

The Evolution of the Theme of Race Relations in the United States: A  
Rhetorical Analysis of “The Gettysburg Address,” “I Have a Dream,”  
and “A More Perfect Union.”

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By  
Matthew Schonfeld

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## Introduction

Few speeches in American history are as well known and iconic as Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. The speech is not just famous for its delivery but famous for its oration style as well. "Many historians of American public address rate it as the best speech of the twentieth century. Few people who have seen King deliver the speech fail to be profoundly moved by its appeal, by King's charisma, and by the turbulent moment in American history the speech symbolized" (Leeman and Duffy). Martin Luther King Jr. was a king of oratory and when he delivered that speech on that fateful day on August 28, 1963, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, he was nothing shy of exemplary (Garrow 26). "I Have a Dream" would be the first nationally televised public demonstration, and the speech is famous for being noted as iconic before it was even iconic. "I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation" (King). This speech, many would argue, is the most important speech to have ever been delivered in this country and it was this speech that was the push to end segregation and allow for the "freed" Black man to become absolutely "free". "King's rhetoric was transformational because it created new understandings and possibilities for many different audiences. This was especially the case for African American audiences, for whom King provided a new sense of self-understanding, definition, and direction. King's rhetoric established the framework for a different pattern of structural and interpersonal relationships between African Americans and whites, and it recast legal and political issues into questions of morality and conscience" (Leeman 218).

The speech even has a sense of urgency, which is quite ironic, because just a few years

later, Dr. King was assassinated for his controversial, yet needed to be said, beliefs. Many feel that if this speech, and King's involvement with the Civil Rights Movement would not have occurred, that we would, most likely, be in a different place in regards to race in this country, and the fact being that our current President is an African American, we can see how this speech has changed the course of history. "King's eloquent words and courageous deeds throughout the civil rights movement inspired victims of discrimination to demand equality, encouraged politicians to dismantle pernicious Jim Crow laws, and goaded the federal government to pass legislation protecting the freedom of all citizens" (DeLaure and Duffy 258). Without such a fine orator as King, the Civil Rights Movement would not have had such an iconic leader. Without such an iconic leader, perhaps we would not be as far as we are today in regards to social justices and freedoms.

Now the question remains, forty-seven years later, is this speech, that has been analyzed so many times by so many scholars, still relevant to the field of rhetorical criticism? Some feel that this speech has been over analyzed, but I would argue that the spirit and words of the famous "I Have A Dream" speech are truly timeless in their makeup and this timeless quality is why the speech has stood the test of time. If one wants to evaluate how this speech has affected others and how it has been influential, one needs to see how the words of this speech have evolved and have been transmitted by others. Call it fate or call it the limits set forth at the time, but the "I Have a Dream" speech, in regards to race, is the second speech in a three-act-play of famous and iconic race speeches in the field of rhetoric in the American political arena. If one were to call into question three speeches that fit together like a three-act-play in regards to race, in which race is the integral theme and has evolved through all three speeches, those three speeches in the three-act-play would be Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address," King's "I Have a Dream," and

Obama's "A More Perfect Union." Why do these three episodes of rhetoric fit together in the story of dealing with racial tensions in this country? How does King's "I Have a Dream" speech fall into the thread of race genre in this country and how does it build upon the framework of Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" and provide momentum for Obama's "A More Perfect Union?"

### **King's Background and Notable Accomplishments**

Martin Luther King first came to public attention as a fearless leader during the Alabama Bus Boycott in 1955; he was just as powerful of a force then even though he was still the tender age of twenty-six. Originally from Atlanta, Georgia but calling Alabama his home, he was a prominent Baptist pastor at the Dexter Avenue Church in Montgomery, Alabama. King was destined at an early age to be a powerful and dynamic Black preacher as both his father and maternal grandfather were both Baptist pastors, and "King grew up listening to the themes and cadences of Black preaching" (Duffy and DeLaure 258). King was influenced by Benjamin Mays, the college president at Morehouse College, who encouraged King to be a minister for he felt that King would be a great moral leader in causes of social activism. King then decided to take up his calling and at the age of seventeen, he decided to become a preacher and was ordained in 1947, literally and figuratively following in his father's footsteps by accepting a position as the assistant pastor at Ebenezer Baptist.

After the bus boycotts, King went on to organize the Southern Christian Leadership Conference where he there became the number one influential member of the Civil Rights Movement. Though under the same instruction and religious purpose, many white evangelical Protestants opposed his views (Evans 245). He borrowed from the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi in that he advocated non-violent type of protests. He was a very intelligent man who knew how to handle the media and how to make the most of his television exposure.

King was once arrested for his leadership in the campaign to ban the Alabama boycott system. This is perhaps his most famous “sit in” type of protest. In March 1955, a fifteen-year-old school girl, Claudette Colvin, refused to give up her bus seat to a white man in compliance with the Jim Crow laws. King was on the committee from the Birmingham African-American community that looked into the case. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, urged and planned by Nixon and led by King, soon followed. The boycott lasted for 385 days, and the situation became so tense that King's house was bombed. King was arrested during this campaign, which culminated with a United States District Court ruling in *Browder v. Gayle* that ended racial segregation on all Montgomery public buses. While in prison for his activities in the boycott, he explains in a letter from his prison cell that his purpose for his non-violent protests had a foundation behind it, not just composed on a whim, for he felt that “Non-violent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue” (Cavendish 14).

