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Mixed Messages: Barack Obama and *Post-Racial* Politics

The 21st century has ushered in a set of paradigm shifts that are responding to changes in technology, economics, politics, cultural flows, and narratives of identification.¹ From the advent of social media, to the Great Recession, to health care reform, to the revised racial categories on the U.S. Census, American lives are faced with increasing tensions and ambiguities. No single icon reflects these tensions and ambiguities, and the paradigm shifts they are inspiring, more cohesively than President Barack Obama.

Some critics argue that Obama's election to the Presidency and status as global "supercelebrity" are signs that we have entered a *post-racial* moment in which everyone and everything is mixed.² "Watching Obama campaign with his African American wife, his Indonesian-Caucasian half-sister, his Chinese-Canadian brother-in-law...all of their children," not to mention the memories of his Kenyan father and white American mother and grandparents from Kansas, is evidence of this mixed, and ultimately *post-*, racial moment.³ Census statistics support this view, revealing that the population of multiracial children in the United States has soared from approximately 500,000 in 1970 to more than 6.8 million in 2000, and that they are happier than their mono-racial counterparts.⁴

As a result of this mixing, many now question the existence of racial prejudice and discrimination writ large. In a recent interview with CNN's John King, President Obama was asked about the role

he thinks race and racism play in his political reception. The President suggested that while racism exists, it lives more so in our imaginations than our intentions.⁵ If *post-racial* proponents are interpreting Obama's words and images correctly, then we may be on the verge of entering an era in which discriminatory racial barriers, partisan emotions and divisiveness have been dismantled. Put bluntly, in *post-racial* America, racism will be dead. If *post-racial* proponents are incorrect, then our dream of a *post-racial* America is a myth that both constrains and contains an ongoing drama concerning multiracialism, identity, and Obama's ability to change national public policy. In either case Obama is, as Peggy Orenstein claims, our emblematic "mixed messenger."⁶ In the pages that follow I will engage *post-racial* politics by asking and answering three questions: What does *post-race* mean? How does Obama's racial rhetoric address a *post-race* perspective? And, what are the implications of Obama's iconic racial status for U.S. racial politics?

Post-Race

According to scholar Ralina Joseph, *post-race* has two meanings that are often conflated. On the one hand, the existence of a *post-race* era proves that the Civil Rights era accomplished its goals. Therefore, a *post-race* era is one in which racism has no significance. On the other hand, living

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in a *post-race* era means living in an era in which race itself is not significant.⁷ Putting the nation's faith in either of these meanings suggests that we may be, if we are not already, a "colorblind" or "colormute" nation.⁸ The thesis is that we have made impressive progress as a society on issues of race and racism. We should be proud of ourselves.

While there is some truth to this thesis, it is grounded in a privileged perspective that ignores what still needs to be done in order to achieve liberty and justice for all.⁹ From a non-privileged perspective *post-racial* politicking is wishful thinking and must be mitigated by a closer look at social, political and cultural contexts. In the words of Paul Ortiz, *post-race* is "undermined by an avalanche of recent events": "Hurricane Katrina. The U.S. Supreme Court's dismantling of *Brown vs. Board of Education* and the re-segregation of American schools. The... War against Islam. The backlash facing immigrant workers. A grotesque prison industrial complex."¹⁰ Then there is the nation's fascination with mixed race icons. In a *post-race* nation, mixed raced people are presumed to be beyond the traditional concept of race as an observable set of fixed biological and transhistorical characteristics. They are, as declared by Ruth La Ferla in her 2003 *New York Times* article, "Generation Ethnically Ambiguous."¹¹ If this is the case, then race can be considered a costume that can be put on and taken off whenever necessary and convenient. Because of their supposed superpower to transcend race, mixed race people are touted as a new model minority and can be propped up to denigrate other groups of color. From Vin Diesel, Dwayne Johnson (a.k.a., The Rock) and Keanu Reeves to Tiger Woods, Mariah Carey and *American Idol's* Jordin Sparks, mainstream society is reminded that multiracialism is not only our destiny but our reality. Popular reality television shows like *America's Next Top Model* have even gone so far as to steer contestants through a makeover process in which they become biracial because the ethnically ambiguous look is the latest trend in marketing.¹²

