-switching is to provide social distance, or alternatively, social proximity to the people with whom one is speaking (Martin et al.). As an African-American, especially one running for the highest office in a land that is predominantly Caucasian, Obama was required to speak publicly in a manner consistent with white culture. In other words, he was forced to code-switch away from black dialects to provide the social distance from black culture in order to transcend his race (or more specifically, his blackness), and to make white voters comfortable with him.

It is typical of African-Americans, and people of minority cultures across the world, to speak in one manner when they are talking to their own in-group, and in another that conforms to the dominant group’s communication style when they are interacting with that group. Ta-Nehisi Coates, writer for *The Atlantic*, explains:

Well, I think it's just a basic rule: How you talk among your friends out in the street is not how you talk if you're going for a job interview. I don't - you know, I come up in the hip-hop generation. I don't think I could talk the way I would among my friends if I were applying to be - for a job in human resources, much less president of the United States. I think that's just a kind of basic logic that, you know, most African-Americans work under and certainly this kind of basic logic that most black parents try to impart to their kids, rightly or wrongly. (Martin et al.)

Dr. Marc Lamont Hill, professor at Columbia University agrees and expands on Coates.

And that's why I think that part of what Harry Reid was doing was not just talking about the particular language choices that Barack Obama was making but also the sort of stylistic etiquette that he deployed. So for example, if you would look at Jesse Jackson in '84 and '88, he also spoke Standard English in his interviews, but Harry Reid - for the most part, but Harry Reid would likely say anyway that he spoke with a Negro dialect. So part of it is about the language choices, but it's also partly about the aesthetics of speech and the style and also even the regional sort of distinction between North and South that Barack Obama was somehow able to avoid partly just because of his upbringing and not being around a whole lot of African-American people. So I think Barack Obama code-switches the way all African-American people code-switch, but Harry Reid saw something distinct in Obama. (Martin et al.)

Because they must fit in and interact with different culture groups, minorities must be adept at switching their communicative patterns to fit the situation as appropriate; Obama, however, was especially skillful at code-switching.

It was this tacit agreement of code-switching that led to the basic bargain of his Presidency, "...that he could become president if he did act as a president for African-Americans, if he did not provide leadership on race issues, if he upheld the fiction that there is already (with a few lapses) impartial legal justice for all" (Hobson). We see this manifest itself in the incident with famed Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates and a Cambridge police officer, Sergeant James Crowley, and Obama's subsequent reaction. Dr. Gates, returning from a trip to China and finding his door lock stuck, enlisted the help of his cab driver to pry the door open. His neighbors, suspicious of his activity, subsequently called the police on him. The unwritten rules for African-Americans in surviving a racial profiling incident such as this are "quiet politeness" and frequent use of the word "sir" (Hobson). Dr. Gates, by any account an incredibly accomplished and brilliant human being, a person of high status not used to being pushed around, broke these rules. He responded as "an American" rather than "a Negro" and neglected to switch codes (Hobson). Dr. Gates protested his treatment, and Sergeant Crowley arrested him in his own home for "disorderly conduct." In his response, Obama as well neglected to switch codes and adopt a deference and respect for the police. He said, a little too candidly, that the police had, "acted stupidly," and added that, "...there is a long history in this country of African-Americans and Latinos being stopped by law enforcement disproportionately...that's just a fact" (Hobson). After his remarks aroused controversy, Obama was forced to back down from his statements, and explained that while he thought the arrest was an "overreaction," that Gates "probably overreacted as well" (Hobson).

Obama himself acknowledges code-switching, saying:

I think that the themes are consistent. I think there's a certain black idiom that it's hard not to slip into when you're talking to a black audience because of the audience response. It's

the classic call and response. You know, anybody who has spent time in a black church knows what I mean, and so, you know, you get a little looser. It becomes more - a little more like jazz and a little less like a set score (Martin et al.)

When in front of a predominantly African-American group, such as in a black church, the purpose of code switching becomes social proximity. It is a way for Obama to indicate to the audience that he is “one of them.”

President Obama is particularly skilled at “dog-whistle politics” (Henderson). Like a dog-whistle that can irritate any nearby canines but is inaudible by humans, Obama employs language, mannerisms, and symbols that resonate deeply with his African-American audience but largely fly over the head of his white audiences (Henderson). The President is fond of including references that most if not all African-Americans would get instantly to strengthen his bond to them without overtly racializing himself as “the black candidate.” Again, this is one of the differences between him and Jesse Jackson’s campaigns that led to far different outcomes. During his Presidential runs, Jesse Jackson couldn’t be viewed any other way than “the black candidate” due to his language and actions (Henderson).

In January 2009, while discussing the economy, Obama employed a reference to the famous black poet Langston Hughes and his poem, “Harlem” when he references, “American dreams that are being deferred” (Henderson). Hughes’ poem was written in 1951 and attempts to sum up the feelings of the black community during a time of oppression. This era was characterized by frustration in the black community due to prejudice, their inferior status, and second-class citizenship (Cummings). This poem’s ending, “Or *does it explode?*” predicts the struggle for civil rights in the decades after this poem was written. Even Hughes would likely be

surprised that just over half a century later, the United States would elect its first black President. Employing this symbolic reference connects Obama to the struggle of the Civil Rights generation of African-Americans, as well as the contemporary black community.

