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RESEARCH ARTICLES

**A Guilty Conscience:
Barack Obama and America's Guilt in "A More Perfect Union"**

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Abstract

On March 18, 2008, Barack Obama addressed the status of racial equality in America in a speech titled "A More Perfect Union." The speech came on the heels of a media firestorm that erupted around Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Obama's religious advisor and friend, whom media accused of harboring allegedly racist and anti-American sentiment. The association with Wright undermined Obama's status as the post-racial candidate and threatened to derail his presidential bid. Using Kenneth Burke's dramatisitic process (the guilt-purification-redemption cycle), this article argues that Obama's use of guilt may have contributed to his success. In the speech Obama elucidated three types of guilt concerning racial inequality: Obama's guilt, the guilt of European Americans, and the guilt of African Americans. Although the disparate notions of guilt evoked by the speech had the potential to divide America across racial lines initially, it helped Obama preserve his candidacy and provided a foundation for America's redemption.

Key Words: Barack Obama, Racial Inequality, Guilt, Dramatism, Victimage, Scapegoat, Mortification, Purification, and Kenneth Burke

Introduction

The candidacy of Barack Obama heightened America's racial awareness more than any other presidential election in recent history (Tesler and Sears 52). With a race-neutral approach, Obama ascended the highest rank in American politics, becoming the forty-fourth US President (Nagourney n. pag.; Helman n. pag.). In fact, even prior to his success in the 2008 primary election, news media hailed Obama as the post-racial candidate who transcended the division of identity politics in the post-civil rights era (Hoagland n. pag.; Schorr n. pag.; Steele n. pag.). Obama's journey to the White House, however, did not go unimpeded. In early March, he encountered his most critical exigency to date with the controversy surrounding Reverend Jeremiah Wright of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ, Obama's pastor and friend of more than two decades. As snippets of Wright excoriating a "white America" and the "US of KKKK" circulated endlessly on social media, Obama's association with Wright made national headlines (qtd. in Kantor n. pag.).

On March 18, 2008, from the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Obama addressed the Wright controversy in a speech titled "A More Perfect Union." Although the conservative news media sensationalized Obama's connection to Wright in an effort to thwart his candidacy, most pundits responded favorably to the speech. David Broder proclaimed it "politically ambitious, intellectually impressive, and emotionally compelling," calling it Obama's "most important [speech] . . . since his keynote at the 2004 Democratic National

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Convention” (n. pag.). Eli Saslow sounded a more conciliatory note when he said of Obama’s invocation, “He’s trying to remain loyal to his pastor but also differentiate himself politically” (n. pag.). Charles Krauthammer, by contrast, called the speech a “brilliantly sophistic justification of . . . scandalous dereliction” (n. pag.). Perhaps the fairest assessment came from Sean Carroll, who explained that Obama responded with a “nuanced and honest assessment of race-based resentment in America” (n. pag.). While critiques ranged from laudatory to scathing, nearly all recognized the speech as a defining moment for Obama.

Critical examinations have acknowledged Obama’s attempt to unite America through a color-blind message that crosses multiple demographic lines (Darsey; Terrill; Frank). An alternative interpretation, however, reveals that guilt may have contributed to Obama’s success in “A More Perfect Union.” That proved key given that guilt, in the context of racial inequality, occupies a prominent place in the American psyche (Mitchell n. pag.); prior assessments of the speech had overlooked that element. Guilt—rarely viewed through a positive lens and seldom a preferred rhetorical strategy among political candidates—holds motivational value. As Kenneth Burke reminds us, when people experience guilt, they seek ways to correct it (*Permanence* 284).

Using Burke’s dramatic process—the cycle in which people experience guilt, seek ways to purify it, and achieve redemption—and other theoretical insight on guilt, I interrogate the question, “How does Obama purify his and America’s guilt concerning racial inequality in ‘A More Perfect Union’ and provide America a path to redemption?” I demonstrate how three layers of guilt manifest in the speech: Obama’s guilt, the guilt of European Americans, and the guilt of African Americans. Although the different types of guilt in the speech had the potential to divide America across racial lines initially, it helped Obama move beyond his association with Wright, preserve his candidacy, and provide a foundation for solidarity between white people and people of color on the issue of racial equality. To help America achieve redemption, Obama established a foundation for both purification strategies to operate. Purification, the process by which people attempt to expel and cleanse guilt, occurs through victimage or mortification (Girard 18; Foss, Foss, and Trapp 209). Victimage, the more common of the two, manifests in a scapegoat who is blamed for society’s problems, as when someone assigns blame to an external source. Mortification, by contrast, is a self-inflicted sacrifice. In *Permanence and Change*, Burke defined mortification as “a scrupulous and deliberate clamping of limitation upon the self” (289). For example, one may decide to leave the credit card at home before a trip to the mall to reduce the urge to spend unearned money, or choose to avoid the ice cream aisle at the grocery store when doing the weekly shopping to avoid the tendency to overindulge. In any case, through mortification we deny ourselves the impulse to act on a certain behavior. While Obama purified his guilt through victimage by scapegoating news media and government institutions, America’s purification will happen through mortification. Obama asked listeners to sacrifice their racialized worldviews and invest simultaneously in the modern welfare state to protect and ensure equality for future generations.¹

Examining Obama’s speech in this way yields at least two insights for rhetorical scholarship. First, it calls for reconsideration of the ways in which guilt functions in the dramatic framework. While the tendency exists to treat guilt as a singular concept, I demonstrate how Obama’s speech elicits three distinct notions of guilt concerning one topic—