According to Mary Beltrán, the seemingly new, "ethnically ambiguous protagonist embodies contemporary concerns regarding ethnicity and race relations with respect to the nation's burgeoning cultural creolization and multiethnic

population."¹³ Our current generation is referred to as "Generation Mix" and mainstream society is asked to celebrate several milestones of mixedness.¹⁴ Two milestones are virtual miscegenation in the form of a computer generated "image of the new Eve" as "the new face of America" on the cover of a November 1993 issue of *Time Magazine* and the model of digital pastiche on the cover of *Mirabella* in September 1994. Another milestone is the "check all that apply" option on the 2000 U.S. Census as an opportunity to refute the need for future race based government initiatives. A third milestone is the public presentation of race as a figment of the social imaginary per PBS in its 2003 three-part series entitled, *Race: The Power of Illusion*. The latest milestone is the election of mixed-race President Barack Obama, whose image in the realm of popular culture is interpreted as one of racial transcendence instead of an invitation to frank deliberation about the complexities and contradictions of race in America. Rather than simply declaring that racism and race are either wrong-headed or unnecessary, Obama uses his mixed race identity to explain that we must contextualize race and racism, use logic to understand how the problems emerged, and then resolve our problems through honest communication. In this article I argue that *post-racial* politics, the ideology that race and/or racism is dead, ignores the salient fact that we continue to live in a society deeply influenced by race, with material consequences that affect life chances. I support this argument through an examination of Barack Obama's racial rhetoric in his address of March 18, 2008 – "A More Perfect Union" – perhaps the most climactic moment of his first Presidential campaign.¹⁵

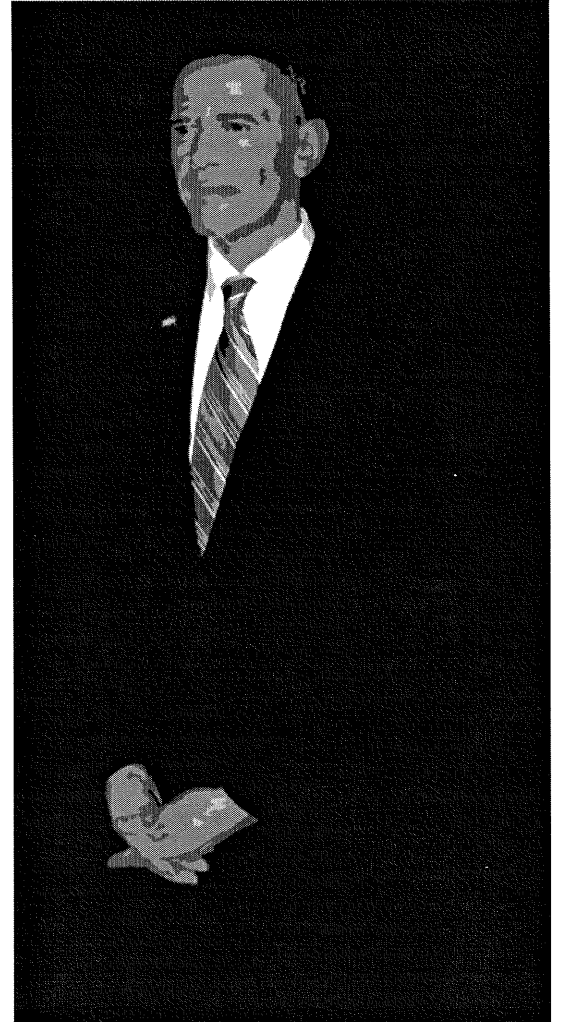
Obama's Racial Rhetoric

In March 2008 Obama came under fire for his affiliation with the inflammatory rhetorician Rev. Jeremiah Wright of the Trinity United Church of Christ. Wright was known for mixing traditional Christian messages with denunciations of the United States as a whole and white people specifically. In the speech Obama aimed to quell the controversy sparked by YouTube clips of Wright condemning values and actions of the

United States government. According to David Axelrod, Obama's campaign strategist, Obama told his aides, "either people will accept [my views about race and Jeremiah Wright] or I won't be president of the United States. But at least I'll have said what I think needs to be said."¹⁶ Obama took the occasion to interpret Wright's commentary and his own motives by analyzing present and historical race relations and then opening dialogue using the central theme of unity, which he embodies as a mixed race messenger. President Obama mobilizes his mixed race identity to foster unification and eschew a *post-race* perspective, specifically by bridging sociopolitical divisions like political affiliation, class distinction, and religious association. Thus, Obama presents us with a sequence of events in which identity is under siege, raises questions about how language is structured to guide us in some ways and not others, and provides moments of reflection in which we discover new ways to engage with and as "the other." In so doing Obama's speech constitutes a racial dialogue initiative and not a *post-racial* accomplishment. In other words, the speech is a prologue to racial dialogue and not a *post-racial* epilogue or monologue.

