

“An Embodiment of Contradiction”: Creating an Apologetic Narrative in Barack Obama’s “A  
More Perfect Union” Address

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The question of race and race relations in the United States has been a toxic and turbulent topic in our country’s short history. Since the framing of the Constitution over 200 years ago, race has been the most dominant source of conflict and violence on American soil. To put it succinctly: “Wars have been fought, marches have been led, and movements have been nurtured from the pain and discovery of our evolving debate over the politics of difference,” (Ifill 18). The politics of race relations, particularly between African Americans and White Americans, have shaped this country into what it is has become today. From Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation during the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the racial divide has been a pervading feature of political and social life in the United States for the last two centuries. Unfortunately, even with the advances made in race relations by great orators such as Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, these advances have been too few and too far between. While successful during their individual times in facilitating a racial narrative via oratory, each have failed to create a successful and continuing racial narrative between numerous generations of African and White Americans. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the problem of the color-line still remains (Terrill 394). According to *New York Times* writer Janny Scott, in a country where racial divisions and distrust are deeply embedded within our foundation, the long-neglected politics of race relations had to be brought back to the direct attention of politicians and American voters.

The presidential campaign of 2008, one of the most historical and unprecedented presidential elections in American history, proved to be the right time to address the racial divide in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. On March 18, 2008, Barack Obama, a biracial Democratic U.S. Senator

from Illinois and presidential candidate, confronted America's longstanding racial divide in a 37 minute address to the American public at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia (Issenberg A1). The address was primarily prompted by video clips on YouTube of sermons given by Obama's pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright of Trinity United Church of Christ, which were considered "inflammatory, unpatriotic, anti-Christian, and racist," (Frank 168). Up until this point, writer Mike Dornig notes, the Obama team had made a conscious effort to prevent the topic of race from consuming his campaign; however, after Wright's sermons sent shockwaves across the media, Obama knew he had to address the issue of modern race relations facing the American public directly and honestly. When initially asked what he intended to say about race, Obama simply replied, "I already know what I want to say in this speech. I've been thinking about it for 30 years," (Plouffe 3).

The result was "a 5,000 word address that examined the origins and evolution of race in the American story," entitled "A More Perfect Union" (Olive 90). In this speech, Obama presents himself as a candidate who can move beyond the racial divisions that have plagued generations for so long. According to David Frank, Obama had to "put black anger and white anxiety into perspective and offer himself as an embodiment of the country's contradictions, and to narrate a story of hope his audience could adopt" (179) in order for Americans on both sides of the color-line to understand each other and concentrate on the goals and ideals that unite them (Wills 4). Such rhetoric was unprecedented in modern political discourse. Before Obama's rise to political fame, few other orators and politicians, particularly since the civil rights movement, have been able to address the racial issues of the United States so openly and straightforward, leading "the nation by the power of their words," (Broder 2).

The power of Obama's rhetoric is derived from his ability to construct powerful narratives that put American goals and ideals at the center of the American journey that are easy for Americans to adopt (Darsey 89). In this address, as a biracial candidate, Obama was faced with the challenge of constructing a narrative that defended his character and denounced Wright's comments without offending the black community while concurrently addressing the anxieties felt by white voters in reaction to Wright. As a member of both communities, Obama was forced to walk a thin tightrope. Obama utilized the rhetorical genre of apologia, which generally includes speeches of self-defense. Specifically, apologia is a personal response to the "questioning of a man's moral nature, motives, or reputation," (Ware and Linkugel 274). Because Obama could not deny the actions of his former pastor, he had to reframe the situation in a way that would be most acceptable to both the black and white Americans of his audience. Scholar Kirsten Theye argues that the best way to ensure the effective use of apologia is to include a well-defined narrative; she maintains that "narrative is uniquely suited to function as a framing device that can shape the facts of the story" to ensure greater acceptance of apologetic address (161).

Although examinations of the apologetic genre flood the communication discipline, few scholars have examined narrative as a critical component in the functions of apologia. While scholars have analyzed several of Barack Obama's significant speeches, including the address used in this analysis, his prominent use of apologetic narrative in this address has been sadly overlooked. The following essay will seek to examine the use of apologetic narrative as a legitimate and effective rhetorical strategy in political discourse, specifically in Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union" address. I will argue that as a biracial "embodiment of the country's contradictions," Barack Obama successfully constructs an effective apologetic address by

creating a three-part narrative in which he defends his character, addresses the Wright controversy, and frames the issue of race in America. Finally, this paper will examine the degree of Obama's success in re-establishing his character and credibility with his audiences and also, in his success in addressing race and creating racial dialogue through apologetic narrative. His success will be examined by looking at the reactions of right and left wing politicians and commentators, global journalists, and more importantly, the American public.

While there is no gap in the research on this particular address, there is still a gap in the study of African-American oratory. Although there have been more critical analyses of African-American rhetoric in more recent years, it is essential that scholars continue to build its presence within the communication discipline (Leeman XXI). The following essay hopes to contribute to filling that gap and to inform more Americans about the power and impact that African-American oratory has had in shaping this country over the last two centuries. With Barack Obama elected as the first African-American President of the United States, this examination is written in the hope of inspiring more people to study and illuminate the past, present, and future successes of African-American rhetoric.

Before getting into critical discussion of Obama's "A More Perfect Union," it is essential to create a foundation on which to build the analysis. I will first discuss apologia as a significant and distinct genre in the communication discipline, its inherent relationship to speeches of accusation or *kategoria*, and finally how narrative, as one of the most basic forms of human communication, is a key component in creating successful political apologetic discourse.

### *The Use of Narrative in Apologia*

Apologia is broadly defined by communication scholars as a speech of self-defense, whether it be defending their character, speech, or actions. As the research notes, apologia is one

of the most widely studied and widely utilized genres in public discourse (Theye 160)<sup>1</sup>. The apologies of many public figures, both past and present from John F. Kennedy to Dick Cheney, have been analyzed by communication scholars. Politicians in particular have found that it is essential at certain times to issue a statement of apology in light of actions, morals, speech, or character issues that American audiences find culpable. Speeches of self-defense are often made because public figures and civil servants are often expected to uphold and live up to higher moral and professional code than the average American; they must be beyond reproach. In America, the rhetorical act of apologia is an important and expected part of political discourse. Americans like the idea of upholding the ideals of humility and honesty and we expect our politicians to do so as well. As Ware and Linkugel state, “In life, an attack upon a person’s character, upon his worth as a human being, does seem to demand a direct response,” (274) in the form of apologia.