Dr. King, as the years of the decade continued, expanded the beliefs and the propositions in which he believed. As the years progressed, he fought against poverty of both Blacks and whites; he established the Poor People's Campaign where he put pressure on the federal government to be more effective in their battle with the nation's poverty. He also opposed the Vietnam War, as well. Early in 1968, he went to Memphis, Tennessee to support a strike held by Black sanitation workers, where he helped lead a protest march. On April 3<sup>rd</sup> after he gave a speech in which he reprimanded the sanitation protest for its violence and looting, he uttered some famous words, now in hindsight, that are very ironic. He addressed the death threats that were made against him and explained, “Like anybody I would like to live a long life.” Ironically

enough, the next day at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee at around six o'clock in the evening, when he was about to go to dinner with his friend Billy Kayes, he was shot from a limousine waiting down below (Cavendish 14).

Even though at the age of thirty-nine King's life was cut short, his influence on America lives on, and his legacy is captured most by his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. The artifact to be analyzed, King's speech, was a seventeen minute public address, in which King called for racial equality and for the push to end segregation. It was delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in front of over 200,000 people and was one of the most prolific and most televised speeches in American history at the time with millions of Americans tuning in at home. The speech has become so iconic because it has "underwent a gradual process of cultural dissemination and mediated amplification" (Duffy and Besel 186). The occasion was the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, in which King was an integral participant; this was the apex of that march, as King's speech was the most important aspect to the demonstration. According to U.S. Representative John Lewis, who also spoke that day as the President of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, "Dr. King had the power, the ability, and the capacity to transform those steps on the Lincoln Memorial into a monumental area that will forever be recognized. By speaking the way he did, he educated, he inspired, he informed not just the people there, but people throughout America and unborn generations" (Suarez).

### **"I Have a Dream"**

First, one needs to understand the title of the speech and what Dr. King meant by that. It is a well-known fact that the "I Have a Dream" statement is uttered many times in the actual speech, but what was Dr. King actually referring to? Lischer asserts that this dream was "no



Freudian disclosure of personal meaning. No, this was a big dream of world transformation, the kind that God gives, and when God gives a dream, it is the fearful thing because it always comes to pass. Which is why forty years ago the preacher said with such emphasis, ‘knowing that we will be free one day’ ” (Lischer 9). The dream is a two-fold dream and it is the relationship between the two tenets that gives it such a powerful presence. Its construction is both the American dream and the heavenly-like dream that Lischer explains. King tries to portray that the American dream, which is life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, in a world free from racial oppression and in a world of complete social justice, is rooted in the heavenly dream. King understands the need for a complete American dream because his thoughts about “the dream” are rooted in his interpretation and edification of the Bible.

### **King’s Implementation of the Bible**

It must be well understood that the “I Have a Dream” speech is concerned with the teachings of the Bible because King used many direct references from it (Jones 421). It must be noted that King was a Black preacher from Alabama and thus his interpretation and use of biblical teachings is very significant to his cause. King uses two direct references from the Bible in his speech, Isaiah 40:4-5 and a paraphrase of Amos 5:24. The Isaiah passage is King’s referral to the proliferation of this American dream for his early and heavenly purposes. “Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” The passage points to the glory of the Lord that must be made known to the nations and this glory that King is using is the widespread capture of the American dream. Directly after this iconic line from the speech, King explains that this is his hope; it is this hope that he takes back with him to Alabama. Clearly the spread of the American

dream in the glory of the Lord is one of King's main intentions for the speech (Long 41).

Along with Isaiah, the paraphrase of Amos is used in his lament where he explains that the Black man is not satisfied with the current state of affairs. He makes many references that the Black man can never be satisfied until "justice rolls down like the waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." He alludes to many different instances that explain how the Negro, as he puts it, is not satisfied; he makes allusions to the problems at the time concerning voting in Mississippi and New York. His biblical language is also apparent in this section because he references Blacks being unsatisfied. He details that many of the people today are here out of great trial and tribulation, which references the hardships that humans must endure during the end times in the book of Revelation; he alludes to the wandering of the Israelites in the desert for forty years in the book of Exodus. King's faith is explained and exemplified in this speech.

King very much wanted this line in the "I Have a Dream" speech because he used the same paraphrase throughout his career; he used Amos in December 1955 at the Montgomery Bus Boycott, at a 1961 commencement address he gave at Lincoln University, in 1967 at his last presidential address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and even in a sermon he gave on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, the night before he was killed in Memphis. To commemorate King's famous line, the paraphrase is found in Montgomery on the Civil Rights Memorial. The other curious nature of this verse from Amos is that Dr. King used this paraphrase differently during the March on Washington than in all other instances. In the other situations, King used the actual King James Version of this passage verbatim, but he used a sort of mix-and-match translation during the "I Have a Dream" speech. Ackerman feels that he used this non-verbatim version because he was guided by his theology and his politics, and that he used this particular paraphrase for he was an excellent off-the-cuff orator, and must have implemented this particular version because he

felt that it would evoke the best response from the audience (Ackerman 190).