¹ For this essay, I use Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s definition of “racialization.” They conclude that racialization occurs when a dominant group ascribes an identity, racial or otherwise, to a subordinate group for the purpose of continued domination (71). For an extended conversation, see their book *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*.

racial inequality. A close examination of how these three notions intersect illuminates how guilt can manifest simultaneously for speakers and their audiences, and the ways in which rhetoricians can utilize different strategies for purification. Although Burke's model asserts that a speaker may employ the scapegoat or mortification, few rhetorical studies examine the intersection of both approaches. Second, examining Obama's speech from this perspective challenges the characterization of his discourse as inclusive. Although the end goal for Obama and America is equality, Obama first cultivates a sense of division between European and African Americans on the basis of America's guilt over racial inequality. This division, however, has the potential to create what Brian Jackson calls an "alchemic" fusion of two conflicted audiences with different notions of guilt through appeals to a higher value: the assurance of equality for future generations (49).

In pursuing these claims, this essay proceeds in four parts. First, I contextualize Obama's speech within the history of the black church, unpack the rhetorical problem brought forth by Wright, and demonstrate how Obama's use of guilt challenges existing rhetorical scholarship on his discourse. Second, I offer a theoretical discussion of the dramatistic process that demonstrates the manifestation of three layers of guilt in Obama's speech: Obama's guilt as the "bad conscience" conceived by Friedrich Nietzsche; the membership guilt experienced by European Americans; and the existential guilt experienced by African Americans, as theorized by Martin Buber. Third, I analyze the speech and show how both scapegoating and mortification are required for Obama's and America's redemption. Finally, I conclude by discussing how Obama's use of guilt helped him disavow his ascribed post-racial identity, and I explain how my reading of the speech contributes to our understanding of guilt as a rhetorical strategy.

Overcoming Defiance and Opposition in the Black Church

More than Jeremiah Wright, the exigency of Obama's rhetorical situation materialized from generations of defiance in the black church. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the political and social imperative of slavery, and what it left in its wake, caused the black church to operate in defense against oppressive white culture. According to Hans Baer and Merrill Singer, religion in this context provided a source of identification and a form of self-expression for many African Americans who were trying to make sense of their surroundings (xvii). Religious scholar C. Eric Lincoln explained that during its inception, the black church emphasized that African Americans were not God's curse, nor did their existence mean serving white "masters" (qtd. in Billingsley xxiii). Simply put, the black church developed in social resistance but also sought a unique place within organized religion. The black church thus found its origin, not through established religion in America, but in acknowledging what it meant to be an African American living through slavery (Billingsley 13; Baer and Singer 4).

As European Americans asserted their position in the racial hierarchy during the slavery and post-slavery eras with violence, public lynchings, and economic retaliation, the black church continued to provide spiritual sustenance to its constituents and sought ways to counter white oppression (Tribble xvii; Clardy 203). At the dawn of the twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois's vision of pastoral ministry directed the goals of many black preachers. In this vision, ministers were moral leaders who mobilized people for community involvement and congregational development.

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, the persistence of inequality between the races has represented an integral part of the black worship experience—especially with regard to

cultural, political, and socioeconomic policies (Clardy 205). For example, African Americans in post-civil rights America face a resurgence of blatant racism and, for the first time in history, the economic and social distinctions among people of color create internal tensions that previously did not exist (Pinn 28; Billingsley 187). People of color continue to compete with white people, but now also with each other in unprecedented ways. According to Pinn, the struggles of the 1960s produced a black middle class that enjoyed new advantages in the 1970s and 1980s (34). The emergence of the black middle class, coupled with the development of black secular institutions and the increase in rivaling black religions, complicated Du Bois's pastoral vision. These new challenges fragmented the black church and its common vision of earlier times (Tribble 8). For these reasons, the black church has experienced difficulty carrying out its dual mission of salvation and liberation (Tribble 87).

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the black church confirmed over 25 million members in more than 63,000 congregations, creating a division that continues to reinforce the need for transformative leadership (Pinn 35; Tribble 88).² Jeremiah Wright is one pioneer who leads the call for reform. With a message rooted in Black Theology of Liberation, Wright condemns oppressive institutions and urges African Americans to support a vision of faith unlike white evangelical Christianity (Walker and Smithers 31; Saslow n. pag.).³ Liberation and salvation, for Wright, will occur when African Americans enjoy full equality. In his capacity as senior pastor at Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ from 1972 to 2008, Wright delivered sermons that articulated tension and unrest within the African American community (Clardy 205). Although media characterized him as a black racist, Wright impacted Trinity and its congregants in positive ways. By 1986, he had mentored more than a dozen young preachers through Trinity. In 1990, Trinity founder Reverend Kenneth B. Smith commended Wright's dynamic leadership as a reflection of the pride that people take in the church (Billingsley 172). In 2008, however, Wright reminded America of the long road ahead on the journey to equality, and his comments reopened wounds thought by many to have healed over time. As the controversy surrounding Wright's inflammatory comments continued to shock, America wondered how Obama would respond.

