

RED AND BLUE IDEOLOGY: A FANTASY-THEME ANALYSIS OF BARACK OBAMA'S  
POLITICAL DISCOURSE

by

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This thesis will examine the rhetorical style of Barack Obama throughout the 2008 presidential campaign and his contentious push for health care reform, in order to provide insight into Obama's post-inaugural political discourse. Drawing upon a variety of critical and rhetorical theories—e.g., fantasy-theme analysis (Borman, 1982), the narrative paradigm (Fisher, 1984), and Kenneth Burke's (1969) notion of identification—I argue that Barack Obama's rhetorical style changed drastically after he took office on January 20, 2009. This shift in rhetorical style is especially significant given the declining support for the president since he took office. A total of six speeches have been selected from both the 2008 presidential campaign and those delivered post-inauguration. Based upon an analysis of these speeches, I will argue that Obama employed a unique rhetorical vision throughout his campaign by combining two politically polarized myths to create a blended ideological frame that emphasized notions of bipartisanship. The reason Obama was able to portray such a convincing rhetorical vision that embodied two polarized ideologies is because of his blended racial heritage. Obama's own story of independent success

alongside his intimate ties with a disenfranchised group of Americans allowed him recast the American Dream and set forth a unique rhetorical vision that resonated with constituents. This rhetorical vision embodied a moralistic frame predicated on specific values and principles. This analysis also revealed a distinct rhetorical shift in Obama's post-inaugural discourse with regards to his use of narrative elements. Obama's pre-inaugural narratives reveal clearly defined actors who are formed through common archetypal characterizations. Obama pits the narratives' protagonists and antagonists against one another by characterizing them as heroes and villains. The heroes and villains of these stories were ascribed specific character traits and motives, and this enabled Obama to present clear action themes of good versus evil. The specificity of these characters provided Obama's audience with central characters they could identify with. Obama's post-inaugural narratives fail to embrace archetypal character themes or concrete characterizations that expose a clear villain or hero within the drama. As a result, his speeches have lost their dramatic element. These characters were portrayed as vague, obscure figures that lacked basic character motivation and a guiding ideological principle. Instead, these narratives focused on the materialistic benefits of proposed policies and materialistic values as they relate to economic stability. These narratives provide evidence of a distinct shift from the moralistic frame that supported notions of collectivism to a materialistic frame that promotes notions of free enterprise and individual gain. Obama's tendency to cater to conservative constituents demonstrates a confounding ideological shift which depicts an entirely separate candidate from the confident, bi-partisan leader evident throughout the 2008 Presidential Campaign.



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by

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“I am so clever that sometimes I don’t understand a single word of what I am saying”

Oscar Wilde

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## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

In the wake of economic turmoil, two expensive foreign wars, and an unemployment rate at nearly 8%, Barack Obama seemed to many Americans like an optimistic answer to their prayers. Obama “the candidate” was highly praised for his ability to capture the attention of a discontented American public. He was able to tell stories that the American people could relate to. His campaign rhetoric centered on themes of unification, optimism, and equality. He regularly shared emotional stories of families struggling with the rising costs of college tuition, groceries, and gas. Many of the early narratives from Obama’s campaign also touched on the struggle for racial equality met by his African father and Caucasian mother. Other narratives involved the financial turmoil his mother faced when pleading with insurance companies over an inflated medical bill. Not surprisingly, numerous scholars praised Obama for his persuasive rhetorical ability throughout his campaign speeches. Phillip Hammack (2010) credits Obama’s rhetorical success to his strategic use of personal narratives, which embodied “a new discourse of pluralism, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism” (p. 183). Obama’s unique voice embodied an egalitarian quality that spoke to a diverse group of constituents who often times felt polarized by the divisive and technical nature of political rhetoric.