On Election Night in November 2008, then President-elect Obama echoed perhaps the most revered African-American in United States history, Martin Luther King Jr., when he said, “we as a people will get there” (Henderson). This of course is a reference to the final line of Dr. King’s famous 1968 “Mountaintop Speech.” With the optimism that Obama had come to represent in his campaign, King exclaimed, “But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!” (“I’ve Been To The Mountaintop”). Unfortunately, this was Dr. King’s final public speech, but by echoing its sentiments, he frames himself as the carrier of King’s legacy.

On the campaign trail in South Carolina in 2008, in response to the persistent, thinly-veiled racist allegations that he was a Muslim, he evoked Malcolm X as portrayed in the Spike Lee film of the same name, “They try to bamboozle you, hoodwink you” (Henderson). Professor William Cobb who specializes in black history and politics at Spelman College explained, “All of us knew that he was referencing Malcolm X, and when he said it, the reaction was instantaneous” (Henderson).

But not all of his language choices need to be literary or film references. In a pre-inauguration visit to Ben’s Chili, a landmark for Washington D.C.’s African-American community, he slipped into what linguists call black English vernacular (BEV) (Charles), when the cashier asked him if he wanted his change back (Henderson). Obama replied, “Nah, we straight” (Henderson). The video of the verbal exchange became an internet phenomenon and

especially popular in the black community, with commentators even proclaiming that Obama was “mad cool” (Henderson).

John McWhorter, a linguist at the Manhattan Institute, believed that these messages are conscious and an important factor in his Presidential victory (Henderson). “Obama’s tapping into [black English] cadence helped win him the election. Imagine John Kerry or Hillary Clinton saying, ‘Yes, we can!’ It would have sounded phony — only in what I call a ‘black-cent’ can it sound prophetic and arousing” (Henderson).

While these examples of code-switching have been language related, they are not limited to language only. Obama’s mannerisms, especially his walk (oft described as a “swagger”) is also a form of code-switching that display his authenticity to the African-American community (Henderson). Princeton University professor Melissa Harris-Lacewell explains, “The swagger was out of control, dragging the left foot, it was like, ‘Barack, you have got to calm down. The swagger thing just got worse and worse during the campaign. In those circumstances, it is his blackness kind of squishing out of the edges. It’s not the same thing as deploying it like Bush did, but it has the same effect... solidifying his base of black folk” (Henderson).

Code-switching is a specialized set of behaviors that involve, in communicative terms, knowing the audience and adapting message, mannerisms, and vocalics in order to get a message across clearly and effectively. In any situation, there are hundreds if not thousands of communicative choices one could make. Code-switching requires evaluating these choices, determining the varying effects of those choices, and deciding which to employ. Because minorities must shift their communicative patterns in different contexts, minority communicators must develop their analytical and evaluative skills and situational awareness in ways that

majority communicators do not. These skills are necessary in order to facilitate effective code-switching.

Obama in particular has demonstrated his communicative adeptness with his skillful employment of code-switching. He was able to develop connections with audiences of all different backgrounds by switching his communicative patterns as appropriate. Even when addressing multiple audiences at once, common on the campaign trail and as President, he managed to utilize “dog-whistle” communication to show solidarity with one group, which largely goes over the head of those who are not group members. This allows him to speak to his blackness, at least for those who recognize it, while at the same time appearing to speak away from his blackness.

### Conclusion

As the United States’ first black President, Obama has faced unprecedented communicative challenges. As part of furthering my own understanding and the understanding of the academic community, I have engaged with several concepts that I believe are important in helping us further understand race, culture, and communication.

The first major concept we engaged was color-blind ideology. While all Presidents and public figures are bound by rhetorical frameworks tied to cultural norms, a black President carries an extra burden. The political climate of the United States in 2008, as well as at the time of writing in 2011 (as we prepare for upcoming elections next year) will only allow a black candidate who transcends race and minimizes its impact in every way. An effective way to run a race-neutral campaign and Presidency is to utilize color-blind ideology. This ideology is based on framing, and specifically on four frames: abstract liberalism, cultural racism, minimization of

racism, and naturalization. While Obama uses these frames to present himself as race-neutral, pundits and commentators also take advantage of these frames as evidence of a post-racial era. Both uses of color-blind frames prevent our country from having a dialogue on race, and instead cause us to sweep race-related issues “under the rug.” The implications then of color-blind ideology are threefold: 1) despite claims to the contrary, we are not in a post-racial era; 2) the use of post-racial ideology is a necessary evil that a person of color must adopt in order to win election to a national office; 3) post-racial ideology inherently limits discourse about racial relations by pretending that it is unnecessary.