The negative attention surrounding Wright created a unique rhetorical challenge that summoned Obama to respond publicly. According to Clarence Walker and Gregory Smithers, Obama's association with Wright threatened to derail his presidential bid (14), and Obama's chief strategist, David Axelrod, recognized that Wright's rhetoric undermined Obama's "well-cultivated post-racial image" (qtd. in Tesler and Sears 4). Others corroborated Axelrod's observation and noted that Obama's association with Trinity emphasized his "blackness" (Walker and Smithers 53). Voters showed a similar concern, and in many instances Wright's statements alarmed Americans. Democrats feared that Obama's connection to Wright would cost him the election (Teshfariam n. pag.), and many acknowledged that the pastor seemed "a world away from the calm and considerate image that Obama . . . presents" (Broder n. pag.). On March 18, 2008, Obama responded to Wright and the status of racial inequality in America in "A More Perfect Union."

² Tribble explains that transformative pastoral leadership encompasses ministry that is engaged in changing people, churches, and communities.

³ According to Walker and Smithers, Black Theology of Liberation is a Christian movement created by black ministers in the late 1960s. The movement's leaders believed that the teachings of Jesus Christ held a positive message for people of color, despite the racism they encountered from white Christian Americans.

Critical assessments of Obama have acknowledged his ability to create a message that transcends party and demographic lines. For example, in his analysis of Obama's 2008 campaign speeches, James Darsey argued that Obama used the metaphor of a journey to project an experience relating to all Americans. The success, for Darsey, resided in Obama's ability to unite his personal journey with America's national journey (89). In the same vein as Darsey, Robert Rowland and John Jones argued that Obama, through a metaphor of hope in his speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, balanced communal and individual values, thus making the American Dream seem more attainable for every American ("Recasting" 442). David Frank and Mark McPhail viewed Obama's convention speech as an attempt to cultivate racial reconciliation. Although Frank argued that Obama linked minority and identity groups to shared American values, McPhail remained skeptical, explaining that Obama reinforced a discourse of whiteness through its dominant rhetorical tropes: innocence, race neutrality, and positive self-presentation (583). As these critiques show, a central theme has remained on America's ability, or lack thereof, to coalesce in order to overcome its differences, racial or otherwise.

The literature on "A More Perfect Union" has reinforced the characterization of Obama's discourse as inclusive. Rowland and Jones recognized Obama's ability to unite America through racial acknowledgement and commended Obama "for honestly confronting the most controversial and emotional issue in American politics, race" ("One Dream" 125). Judy Isaksen concurred, explaining that Obama occupied a middle-of-the-road spot that transcended the "bipolar" problem and put forth a new position that "calmly" but "substantively" confronted racial progress (457; 468). For Robert Terrill, Obama's embodiment of double consciousness, W.E.B. Dubois's invitation and call for people to view themselves through the perspective of others, enabled listeners to invoke the Golden Rule and helped them "find that common stake we all have in one another" (374-381). David Frank explained that Obama contextualized race in religious terms. He used the prophetic tradition, which merges Jewish and Christian faith with the experiences of African Americans, to wage acknowledgement between the races and emphasize "carnal recognition" ("Prophetic" 167-171). Frank observed a similar strategy at work in Obama's first inaugural address and claimed that Obama employed a "multi-faceted conception" of religion that catered to a diverse audience with differing beliefs and values ("Rhetorical Signature" 619). Most scholars agree that Obama's discourse holds the potential to unite America in shared values, whether through invoking the Golden Rule, the American Dream, or an all-encompassing conception of religion.

My work on "A More Perfect Union" offers a slightly different explanation for Obama's success, and challenges the characterization of his discourse as patently inclusive. While I agree with Terrill that Obama succeeds in enabling listeners to employ the Golden Rule, I remain skeptical that shared optimism about the future is enough to transcend America's turbulent racial history. America must first acknowledge and work through its guilt concerning racial inequality, past and present, before it can focus on preserving the future for subsequent generations. Contrary to Isaksen, my reading of the speech has Obama emphasizing America's violent racial history. Rather than "calmly" and "substantively" confront racial progress, I hold that Obama forcefully and unabashedly illuminates the guilt that exists between the races. While progress narratives have a tendency to downplay the reality of any discrepancies that may exist between the races, an emphasis on guilt brings inequality to the fore. I would echo most of the scholarship that claims Obama's rhetoric holds the possibility for transcendence, but I maintain it is not through universal appeals or inclusive metaphors that Obama's discourse will help America overcome its differences—nor did it contribute to his success in overcoming the rhetorical

problem in “A More Perfect Union.” Rather, Obama deployed a tripartite construction of guilt in the speech to help mitigate the damage caused by Wright, salvage his presidential campaign, and provide a foundation for America to work through racial tension of past and present. While the end goal for Obama, and America as a whole, is equality, it is through the production of the racial guilt in the speech that America recognizes its stake in preserving the future. The potential for transcendence exists not in America’s future but in its ability to work through a racialized past and invest in government programs such as healthcare, education, and welfare in the present.

In the following section I discuss guilt, victimage, and mortification in the Burkean framework. First, I outline the three types of guilt that materialize in the speech: Obama’s guilt as a result of “bad conscience,” European Americans’ collective guilt, and the existential guilt of African Americans. I then demonstrate how this multilayered construction requires the simultaneous use of a scapegoat and mortification for purification.