Forging racial dialogue is why Obama chose not to distance himself completely from Wright, but instead used his own mixed race identification to call for a national unity and understanding of differences and different experiences. Obama's choice not to identify as either white or black only becomes an invitation for all Americans of all races to self-reflect and find out how they fit into the national fabric. Obama declared:

I can no more disown [Rev. Jeremiah Wright] than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown [Wright] than I can my white grandmother - a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe. These people are a part of me and they are a part of America, this country that I love.¹⁷



Obama's compatibilist perspectives engage intimacy and hope by challenging the historical narrative of mixed race alienation and the current *post-race* narrative. "By acknowledging and then embracing his black and white heritage... Obama embeds this heritage in the character of America."¹⁸ Moreover, this rhetorical doubling promotes at least "two simultaneous points of view" that serve as invitation to productive racial dialogue.¹⁹ Obama challenges the racial thinking that leaves people of color no obligation other than to demand justice and equality from the powers that be. At the same time he challenges racial thinking that allows whites to be complacent, simply telling people of color to become more self-reliant and take more responsibility for their own

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problems. In so doing Obama invites all Americans to be more engaged and reflexive in leveling the playing field. Therefore, Obama demonstrates the ways in which sincere expression of a mixed race identity, that defies either/or paradigms, can be used to acknowledge racial division as well as its predicaments and awkwardness. Such acknowledgement brings with it the potential for change by creating a sense of universal identification that is also rich with particulars. Americans of color identify with Obama's hopeful call for a more equitable future, and white Americans identify with his recognition of the giant strides made since the slavery and segregation eras. All are invited to Obama's racial dialogue.

Obama's audience finds "no disavowal, but instead a new assertion, and a new challenge" in these words.²⁰ According to T.L. Dumm, Obama engages a transformation of terms that links racial justice to economic justice by observing that we all suffer because of traditional social practices based on misperceptions. In order to accomplish this, Obama uses his mixed race identity, which gives him membership in black and white communities, to shed light on shared economic concerns and expose misperceptions on the parts of black and white Americans alike. The primary black misperception is that systemic racism represents the racism of all white Americans. The primary white misperception is that government programs like affirmative action have done away with institutional racism and moved society beyond equal access to opportunity and into an era of "reverse racism" and discrimination.²¹ However, Dumm fails to acknowledge that Obama also addresses the primary misperception among blacks and whites—that we can have a conversation about race that is just black and white. Thus, Dumm's critique falls victim to the myth that by invoking a mixed race persona that is both black and white, Obama is somehow making a *post-race* ideological move. This assertion is not only incorrect and a red herring, but dangerous insofar as it reinforces the popular critique that Obama's speech represents a *post-racial* ending point rather than a mark of the beginning of an inclusive and ever broadening racial dialogue.

President Obama's mediated and political images as a mixed race person become even more profound when juxtaposed with *post-race*, anti-Affirmative Action legislation (such as California's Proposition 209, Washington's Initiative 200, and Ward Connerly's various Racial Privacy Initiatives). Obama responded to this issue in "A More Perfect Union" when he stated that: "we've heard the implication that my candidacy is somehow an exercise in affirmative action; that it's based solely on the desire of wide-eyed liberals to purchase racial reconciliation on the cheap."²² This misperception of Obama as a *post-race* figure that either benefitted unreasonably from or succeeded in spite of such legislation allows many to assert that a heightened focus on mixed race issues has become the emperor's new clothes. As Joseph argues, "racism and racialized identities [have] become conjoined notions so that in the state imagination, eliminating racialized categories of identity leads, without any structural change, to eliminating racism."²³ To be blunt, the U.S. is not *post-race* but it may be less racist. While the racial climate in the U.S. does reflect some progress, as Obama's status evidences, issues of mixed race identification force us to confront the legal, symbolic, and socially constructed residues of slavery, segregation and unequal opportunity with important implications for contemporary race relations that go beyond black and white.

By focusing on the ways in which individuals and societies can create positive change through open dialogue, Obama's message presents an occasion for Americans to reconsider what W.E.B. DuBois called "the problem of the color line."²⁴ The color line, arguably the most dreadful and enduring social problem in U. S. racial politics, began as our forefathers authored a Constitution that, according to Obama, was "ultimately unfinished." In a DuBoisian tradition, Obama explains that our Constitution set the color line in place:

It was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least twenty more years, and to leave any final resolution to future generations.²⁵