### **Voice Merging**

King was described as a voice merger, an individual whose rhetoric was so powerful and strongly effective because King had the ability to draw from a multitude of sources and compile them together to fit how he wanted to portray his message. One could think about using a dinner buffet metaphor: King chose what he wanted to put on his plate and compiled items that complemented each other. King was a master of peroration and was able to blend different meaning and messages of others into words that encompass the masses. “I Have a Dream” has numerous instances of voice merging but perhaps the greatest example of King's use of this skill is at the end of the speech where King makes a peroration of Archibald Carey's address to the 1952 Republic National Convention (Miller 28). Carey implements words of the famous song “America the Beautiful;” King simply borrows from a variety of sources and pieces his rhetoric together in a more persuasive format, and his version becomes slightly different than Carey's rendition: “This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning, ‘My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.’ And if America is to be a great nation this must become true. So Let freedom ring...” Here Miller notes that the “let freedom ring” sequence seems to perpetuate “America the Beautiful;” this continuation is both stylistic and metaphorical in nature. King employs the last three words that he and Archibald Carey quoted from the same song to establish his concluding anaphora, “Let freedom ring,” a phrase that he continues to use in the final moments of the conclusion of his speech.

Vail believes that this concept of voice merging allows King to have an integrative style of rhetoric. “Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech exhibits an integrative rhetorical

style that mirrors and maintains King's call for a racially integrated America. Employing the theoretical concepts of voice merging, dynamic spectacle, and the prophetic voice, this essay examines how text and context converge to form a rhetorical moment consonant with the goals of the speech, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and the non-violent direct-action Civil rights Movement" (Vail 51). Using these three tenets, King implemented his own unique style of rhetoric, a style that was perfectly suited for the occasion. In one sense, King's voice-merging echoed the rhetorical situation. The March for Jobs and Freedom was, itself, a movement of merged voices where hundreds of thousands came together to tell their stories and compile their grievances.

Secondly, King uses his prophetic voice as a vehicle or channel to be integrative of the secular and religious issues that were inherent in the Civil Rights Movement. His voice successfully merged all different people from different walks of life: "We will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, Black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old negro spiritual, Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!"

Third, Vail explains that the "dynamic spectacle" that the march stood for was what allowed for this successful merger. Vail then goes on to explain that what made King so superior at his craft and influential is that scholars still esteem King for his ability to move the masses even when scholars denounce his style. For example, Vail in his section of voice merging, shares the sentiments of the famous rhetorical critic, Edwin Black, and his comments towards King's style in 1970. Black, in his essay, criticizes King for his use of mix and match metaphors and for its uneven quality of composition. "Indeed, I shall go even further and suggest that by common, belletristic standards, Martin Luther King was often a clumsy, and overblown stylist, that much

of his writing though it was grandly ambitious, will not bear up under intense scrutiny” (Black 9). Though he makes well-known his criticism of King, Black then goes on to add one more point regarding the esteemed orator: “Show me a man who can hear that speech and not be stirred to his depths, and I’ll show you a man who has no depths to stir. . . What affected his audiences was not just his prose (they could have heard its equal from a hundred others), but the whole persona: the role that King was playing in an epic drama and the character that he explicated in that role” (Black 10). King’s prose transcends what is known to be rhetorically persuasive because he creates the character that goes beyond the words themselves.

What makes King such a successful voice merger? Miller contends what makes King so successful is that his speech is paradoxical in nature. “Martin Luther King Junior invokes a past of Jefferson and Lincoln and embraces Old Testament prophets and Christianity as he presents an entire inventory of patriotic themes and images typical of Fourth of July oratory. Yet, King devotes the first half of his address not to celebrate a dream but to cataloguing a nightmare, not to hailing the bounty of the present but to damming the horror of the status quo that demeans all Black Americans” (Miller 23). Miller asks the question how did no one before King, either liberal or conservative, blend the motifs of nationalism and religion into one entity that called for mass social change? “King’s persuasiveness stems not from ideas expounded at Boston University but from the typological epistemology of the Black folk pulpit and from the methods of voice merging and self-making that proceed from that epistemology” (Miller 23). It is King’s discipline as a Black preacher in the Black sermon style that makes his rhetoric so effective. Miller explains that Black ministers create their identity not through original language but by identifying with a sacred tradition (Miller 24). Miller hails King as a fantastic voice merger and says that King is merging the voices of the slaves from the past and the African Americans who

still today are being persecuted, together in the same group. King's prowess of merging voices from different time periods allows the spirit of both groups to merge tighter and combine into an even more significant occasion.

### **King's Allusion to Lincoln**

Along with King's references to biblical passages, he also alluded to the Declaration of Independence, Shakespeare, and most importantly the Gettysburg Address. The issue of race, and how race is dealt with in this country, has evolved over the last two hundred or so years, and there have been many famous orators, both Black and white, who have famously commented about the race issue. King's famous speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial is almost the continuation of the "Gettysburg Address" with Lincoln's discussion of freedom and the proposition that all men are created equal. George asserts that "I Have a Dream" and the "Gettysburg Address" are the two most famous speeches in American history because they are the two different oratory feats that had to be given in order to ease racial injustice and oppression.