In order to understand apologia the current examination, some of the basic elements of the apologetic genre must be elaborated. There are several strategies, often referred to as factors, which are often found in apologetic speeches. There are four major factors in apologia: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. For the current discussion, I will only focus on bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Bolstering “refers to any rhetorical strategy which reinforces the existence of a fact, sentiment, object, or relationship,” (Ware and Linkugel 277). Rhetors utilizing this strategy try to identify themselves with something viewed positively by the audience; however, this identification cannot be fabricated and has to align with the reality the audience perceives (277). For example, many American politicians when giving a speech of self-defense will often try to identify themselves as being patriotic and pro-American because Americans view that sentiment favorably; however, the track record of the politician has to

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<sup>1</sup> See also Gold, Ellen Reid. “Political Apologia: The Ritual of Self Defense.” *Communication Monographs* 45 (1978): 306-16. See also works by William L. Benoit about image restoration and apologia.

match the sentiment he is trying to identify himself with. This is a reformative strategy in the sense that it does not attempt to change the audience's meaning of the situation (275). The transformative strategies are differentiation and transcendence because they do attempt to change the meaning that audiences put to a situation (280). Differentiation serves the purpose of "separating some fact, sentiment, object, or relationship from some larger context within which the audience presently views that attribute," and is often "signaled by the accused's request for suspension of judgment until his actions can be viewed from a different temporal perspective," (Ware and Linkugel 278). On the other hand, transcendence "joins some fact, sentiment, object, or relationship with some larger context within which the audience does not presently view that attribute," and "moves the audience away from the particulars of the charge at hand in a direction toward some more abstract, general view of his character" (280).

In order to determine which strategies and postures are used within the address, according to Halford Ross Ryan, *apologia* must be understood as belonging to a set. Specifically, the two genres of accusation (*kategoria*) and apology (*apologia*) should be considered as a "speech set" and inherently linked (254). This inherent relationship between these genres follows that, "apologetic discourse is motivated by accusatory discourse," (Ryan 254). In a speech of accusation, "the accuser perceives an evil or an exigence, he is motivated to expose it," and in exposing it, he hopes to modify the original exigence (256). The image created by the accuser then becomes the exigency that causes the apologist to react in order "to deny, to mitigate, or to purify the resultant image," through *apologia* (257). The particulars of the accusation determine the material and the strategies that a speech of self-defense will utilize. One must understand and know what one is apologizing for in order to give a successful apology. By not tailoring arguments to the initial accusation, the *apologia* of the accused will inevitably fail. For example,



they cannot utilize a bolstering technique if there is nothing for the audience to identify with. When examining speeches of either accusation or apologia, such as the address used in this analysis, that it is best to evaluate the whole speech set, rather than each speech individually in order to gain a broader understanding of the artifact (Ryan 258). After all, apologia cannot exist if there was not an initial accusation. As I have mentioned before, apologia is a prominent genre in public discourse, therefore, it only follows that “The recurrent theme of accusation followed by apology is so prevalent in our record of public address,” (Ware and Linkugel 274).

Since we have established that speeches of accusation are inherently linked to speeches of apologia, the negative actions or character presented in the accusation contribute the raw material with which to weave strategies of self-defense. In other words, it presents the material necessary allowing potential apologetic speakers to tell a story. In more recent years, scholars are beginning to look seriously at the strategy of storytelling, or narrative, as potentially being a critical component in successful apologetic discourse on top of the already mentioned factors and postures.<sup>2</sup>

As humans, narrative makes up a vast part of our communication consciousness that many of us take for granted. It is the basis for our novels, films, etc., but it also provides the foundation for our everyday communication conversations, including speeches. John Lucaites and Celeste Condit remark that narrative represents “a universal medium of human consciousness,” meaning that everyone and every culture tells stories (90). Often people interpret narrative to mean literary in the literal sense; only fiction, poetry, or short stories can be narrative. Viewing narratives in a purely literary sense, however, provides little information about how narratives function in and act upon the meaning and structures of culture and the

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<sup>2</sup> See work by: Achter, Paul J. “Narrative, Intertextuality, and Apologia in Contemporary Political Scandals.” Southern Communication Journal 65.4 (2000): 318-33.

human communication experience, especially in an era dominated by mass-media (91). Walter Fisher, the mind behind the narrative paradigm, noted in his famous work that narrative is “meaningful for persons in particular and in general, across communities as well as cultures, across time and place,” (8). If the narrative is so universal and holds meaning for people across cultures, it is interesting that it has not been looked at more seriously as being a crucial persuasive tool in political apologia.

There are three functional categories of narrative; however, this examination is only concerned with the rhetorical narrative. In use, the rhetorical narrative has the distinct ability to provide an “interpretive lens” through which the audience is asked to view and understand the truth of propositions in an address (Lucaites and Condit 94). Traditional rhetorical address places primary emphasis on form and content of the address and is structured based on the five canons of rhetoric; in contrast, the rhetorical narrative places primary emphasis on the relationship between speaker, speech, audience, occasion, and change. Content and form become secondary to the “specific audience to which it is addressed, the specific context in which it appears, and the specific gain toward which it strives,” (94). These qualities particularly make rhetorical narrative particularly appealing to apologetic address. Because apologia is inherently influenced by the corresponding accusations, it follows that these accusations would also provide some of the content necessary for a politician or other public figure to focus in on the elements found in the rhetorical narrative: specific audience, specific context, and specific gain. It seems that narrative is most successful when the primary strategy or goal of apologia is not denial; rather it is most effective when attempting to shift or alleviate blame (Theye 162). In a situation where the speaker cannot deny the negative action, narrative is a useful component in creating

successful apologia if it fulfills several functions: framing, identification, and narrative rationality (161).

The narrative's ability to provide a coherent framework within which to view the world makes it particularly useful in apologetic addresses (163). People of all cultures use narratives every day to contextualize their understanding of the world and to process its complexities (Lucaites and Condit 105). With speeches of self-defense, speakers have the main goal of changing how the audience views the reprehensible act. By using narrative to provide a framework within which the audience can view a negative action, the speaker is able to reframe the situation and his/her role in it within the larger context that shift how the audience views and attaches meaning to the negative action. (Theye 163). The ability of narrative to construct a solid framework in which to show a particular point of view is highly contingent upon the speaker's ethos or credibility (Lucaites and Condit 101). If the audience cannot trust the speaker, the point of view of the speaker will not be accepted by the audience. Once the basic criterion of credibility is met, however, it makes it much easier for the audience to accept the narrative framework, and thus, easier for the audience to begin to identify with the speaker. Apologia inherently implies that the speaker is giving a personal testimony of the negative situation, establishing a connection, and is involved in the larger context (Theye 162). Because narratives are something everyone uses, they easily create identification with the audience and can elicit an emotional response; it is most effective when a rhetor can convey the emotions they feel and create emotions within the audience (164). As Walter Fisher notes, narrative appeals "to all the senses, to reason and emotion, to intellect and imagination, and to fact and value," (19). As an audience, if we are able to identify with our speaker, the framework is reinforced because we

begin to see what he sees. Thus, narrative allows the negative action to appear reasonable within the context of the apologia (Theye 165).