Adopting a pluralistic voice is not the only advantageous quality of Obama’s rhetorical style. His ability to effectively communicate important problems and hypothetical solutions relied on the principles of pragmatism. Jenkins and Cos (2010) claim that “the Obama campaign illustrated important rhetorical inventions within contemporary American political discourse” by utilizing “a pragmatic moral voice” (p. 185). Similarly, Renshon (2008) argues that campaign narratives no longer focus on party identifications. He explains, “This metric faltered because presidential candidates, beginning with Richard Nixon, began to blur ideological political lines as a means of appealing to a wider group of potential voters” (p. 395). In order to garner the

support of potential constituents in a political environment with indistinct party ideologies, candidates must utilize creative persuasive appeals. Barack Obama was able to “[present] himself not as a liberal, a term that is consistent with his voting record, but as a ‘pragmatist’ who [was presenting] a practical, not ideological solution” (Renshon, 2008, p. 395). Transcending divisive ideologies allowed Obama to appeal to a wide variety of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans.

Obama’s most notable legislative push centered on comprehensive health care reform. Throughout the 2008 presidential campaign Obama stressed the dire need for health care reform by retelling stories of average Americans struggling with the high cost of health care and the unfair practices of health insurance companies. On August 26, 2008 the U.S. Census Bureau released statistics that revealed a significant shift amongst insured Americans from private-based health care coverage to public-based health care coverage (Gould, 2008). According to Elise Gould (2008), Director of Health Policy Research at the Economic Policy Institute, although research indicates a decrease in the number of uninsured Americans from 2006 to 2007, the shift from private-based coverage to public-based coverage suggests a significant increase in health care costs. Presidential candidates across the board recognized the need for change, but it was Barack Obama who took stories of struggle and hardship from average Americans and brought them to the forefront of the 2008 political debates.

In addition to his health care rhetoric, Obama’s ability to negotiate racial tensions separated him from stereotypical political discourse and propelled his status as a “master communicator.” Other rhetorical styles Obama utilized throughout the presidential campaign included his use of powerful political tropes that served as an effective tool for unification. Obama’s ability to present concepts of civil religion and national identity as well as anecdotes of

professional and personal strife personifies key principles of American values while establishing an intimate rapport with potential constituents.

This thesis will examine the rhetorical style of Barack Obama throughout the 2008 presidential campaign and his contentious push for health care reform, in order to provide insight into Obama's post-inaugural political discourse. Drawing upon a variety of critical and rhetorical theories—e.g., fantasy-theme analysis (Borman, 1982), the narrative paradigm (Fisher, 1984), and Kenneth Burke's (1969) notion of identification—I argue that Barack Obama's rhetorical style changed drastically after he took office on January 20, 2009. This shift in rhetorical style is especially significant given the declining support for the president since he took office.

A total of six speeches have been selected from both the 2008 presidential campaign and those delivered post-inauguration. Based upon an analysis of these speeches, I will argue that Obama employed a unique rhetorical vision throughout his campaign by combining two politically polarized myths to create a blended ideological frame that emphasized notions of bipartisanship. More specifically, Obama combined the Horatio Alger myth and the New Deal myth to create a rhetorical vision that embodied both liberal and conservative ideologies.

The Horatio Alger myth (or the American myth of success) “stands as one of the most enduring expressions of American popular ideals” and subsumes the conservative belief that the opportunity to succeed exists for every American willing to work for it (Weiss, 1988, p. 3). This myth typically takes the shape of a “rags to riches” scenario and was often paralleled with personal narratives regarding Obama's humble upbringing. The New Deal myth originates from President F.D. Roosevelt's reform in policy which provided relief for millions of unemployed, homeless Americans shortly after the Great Depression (Vrijders, 2009, p. 15). This myth

features collectivist concepts which typically promote liberal ideological principles of community, brotherhood, and the need for government support.

Obama's combination of these two myths constituted a rhetorical vision that valued altruistic government policies and simultaneously gave credence to the conservative philosophy of hard work and independent success. The reason Obama was able to portray such a convincing rhetorical vision that embodied two polarized ideologies is because of his blended racial heritage. Obama's own story of independent success alongside his intimate ties with a disenfranchised group of Americans allowed him recast the American Dream and set forth a unique rhetorical vision that resonated with constituents. This rhetorical vision embodied a moralistic frame predicated on specific values and principles.