Future generations have largely kept the color line as a distinguishing and lasting element of U.S. life. The color line worked in conjunction with the “one-drop rule,” the idea that merely one drop of black blood makes a person black, to effectively exclude anyone of African descent from full participation in mainstream society. History reveals the ways in which this legalized discrimination caused suffering and turmoil for all parties involved, especially during the slavery and Jim and Jane Crow segregation eras. African Americans were barred from voting, from attending schools, from particular modes of transportation, from attaining mortgages, and from careers in public service. Even today, statistics reveal that unemployment rates for African Americans and Latinos, 15.7% and 13.1% respectively, rival those experienced by these groups during the Great Depression.²⁶ Obama’s description of these events makes the suffering concrete:

Segregated schools were, and are, inferior schools...the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today’s black and white students. Legalized discrimination...meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations. That history helps explain the wealth and income gap between black and white... A lack of economic opportunity among black men, and the shame and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one’s family, contributed to the erosion of black families – a problem that welfare policies for many years may have worsened. And the lack of basic services in so many urban black neighborhoods...all helped create a cycle of violence, blight and neglect that continue to haunt us.²⁷

In addition, those of African ancestry were the subjects of pseudo-scientific racist studies concluding they were soulless beasts, a threat to civilization itself, a drain on the economy, and a generally cursed people. These sinister images became the basis for a biological theory known

as “hybrid degeneracy,” which claimed that mixed race people were emotionally unstable, irrational, recalcitrant, and sterile.²⁸ According to Robyn Wiegman, this theory became a biological fact in Western discourse based on pseudo-scientific observation and comparative anatomy, especially of the brain, skull, and reproductive organs.²⁹ As a result of these sociological and pseudo-scientific findings, white/European Americans were instructed to dissociate from African Americans in social life in order to maintain their purity. It is therefore unsurprising that blacks and whites who dared to cross the color line in any way, whether to attend school, vote, or mix with one another romantically, were the subjects of torture and abuse. Such physical and juridical policing of the color line is why the study of mixed race identification remains important to any discussion of racial and *post-racial* politics. Moreover, those of mixed race who passed as either white or black demonstrated that the color line promoted suffering on both sides and in the spaces in-between, making it at the same time all too real and extremely unstable.³⁰

The instability of the color line is at the heart of Obama’s optimistic message and persona. His perspective as a person who identifies as both black and white is one from which to engage racial disputes and restore some measure of harmony by focusing on fairness and equality. Moreover, his mixed race perspective highlights and argues against the fallacy that any person must identify as either black or white only. This perspective also explains why it is not in Obama’s interest to identify particular individuals as the responsible agents for the legacy of racial injustice he recounts; rather, he maintains that the American Republic and its laws are the source of racism. It is for this reason that Obama can remind his audiences that the nation and its Constitution also present a method for “final resolution” of the color line and its stains. Perfecting our union over time through amendments, coupled with hands-on action by those looking to end suffering, can “narrow the gap between our ideals and the reality of their time.”³¹

Even as he makes these hopeful assertions, Obama acknowledges that we live in a time where the ideals of justice and social innovation appear less promising than attaining economic

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and political power. Unfortunately, certain social groups have built their power on the backs of others. Ours is “a corporate culture rife with inside dealing, questionable accounting practices, and short-term greed; a Washington dominated by lobbyists and special interests; economic policies that favor the few over the many.”³² Obama implies, but does not acknowledge directly, that the economic structure has been impacted by race, racism, and racial hierarchies, adding another level to the playing field that needs to be leveled.³³ In other words, the residue of the color line prevents us from dealing with economic troubles that can and should anger both whites and blacks alike. Emphasizing his own ability as mixed messenger to recognize and see beyond the color line, Obama re-invites us to his racial dialogue.

But 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. The fact is that the comments that have been made and the issues that have surfaced over the last few weeks reflect the complexities of race in this country that we’ve never really worked through – a part of our union that we have yet to perfect. And if we walk away now, if we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to come together and solve challenges.³⁴

Race has not been and will not be transcended in the foreseeable future, as was revealed by Harry Reid’s recent comments regarding Obama’s political suitability, “light-skinned” appearance and lack of “Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one.”³⁵ Obama invites us to face comments such as these, look at one another and address the suffering caused by racial and economic injustices simultaneously through honest and ethical communication.

Though important and insightful, I argue that a *post-race* interpretation of Obama’s image and perspective requires a more adequate working through of race and the color line than is currently

in vogue. Thus, the questions I am asking are of a very different nature: Could it be argued that mixed race identification is allowing us to finally come to grips with the idea that, though we may be less racist, we are not *post-race* at all? Is race itself a way of thinking and speaking as well as a way of seeing and not seeing? To rephrase and summarize: Instead of *post-race*, are the problems of mixed race identification better understood as enactments of the ever morphing conceptions of what race actually is and can be?