Also, rhetorical narrative must be consistent with itself as well as within the larger context of discourse of which it is a part (Lucaites and Condit 95). In essence, it must be believable to the audience (Theye 164). Believability refers to the quality of narrative rationality. To achieve the quality of narrative rationality, the person creating the narrative must be aware of narrative probability and narrative fidelity. As Fisher notes, it is very important for a speaker to keep in mind that as a form of rhetorical communication, the narrative “implies an audience, persons who conceive of themselves in very specific ways” (9). Narrative probability refers to having a clear, coherent story in which all the pieces fit together relatively seamlessly, while narrative fidelity refers to whether the story or narrative presented is in line with what the audience already knows to be true in their lives (Fisher 8). Individually, as respective forms of rhetorical discourse, narrative and apologia both must fulfill the requirement of probability and fidelity. Narratives that are knowingly written in a fictional and literary genre still must be coherent and ring true - to at least some extent - to the way both people and the world are, in order to be accepted (10). In particular, Fisher remarks, narratives concerning perceptions of political discourse must also “stand the tests of probability and fidelity,” (10). In the same sense, an apology must be coherent and follow a logical pattern, but at the same time, ring true to make sense in the larger context of the audience worldviews. If either of these components is not met, it is very likely that a particular narrative or apology would not be accepted by a particular audience. It is in this fulfillment of narrative rationality that narrative is uniquely suited to produce successful apologia.

Specifically, for the apologetic speaker, it is critical that they know how their audience views themselves, the world, and most importantly, the speaker himself in order to create a narrative framework specifically designed for the exigency they are addressing. Having this knowledge, the apology will have a better chance of avoiding the mistake of denying individual's worldviews within an audience, rather framing their worldviews within the context of the speaker's apologia. Narrative rationality is essential for political discourse, particularly when it concerns apologia. To be clear, narrative rationality differs from traditional rationality in the sense that traditional rationality lays out rules of reason and logic to ascertain truth, particularly within specialized fields, while narrative rationality is "descriptive, as it offers an account, an understanding, of any instance of human choice and action," (Fisher 9). Narrative rationality, however, does not negate or replace traditional rationality. By definition, apologetic speeches are speeches of self-defense; in giving their defense, they provide an account of a situation from a certain point of view and try to persuade an audience to view it the same way. In most situations of political apologetic discourse, the politician in question often directs their apology to an audience of the American public and submits to them for "judgment" (Fisher 9). Because the average American audience does not have the "specialized" knowledge behind complex democratic politics, it is easier for them to judge apologia in the form of a narrative, a story, "told for and about them, and that stresses their rational capacity to make such judgments," (9). Due to the universal nature of narratives, they are easier for us to understand. They are widely used within public apologia statements because they allow audiences to make sense of complex situations where traditional rationality would not have worked (Theye 173). Narratives can also help people "act out" and "work through" the consequences of a complex trauma (Frank and McPhail 574).

With the understanding of the relationship of narrative and the strategies of apologia in mind, the following examination will seek to look at how Obama utilizes this relationship in addressing the complex issue of race and facilitating racial understanding in his “A More Perfect Union” address. This address is an excellent illustration of the apologetic narrative. Before moving on into analysis, it is of great importance to understand Barack Obama’s background in relation to the topic of race in this speech, as well as understanding the climate and accusations that facilitated the necessity of giving this unprecedented speech.

*“An Embodiment of Contradiction”: Barack Obama*

Barack Obama is arguably one of the most unique men that have ever been a presidential candidate for a major party. Michael Tomasky, a contributor for *The New York Review of Books*, refers to Obama as a “phenomenon,” a term he says “reserved for a special minority of people who seem to have singular talent and potential.” A virtual unknown United States Senator from Illinois just several years ago, the exponential growth of his fame and popularity as an orator and politician and his distinct background have truly made him a phenomenon of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and worth further study by historians, politicians, and communication experts alike.

Obama relates his unique background in his autobiography, *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. He is the son of a Kenyan father from Africa and White American mother from Kansas who had met while both attending the University of Hawaii. His father returned to Kenya when Barack was only two years old and his parents divorced soon after. For most of his childhood, he was raised by his white maternal grandparents in Hawaii. He saw his father again briefly, for the last time, when Obama was only 10 years old. When he left for college, he attended Occidental College in Los Angeles for two years, followed by a few years spent at Columbia in New York. After graduation, he ended up in Chicago working as a

community organizer for a few years until he decided to attend Harvard Law School. He eventually came back to Chicago, teaching constitutional law part-time at the University of Chicago and working at a law firm on civil rights cases. In 1997, he was elected into the Illinois State Senate and in 2004 was elected to the United States Senate, only the 3<sup>rd</sup> African-American in U.S. history to do so (Olive XVI).

Obama first burst onto the political scene in 2004 when he gave the Keynote Address at the Democratic National Convention which nominated John Kerry as the Democratic presidential candidate. Although there were many who praised the speech for its attempts to “bring the various components of his composite audience” together under a common set of values, there were a few who thought that it denied the racial realities of American history (Frank and McPhail 571). Further, many argued that it failed to address the specific issues of race altogether. Whatever the perspective, the speech brought Obama and his distinct rhetoric, his “romantic delivery, reassuring words,” and firm yet conciliatory tone (Hendon 54), into the political spotlight. Combined with his unique background, Barack Obama proved himself to be someone who could potentially close the racial divide.

Obama provides a remarkable representation of the American story. He is part of four distinct populations that have all managed to shape American history: white and black, native citizen and immigrant. His was the story of hope and the American Dream to which all could aspire (Derrick, “*Wright Stuff*”, 6). Although Obama grew up in Hawaii (considered the most multicultural state in the United States) and comes from a multicultural background, Obama discusses in his autobiography knowing at a very young age that he was somehow different based on how his classmates treated him at school (Olive 3). Even though he was born to a white American mother, people always saw him for the traits he received from his African father. It is

from this biracial background that Obama manifests himself as a representation of racial reconciliation; he represents the contradiction of being both black and white in America, an immigrant and yet native citizen. As Obama relates in his autobiography, “As it was, I learned to slip back and forth between my black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and structures of meaning, convinced with a bit of translation on my part, the two worlds would eventually cohere,” (*Dreams from My Father*, 82). Scholar Robert E. Terrill argues in his essay about Obama’s “A More Perfect Union,” that Obama absorbs all of his identities into himself without resolving any of their contradictions and in doing so, he presents his own body as “a metonymy for the divided, yet whole, political body,” (369).

Obama’s story should be appreciated in the current analysis because his story is the “fulfillment of our [Americans’] common dream and a testament to the viability of our ideals,” (Darsey 94). The story, the narrative, of his life is part of and represents the narrative of the American story that we read about in history books. In this particular speech, he draws upon his own biography because his personal narrative rings true to the success of American goals and ideals. His own narrative contributes significantly to the construction of an effective statement of apologia because it is plausible narrative based on American ideals and is easier for Americans to adopt.

Although he had a story that lived up to American ideals, Obama often avoided race as a topic in his campaigns. He and his team made a conscious effort to turn the focus away from race and turn towards the more central issues to his platform. This remained true during his campaign for president in 2008 until his former pastor endangered Obama’s chances at becoming the first African-American president of the United States.