This analysis also revealed a distinct rhetorical shift in Obama's post-inaugural discourse with regards to his use of narrative elements. Obama's pre-inaugural narratives reveal clearly defined actors who are formed through common archetypal characterizations. Obama pits the narratives' protagonists and antagonists against one another by characterizing them as heroes and villains. The heroes and villains of these stories were ascribed specific character traits and motives, and this enabled Obama to present clear action themes of good versus evil. The specificity of these characters provided Obama's audience with central characters they could identify with. Obama's post-inaugural narratives fail to embrace archetypal character themes or concrete characterizations that expose a clear villain or hero within the drama. As a result, his speeches have lost their dramatic element. These characters were portrayed as vague, obscure figures that lacked basic character motivation and a guiding ideological principle. Instead, these narratives focused on the materialistic benefits of proposed policies and materialistic values as they relate to economic stability. These narratives provide evidence of a distinct shift from the

moralistic frame that supported notions of collectivism to a materialistic frame that promotes notions of free enterprise and individual gain. Obama's tendency to cater to conservative constituents demonstrates a confounding ideological shift which depicts an entirely separate candidate from the confident, bi-partisan leader evident throughout the 2008 Presidential Campaign.

## CHAPER II LITERATURE REVIEW

Political campaigns play a decisive role in a politician's success or failure. Thus, politicians enlist the help of skilled rhetoricians to construct effective campaign speeches in order to persuade a targeted audience. Many factors contribute to the overall efficacy of a politician's message. Factors beyond a politicians reach such as geographical location, religious affiliation, media consumption, and age are all determinants in considering ones' political socialization. A thorough understanding of the interplay between these determinants and a firm grasp of persuasive communication can make or break a political campaign.

### Theoretical framework

The demanding process of campaigning is complex to say the least. Kephart & Rafferty (2009) note, "Candidates must wade through partisan politics at both the local and national levels, slug through a grueling campaign schedule of stump speeches and primary debates, and be constantly aware of the demands and danger of a 24-hour news cycle" (p. 8). Any number of influences can account for a shift or change in a political campaign. Contemporary campaign literature tends to examine the aforementioned influences through the contextual lens of rationalism. A rationalist approach tends to limit "the multiple ways in which issues are generative throughout a campaign...and diminish the importance of emotions and poetic forms of arguments" (Kephart & Rafferty, 2009, p. 8). In order understand the intricacies of Barack Obama's rhetorical style—a style in which emotion and storytelling played a substantial role—I will necessarily adopt a multidimensional approach in examining Obama's campaign and presidential rhetoric.

One component of Obama's campaign, which ultimately became the central theme, was his use of a powerful political trope that served as tool of unification for his many followers. Kephart & Rafferty (2009) trace the evolution of the "yes we can" slogan and how it provides a critical case for hyper-modern campaign rhetoric (p. 7). The theoretical framework backing Kephart & Rafferty's argument lies in the rhetorical rhizomic metaphor. According to the authors, "the term was developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri (1987) as a metaphor for knowledge that rejects top-down binary thinking and instead adopts a fragmented, non-hierarchical (horizontal) approach to knowledge allowing for multiple points of entry and departure in the construction of knowledge" (Kephart & Rafferty, 2009, p. 7). Rejecting contemporary viewpoints in traditional academia allows the authors to study Barack Obama's campaign rhetoric outside of a "discrete, bounded, and purely rational" context (Kephart & Rafferty, 2009, p. 8). Based upon this understanding of rhizomic rhetoric, the authors argue that Barack Obama's use of the political trope "yes we can" serves as a persuasive tool for rhetorical agency and inclusivity. The trope's "open-endedness provide[s]...limitless possibility to move through communicative ecologies in its development and presentation" which ultimately allowed Obama to transcend political, racial, and social boundaries and deliver an egalitarian message of hope and change (Kephart & Rafferty, 2009, p. 14). This particular message became the central theme for the 2008 campaign and ultimately gave Obama additional persuasive power over his opponents.