Few icons embody these morphing conceptions—that race is a symbolic social construction, a fixed biological and material truth, and a political, social, and civil institution that can be changed—like President Obama. But therein lays the paradox. Obama’s mixed race identification allows him to identify and communicate with multiple audiences, suggesting that mixed race identification can be a rhetorical apparatus to question the construction of the color line. However, because mixed race identification capitalizes on the absence of reliable evidence of difference among racial groups, it begs the question of whether we know anything about race now that differs substantially from what we have known about it historically or rhetorically. In light of this I doubt that it is prudent to suggest that race is no longer significant, a casualty of newer and better theories about prejudice and progress. Instead, I propose that we understand our present moment as one of racial and multiracial dialogue initiation.

Implications of Obama’s Iconic Racial Status

So where can we find some resolution to these race and *post-race* questions? Obama’s presentation suggests that resolution can be found in rhetorical discourse and performance of the symbolic social self. In other words, communication is the key. Communication that uses mixed race identification strategies can explode the myth that mixed race individuals either wish to be or are already *post-race*. However, in all honesty, the mixed race persona and multiple identifications constructed in the speech, which object to our biracial fascination, also perpetuate this fascination. That is why Obama is a “mixed messenger.”

Obama's messages in "A More Perfect Union" can facilitate sincere communication and create healing. Obama discusses race from a perspective that can explain to and extricate us from some of the dilemmas of identification and representation in our present historical and cultural moment. It seems that a moment of resolution has been found in Obama's rhetoric as part of a larger story about mixed race identity and U. S. racial politics. But, in order to understand that moment of resolution, we must not be afraid to dig deeper into related cultural moments of the past. A willingness to work through rather than simply declare transcendence over historical meanings of race and racism will further bridge social and political divides, help shift from the popular black/white racial paradigm, and embrace Obama's invitation to racial dialogue and political intervention.

Consequently, I present this reading of Obama's speech as a starting point for understanding how mixed race identity can be read as a prologue to racial dialogue that will contribute to and expand upon America's racial story. Obama explains:

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within

her the blood of slaves and slaveowners - an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible. It's a story that hasn't made me the most conventional candidate. 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.³⁶

The recognition "that out of many, we are truly one" means that the unity for which we hunger cannot be the effect of a *post*-race era. Rather, the unity that will perfect our nation must allow for differences. The "Unum" must be "e pluribus." So in order to make our union more perfect we must set about living with our differences and agree on institutional procedures for acknowledging and valuing them sincerely. In this very context—this "e pluribus unum"—race and racism are anything but passé. Rather, the presence of race and racism challenge the enduring fallacies of a *post*-racial era. In the end, narratives of race and racism demonstrate our needs for personal and collective recognition, appreciation, and respect. Addressing these needs through racial dialogue is a way to become less racist. It is the way of honest and ethical human communication. It is, as Obama informs us, not where we end but "where we start. It is where our union grows stronger,...[and] that is where our perfection begins."³⁷

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End Notes

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- 27 Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union."
- 28 Ursula M. Brown, *The Interracial Experience: Growing Up Black/White Racially Mixed in the United States*. (Westport: Praeger, 2001): 37.
- 29 Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 1995).
- 30 The issue of suffering as it connects to spectatorship and audience has been analyzed sensitively and thoroughly by Luc Boltanski and Graham Burschell, leading figures in the new "pragmatics" school of French sociology. According to Boltanski and Burschell, suffering begs the question of what can be considered the morally acceptable responses to its witnessing when the viewer cannot

act directly to affect the circumstances in which the suffering takes place. Boltanski argues that spectators can actively involve themselves and others by speaking about what they have seen and how they were affected by it. Developing ideas in Adam Smith's moral theory, they examine three rhetorical topics available for the expression of the spectator's response to suffering: the topics of denunciation, sentiment, and aesthetics. They conclude with a discussion of a 'crisis of pity' in relation to modern forms of humanitarianism. A possible way out of this crisis is suggested which involves an emphasis and focus on present suffering. For further discussion and detail please see: Luc Boltanski and Graham Burschell, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1999).

31 Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union."

32 Ibid.

33 Though not addressed by Obama in "A More Perfect Union", it is important to note that gender is also a part of this hierarchy, which intersects with race and class to present another disempowering dynamic that affects life chances for all women regardless of race. Moreover, the aspect of *post*-racial politics that assumes the end of inequality is also shared by the politics of *post*-feminism. *Post*-feminist thinkers assume that the second wave feminist movement eradicated sexism to the extent that it no longer exists, thus the problem remains focusing on patriarchy and gender discrimination.

34 Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union."

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