*The Wright Controversy and the 2008 Presidential Campaign*

Derrick Z. Jackson states in his essay, “Obama would never have had to make his fabled speech on race – at least this particular speech – had it not been for his once mentor the Reverend Jeremiah Wright,” (“Wright Stuff”, 19) of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. Before the famed “A More Perfect Union” address on March 18, 2008, Reverend Wright had been used as a weapon for months by right wing politicians and media to destroy the Obama campaign (Hendricks 165), however, the real problem came when a series of video clips from YouTube displaying Reverend Wright making highly provocative statements to his primarily African-American congregation were shown on television. Many Americans deemed these statements anti-American and racist (Frank 168). Wright had been the pastor at Trinity for over 30 years and was Obama’s pastor for 20 before he retired (Sharpley-Whiting 6). Due to the high caliber of Obama’s campaign and his known associations with Wright, it was inevitable that these clips would not have remained quiet for long. This crucial event, however, was not the only thing stirring up controversy about Obama’s moral character as an American presidential candidate. For instance, Geraldine Ferraro, the unsuccessful Democratic vice-presidential candidate in the 1984 election, had made several comments alluding to the idea that the only reason that Obama had achieved such high status in the 2008 campaign was because he was black (Hendon 42). Further, George Lakoff, professor of linguistics at U.C. Berkley and published political commentator, relates there had been several attacks on both Barack and Michelle Obama’s patriotism, referencing Obama’s negative stance on the war in Iraq and Michelle’s comment during a political rally that for the first time in her adult life, she was proud of her country. Many Americans also began claiming that Obama was a Muslim, even though Obama had shown himself to be in both speech and action a devout Christian. Finally, Lakoff remarks, many of

Obama's opponents made the critical claim that the American public did not know who Obama was in terms of his values and beliefs. All of these comments and events came during one of the most intense and vital points of the campaign, and combined, they threatened to "turn the Obama campaign into a footnote in history," (Terrill 366).

Up until the point of Wright's comments, Barack Obama's campaign to become the United States' first African American president was not centered on the issues of race and race relations in America (Boyd 76). He did not want Americans to focus on his race; rather, he wanted them to focus on the key issues of the campaign, such as the economy and healthcare, and had been successful up until the controversy began building in March. In fact, Obama had been doing very well in his campaign, already winning 12 caucuses and primaries (including ever-important Iowa) and clinching the early lead in Democratic delegate counts over Hillary Clinton (Sharpley-Whiting 1). He had created the largest grassroots movement in American political history with over 1.5 million volunteers (Olive 6). His campaign brought in record-breaking amounts of money, breaking almost every fundraising record without accepting money for Washington D.C. lobbyist groups. Further, even though campaign donations were made in smaller amounts, he raised more money over the internet than any candidate had ever before (Hendon XVII). And while his campaign successfully utilized technology as a nontraditional campaign strategy throughout 2008, the internet proved to be the source of the biggest controversy that Obama faced during the campaign.

While Wright had been a potential hazard for the Obama campaign for months, video clips of Reverend Wright's fiery sermons had been available online for weeks on YouTube and were widely downloaded. These clips were finally aired on mainstream television for the first time on March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2008 on ABC news (Dumm 317). Many Americans, particularly White

Americans, were shocked and angered by Reverend Wright's comments. The statements were contained in four separate short clips from four separate sermons that Wright had delivered over the course of several years and could have very well been taken out of context by the media (Hendricks 167). Reverend Wright's comments included calling America the "US of KKK-A" and stating that "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...God damn America for treating her citizens as less than human," (Jackson, "Wright Stuff", 23). Soon after, all the "major news networks were wallpapered with Wright every day, all day," (Sharpley-Whiting 1). Such a situation was without precedent in a presidential election; race had never been addressed to this degree in a modern presidential campaign. While many have tried to compare the situation to that of John F. Kennedy's when he gave his address to the Baptist ministers of the Greater Houston Ministerial Society, the fact is, Sasha Issenberg notes, is that "race is a deeper, darker divide than discrimination against Catholics." Not only that, but Kennedy's address did not have the extensive negative media coverage that the Wright controversy had for Obama. Obama's team did the typical "media rounds to stem the negative coverage" (Sharpley-Whiting 2) and prevent the controversy from spreading in order to stop the initial drop in Obama's support after the clips aired. According to the Pew Research Group, 49% of Americans had already seen the videos ("Obama's Speech on Race" 2). Further, Sasha Issenberg remarks that with the development of Wright's comments, Obama's favorable rating had already dropped 5% down to 47%. Voters began saying they would be less likely to vote for Obama because of his association with Wright. According to David Plouffe, one of Obama's chief campaign strategists, although they did everything they could to distance themselves from the Wright situation, including interviews and a press conference, Obama was still unsatisfied with the outcome and he felt the

voters felt the same way. Garry Wills remarks that the whole problem of the Wright controversy was that it undermined Obama's campaign which stressed unity over divisiveness and hurt the cause of "joint progress" on which Obama based his campaign. Even 73% of likely American voters viewed Wright's comments as divisive (Hendricks 172). Obama knew at that point that the issue had to be addressed head-on. He shocked not only his campaign team, but politicians, journalists, and the public, when he announced that he wanted to give a speech about race and how Wright fits into that idea of race relations in America.

*The Speech: "A More Perfect Union"*

In the days after the Wright controversy broke, Barack Obama faced an uphill battle with the media who had created a "guilt-by-accusation" case that linked Obama to Jeremiah Wright (Hendricks 172). The looming accusation read that Obama was "guilty of the same racial hate mongering, anti-American demagoguery that Wright was charged with," (161). As his preacher and confidante, many Americans thought Wright had skewed Obama's "moral compass" and were not sure what to expect if Obama actually made it all the way to the White House (167). But why was Wright such a big issue at this moment though he had been talked about for months before the controversy broke into the media? I would argue that the main reason for this widespread national media coverage was the fact that conservatives felt threatened by the early successes of Obama's campaign that have already been mentioned. Wright had been associated with Obama for months, but it had not been such a big deal because conservatives had not expected Obama to do well amongst the American public during the primaries. Thus, conservatives brought it to the direct attention of the media via Bill O'Reilly of FOX News at a critical point before the Pennsylvania primaries (which Obama lost to Hillary Clinton) and accused Obama of holding the same views as his pastor, being anti-Christian, anti-American, and

racist. The accusations framed by the media created a divide among the black and white populations; they hoped to damage Obama's campaign because white Americans would never vote for a candidate that held Wright's racist attitudes, and African Americans would not vote for a candidate who denounced their own pastor who is a major part of African American culture.

In addressing Wright and the issue of race, Obama had to be extremely careful in understanding the situation and how he was being perceived by White and African American audiences alike. With the United States already in the middle of two wars and the economy tanking, Americans were already in a vulnerable position when the controversy hit (Jackson, "Nuanced Genius," 118). The media had put Obama in a tight position. He could not be an Al Sharpton or a Jesse Jackson; he could not be a radical or Black activist. He could not sound too resentful in giving this speech because doing so would threaten some white Americans; essentially, he could not be the archetypal "Angry Black Man," (Hendon 53). He would never have been elected. It was because of this stereotype that Obama had tried so hard to avoid addressing the issue of racism. On the other hand, had Obama remained silent on the Wright controversy and not addressed the issue of race directly, there is no doubt that his campaign would have been completely ruined. According to Mike Dorning, David Axelrod, another of Obama's chief campaign strategists, stated "It was a good time, the right time to talk about the issue of race, politics, and how we bring our country together." Author Derrick Z. Jackson describes the challenge Barack Obama was faced with in giving this unprecedented address to the American people: "Successfully explaining the perspective of black anger while running a crossover campaign of hope would take nothing less than a miracle. Not a single word could be misspoken. He wanted to renounce the message without condemning the messenger," ("Wright Stuff," 24).