Guilt, Victimage, and Mortification

The relationship between rhetoric and emotion has been acknowledged since the time of Aristotle. Emotions, in his work, represent the feelings people experience, which have the potential to affect the judgments they make. Aristotle maintained that when people argue, they must do more than make a claim worthy of belief; they must also put listeners in the right frame of mind. “[P]ersuasion,” he explained, “may come through the hearers, when the speech stirs their emotions. Our judgments when we are pleased and friendly are not the same as when we are pained and hostile” (Book I, Chapter II, Paragraph III). For example, to arouse anger in an audience, a speaker must first understand the nature of anger and what makes the audience angry, because arousing an angry audience is quite different than stirring a friendly audience. Burke, like Aristotle, recognized the need to identify the moods and emotions of listeners. In the Burkean view, a rhetorician’s success hinges on the ability to know the appetites of the audience and on “their being ripe for the evocation of [the] chosen emotion” (Brown 17). In “A More Perfect Union,” Obama identified guilt as America’s prevailing emotion on racial inequality.

Guilt generally reflects the anxiety people experience when they violate and transgress socially established norms (Stein 15). Although guilt, for Burke and others, connotes a type of anxiety, we must proceed cautiously. To ascribe guilt a universal definition is dangerous because guilt is a concept with “blurred edges” (Smith 18). According to Burke, guilt results when people reject the implicit and explicit rules that govern social life, the hierarchies that order the world in which we live (*Religion* 210). For example, a person may feel guilty for shoplifting from a grocery store or for accepting a phone call in a movie theater. While one is a crime and the other merely violates an unspoken social rule, both deviate from the hierarchy that dictates acceptable behavior. Because no person can obey all social rules, everyone fails or disobeys to some extent (Bobbitt 34; Foss, Foss, and Trapp 208). For Smith, guilt manifests in a host of transgressions that range from debt to uncleanness and crime, concepts that individually may seem unrelated. But viewed in the context of guilt such deviations impel us to “restore the boundary,” as Smith observed (20), or what might be called seeking redemption in the Burkean framework. To understand the function of guilt in “A More Perfect Union,” we must treat it conditionally, embracing an approach that sees guilt as context dependent.

The rhetorical potency of Obama’s speech materializes in the confluence of three disparate notions of guilt: Obama’s guilt, the guilt of European Americans, and the guilt of

African Americans. While each type results from unique circumstances, taken together they underscore the significance of guilt in “A More Perfect Union.” Obama’s guilt is understood best in light of Friedrich Nietzsche, who characterized guilt as “bad conscience” (32-33). Guilt, for Nietzsche, manifests when people default on their contractual obligations. When Obama announced his candidacy, he entered into an unspoken agreement with the American people to uphold the ideals of democracy. The connection to Wright, a staunch and outspoken critic of the American political system, manifested the Nietzschean guilt that Obama may have felt for seemingly voiding the contractual agreement. Guilt for America, however, manifests in different ways.

European Americans experience guilt in a more collective sense. Broadly speaking, collective guilt implies that one is a member of a group that has done something wrong (Katchadourian 21). While most of the current generation is not directly responsible, some believe that white people as a whole share some culpability in the racial violence of the past two centuries. Burke noted that the possibility exists for individuals to inherit the guilt of their predecessors (*Permanence* 278), what Margaret Gilbert would characterize as membership guilt (231). Although most white people did not actively inflict violence against people of color, many chose not to intervene, which implicated them for inaction.⁴ As awareness of that inaction transfers from one generation to the next, membership guilt replicates across time (Katchadourian 96-97). In the context of “A More Perfect Union,” membership guilt stems from the shared knowledge of European Americans’ troublesome past. White people then shoulder the burden of guilt associated with their ancestors’ transgressions—wrongdoing that resulted from both action and inaction.

African American guilt, by contrast, operates in the existential sense theorized by Martin Buber. Existential guilt manifests through self-assignment when people fail to capitalize on their potential or realize the essence of what they are called to become. Under a system of white oppression, people of color could not and have not achieved their full potential, thus making it possible for them to experience guilt existentially. In *Good and Evil*, Buber clarified the effect that existential guilt can have on the psyche: “Their life was ‘set in slippery places’; it was so arranged as to slide into the knowledge of their own nothingness; and when this finally happens . . . the great terror falls upon them and they are consumed” (40). Because the urge to elevate oneself to a higher level is naturally embedded in human consciousness, when people do not succeed, whether due to societal impositions or their own limitations, they may experience guilt existentially.

The convergence of guilt in “A More Perfect Union” creates the possibility for Obama and America to recognize their individual and collective roles in racial inequality. That is, the speech provided Obama a platform to enable listeners to acknowledge their own guilt while simultaneously identifying their collective stake in fixing it. When people experience guilt, Burke reminds us, they are motivated to correct it (*Permanence* 284). Although the impulse to correct our transgressions has always been present, Americans required a rhetorical catalyst to provoke them into action. “A More Perfect Union,” as such, creates the possibility for Obama and America to become joined in not only the problems but also the solutions associated with racial injustice.

⁴ Hannah Arendt’s essay details how membership guilt can arise from inaction. Arendt explains that after World War II, many Germans felt guilty because of their heritage. Although the majority of Germans did not contribute directly to the extermination of Jews during the Holocaust, responsibility laid on the shoulders of those who sympathized with Hitler during the war and aided his rise to power (260).