Both "I Have a Dream" and the "Gettysburg Address" were delivered in the midst of tumultuous times; the "Gettysburg Address" was delivered during the Civil War struggle of 1863, and the "I Have a Dream" speech was delivered during the chaotic civil rights era of the 1960's. It is interesting to note that King's address was delivered almost exactly one hundred years after the "Gettysburg Address." George establishes that the "mythic hold" that these two speeches have in conjunction with one another is so apparent because they struck a "vibrant chord" in that they "raised rhetoric to a level of literature" (George 52). With this type of chronological quality between the speeches similar to a three-act-play, King was able to pick up where Lincoln left off and took the issue of race to its echelon. Obama was then able to pick up

where King finished in his famous race speech. Through this three-act-play of rhetoric one can see the history of how race has evolved in this country. At the time of Lincoln, Blacks were not allowed the same freedoms that white men had, and Lincoln's speech paved the way to the eventual Emancipation Proclamation and the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment soon after the "Gettysburg Address." King, in his speech, was one of the most avid proponents of the Civil Rights Movement and was the driving force to end segregation in the 1960's. Finally Obama, being the first African American president, has shown the entire nation that race has come full circle because the Commander in Chief, currently presiding over the executive branch, is a man of color.

Oratory historians have found that the "Gettysburg Address" and "I Have a Dream," though delivered one hundred years apart, evoke a type of poetry. Historians argue that both speeches rhyme their lines or have a particular type of meter that they strictly stick with throughout the entire duration. Historians feel that the first lines from both of these speeches invoke a similar cadence. With Lincoln's "Four score and seven years ago," this pattern is also very apparent in King's first line: "Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice." Both speeches also invoke the use of anaphora or the repetition of a key word or phrase throughout. Where Lincoln uses "we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground" and "government of the people, by the people, for the people," King reiterates both "I have a dream" and "let freedom ring." In both speeches, the orator's argument moved through a progression of successive and parallel constructions and through this cadence broke out into an enthusiastic and zealous climax. This cadence that King used is part of his makeup because of his other occupation as a Black southern Baptist pastor; his speech is very much like a passionate sermon that has a waxing and waning component, or an

ebb and flow type of feel. His speech starts off low and ends high with many miniature speech crescendos or “high points.” After a crescendo, he drops back to where he started, increasingly building to an even higher crescendo, keeping the rise in energy constant as he goes into the extemporaneous last section of the speech.

King and Lincoln also both use the same sources, the Bible and the Declaration of Independence. King and Lincoln also start the speech in the same way: “Four score and seven years ago” for Lincoln and King’s “Five score years ago,” which is directly addressing Lincoln. They both quote from the Declaration of Independence in that “all men are created equal.” These speeches are so closely linked that it is almost uncanny how they cohesively fit together in their purpose and intent. King used his speech as a somewhat follow up to the “Gettysburg Address,” but it is unprecedented how well he fulfills the “dream” where Lincoln left off. At Gettysburg, where Lincoln, in a very eloquent fashion, advocated that his audience fight on, save the Union, and win a new birth of freedom, King, in the eerie glow of Lincoln directly (on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial with Lincoln looking down on him) calls to the multitude of those in attendance to end segregation. Therefore, King completed the goal of the Declaration of Independence, and fulfilled what the “Great Emancipator had begun” (George 53).

### **Final Moments of the Speech**

Throughout the speech, King, in his ebb and flow cadence, used particular word phrases to explain his position and kept the excitement of the speech brimming. In many instances, he uses opposite metaphors to hold attention; he almost uses these contrasting images as a use of anaphora. Instances of these contrasts can be seen in various passages throughout both: “one hundred years later the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity,” and “I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state



sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.” It is these night and day, black and white contrasts that make powerful metaphors to show the oppressing blow that racial injustice had on the Black spirit. One can tell that his choice of words was carefully selected and that they were delivered carefully and precisely to the audience. “With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.” This passage once again uses the contrasting metaphors, which may seem to be lacking interesting arrangement, but is done in such a beautiful and eloquent way that captivates through its elegant simplicity.

What is amazing about King’s speech is the strong finish. Throughout his miniature crescendos he built up the cadence and anticipation for the famous and iconic climax. At the end of the speech, King departed from his prepared text for a partly improvised peroration on the theme of “I Have a Dream,” possibly prompted by Mahalia Jackson’s cry, “Tell ‘em about the dream, Martin!” Scholars are unsure whether King intended to use this as a final closing or whether he was inspired in the moment. He had previously delivered a speech incorporating some of the same sections in Detroit in June 1963, when he marched on Woodward Avenue with Walter Reuther and the Reverend C. L. Franklin, and had rehearsed other parts, so he was well versed in this showstopper. King, known as an oratory genius and a “voice merger” was able to read his audience and respond back to them reciprocally. The final section with Mahlia Jackson is a very stereotypical Baptist-type of sermon style, and we know from King’s background that he had the prowess and skill to use this style proficiently. Regardless of the fact of whether King intended on using this final section to close his speech or not, King’s delivery was flawless and stands the test of time in oratory tradition.