Obama's political trope "yes we can" helped secure audience unification, political support, and was, therefore, crucial to his rhetorical agency. Obama supporters' response to his campaign message can best be understood through Bormann's fantasy theme analysis. According to Bormann (1972) "when group members respond emotionally to [a] dramatic situation they

publicly proclaim some commitment to an attitude” (p. 396). Given the success of Obama’s political trope, the values and attitudes of his constituents were legitimized through the process of fantasy chains. Bormann (1972) explains the organic nature of ‘dramatization’ in describing its ability to “catch on and chain out in the group to create a unique group culture” (p. 398). Once a rhetorical vision is established, the same dramas used to create it can be developed in future speeches to generate an emotional response which has the potential for behavioral change (Bormann, 1972).

A fantasy theme analysis illustrates the multifaceted and changing nature of Barack Obama’s political discourse. Bormann (1982) tested the usefulness of fantasy theme analysis by examining the television coverage of the 1980 hostage release and the inauguration of former President Ronald Reagan. His critical analysis compares media coverage of the hostage release and the inaugural to Reagan’s strategic political rhetoric which utilized powerful fantasy types centered on themes of restoration and economic movement (Bormann, 1982). “Restoration,” according to Bormann (1982), is “one of the most venerable and powerful fantasy types in the history of American public address” (p. 136). Reagan’s restoration fantasy pulled from basic values and standard beliefs set forth by our nation’s Founding Fathers and became the foundation for persuasive, political campaigning (Bormann, 1982). The juxtaposition of the hostage crisis and Reagan’s pre-inaugural speech coverage revealed a matrix of complicated and confusing images which forced audiences into a state of internal conflict (Bormann, 1982, p. 137). Bormann (1982) asserts that this confusion “created a symbolic climate conducive to getting the hostage problem out of the consciousness of the viewers and letting them turn to something else, to start anew with a different drama” (p.137). A similar correlation can be made to the tumultuous years of the Bush era that preceded Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign. Riddled



with bitter emotions towards a divisive congress and a weakening economy, Americans were fed up with a confusing and complicated political discourse and were ready for a change.

Another piece of exemplary theoretical scholarship that examines rhetorical persuasiveness and public argument is Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm. In his article *Narration as a Communication Paradigm: The Case of Moral Public Argument*, Fisher (1984) recognizes the usefulness of fantasy theme analysis but claims that the "rhetorical visions" Bormann describes as dramatic stories are in fact "rhetorical fictions" wherein the construction of "fact and faith" play an integral role in the persuasive nature of rhetoric, "rather than fantasies" (p. 7). Fisher views the narrative paradigm as an overarching tool of rhetorical criticism that seeks to understand *how* each human being constructs his or her own reality through narratives. Fisher is mainly concerned with academia's heavy reliance on the "rational-world paradigm" which ultimately "assumes that traditional logic is the only appropriate form of discourse leaving little room for those narratives that espouse a different set of values" (Hanan, 2008, p. 4). According to Hanan (2008) "if traditional rationality is viewed as contingent upon a narrative ontology [then] a new form of 'rationality' supersedes it" (p. 4). This new form of rationality can be understood through Fisher's notion of narrative rationality. Fisher's concept of "narrative rationality" adopts the aforementioned idea wherein it seeks to understand human action as founded upon "'good reasons' as opposed to 'logical ones'" (Hanan, 2008, p. 4). Fisher's concept of narrative rationality supersedes previous notions of rationality and seeks to understand human action through stories that ultimately demonstrate good reasoning. Narrative rationality also illustrates "why rationality changes overtime and why discourse only has *presence* within its own context" (Hanan, 2008, p. 5). Furthermore, the dichotomy between these opposing views demonstrates why "some people in this society are privileged and others are

marginalized” (Hanan, 2008, p. 5). Fisher embraces key concepts of the rational-world paradigm, but offers a broader form of rationality based on the assumption that each human being possesses the ability to tell and critically analyze stories. Using Fisher’s narrative paradigm to scrutinize Obama’s political discourse enables an analysis of both the speaker’s authenticity and the reasonableness of his claims (Hanan, 2008).