In giving this address, Obama had several goals to accomplish. First and foremost, Obama had to re-establish his ethos and credibility in order to regain the trust of his audience, the American people. To do this, he had to denounce Wright's comments without denouncing Wright himself. Rather than distance himself from the situation, he had to explain those comments within their proper historical and social context and reframe how American voters viewed the controversy (Frank 178). Second, he had to create a narrative in which he addresses the grievances of both African and White Americans and recognize the grievances of both sides as legitimate within their social and historical context in a way that was consistent with American ideals. Third, he had to present himself as someone who could transcend racial division and, as Sasha Issenberg notes, communicate across the color line. Finally, in order to facilitate a successful and continuing racial dialogue, Obama had to "enlist the active participation of the audience in the solution and bring about transformation to amend a conflict or problem," (Lucaites and Condit 100). Obama could only lead the people in the right direction towards a solution of the race issue in America.

Obama gave this speech at precisely a unique and historical moment (Jackson, "Nuanced Genius," 118). As America's first serious African American major party candidate, race was something Obama would have to face eventually although many hoped it would have been on better terms. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting notes in the introduction to *The Speech: Race and Barack Obama's 'A More Perfect Union'*:

Compared to Abraham Lincoln's 'A House Divided' as well as his Gettysburg Address, John F. Kennedy's speech on religion, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' speech, as each of these addresses reached for American unity in the face of Americans' racial, religious, and ideological differences, 'A More

Perfect Union' is 'The Speech' that many say Obama always knew he would have to give someday in his run for the presidency (6).

Following the goals outlined in the paragraphs above, the following will examine the use of the apologetic narrative in Barack Obama's historic "A More Perfect Union" Address.

### *Analysis*

On March 18, 2008 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania at the National Constitution center in the presence of a small, carefully chosen audience and millions of Americans watching on television and streaming online, Barack Obama addressed the comments of Reverend Jeremiah Wright and the issue of race in America (Dumm 317). As an apologetic address, Obama was presented with the challenge of addressing the negative accusations that linked him to Wright, let alone discuss the monumental topic of race. While he could not deny what Wright had said during his sermons, he had to defend himself against his various character accusations to the American people and re-establish their trust and his credibility as a politician. In order to defend himself and address Wright's comments, as he uses tradition apologetic strategies, he also constructs a three-part narrative concerning race that begins with the Founding Fathers and the Constitution, and then moves into the present, specifically targeting himself, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Whites, and African-Americans as the primary actors, and finally looks into the future of race relations in America utilizing all American people. In all three parts, Obama maintains the theme of understanding race and race relations within their larger historical and social context in America. Up until the point of this speech, any progress that had been made in American race relations had been due to the construction and reconstruction of narratives (Frank and McPhail 574) so it was important for Obama to utilize it as a strategy here.

The first part of Obama's narrative primarily utilizes the strategy of bolstering. Throughout this first section, Obama tries to get his audience to identify him with the American ideals of equality, progress, freedom, and justice. He does so by beginning his narrative appealing to the first line of the preamble of the Constitution: "We the people, in order to form a more perfect union." With this single line at the beginning of the speech, Obama already begins laying the narrative framework necessary for the rest of the apologia. It begins to develop his ethos and credibility which are essential elements for successful apologia. He does this in several ways. For one, the speech was strategically being held at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, which is a museum completely dedicated to the history of the U.S. Constitution. It is located just across the street from Independence Hall where the Founding Fathers signed both of America's founding documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution (Boyd 79). Obviously, the location serves as an important part of American history and holds much symbolism for many Americans, providing both a "visual and metaphorical link with principles and ideals of U.S. history," (79). This sets the tone for the narrative, signaling to the American people that this speech is about American goals and ideals set forth by the Founding Fathers, invoking patriotism and the American spirit (Hendricks 173). Also, in terms of the setting, Obama delivered the speech in front of a solid American blue background flanked on either side by American flags (Scott A14). In doing this, he utilizes the apologetic strategy of bolstering in trying to identify himself with the Constitution, patriotism, and the Founding Fathers. This not only addresses the accusation that Obama was unpatriotic, but also creates a patriotic foundation as the setting for his narrative. His audience should begin to see that Obama stands for America. For many Americans, the symbolism and power of the Constitution and what it stands for remain at the core of their worldview regarding the United States. When these things are threatened, past



experience (i.e. the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup>) shows us that a great emotional response is elicited from the majority of Americans. For Obama, it was crucial to identify himself with the ideals laid out in the Constitution to create an emotional response among his American audience and in creating this emotion, it allows his audience to identify with him more. This in turn builds his ethos and credibility showing Americans that they can trust him because he is a patriot just like them. According to George Lakoff, the power of this speech is developed from the emotional structure and empathy it creates, and in the same way, it is what makes it such a powerful example of apologia.

After creating a physical and narrative setting and tone with which the audience can identify, Obama begins to address the Constitution itself. During this part of his narrative, he tells the story of the Constitution. In the first paragraph, Obama states:

Two hundred and twenty one years ago, in a hall that still stands across the street, a group of men gathered and, with these simple words, launched America's improbable experiment in democracy. Farmers and scholars, statesmen and patriots who had traveled across the ocean to escape tyranny and persecution finally made real their declaration of independence at a Philadelphia convention that lasted through the spring of 1787 ("Union," 1).

It is the story that every American has learned since the beginning of grade school, further bolstering his identification with the American story and a commitment to American ideals. In the second paragraph, he goes further into what the Constitution actually says, specifically in regards to race. No explanation was required because everyone knew beforehand that he would be giving a speech on race on this particular day. He explains that while the document was signed by the founding fathers, it was "ultimately unfinished" because "it was stained by this

nation's original sin of slavery," and was left by Founding Fathers for future generations to develop a final solution (Obama, "Union," 1). This establishes the conflict in the first part of this narrative because it poses a contradiction. Obama essentially makes the inference that the Constitution, the document our government was founded upon, was the foundation for racism in America (Hendricks 174). This completely goes against what most Americans believe the Constitution stands for; they firmly believe it stands for democracy, freedom, and equality. Even Obama knows that this is a hard contradiction for Americans to understand as "Of course, the answer to the slavery question was already embedded within our Constitution – a Constitution that had at its very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty and justice," ("Union," 1). Obama reinforces his credibility on with this notion purely based on his background if audiences knew anything about his biography. He was the editor of the Harvard Law Review and was also a professor of constitutional law at the University of Chicago for several years before he came to Washington D.C. In referring to the Constitution and what it stands for, Obama had the credibility, authority, and background to know what he was talking about. In creating this contradiction and conflict within his narrative, he begins to frame the historical context he wishes Americans to view the current situation of race in America and also in which to view Reverend Wright's sermons. He reinforces this narrative frame by presenting his vision of the Constitution, a view that is consistent with the Founding Fathers' view that the United States as a "union that could be and should be perfected over time," (Obama, "Union," 1). Obama makes the argument that in the founding fathers call for "We the people, in order to create a more perfect union," opened the doors for future generations of Americans to do their part to continue the "march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring, and more prosperous America," ("Union" 2). Thus, the Constitution has

been transformed from being the antagonist, into the protagonist, by becoming a means “for its own transcendence,” (Wills 4). In aligning his views with the founding fathers, he continues to increase his credibility and contributes to his narrative rationality because it rings true within the larger context of American history. We are a nation that has constantly progressed and evolved and Americans hold that notion very dear. Americans want to believe in their continued capacity for progress toward our destiny outline in the Constitution (Darsey 98). In this section of his narrative, he has established the historical framework in which he wishes his audience to view the rest of his apologia and has also established the ethos and trust necessary from the audience for the apologia to be accepted.