From an Aristotelian perspective, this speech captures all three elements that constitute

exemplary rhetoric: King evokes ethos, pathos, and logos. His ethos comes from his audience and critics' perception of his credibility. King has a long list of accomplishments that show his credentials; he, for one, is educated, having received his Doctorate of Divinity and a bachelor's degree in philosophy. His credibility or ethos is also rooted in his activism and leadership; he is the number one leader of the Civil Rights Movement, and though rejected by those at the time who had racist views, he was respected and held in high esteem by many. The pathos in the speech is its emotional appeal. The well-crafted words evoke a particular response and pull at the heartstrings of the audience to unveil and uncover the issues of racial oppression. Finally, the logos, or the argument from reason, is exemplified in the speech; there is a solid structure to the piece that uses different sources, and his argument is clearly expressed and justified.

The final tier of rhetorical analysis criticizes the speech from an ethical perspective. Without action, words and propositions are pointless, in that, without application, nothing will get done. If this speech did not evoke a response and a call for action, this speech would be in vain; it would not have fulfilled its purpose. The speech did, in fact, fulfill its purpose because The March on Washington put much more pressure on the Kennedy administration to bring forward Civil Rights legislation in Congress. "I Have a Dream" invoked action and change during this phase of the Civil Rights Movement as new legislation was passed into law. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination in employment practices and public accommodations; The Voting Rights Act of 1965 restored and protected voting rights; the Immigration and Nationality Services Act of 1965 dramatically opened entry to the U.S. to immigrants other than traditional European groups; the Civil Rights Act of 1968 banned discrimination in the sale or rental of housing. As a result of the speech, African Americans re-entered politics in the South, and across the country young people were inspired to action

(Washington 16).

### **“A More Perfect Union” Speech**

This momentum has clearly continued to present day, as the current President of the United States is an African American. Barack Obama, who has now been President for two years, has been said to have received his push into the White House after he delivered his famous speech on race. On March 18, 2008, at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Obama gave remarks in which he responded to the Reverend Wright controversy that had happened a few months prior. Obama gave this speech as a push to be the 2008 Democratic Party’s presidential nomination. Just like King, Obama’s speech concerned racial tensions, white privilege, and race and inequality in the United States, which was the lifeblood of the speech that King had delivered forty-five years earlier. Obama followed in the footsteps of King because King had made it possible for a man (Obama) to be in such a high position of power (senator/presidential nominee) when his (King’s) speech tipped the scales for the implementation of the Civil Rights Movement. Pew Center Research said that “A More Perfect Union” was “arguably the biggest political event of the campaign so far.” They also commented that eighty-five percent of all Americans said they heard at least some of it and fifty-four percent said they heard most of it. With so many tuning in to a speech concerned about race, clearly the previous influence of Dr. King holds supreme regarding race and equality in this country.

### **Obama’s Use of Consilience and Prophetic Voice**

Frank, a leading scholar on the subject of Obama’s “A More Perfect Union,” postulates that Obama is directly following in King’s footsteps: “Some 50 years later, presidential candidate Barack Obama, a man of mixed racial heritage, addressed similar issues of race and religion, and in so doing, echoed many of the theological refrains sounded by King. His March 18, 2008,

address “A More Perfect Union” stands out as a descendent of King’s theology and rhetoric” (Frank 168). Frank upholds what makes Obama so successful is that he adopts a technique that King used decades before. Consilience, moreover religious consilience, is the ability to bring different religions together because of a shared belief towards a commitment to caring for people and for their well-being. Obama was able to blend the Africentric theologies alongside those of Christianity and Judaism to allow for a wider group of people to appreciate his speech. Similar to King, he bridged the racial divide, which works well in regards to the effectiveness and dissemination of the speech.

King was radical; he claimed that both whites and Blacks are made in the same image as God as one of his main tenets for why racial inequity must be abolished in the United States. This theological viewpoint was the cornerstone of King's beliefs and rhetoric and the idea of consilience allows for the multitudes of people to come together and hear the same message even though their faiths differ. King was hopeful that one day all would see a world that is not ruled by hatred and inequality. He urged Blacks to forgive the injustices done against them by white people, forgiveness being a major tenet of King's Christian philosophy and morals. In an appeal, that was both radical and counterintuitive, Martin Luther King on December 5, 1957, urged Blacks to “stand up before our white brothers in this Southland and see within them the image of God. No matter how bad they are ... no matter what they do to us, no matter what they said about us, we must still believe that in the most recalcitrant segregationist there is the image of God “ (King 341). King so desperately preached this for he wanted both Blacks and whites to be able to come together not because of the color of one's skin but simply because they come from the same creator.

King's appeal transcends the issue of race and skin color and calls for equality because

we are all human beings equal in the eyes of God. King was so radical for not condemning the white population, because at the time, famous black leaders such as Malcolm X were vehemently against whites and believed that “the white man is the devil” and, for good reason, because Blacks were often persecuted by whites in a system where lynching, beating, and torture often occurred because of the perpetuation of the Jim Crow laws (Terrill 89). King is so revolutionary because he is literally dismissing race and making it a non-issue regarding how people are viewed in the eyes of God; race is just a feature that allows different people to be unique, it is never a determining factor regarding someone’s self worth and value in society. “Dismissing race as an accidental rather than an essential feature of human beings, King recognized the reality of white racism, adamantly condemned the viciousness of its structural violence, and insisted throughout his life on nonviolence, dialogue, and persuasion as the prophetic Christian method of confronting and converting segregationists made in the image of God” (Frank 168).