## Race

An analysis of the evolution of the political trope “yes we can” also reveals Obama’s rhetorical mirroring of themes from the Civil Rights movement. According to Kephart & Rafferty (2009), “his message was designed to resonate with, first, a fractured Democratic electorate, and later the diversity of the general public, largely by appealing to treasured American *narratives* of progress and the Civil Rights movement” (p. 9). Kephart & Rafferty (2009) explain Obama’s ability to negotiate race within a single political trope in stating that “yes we can” anticipates and refutes the response “no you can’t” which audiences identify with as a negative response to change and progress firmly rooted in our Nation’s history of racial tension (p. 10). Obama’s political trope encompasses both positive reinforcement and unification while simultaneously combating negative rhetorical reactance.

Understanding the critical role of race in the 2008 presidential campaign provides a multi-faceted perspective on the evolution of Obama’s rhetorical style from pre-inauguration to post-inauguration. A specific account concerning Obama’s rhetorical negotiation of race can be seen in Phillip Hammack’s 2010 article *The Political Psychology of Personal Narratives: The Case of Barack Obama*. Guided by Freire’s (1970) notion of social consciousness and theories of racial identity development, Hammock (2010) takes an in-depth look at Barack Obama’s

autobiography *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* to understand how Obama's personal narratives challenges the stability of a received taxonomy of political identity. Hammack (2010) argues that "the consistency between Obama's evolving narrative of American national identity and the unique cultural approach...revealed a new discourse of pluralism, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism in American politics" (p. 183). The autobiography set the foundation for the 2008 presidential campaign wherein Obama cleverly and persuasively situated race and national identity at the forefront of constituents' minds by sharing personal stories of racial discrimination. American voters viewed this honesty concerning his racial heritage as vulnerability which ultimately established a personal, somewhat intimate relationship between Obama and potential supporters.

Hammack (2010) strongly refuted the notion that the 2008 election or Obama's personal narratives of racial identity demonstrate a decline in the significance of race "or a 'post-racial' era in American politics" (Wilson, 1980; Gilroy, 2000; p. 183). Rather, Hammack (2010) takes on a post-ethnic perspective which challenges scholars to "move beyond the 'solitarist' view of identity toward a notion of multiplicity—to see individuals not as embodiments of static notions of 'race' or 'ethnicity' but as always in a process of dynamic engagement with these social categories" (p. 185). Hammack's (2010) insight about Obama's self-constructed *cosmopolitan* identity mirrors the post-ethnic perspective and demonstrates a key persuasive rhetorical tactic. Hammack (2010) asserts that Obama's cosmopolitan identity fosters the notion of global citizenry thus unifying constituents and negotiating race through a multicultural approach. According to Appiah (2006), cosmopolitanism "is the idea that we have obligations to others...that we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance" (Appiah,

2006, p.xv). Hammack (2010) believes that the self-construction of this unique political identity “suggest[s] a leader whose commitment to conversation, sensitivity to difference, and belief in action might foster a new era of pragmatism in American politics” (p. 202). By adopting a cosmopolitan identity, Obama increased his appeal to a large pool of constituents and thereby increased his potential rhetorical agency.