The second part of Obama’s narrative primarily utilizes the factor of differentiation; it is in this section that he tries to get his audience to view the present situation from a different point of view. In his transition into the second part of the narrative, which focuses on Obama and the present time in history (at the point the address is given), Obama begins to tell his story to the audience where that story comes into the narrative of America’s journey towards perfecting the union. As he begins:

I chose to run for President at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together, unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, 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 (“Union,” 2).

Again, Obama begins to create identification by means of his personal narrative. He places his story next to the stories of all Americans during this speech. As noted before, scholar James Darsey makes the point that the power of Barack Obama’s rhetoric comes from his unique ability

to construct a coherent narrative; in particular, it comes from his ability to weave his personal narrative into the larger narrative of the American journey (94). In this address, particular in the current section being examined, much of speech was self-referential (Issenberg A1). It was a very personal speech and one that he had given much thought (Dorning 1). The narrative in this part of the address draws much from Obama's own biography. He uses his biracial identity to his advantage, a representation of the contradictions embedded in the Constitution. Again, his own experiences as both a white and black man in America give him the authority to discuss race issues in America and audience cedes him that authority (Sharpley-Whiting 12). Using his own biracial identity, he promotes the American ideal of unity; he says, "I will never forget that in no other country on earth is my story even possible. It is a story that hasn't made me the most conventional of candidates. But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts – that out of many, we are truly one," ("Union," 2). He then shifts into describing recent events in the campaign when race has become more and more of an issue, becoming a stark contrast to the nation's unity he just described, and immediately addresses the accusations that brought the speech about, addressing Geraldine Ferraro's comment by saying, "We've heard the implication that my candidacy is somehow an exercise in affirmative action; that it's based solely on the desire of wild and wide-eyed liberals to purchase racial reconciliation on the cheap," and more importantly, addressing the situation with Reverend Wright: "We've heard from my former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, use incendiary language to express views that have the potential not only to widen the racial divide, but views that denigrate both the greatness and the goodness of our nation and that rightly offend white and black alike," ("Union" 3). Although having denounced Wright's comments before giving this speech, he reaffirms his condemnation and full disagreement with Wright's comments without

condemning Wright himself. Not only did he denounce Wright's comments, but continued the narrative by specifying what was wrong with Wright's comments in the light of the American story, his story, and the audience's story, turning the controversy in his favor (Robinson A15). Obama remarks in his speech that Wright "expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country," and that his comments were "not only wrong but divisive, divisive at a time when we need unity; racially charged at a time that we need to come together to solve a set of problems [...] problems that are neither black or white or Latino or Asian, but rather problems that confront us all ("Union" 2). By relating what is wrong with Wright's comments, Obama disassociates himself from the accusation that held the same anti-American, racist beliefs. This was critical because people did not know the extent to which Obama agreed with Wright's views before this speech (Olive 254). This was also a crucial move because it completely shifted the blame onto Wright without actually personally attacking him. In fact, Obama never actually addresses any of Wright's comments that were directly found in the televised clips; rather he only refers to them as "incendiary language," (Hendricks 176). There was really no reason for Obama to waste time in addressing each comment, perhaps because he did not want to be quoted or heard as saying the same comments, furthering the disassociation from them, but also possibly to avoid being taken out of context yet again by the media or the audience. Interestingly, he does not address or criticize the role that the media played in exacerbating the Wright controversy to the degree that it did. By shifting the blame onto Wright, Obama presents himself as the clear protagonist and Wright's comments as the antagonist, an important distinction in this narrative. As scholar Robert E. Terrill remarks, Wright is placed as the wedge that prevents the American community from achieving the unity that they desire, an image that Obama seemingly adopted from the media (374). Even more, by pointing to Wright's comments as being divisive and

stagnant, Wright becomes a threat to America's journey narrative (Darsey 94). Using narrative, Obama begins to reframe how the voters viewed the controversy by placing Wright into the appropriate historical and personal contexts to begin his discussion on race (Frank 178). While Obama maintains that Wright's comments were decidedly wrong, he essentially asks for suspension of judgment when he tries to take them out of the controversy context. Utilizing the explanative approach, through differentiation, Obama asks that his audience view Wright's actions from a different temporal perspective. He does this by again relaying his own personal narrative to his audience regarding his experiences with Wright. Obama describes his experiences at Trinity with Wright; he tries to create identification by sharing details such as, "He has been like family to me. He strengthens my faith, officiated my wedding, and baptized my children." Most Americans would view their pastors in the same way, thus Wright is taken out of the larger political context the audience viewed him, and placed in the context of the black community and black church as just another pastor. In creating identification, it makes easier for the audience to understand when Obama relates, "I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can disown my white grandmother [...], a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed her by on the street [...] These people are a part of me. And they are part of America, this country that I love," ("Union" 4). Having related personal and intimate details about his life and relationship with his pastor leaving his audience emotionally vulnerable, Obama then uses this opportunity to transition from the Wright controversy into the more inherent issue of race in America. He states, "Race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now. We would be 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," (5).

Obama then jumps into a brief history of African American anger, discrimination, resentment, and humiliation in the United States. He states, “But for all those who scratched and clawed their way to get a piece of the American Dream, there were many who didn’t make it – those who were ultimately defeated, in one way or another by discrimination. That legacy of defeat was passed on to future generations,” (“Union” 5). And while many of African Americans are angered by this legacy, Obama emphasizes that it is not the solution to the problems African Americans face, in fact, “it distracts attention from solving real problems,” and bringing about change (“Union” 6). However, Obama does not downplay this anger; he gives it legitimacy by remarking that it is real and deserves attention. Obama then addresses the story of the white population, trying to draw a vague parallel between the two populations. He states, “A similar anger exists within segments of the white community,” (6), with resentment towards affirmative action and welfare problems. And while white concerns and anger are also deemed legitimate, Obama makes the point that “just as black anger often proved counterproductive, so have these white resentments distracted attention from the real culprits of the middle class squeeze,” (6). Obama “did not hide from the often unspoken reality that people on both sides of the color line are angry,” (“Mr. Obama’s Profile” A18). He asserts that because both sides have been too consumed with their own anger and blaming the other side, America has entered a racial stalemate. In order to break that stalemate and “continue on the path toward a more perfect union, Americans have to work together to “move beyond some of our old racial wounds,” (“Union” 7). Obama’s narrative allows both sides to begin to understand why the other holds such resentment and anger by telling the story from both sides of the color line. His point was not to bring both sides into harmony, but rather recognize that both perspectives were genuine and that something should be done about the deep racial divide that the country faces (Terrill