“ A More Perfect Union” was well received by the general public and critics alike because the speech was in the same caliber of American public address as Lincoln, the rhetor of the first speech of this three-act-play. The speech received significant acclaim and criticism. “Garry Wills, in a *New York Review of Books* article, juxtaposed Abraham Lincoln’s address at Cooper Union with Obama’s “A More Perfect Union,” concluding that both “forged a moral position that rose above the occasions for their speaking” (Wills 4). Obama echoes King once again because he transcends the rhetoric; he creates a persona or a character, a trait that Edwin Black believed was what made King so revolutionary and so persuasive to his audience.

Before the speech was delivered many felt that Obama was trying to win the Democratic National Convention nomination because he was “playing the race card” so to speak, in that, he was pressuring individuals to vote for him simply because he is an African American. If they

fail to vote for him it may cause cognitive dissonance; they feel that they might have a slight degree of racist tendencies at an unconscious level simply for not voting for a man of color. Now of course this idea is ridiculous because voting for a white man does not make you a racist at all; voting for another individual is simply selecting a candidate whose platform matches your own personal political preference. Obama's speech was an apologia or a speech of defense; Obama responded to the lewd and ridiculous comments made by Wright, but the speech transcended to much more than a speech to boost his ratings at the polls: "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. Whether or not the speech defuses the controversy about some crackpot comments by Obama's longtime pastor, it redefines our national conversation about race and politics and lays down a challenge to the cynical use of the "race card" (Obama's speech 16).

Obama follows in the footsteps of King through "A More Perfect Union" because he personifies the prophetic voice, the same voice that King used in "I Have a Dream." "Properly understood, the prophetic tradition rests on coherent and rational principles, and presumes that anger is a proper mood to adopt in the face of injustice, that hope is based on faith in God's creation, and that justice, in the words of Amos, will 'roll down like waters' " (Frank 170). Through his Prophetic tradition, Obama adopts the principle that justice will be carried out by the Lord and that the hope to see justice carried out is in God's hands and not in the hands of humans as a means to dismiss hatred and incivility toward one another because justice will prevail in the end; the responsibility to be angry is not our own. In the speech, Obama in a act of consilience, makes it known that "our relation to the world depends not on knowledge but on

acknowledgment of the other.”

Obama’s use of prophetic tradition is his Africentric expression of Christianity and is explained in the speech. The biblical stories that he mentions in the description of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago are “keystones of an Africentric expression of Christianity” (Frank 171). At his church and in many Black Christian churches across the country, the stories of Moses and the exodus of the Israelite people, is in a way, a personification of the slavery of Blacks in this country and the pursuit of reaching racial equality is equated to getting to the Promised Land of biblical times. In the Black church tradition, Moses is depicted as an “African prince,” Jesus is described as having “nappy hair” and of having a bronze complexion. Trinity Church’s focus on the African dimensions of Christianity allowed Obama to have a connection to his heritage. Obama in his book, *Dreams of My Father*, regarding his church “imagined the stories of ordinary Black people merging with the selected biblical stories” (Dreams 294). “These biblical stories were the source of Martin Luther King's narrative frame for the African American Civil Rights Movement, as he became a Black Moses leading his people to the redemption of the Promised Land” (Frank 172). King was a fantastic compiler and a genius of peroration and his creative adaption of the exodus story in regards to the Civil Rights Movement was a blending of Christianity and Black historical themes; he depicted both slavery of the Israelites and segregation of Blacks against God’s will in the same way that Obama does. King believes that justice will roll down like a mighty stream, a biblical passage he mentions in his speech, but one must have hope and patience because “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” (King 249). Obama was able to successfully blend the motifs of African Americans along with the motifs of the major religions in this country in order to reach a larger audience much like King.

### **“A More Perfect Union:” Similarities Between King and Obama**

“A More Perfect Union” starts where King left off; it starts where King ended because he was limited by the times in which he lived. Both King and Obama commenced their speeches by explaining the historical significance of the occasion and by explaining their place in the time continuum of American history. Whereas King explained figuratively and literally, standing in the shadow of Lincoln, Obama purposefully explained how society is following in the footsteps of those in Philadelphia after signing the Constitution. Obama began with the preamble of the Constitution and set the tone for the rest of his speech: “We the people in order to form a more perfect union.” This state of perfection, a term that Obama used later in the speech, became the overall theme of his address. Both Obama and King never used terms that say racism has been successfully overcome or that racial tension is no longer an issue. Quite the contrary, both orators expressed how the issue of racism is dynamic, it is not static or unchanging; people must always strive to change the status quo, and in the words of Obama, strive for perfection. Obama went on to say, in the first couple lines of his speech, after explaining the signing of the Constitution, that though the document is signed, it is ultimately unfinished. The language of “unfinished” further demonstrates Obama’s craft to explain the dynamic quality of race in this country and that society should never reach a point where there is no longer a concern for it.