People naturally seek to eliminate guilt by victimage through a scapegoat or through an act of mortification (Burke, *Permanence* 286-289). These strategies of purification serve to excise guilt, promote social cohesion, and restore balance to the social order. Many scholars have explored guilt (Olson; Villadsen; Wood) and victimage in political discourse (Bobbitt; Brummett; Engels; Foy; Moore).⁵ For example, Mark Moore examined the scapegoating and mortification of Illinois Governor George Ryan. At the end of a political career plagued by corruption, Ryan, a lifetime proponent of capital punishment, scapegoated the criminal justice system and then, in an act of mortification, placed a moratorium on the death penalty and commuted nearly two hundred death sentences (Moore 313). David Ling observed a similar phenomenon in Senator Ted Kennedy's address of July 25, 1969, to the people of Massachusetts. Although Kennedy was behind the wheel, he rejected any wrongdoing in the car accident that killed Mary Jo Kopechne, portraying himself as a victim of a helpless scene characterized by a "narrow bridge" and an "unlit road" with "no guard rails" (Ling 368). While Moore demonstrated the ways in which rhetoricians can employ both strategies for purification, Ling's analysis indicated how speakers and their audiences can be jointly implicated in the dramatistic process. Neither study, however, offers a clear explanation of how purification happens when multiple and seemingly contradictory notions of guilt manifest in the Burkean frame—the fundamental task of Obama's speech. Obama had to provide the means for his own purification and for two different audiences with conflicting types of guilt with regard to racial inequality. Although these studies examine the intersection of both purification strategies, they represent the exception to the rule because most analyses focus solely on either the scapegoat or mortification.

Victimage through the scapegoat mechanism shifts blame for problems onto individuals who are not necessarily responsible. Rene Girard explained that scapegoats may be guilty of their accused crimes, but accusers often select victims because they belong to marginalized groups or communities susceptible to persecution (17). Scapegoating can then occur in racialized terms. For example, when poor white Southerners scapegoated African Americans for the South's economic woes, they adopted lynching as a physical sacrifice and solution to their problem (Gilmore 15). Once a community assigns a scapegoat they sacrifice it in physical or symbolic terms.

To induce sacrifice, whether physically or symbolically, a community must prepare its scapegoat. One way to make a scapegoat worthy for sacrifice is to prime it fatalistically (Burke, *Literary* 40).⁶ A fatalistic sacrifice positions the scapegoat as something that has fallen out of popular favor. For example, politicians who fall out of favor with their constituents may become scapegoats for their party. If the party faces scrutiny, it may ascribe blame to its unfavorable politicians and bring about fatalistic sacrifice. Girard's characterization of the disabled scapegoat helps clarify this point. According to Girard, while the term "disability" may connote physical

⁵ For Nietzsche, victimage is not a curative for guilt; it simply prolongs the feelings associated with guilt by assigning it to another source. Jeremy Engels insightfully details the victimage of Richard Nixon. By transforming the "majority" of Americans into victims of the minority (the tyrannical protestors who undermined democracy), Engels explained, Nixon cultivated a politics of resentment intended to keep America in need of his leadership (315). The resentment the majority felt toward the minority continued to fester without resolution. Using Nietzsche to frame Obama's guilt, I show how Obama's scapegoating of media and government institutions does not purify America's guilt over its racially disruptive past.

⁶ Burke explains that a scapegoat can be transformed in one of three ways: legalistically, fatalistically, or through poetic justice. A legalistic sacrifice assumes the scapegoat violated the governing rules of its community, and a sacrifice through poetic justice suggests the scapegoat is too perfect for this world, as with Jesus Christ. However, I am concerned with the scapegoat who is sacrificed fatalistically.

limitations, it refers also to individuals who experience difficulty adapting to society, such as foreigners (18).⁷ The aforementioned politicians, if deemed incapable of adapting to their party's needs, would constitute a disabled scapegoat in the Girardian sense. When members of an out-group become scapegoats, they may choose to inflict sacrifice upon themselves to restore balance within their own social hierarchies.

Some scholars have complicated our understanding of the scapegoat mechanism. Matthew Foy, for instance, explained how Steve Barber, a student at University of Virginia's College at Wise, resisted his symbolic death after being scapegoated for writing a "violent and allegedly threatening" short story (94). In an effort to disrupt attempts to sacrifice him for the guilt from the university's 2007 massacre and the continual threat of on-campus killing sprees, Barber created a counter narrative that positioned himself as a "victim of abuse by corrupt school and law officials," thus resisting his symbolic death (Foy 97). According to Robert Westerfelhaus and Diane Ciekawy, when scapegoating occurs across multiple hierarchies, people may capitalize on their advantageous position in one to improve their place in another (269). Young members of Kenya's Mijikenda village utilized resources of the modern state to accuse their elders of witchcraft, they explained, which provided them access to fiscal and land benefits normally reserved for village elders (273).

An analysis of how racial guilt manifests across different hierarchies would seem plausible since white people have benefited at the expense and exploitation of people of color for generations in a variety of contexts. Such an examination, however, would not address the problem of racial inequality in Obama's speech. Rather than absolving guilt across multiple hierarchies, Obama's task is to provide a means to purification for different types of guilt within one hierarchy, the racial hierarchy that does not afford opportunity equally to all Americans.

An exercise in self-restraint, mortification suppresses the desires that cause guilt to arise. Mortification, in short, is the process by which we make ourselves suffer for our guilt or sins. For instance, the aforementioned scapegoated politicians may forego a run for reelection, a self-inflicted sacrifice that would remove them from politics altogether. The use of mortification to expiate guilt and restore balance to the social order has proven popular for both political and corporate leaders (Foss; Ling; Moore). For example, Sonja Foss demonstrated how the Chrysler Corporation's request for federal aid as part of a bailout created guilt for the company. In an act of mortification, Foss argued, Chrysler engaged in self-inflicted punishment by issuing a rebate to restore its corporate image (75). Although his connection to Wright created a need for Obama to repair his image, Obama employed the scapegoat mechanism rather than mortification to purify guilt.