371). Obama emphasizes that at this present point in the American narrative and the narrative he forms within the speech that Americas have a choice, a decision to make in the American story. They can either make the same mistake that his pastor made and speak “as if our society was static, as if no progress had been made, as if this country – a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office [...] – is irrevocably bound to a tragic past” or we can transcend the racial divide and hold to the belief that “America can change” (“Union” 7). It was essential for Obama to point out Wright’s mistake because his American audience would obviously not want to side with Wright, and thus would want to side with Obama and his apologia. Obama had already affirmed his condemnation against people such as Wright in an Independence Day Speech in Independence, Missouri, when he said, “I believe those who attack America’s flaws without acknowledging the singular greatness of our ideals, and their proven capacity to inspire a better world, do not truly understand America,” (Olive 36). He establishes this choice that Americans must make and utilizes it as an opportunity to segway into the third part of his narrative in which he develops the narrative into the future of the racial divide in America.

In order to get on the right path to perfect the union, Obama states that “It 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” (“Union” 8). Obama utilizes the transcendence strategy throughout most of this third section. He begins to move away from the particulars of the Wright controversy and the other accusations made against him, and joins the result of the audience’s decision to the larger context of their impact on the American journey. He asks Americans to face their past, exorcise those demons and look toward the future (Hendon 54). Rather than be



brought down by the Wright controversy, Obama utilizes the negative occasion to speak to use to his advantage by speaking of a better future for America by beginning racial dialogue and transcending the racial divide. He begins to list all the things that Americans can do differently in this election, inferring that by electing him, all of these changes will come to pass. He presents himself as the figure of change. He states that we can either continue on our path of division, conflict, and cynicism, or with this election, “we can come together and say, ‘Not this time,’” (“Union” 8). He proceeds through a section where he foresees what will come to pass if we decide to accept his narrative and eventually elect him president. Obama utilizes anaphora throughout this section by repeating the phrase, “This time,” at the beginning of each paragraph. For example, “This time we want to reject the cynicism that tells us that these kids can’t learn; that those kids who don’t look like us are somebody else’s problem” (“Union” 8). This parallels Martin Luther King Jr.’s repeated use of anaphora in his “I Have a Dream” speech. Interestingly enough, whereas Martin Luther King repeats a sequence of “I have a dream...” Obama presents himself as one who can be the answer to those dreams from over 40 years ago if Americans choose to change “This time.” He is the can provide the conclusion to the narrative of racial divisions. In this part of his narrative, this generation and the generations to follow are presented as the means of change. Obama realizes complete change will not happen overnight but it can start with this generation. As he says, “The union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected” (“Union” 9). He concludes this part of his narrative by giving what Kenneth Burke refers to as a representative anecdote. Obama relates the story of a girl, Ashley, in the present generation who epitomizes this commitment to change and transcending the racial divide. He tells her story of poverty because of medical bills due to her mother’s cancer. Her story represents what all Americans should do in the face of hardship: she

did not blame her problems on anyone of a different color, “she sought allies in her fight against injustice” (9). When she got older, she became a grassroots campaign organizer for the Obama campaign. At a roundtable discussion, she asked why everyone was there to support the campaign. An older black man states that the only reason he was there was this: “I’m here because of Ashley” (9). By relating this story, Obama is giving his audience a true to life example of recognizing the racial divide and overcoming it as a whole America, not a racially divided America. Obama utilizes this as a start to the racial dialogue he hopes to begin among his fellow Americans. He states that this story is “where we start. It is where our union grows stronger. And as so many generations have come to realize over the course of the 221 years since a band of patriots signed that document right here in Philadelphia, that is where perfection begins,” (“Union” 10). In presenting this story, Obama concludes his own narrative about transcending racial divisions and working towards change, and effectively begins a new narrative for the American people to finish. He gives the American people the power to bring about a more permanent solution and bring about “perfection” to the union, or at least get us closer to it. His narrative comes full circle, beginning with the story of a document that spoke of “a more perfect union” to which the Founding Fathers sought to create and ends the story referring to the document that continues to bring about new beginnings for each generation and demonstrates the progression and narrative of the American people. The fact that his narrative goes full circle makes Obama’s apologia that much more effective because it illustrates the American ideals of progress in change. By transcending the Wright controversy and addressing the issue of race, he shifts his audiences’ focus away from the accusations and more towards looking to the possibilities his candidacy offers for the future of America and what the present generation is capable of doing to change the future and change how people of different races interact. Thus,

not only does his speech fulfill the qualifications of apologia in addressing his accusations, but he goes above and beyond, and makes it a speech about the American story and the American people. Because Obama's narrative frames his American audiences' view in this way, it makes his apologia extremely acceptable within the larger context. As Eugene Robinson of the *Washington Post* states, "He not only ventured into the minefield of race and made it back alive, but he also marked a path for the rest of us to follow."

### *Reactions and Effects*

The best way to evaluate the effectiveness of Barack Obama's apologia is to look at the polls and opinions of Americans after the speech, but also to look at journalist and politician views as well. Aftershocks and opinions of "A More Perfect Union" were varied, swift, and widespread, spawning hundreds of editorials about the speech (Plouffe 3). The speech was both praised and denounced. Most prominent civil rights leaders praised the speech and what it contributed to the rhetoric of race relations; even some conservative politicians at least agreed with the general themes of the speech in addressing race as an issue in America, but not all (Frank 169). Some conservatives, like Bill Kristol of the *New York Times*, completely disagreed with the speech in an editorial the week following the speech. Kristol's thoughts were, "The last thing we need now is a heated national conversation about race." He goes further to say that a national conversation on race is not necessary because there is no racial stalemate and to have a race talk would "do more to divide us than to unite us, and more to confuse than to clarify." Howard Kurtz, a *Washington Post* staff writer, related that conservative radio show host Sean Hannity said on his show: "Most of America is not going to buy this flimsy excuse. . . . If you can't disown Reverend Wright, you're not qualified to be the president of the United States. I don't even think you're qualified to be senator." Most reactions, particularly in the liberal camp,

however, were positive. Other editorials in the *New York Times* related: “We can't know how effective Obama's words will be with those [...] who will reject his frank talk about race. What is evident, though, is that he not only cleared the air over a particular controversy - he raised the discussion to a higher plane,” (“Mr. Obama’s Profile” A18). The *Los Angeles Times* said: “It may have begun as an exercise in political damage control, but Barack Obama's speech in Philadelphia on ‘A More Perfect Union’ was that rarity in American political discourse: a serious discussion of racial division, distrust and demonization. . . It redefines our national conversation about race and politics,” (“Reaction to Obama’s Speech” AA07). The *Toronto Star* further related, “It was a compelling answer both to the challenge presented by his pastor's comments and to the growing role of race in the presidential campaign. . .Mr. Obama's speech was an extraordinary moment of truth-telling,” (“Reaction to Obama’s Speech” AA07). Others, like scholar David Frank, thought that where his Democratic National Convention speech failed, particularly in depicting America as a race less society, his “A More Perfect Union” address was praised for its honesty, candidness, and the advances it made in the rhetoric of race relations (170). Like Frank, historians believed the speech’s candidness was without precedent (Scott A14). David Broder, a staff writer of the *Washington Post* summed up the quality of this speech as follows: “This speech was not typical campaign rhetoric; it had the qualities of a presidential address.”