Obama takes the same standpoint that King did; he explains that the mere words were not enough to bring justice and freedom to all; simply stating that all men are created equal does not really purport this to be true in reality. “And yet words on a parchment would not be enough to deliver slaves from bondage, or provide men and women of every color and creed their full rights and obligations as citizens of the United States.” In the same way King explains the reality that Blacks are truly not free regardless of whether it says that they are on paper. “It is obvious



today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked insufficient funds.” Obama then goes on to say that it is not words that will lead to the reality of true freedom and equality it is the people: “What would be needed were Americans...to narrow the gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time.” Once again the issue of time is mentioned and the dynamic quality that it brings to the table. Citizens are limited by their time, as was King in his pursuit of racial equality. The purpose of his campaign was to “continue the long march of those who came before us,” which ultimately explains how the issue of racism is constantly unfolding, and that it has a story in and of itself.

Next, Obama explains his own story being the son of a Black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas, who was raised predominately by his white grandmother and grandfather. He concludes that his story would be impossible in any other country besides America. A bulk of the middle section of his speech is addressing the very controversial comments made by the Reverend Wright, who was the personal pastor of Obama and a close friend of over twenty years. He condemns what Wright says because he feels that it widens the racial divide and offends both Blacks and whites alike. He explains that the Reverend Wright’s comments express a “distorted view of this country,” and that his comments are not only wrong and divisive but are “divisive at a time when we need unity; racially charged at a time when we need to come together to solve a set of monumental problems.” King also emphasizes numerous times that we must come together: “ the marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidence by their presence here today have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our

destiny. They have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone.” Obama also believes in the doctrines of King: “ 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.” Obama and King strongly call for unity as the only solution to bring about an end to racial inequality and injustice. The unity that King speaks of is his pursuit of a dream; Obama’s use of unity to strive for a more perfect union.

Both King and Obama, in their pursuit of unity, encourage both Blacks and whites to stray away from anger because it serves no purpose in the pursuit to ending racial inequality. King explains: “In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence.” Obama strongly follows the advice offered by King and further perpetuates that anger divides and does not help find a solution: “Anger is not always productive; indeed, all too often it distracts attention from solving real problems; it keeps us from squarely facing our own complicity in our condition... But the anger is real; it is powerful; and to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races.”

Obama empathizes with Blacks and whites alike and explains to both races that he feels for them and does not blame them for their resentment towards each other; resentment is expected when we are not united in one common goal. “So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear that an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they

themselves never committed; when they are told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time.” Though both men explain the resentment that has been built up over time, only Obama explains the resentment of both Blacks and whites. Which is not to say that King has some prejudice against whites because he clearly empathizes with them as well where he calls them fellow brothers a few lines previous. Obama, after explaining that he understands that both Blacks and whites have resentment, goes on to alter it. “Just as Black anger often proved counterproductive, so have these white resentments distracted attention from the real culprits of middle class squeeze... and yet, to wish away the resentments of white Americans, to label them as misguided or even racist, without recognizing they are grounded in legitimate concerns- this too widens the racial divide, and blocks the path to understanding.” This line proves that the world has changed and that race has changed in it from the time of King. Obama then goes on to say that the problem of racism in this country is not because of people being overtly racist or committing prejudiced acts, it is simply because of a misunderstanding. This shows that race has evolved since the time of King in that where “I Have a Dream” spells out the racism and inequality in America, Obama spells out a misunderstanding of sorts.

Obama then moves into the next section of his speech where he explains how we must make the change that we so desperately need. Obama eloquently addresses African Americans and explains that we must “embrace the burdens of our past without becoming victim of our past.” Obama stresses that we must bind up together our grievances to the larger aspirations of all Americans; it emphasizes that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. He calls for better schools, better jobs, and better health care and states that it is ironic to embrace this self-help attitude because this is what the Reverend Wright talked about in many of the sermons that

Obama had sat in on. “Ironically, this quintessentially American, and yes, conservative notion of self-help found frequent expression in the Reverend Wright’s sermons. But what my former pastor too often failed to understand is that embarking on a program of self-help also requires a belief that society can change.” Obama further shows Wright’s mistake explaining that he failed to note the dynamic quality of society believing that it was static and that change cannot be made. Change, eventually the slogan for Obama’s campaign, is emphasized throughout this section and leads to this powerful line: “But what we know, what we have seen, is that America can change. That is the true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope, the audacity to hope, for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.” Obama gives more details about how to implement change including ensuring fairness in the criminal justice system, providing ladders of opportunity to all people, and investing in education and our local communities. The change for which Obama calls for is not a change to advantage someone by disadvantaging another: “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.”

He concludes this section similarly to how King would go about doing so because he quotes a paraphrase from the Bible: “ In the end, then, what is called for is nothing more, and nothing less, than what all the world's great religions demand: that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Let us be our brother's keeper, Scripture tells us. Let us be our sister's keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well.” Obama reiterates that we have a choice; we have a choice in how we handle race in this country. “We cannot accept a politics that breeds division, and conflict, and cynicism. We cannot tackle race only as a spectacle.” Furthermore he addresses what we can say

and what we want to talk about in the next election as items of importance. He continues to repeat the phrase “this time we want to talk about” similar to King’s use of anaphora of “I have a dream” and “let freedom ring.” The particular issues that he wants to talk about in the next election are increasing funding for better healthcare to all races, increasing jobs on the home front, and ending the war, a war that he feels we never should have entered in the first place. After he explains what we should talk about in the upcoming election he again references the ideal of change: “I would not be running for President if I didn't believe with all my heart that this is what the vast majority of Americans want for this country. This union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected. And today, whenever I find myself feeling doubtful or cynical about this possibility, what gives me the most hope is the next generation; the young people whose attitudes and beliefs and openness to change have already made history in this election.” History would soon be forever changed, as “A More Perfect Union” was the commercial success Obama needed in securing the Democratic National Convention nomination and the speech contributed to the momentum he needed as his final push into the White House. Obama was able to fulfill the dream of King because he has forever changed the status quo by becoming the first African American president of the United States.