Anthony Sparks’ (2009) article *Minstrel Politics or “He Speaks Too Well:” Rhetoric, Race, and Resistance in the 2008 Presidential Campaign*” also rejects the notion that Obama’s election demonstrates a new post-racial era. Alongside an analysis of Obama’s pre-presidential rhetoric, Sparks (2009) also focuses on the rhetoric of his political opponents. Specifically, he analyzes their attempt to “attach characteristics to him [Obama] that re-circulate notions first disseminated by American popular culture through blackface minstrelsy” (p. 21). According to Sparks (2009), “in the framing of Obama and his rhetoric as suspicious or inherently untrustworthy the media and the McCain campaign drew on historic and national ambivalence toward the educated and public Black (male) body...deepening the foundation that cast Obama as [the] “Other” (p. 31). In the article’s conclusion, Sparks (2009) cites an interesting correlation between Barack Obama and the confirmation of Judge Sonia Sotomayor that served as an exemplary support for Sparks’ argument. Upon confirmation, Supreme Court Judge Sotomayor was “vigorously...questioned regarding negative suspicions that she was a racial activist” (p. 36). Like Obama, Judge Sotomayor was “forced to diminish her ethnicity as an experiential virtue by equivocating her statement that a ‘wise Latina’ might reach a better judicial result due...to her personal life experiences” (Sparks, 2009, p. 36). Even though Barack Obama (and Judge Sotomayor) are extremely well-educated Americans, their racial heritage encouraged the media and political opponents to attack their use of political rhetoric, ultimately evoking notions

of racial superiority and cultural hegemony (Sparks, 2009). Sparks maintains that through pragmatic, persuasive campaigning Obama and his team were able to combat the rhetoric used in an attempt to defeat him in the 2008 election. However, the “minstrelsy-infused racialized narratives” used by Obama’s opponents ultimately revealed a through line of historical racial nuances that still pervade mainstream media and political discourse.

David Mastey (2010) takes a more narrow approach in understanding the racial context of Barack Obama’s political rhetoric in his article *Slumming and/as Self-making in Barack Obama’s Dreams From My Father*, focusing on how Obama’s personal narratives “function for a white audience” (p. 484). Mastey (2010) asserts that narrative in Obama’s autobiography “provides potential White readers with the opportunity to ‘slum’ alongside Obama in Chicago’s South Side ghettos” (p. 484). This process of association is best understood as ‘racial self-making’ wherein “a potential White reader recognizes herself or himself as a racialized subject” (Mastey, 2010, p. 486). The author describes the unique relationship White readers develop with Obama (the character) and how many recognize themselves in or against his image (Mastey, 2010, p. 490). Startwell (1998) argues that race in this country is best understood as a socially constructed phenomenon wherein “race is conceived as a dichotomy between the interdependent categories of White and Black, and White people comprehend who and what they are in comparison to what they are not” (as cited in Mastey, 2010, p. 490). In a somewhat ironic twist, Obama’s narratives concerning racial identity (an inherently divisive topic) provide an intimate portrayal of the man that enables White American readers to identify with him. The personal narratives utilize race as a tool for unification rather than division and bring Obama (the character and the potential candidate) closer to the white community.

Kenneth Burke's concept of identification illuminates Mastey's (2010) concept of "white slumming" and confirms its persuasive effect on a given audience. According to Foss, Foss, and Trapp (2002), Burke's use of identification is synonymous with consubstantiality wherein persuasion is the result of identification (p. 192). Burke (1969) asserts "you persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his" (p. 55). The authors are quick to point out that Burke does not diminish the traditional role of persuasion, rather, he "sees the concept of identification as a supplement to the traditional view of rhetoric" (Foss et al., 2002, p. 192). Similarly, Mastey (2010) argues that Obama's autobiography allowed for identification ("white slumming") with white constituents because the narratives unmasked "Black characters who exhibit the conventional stereotypes that some White people have of Black people" (p. 496). Utilizing conventional stereotypes in his narratives, Obama was able to ease the White constituents' curiosity by demonstrating an ability to adopt a similar perspective.

Scholars Liu Xiaoyan and Nancy Street (2009) utilize Burke's dramatic pentad to examine Obama's motives in giving what has been popularly referred to as the 'race speech' as a means of redeeming himself after the controversial Rev. Wright sermons received widespread publicity (p. 93). Xiaoyan and Street (2009) apply the scene-act and agent-purpose ratio to illustrate the rhetorical persuasiveness and the motives behind Obama's rhetoric. In the article, the authors dissect Obama's personal narrative concerning "his church and the black community he belonged to" and parallel it with the scene-act ratio wherein he disagrees with Wright's comments but refuses to "disown him personally" (Xiaoyan & Street, 2009, p. 87). In doing so, Obama was able to paint an explicit picture of "the black culture and tradition, full of bitter-sweet memories" while simultaneously asserting the need for unification (Xiaoyan & Street,