From here the essay continues with analysis of "A More Perfect Union," beginning with a close reading of Obama's guilt as bad conscience and his use of a scapegoat for purification. It then continues with a discussion of the collective guilt of European Americans, addresses the existential guilt of African Americans, and ends by discussing America's mortification to purify its guilt concerning racial inequality on the path to redemption.

⁷ "Disability," for Girard, "belongs to a large group of banal signs of a victim, and among certain groups . . . every individual who has difficulty adapting, someone from another country or state, an orphan, an only son, someone who is penniless, or even simply the latest arrival, is more or less interchangeable with a cripple" (18).

Obama and the Guilt of “Bad Conscience”

The rhetorical power of “A More Perfect Union” resides in Obama’s distribution of guilt. Obama begins with an explanation of his role in the Jeremiah Wright controversy. “Given my background, my politics, and my professed values and ideals,” he explained, “there will no doubt be those for whom my statements of condemnation are not enough” (3).⁸ Obama continued to propose rhetorical questions: “Why associate myself with Reverend Wright in the first place? Why not join another church?” (3). He charged, “if . . . that [was all] I knew of Reverend Wright, there is no doubt that I would react in much the same way” (3). Obama acknowledged his guilt through prolepsis, the anticipation of America’s objection to his connection to Wright. As the Wright story unfolded, many wondered why Obama would associate with Wright, an outspoken critic of American democracy. Obama’s statements thus reflect the bad conscience of guilt in the Nietzschean framework, which manifests when individuals default on their contractual obligations. Given his response, Obama understood that the association would elicit censure from the American people.

While Obama justified his relationship with Wright, he simultaneously implicated listeners for propagating a racialized worldview. Obama stated, “As imperfect as he may be, [Wright] has been like family to me. . . . I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. . . . no more than I can disown my white grandmother . . . who helped raise me . . . [and] who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe” (4). Obama then indicted listeners: “I’m sure many of you have heard remarks from your pastors, priests, or rabbis with which you strongly disagree” (4). This is not a black problem; this is not a white problem: it is an American problem. Every American holds some responsibility for the problems of the past that continue to inform the present. Audience members, as such, become co-scapegoats who bear some responsibility for allowing racial inequality to persist. But, as Girard pointed out, while the scapegoat shoulders the burden for society’s problems, it is endowed with the power for correction (43). When Obama justified Wright’s imperfections as the norm, America recognized its role in racial inequality—namely, that everybody is guilty of perpetuating the cycle, but they also possess the power to correct it.

To cleanse his own guilt, Obama deployed the scapegoat mechanism on two fronts: he blamed government institutions and faulted the news media for promoting racial inequality. In the proem of the speech, Obama criticized the government for allowing slavery to continue. “The [Constitution] was eventually signed,” Obama suggested in his opening remarks, “but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation’s original sin of slavery, a question that . . . brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least 20 more years” (2-3). That the forefathers created a malleable document rather than a permanent doctrine makes them an easy scapegoat. Obama, however, seemed to vindicate the forefathers for this limitation. “The Constitution,” he noted, “should be perfected over time” (2). The chance for redemption, Obama explained, rested on the forefathers’ plan “to leave any final resolution to future generations” (2). Subsequent generations would eventually improve any discrepancies set forth in America’s founding document.

According to Girard, scapegoats can materialize in disabled individuals or entities (18). More than physical limitations, disability refers also to individuals who experience difficulty adapting to society, such as foreigners. The forefathers-as-disabled scapegoats manifested with

⁸ The page numbers correspond to the text of the speech as published on Americanrhetoric.com. Future references to this speech will be made parenthetically by page number.

their inability to forge a permanent document to accommodate America's racial and ethnic others. The forefathers could not provide the stability necessary to free America from the burden of its racial transgressions, a shortcoming Obama calls the current generation to correct.

In addition to implicating listeners and scapegoating the government, Obama blamed media for perpetuating racial unrest. Early in the speech, Obama charged, "At various stages in the campaign, some commentators have deemed me either 'too black' or 'not black enough'" (2). Shortly after, he warned that problems would ensue "if . . . Trinity United . . . conformed to the caricatures being peddled by some commentators" (3). Later, Obama asserted, "Talk show hosts and conservative commentators built their entire careers unmasking bogus claims of racism while dismissing legitimate discussions of racial injustice" (6). In every instance, media become a scapegoat for promoting racial resentment. Media are therefore responsible for widening the racial divide in the election, portraying Wright as a fanatic, and hindering progress toward racial reconciliation.

Characterizing media and government as unequipped to correct America's racial problems makes them eligible candidates for what Burke called "fatalistic sacrifice." This sacrifice is appropriate when a scapegoat has fallen from grace—out of popular opinion, so to speak (Burke, *Literary* 40). While the notion of politicians blaming government and the media is far from novel, Obama's remarks foreground these problems and validate his treatment of them as a scapegoat worthy of sacrifice.