### **Conclusion**

The question remains, how have race relations evolved in this country and how have these three rhetorical addresses reflected on the theme of race in this country? Yes, these three oratory feats fit together but I contend that they dependently build upon each other; furthermore, to the extent that each address had to occur for the others to follow.

Lincoln first introduced the issue of race as he articulated in his Gettysburg Address: “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in

Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Not only did Lincoln’s well-conceived words invoke the famous words of the Declaration of Independence, that all men are created equal; it redefined the Civil War not only as a fight to save the Union but also as a fight for a new birth of freedom in this country. Not only did he consecrate the ground for which he is speaking at Gettysburg, Lincoln addressed the topical concerns of citizens regarding the state of the Union and provided the hope to the people that the: “government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” History has taught us that Lincoln’s first priority was keeping the Union intact and not actually freeing the slaves: My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union” (Donald 386). Even so, Lincoln was still influential because his signing of the Emancipation Proclamation allowed for the Black man to be free; it provided momentum for the addition of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which was the final push needed to abolish slavery. In hindsight, we know this to be only partially true because even though Blacks were free on paper, Blacks still suffered from racial oppression and inequality because of the Jim Crow Laws that still dictated legal segregation until the time of King.

One hundred years later, King picks up where Lincoln had left off. King took the issue of race to a completely different place; he played a part in the March on Washington that would be the spark to send legislation to Congress that would end legal segregation in this country. His activism brought the matters of African Americans to the forefront of politics and he was their

official spokesperson and liaison. His profession as a Black preacher allowed him to connect to his African American audience at a deep level and he was one of the finest examples of voice merging and the prophetic voice in American political address. His use of anaphora and contrasting metaphors contributed to one of the greatest arrangements in speech writing. His stunning use of peroration and extemporaneous speech highlights King as one of the most iconic and captivating speakers this country has ever known. The words of his rhetoric transcended the occasion for which he was speaking and his influence on this nation will forever be ingrained in the hearts and minds of its citizens. King would forever dismantle the chains that bound the freedoms of African Americans and implemented the change that was needed to invoke action.

Obama's speech was a different type of speech than the other two, he was not calling for racial justice and equality because we have no laws in this country that discriminate against citizens based on color, creed, religion, etc; Lincoln and King played integral roles in changing the racial laws in this country. Obama's intent was to assert the power of the Black man and the white man conjunctively and urged them to come together to continue in the pursuit of a society devoid of racial oppression; his pursuit of perfection. His goal was to expose the resentments that Blacks and whites have for each other and he asserted that these resentments are bound to happen and we can change how we view and handle racial tensions in this country. He followed in the footsteps of King and noted that while anger is expected, it detracts from the solution. His speech was a petition to go beyond the racial stalemate that exists in this country and to put aside our differences and put our efforts into shared social and political problems.

I also contend that not only do these three speeches build upon each other in a three-act-play, but all three orators build upon each other and invoke many of the same rhetorical strategies to persuade their audience. All three tackle race from a religious viewpoint

predominately; all three uphold that racial oppression is wrong in the eyes of God and God created us different but equal. All three speeches address consilience in some form or another and call for all people to come together through caring for one another. I would go further to say that the theme of religion in dealing with racial tensions in these three speeches is the overarching theme to this three-act-play.

Many scholars have analyzed “I Have a Dream” and how it is one of the most famous and iconic speeches in all of American history. I agree with them but I want to stress that this speech is not just a one time fluke in the time continuum; it is the transition phase in this three-act-play and it is the most important segment because it has continued in the thread that all men are created equal and has shown in the middle stage, of the three-act-play, how race has evolved in this country. Where does the issue of race go from here? Because the United States has an African American President, is there no more work to be done in the field of racial equality in the United States? Certainly not. Is Obama’s position as President of the United States the final chapter in the story of race in this country? Obama’s speech, being the third installment in this three-act-play, does not suggest that his position as our current president, nor the fact being that he is an African American, allude to the fact that he is the end-all-be-all in regards to race or that Obama’s speech on race is the final chapter of the evolution of the theme of race in this country. Nor does it mean that racism does not exist in this country simply because we have an African American President.

Obama’s race speech, as the third installment in the three-act-play, becomes a milestone in the plot of racial tension in order to show directly how King and his famous words of “I Have a Dream” influenced a generation of Americans past and present and I would argue confidently, future Americans as well. The question remains, where do we go from here? I cannot answer that



question because I do not know what issues concerning race will still exist in this country in the years ahead. But I do know that the words delivered by King on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial will continue to inspire and bring hope to those in this country; King's speech will always be a focal point in American history and that historic day will always be seen as one of the most important victories in the pursuit of racial equality in the United States, and in the words of Obama, "Perfection."

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