While many political commentators, historians, and journalists had their opinions about the speech, they were not the only audience. Obama addressed in his speech. His main audience was the American people. In terms of actually watching the speech, according to the Pew Research Group, 85% of Americans said they heard at least a little about the speech and 54% reported they had heard a lot about the speech in the weeks following March 18<sup>th</sup>. It was also

reported that 51% of Americans actually watched the speech, with 39% reporting they watched it on TV, 7% watched on the internet, and the other 5% using other means (“Obama’s Speech on Race” 2). According to the *New York Times*, 4 million Americans actually watched the speech live. Further, two days after the speech was given, it was viewed online over 1.6 million times, was e-mailed widely, and was the top YouTube video for several days after the speech (Rohter and Luo A21). Many people did not watch the speech on television the day of because it was delivered on Tuesday morning while people were at work; however, most Americans eventually saw the speech (Plouffe 3).

According to different polls taken after the speech, it was suggested that the vast majority of Americans found speech persuasive, which allowed the Obama campaign to remain on target for the presidency (Frank 187). Religious groups and academic bodies seemed to be the first groups to respond, discussing the themes of the speech in classrooms and study groups (Rohter and Luo A21). The Pew Research Group found that many of Americans had mixed views about Obama following his speech on race. 30% of Americans reported that their opinion of Obama was less favorable even after the speech and 22% of Americans reported that their opinion of Obama was more favorable (“Obama’s Speech on Race” 4). It is hard to get a true measure of the immediate reaction of the American people to Obama’s speech; however, suffice it to say that most voters responded well because they respected Obama and his courage in addressing race as an issue in America (Plouffe 3).

Even though Obama lost the primary in Pennsylvania to Hillary Clinton following this particular speech, throughout the Wright controversy in March, Obama was the most visible candidate with 70% of people saying they saw him in the news. Whereas he and Clinton had been roughly equal in terms of news coverage at the beginning of March, by the time the speech

was given Clinton was only receiving 15% of public visibility in the news (“Obama’s Speech on Race” 2). While the coverage was not necessarily positive prior to the time the speech was given, I believe it helped his campaign get the visibility it needed for the public to recognize Obama and not be overshadowed by the Clinton campaign. This speech, and the 2008 election in general, marked an important change in political coverage. For the Obama camp, much campaigning was done via the internet and most speeches were either streamed live or posted on the internet immediately after they were given (Plouffe 4).

In terms of long term effects, Obama’s speech seemed to prompt racial dialogue about race, but it is not clear how open and authentic it has been (Frank 187). It is hard to say if this speech had a definite impact on the results of the presidential election of 2008, with Obama winning both the popular and electoral majority of votes and becoming the first African American president of the United States; however, had Americans not accepted his apologetic statements, most political commentators and scholars believe that Obama’s campaign would have been ultimately ruined. Also, had Obama addressed the American people, black and white alike, in the wrong way (i.e. being the archetypal angry black man), his campaign would have been severely debilitated. I would argue that the apologetic narrative he created in this address did have an impact on voter’s perception of how to view Obama in the larger story of America and race relations. If voters had not perceived Obama’s narrative as part of the larger American story, it is very likely his apologia would not have been accepted and he would not have been elected president the following November. Had Obama only addressed his associations with Wright and denounced the comments Wright had made, there is no doubt Americans would have been left wanting of a better answer to those accusations. With this in mind, I believe the overall

effect that the address had on American voters was positive and ultimately had long-term effects on the success of Obama's campaign.

### *Conclusion*

Even after Obama's election to the presidency, it is obvious that race is still a standing issue that Americans face day to day. There was no doubt some were excited that for the first time in 232 years an African American was a serious contender for the presidency (Darsey 99). They were even more excited when he actually won the election. Even with such a historical election, we have not entered some post-racial society. The ongoing existence of discrimination in schools and workplaces, as well as extremist racist groups, makes a society a dream for future generations. But as Obama says in this speech, this generation and future generations have the great task of perfecting the union. He knows that it will be many years until America as a society reaches that point and he upholds the power of hope that we will actually get there one day. While he does not explicitly name himself as a physical representation of the progress that America has made thus far in perfecting the union, his own personal narrative presented within the apologetic narrative presented in this speech illustrates to the American people what this nation is capable of accomplishing and that it will continue to accomplish in the future.

This speech, although spurred by the accusations made by the media that Obama held beliefs similar to Wright's, rose to a whole new level of American political rhetoric. This was not the typical apologetic address. While it was necessary for Obama to address the accusations made against him through apology, that motive became only secondary when he took up the challenge of developing and telling the narrative of race relations in the United States. He knew it was something the American people needed to hear. No one had spoken of American race relations with the candidness and honesty with which Obama approached the issue since Martin

Luther King, Jr. As one scholar put it: “Obama picked up the gauntlet that was dropped when Martin Luther King was assassinated” (Dumm 319). Where Martin Luther King left off with the narrative of a dream of a time when whites and African Americans could live together harmoniously in this country, Obama picked up the challenge with the goal of perfecting the union and finally transcending race.

While the speech was unprecedented as presidential rhetoric in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the complex themes that Obama presented were by no means new. In utilizing narrative, however, he was able to frame the complex issues of race in a way that was acceptable to both sides of the color line. Obama sought a common ground among the disparate views of Americans in order to overcome the undesirable remarks of Jeremiah Wright and achieve the long-delayed goals, initially laid out by our Founding Fathers, which a majority of Americans can agree on (Olive 33). In using narrative as a universal form of communication, he is appealing to all human beings in America, whether they have a Ph.D. or a high school education. He does not dumb down the message he trying to convey for widespread consumption and seems to actually be thinking about what he says (88). He recognizes and legitimizes the grievances that both sides of the color line possess, but tells them to be proactive and understanding in trying to address these grievances. In his apology, his sincerity and emotional connection with race and the American story, appeal to the emotions and spirit of the American people. He submitted himself to judgment by the American people, and they ruled in his favor.

It is hard to say what the outcomes of this speech had on the outcomes of the election and overall race relations in America. Some believe that optimism about race relations grew after Obama was elected president (Teasley 417). Others still believe we have a long way to go before race is no longer an issue in our society. What is for certain is that this address represented an



advance in the discussion of race relations which had been stagnant for over 40 years. Obama's power as an orator and politician was illuminated in this historical speech in his ability to turn his negative occasion for speaking into an unprecedented ideological discussion of the power race holds over our society.

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