The assignment of blame to media and government institutions is, however, ineffective for purifying guilt in the Nietzschean frame. For Nietzsche, the scapegoat is not a curative for guilt; it simply prolongs the feelings associated with guilt by attaching it to another source. By assigning blame to these entities, Obama did little to resolve his guilt or the guilt that America may feel for its troublesome racial history. The displacement of blame onto a scapegoat, Nietzsche maintained, "concentrates" guilt, "sharpens the sense of alienation," and only "strengthens the resistance" (48). Rather than purify his own guilt, Obama merely "hardens and freezes" the bad conscience that manifested from his relationship with Wright, an episode that may have called into question Obama's electability for some Americans (48). If the scapegoat provides Obama any relief, it is temporary, ephemeral at best.

While Obama implicated listeners for promoting a racialized worldview, he did not sacrifice them fatalistically. Contrary to government and the news media, the audience was not cast out of favor by Obama for two possible reasons. First, he recognized their role in his ascendance to the executive branch. Second, he understood that America would have to make a different type of sacrifice to purify its guilt—one enacted through mortification that required Americans to sacrifice their racialized worldviews and invest simultaneously in the modern welfare state.

Obama's task in "A More Perfect Union" was, first, to help America recognize its racial guilt and, second, to provide a means through which America could excise its guilt. The expiation of guilt for America rests upon listeners' willingness to support the government and its programs to safeguard the future. Before providing America the basis for purification, Obama must first divide listeners into two different camps concerning racial inequality: European Americans and African Americans.

The Collective Guilt of European Americans

For European Americans, Obama acknowledged the likelihood of collective guilt. Many, if not all, European Americans shoulder the collective guilt associated with years of legalized discrimination. For decades, white Americans maintained their place in the racial hierarchy through policies designed to subordinate African Americans and other racial minorities, essentially institutionalizing racism. Although many of the policies that disenfranchised African Americans and other populations of color ceased after hard-fought political battles, the wounds still remain. Obama reminded listeners:

Legalized discrimination, where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African American business owners, or black homeowners could not access FHA mortgages, or blacks were excluded from unions, or the police force, or the fire department meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations. (5)

Although most European Americans today do not bear direct responsibility for the policies that subordinated African Americans, the wealth and prosperity they inherited from previous generations came at the expense of racial equality. In *Permanence and Change*, Burke characterized this phenomenon as “*categorical* [emphasis original] Guilt, one’s ‘guilt’ not as the result of any personal transgression, but by reason of a tribal or dynastic inheritance” (278). Obama assigned guilt to white listeners based on that inherited prosperity—the privileges that were not afforded equally to people of color.

The Existential Guilt of African Americans

African Americans, on the other hand, may experience guilt existentially. This guilt manifests when people realize they may not achieve their full potential (Buber 66). Obama articulated how these feelings manifested for people of color in earlier generations: “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” (5). As Obama prompted listeners to recognize the possibility of existential guilt, he simultaneously implicated the welfare state. Although Obama invited African Americans to view the government as a scapegoat, its status as such is not adequate for purifying guilt in this context. For redemption to occur in the Burkean framework, the act of purification must equal the burden of guilt (*Permanence* 290). No amount of blame assigned to the government could ever match the guilt that African Americans may feel for the ways in which discrimination of the past two centuries has interfered with their ability to reach their full potential.

This existential guilt, which stems from denial of black civil rights in the Jim Crow South, and dates back to America’s inception, continues to afflict the current generation of African Americans. “For the men and women of Reverend Wright’s generation,” Obama explained, “the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away, nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years” (6). “That anger is not always productive,” he said, “[b]ut the anger is real. . . . [T]o condemn it without understanding its roots only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races” (6). “Guilt,” Shelby Steele explained, “is the essence of white anxiety [and] inferiority is the essence of black anxiety” (qtd. in Bobbitt 143). This Buberian conception of guilt reverberates throughout Obama’s speech, and

creates the need for symbolic purification, and ultimately redemption, in the Burkean framework. While African Americans may feel guilty for not achieving their potential—a byproduct of institutionalized racism and legalized discrimination—some European Americans may feel anxiety about their place in the racial hierarchy, knowing that they have profited at the expense of African Americans. Thus, an uncomfortable tension exists between white people and people of color in the social fabric of America.

America's Redemption

Obama validated the guilt of European and African Americans, but beyond the scapegoat mechanism remained passive in suggesting paths to redemption. These disparate notions of guilt, he explained, lead to “resentment [that] builds over time” and inhibit America’s ability to work through its racial problems (6). When resentment goes unabated, the result is “a cycle of violence, blight, and neglect that continues to haunt us” (5). Obama’s failure to provide America with an adequate way to excise its guilt provokes listeners to consider mortification, a sacrifice that would safeguard America’s future against racial inequality.

The principle of perfection provides one way to understand sacrifice in this Burkean sense. Perfection, Burke explained, becomes recognizable through a master word, “a god-term” that expresses what people aspire (*Religion* 25). Obama deployed the word “perfect,” or some variation, eleven times in his speech. Closer examination reveals that, in nearly every instance, a discussion of future generations ensues. If guilt is about the past, and sacrifice about the present, then redemption represents America’s future. In the context of racial equality, Obama likely understands that only a focus on the future is capable of bringing America together, the one thing that will incite listeners to recognize their collective roles in the need to confront and work through the past, and sacrifice in the present, to assure equality for future generations.