The current status quo of post-racial ideology is an extremely important issue of social justice. Because of post-racial ideology and communication, our President and nation is hindered from making progress on race relations or even simply opening a dialogue. With race playing a significant part in determining individuals’ and groups’ social status and chances at success, we are letting ourselves be content with an unfair and unequal playing field. While this should be enough of a justification to stop the post-racial farce in itself, we can also think about it in selfish terms as net losses for our society. By handicapping whole groups of people, we could be keeping the next Einstein, Hawking, or Obama from realizing their potential.

Forcing our society towards homogeneity inherently limits our perspectives, ideas, and ways of understanding. One of my favorite analogies is a good way to understand why we need to value diversity. Imagine a car driving down a street in a city, only to be involved in an accident in an intersection. From only one perspective, say a bystander walking on a nearby sidewalk, it may appear that the first car involved was at fault for failing to stop quick enough. That becomes accepted as fact, as the truth, and the proper way of viewing the accident. Now suppose we take and combine the perspectives of a man looking out his fourth story apartment

window, a woman sitting on a city bus waiting for the light to turn green, and our original bystander. We quickly see our original accepted fact was actually incorrect. Through the multiple points of view we discover new ways of thinking of the accident and our original truth is shown not to be a truth at all. Perhaps the second car was over the line and no reasonable amount of early breaking would have prevented the accident; or the driver of the second car was on her cell phone and wasn't paying attention. Limiting ourselves to only one way of viewing prevents us from forming a more accurate and fuller understanding. Just as limited diversity hinders us in our understanding of the hypothetical car crash scenario, limiting diversity by pushing and forcing a false post-racial ideology limits our real world understandings.

The second major concept we unpacked was identity. Identity was a major rhetorical battlefield of the campaign, Obama's presidency, and it looks to again be a focal point in the upcoming 2012 election. At the time of writing, the White House has just released Obama's "long-form" birth certificate, proving his natural-born citizenship. However, early indications are that the birther movement is far from satisfied, and is already attempting to discredit the birth certificate. The reason they attempt to do this, as we explored, is to try and falsely constitute Obama's identity.

It is plain to see the importance of identity when one looks at everything Obama was and is expected to be: white enough to hold the office that only forty-three white men have held before, and simultaneously black enough to be an authentic member of the black community. Indeed, many have commented that Obama is a "Rorschach Test" for the American people: how one sees him says a lot about that person. Again, he has a burden that no other President has faced. As a black man, he is unfairly expected to speak for all of black America.

Third, we examined Dubois' concept of "two-ness," the dual roles African-Americans in the United States play. The two-ness of Obama is especially important because of his multi-racial background. We traced the four stages of minority identity development for Obama, from the unexamined identity, to conformity, through resistance and separation, and finally to integration. We witnessed the transformation of a young Barry to an adult Barack to examine the solidification of his identity. The two-ness of the African-American experience in America shapes and is in turn shaped by Obama's communicative behaviors and rhetorical choices.

Finally, we have looked at code-switching as a communicative tool that Obama uses to manage his identities. We examined the burden that Obama, and indeed all people of color in this country, must carry. They are required to master a separate code, a separate language, a separate set of mannerisms, and switch among them when appropriate. But Obama also harnesses code-switching, like all politicians, for his benefits. He can simultaneously appeal to people of all audiences while maintaining his authenticity with his African-American supporters. We see this in his language choices, echoing without explicit reference famous black cultural symbols, including the words of Langston Hughes, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. We also see this in his mannerisms, most notably the "swagger" in his walk and some of his uses of everyday black vernacular and colloquialisms.

After researching and writing this project, I have begun to recognize the inter-relationships between these concepts. One of the most important conclusions I've reached is the power of communication; communication is much more than simply transmitting a message, it plays a significant role in shaping our ways of knowing and understanding of the world. I've come to understand two-ness as an internal struggle for identity that is often manifested through the communicative technique of code-switching. Two-ness is a way of viewing oneself,

simultaneously as a member of a minority group and American society at large. Two-ness spurs many minorities to develop awareness of audience and methods of delivery. Depending on their understanding of a situation, they could choose to speak in different communicative codes, or code-switch.

Code-switching also allows one to shape their identity, whether consciously or unconsciously. An African-American speaking in an African-American code may strengthen their identity as a black person. This is both internal, as increasing their connectedness to that culture, and external, sending the message that you have constructed an identity that is, at least in part, African-American. We see this in Obama with his internal identity development, shaped in part by an important friendship with another African-American who helped give Obama insight. We also see this externally with his conscious and deliberate choice to be called by Barack rather than Barry. Code-switching also aided Obama in assuming a post-racial identity. By communicating in white majority culture patterns laced with post-racial ideology, he successfully pushed the country to accept his post-racial identity, which proved key in his election.

In the end, I found this an extremely worthwhile project, and I feel like I increased my own knowledge and understanding of race, culture, communications as it relates to Obama and the United States today. I hope by reading my findings and thoughts, that the reader will similarly increase their knowledge and understanding.

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