America’s preservation lies in the hands of Obama’s listeners, but change takes time. Obama acknowledged this limitation: “I have never been so naïve as to believe that we can go beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle or with a single candidate” (7). “But I have asserted a . . . conviction,” he maintained, “that, working together, we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds and that . . . we have no choice—we have no choice if we are to continue on the path to a more perfect union” (7). Although Obama could not solve the problems of the past, he attempted to give America the power to control its future. For better or worse, America’s decisions today will influence tomorrow’s generation. In the pursuit of a more perfect union, Obama explained, justice means that the American people “must always believe that they can write their own destiny” (7). And “[t]he path to a more perfect union,” he continued, starts with acknowledgement “that investing in the health, welfare, and education of black and brown and white children . . . will ultimately help all of America prosper” (7). Obama continued, “It is not enough to give health care to the sick, or jobs to the jobless, or education to our children. But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger” (9). Until America restores its faith in the government, inequality will persist. Restoring faith in the government begins with restoring confidence in Obama and investing in education and healthcare programs that will safeguard America’s future.

Until every American recognizes our political system as both a perpetrator and solution to racial inequality, the government cannot help America achieve perfection. Although he disguised it as a choice, Obama gave listeners an ultimatum:

For we have a choice in the country. We can accept a politics that breeds division and conflict and cynicism. . . . Or, at this moment, in this election, we can come together and say, “Not this time.” This time we want to talk about the crumbling schools that are stealing the future of black children and white children and Asian children and Hispanic children and Native American children. . . . The children of America are not “those kids,” – they are our kids. (8)

Because America’s preservation depends on action at this juncture, listeners cannot reject Obama’s plea for a discussion on race, one that acknowledges the government’s ability and limitations in the pursuit of equality. Moreover, Obama’s shift in voice articulates a collective concern. He begins with an outward reference, an informal mention of “those” kids. His voice then shifts to the inward-turning, possessive pronoun “our,” which illustrates Americans’ common stake in the future. If the past is any indication of the future, especially with regard to the racial issues of the last two hundred years, the audience has no choice: America must unite and sacrifice the worldviews that promote racial inequality. Such a sacrifice alone, however, does not guarantee redemption. To ensure cultural purification, America must repress its desire to blame government for intensifying racial inequality, the “deliberate slaying of appetites and ambitions” that Burke embedded with mortification (*Religion* 135). This form of self-sacrifice requires that Americans resist the urge to blame Washington for the policies and legislation that may have widened gap between the haves and have nots, and exacerbated other inequities that have manifested across racial lines. To suppress this impulse, and to ensure equality for tomorrow’s generations, America must invest in healthcare and education today.

Conclusion

In 2008, when political divisiveness was at fever pitch, many news media outlets acknowledged Obama’s ability to unite America (Hoagland n. pag.; Steele n. pag.). In January, nearly two months before the spectacle surrounding Jeremiah Wright, NPR Senior News Analyst Daniel Schorr noted, “Obama’s appeal seems to transcend race,” and indicated the likelihood of America embarking on a “new, ‘post-racial’ political era” (n. pag.). The post-racial characterization continued to gain momentum after “A More Perfect Union” and throughout Obama’s ascendance to the Oval Office. So why did Obama choose not to reaffirm this ascribed post-racial identity? The problem with the discourse of post-racism, as Michael Lacy and Kent Ono have pointed out, is that it presents the illusion of progress while significant disparities still exist (1). As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva explained, unequal access to cultural, political, and economic capital perpetuate racism in the twenty-first century (14). A post-racial perspective, these scholars would agree, undermines our ability to recognize the continued existence of racial inequality.

Although Obama could have affirmed his post-racial identity, his use of guilt stemmed likely from a disavowal. Viewed this way, Obama’s use of guilt as a rhetorical strategy complicates our common understanding of his discourse and challenges the scholarship that emphasizes his attempt to unite America. Guilt, which holds the potential to divide Americans across racial lines, provided Obama a way to challenge the progress narrative and help America acknowledge and work through the reality of racism, both past and present. While this essay examines the function of guilt in “A More Perfect Union,” it may be useful to apply a similar strategy to Obama’s other speeches. The use of guilt, which may have contributed to Obama’s success, can provide insight into the ways in which politicians and rhetoricians attempt to

subvert the discourse of post-racism. Examinations of guilt in other contexts that have the likelihood to elicit dissenting opinions such as the rhetoric surrounding immigration reform or religion may also prove insightful. An investigation of the discourse surrounding the recent and ongoing Syrian refugee crisis would yield interesting conclusions on both fronts.

Obama likely understood the motivational power of America's guilt around racial inequality. While the tendency exists to treat guilt singularly, "A More Perfect Union" demonstrates that it can manifest in broad and varied forms that require different strategies for purification. After Obama scapegoated the news media and government institutions, America confronted its guilt through mortification. Obama's plea for America to invest in the welfare state reinforces Girard's contention of the scapegoat's capacity for correction, as it suggests that the government, while responsible in part for perpetuating inequality, also has the ability to assure equality for future generations of Americans. Within the spectrum of political discourse, "A More Perfect Union" reinforces the notion that politicians attempt to purify their guilt through a scapegoat, while their audiences enact mortification.

As Obama's second term winds down, the continuation of events highlighting racial inequality serves to remind us that America is far from the post-racial utopia that some envisioned. Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, and the more recent shooting in Charleston, South Carolina demonstrate the complexities surrounding racism and racial inequality in the twenty-first century. While guilt may not provide the solution, or even all the answers, to these problems, an examination of how it manifests across different contexts has the potential to help America better understand and work through its racial differences.

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