2009, p. 87). Xiaoyan and Street (2009) posit that this act “indicates that Obama, [the] black community and Wright are integrated like a big family [and] if people can understand and accept him, they should understand and accept the black community and tradition behind him” (p. 87). A comparison to Robert F. Kennedy’s speech on race after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King reaffirms a common theme of “racial reconciliation and promised hope” (Xiaoyan & Street, 2009, p. 91). Historical references to King’s work throughout the Civil Rights Movement are evident in many of Obama’s pre and post inaugural speeches, thus emphasizing the critical role of race in examining his political legacy.

An analysis of racial discourse in the media during the 2008 presidential campaign and after Barack Obama’s inauguration reveals a similar theme of racial inequality and the reinforcement of Black stereotypes. Stiles and Kitch (2011) explore mythic themes of national principles in their article *“Redemption for Our Anguished Racial History”*: *Race and the National Narrative in Commemorative Journalism about Barack Obama.*” The authors conducted a discourse analysis of twelve commemorative media texts that ultimately revealed the media’s avoidance of the issue of race relations and its role in the monumental election of the nation’s first Black president. Despite commemorative journalisms’ claim that an assessment was made about the historical significance of Obama’s election, Stiles and Kitch’s study reveals a concurrent narrative that frames the event “as the inevitable outcome of democracy and American history overall” (2011, p. 128). Stiles and Kitch (2011) maintain that “if the historic meaning of Obama’s election is that a ‘final’ barrier has been broken, then the Civil Rights movement has reached a conclusion, and we have entered a post-racial era” (p. 128). These types of “Enlightenment narratives” diminish issues of racial inequality and mask the reality of racial

tensions that influence political and societal discourse as well as public policy (Stiles and Kitch, 2011).

Upon closer examination of Barack Obama's unique rhetorical style as it relates to racial discourse, a noticeable shift takes place throughout the presidential campaign. Judy Isaksen (2011) explores the evolution of Obama's racial discourse and notes two strikingly different shifts in rhetorical style (p. 457). At first, Isaksen (2011) analyzes Obama's rhetorical debut at the 2004 Democratic Nation Convention where she notes the common rhetorical theme of unification. Instead of adopting the "Black tradition of addressing race, civil rights, or the struggle for equality, Obama won over his audience with a rhetoric of unity" which garnered an overwhelmingly positive response (Isaksen, 2011, p. 458). A specific account of this style of rhetoric can be seen in many major campaign speeches where Obama makes mention of the "wonder" of his mixed-race ancestry which in turn exemplifies "hopeful possibilities" for his constituents (Isaksen, 2011, p. 458). The article then notes a dramatic shift soon after the Reverend Wright controversy hit the newsstands and forced Obama to drastically alter his stance on rhetorical racial distancing.

The now famous speech commonly referred to as the "race speech," openly addressed the reality of racial tensions and misunderstandings amongst Black and White American citizens. This speech enabled Obama to "provide clear and concise explanations for real human emotions" and encouraged all American's to engage in an honest dialogue to understand and overcome racial adversities (Isaksen, 2011, p. 461). Isaksen's (2011) research also suggested that the rhetorical shift in Obama's racial discourse should serve as a disciplinary lesson within the field wherein the "bipolarity of raceness" is eradicated so that a "rhetorical balance" can exist (p. 469). Isaksen (2011) claims that "the academy, including communication studies, routinely



address[es] the difficult and contentious subject of race in a safe add-race-and-stir melting-pot manner” (p. 468). Isaksen suggests that instead of adopting a style of rhetoric that critically examines the role of race as it relates to politics and mainstream media, the academy simply draws upon the same style of superficial rhetorical analyses that many politicians enlist when attempting to avoid the ‘race debate’. Isaksen boldly purposes that academic research concerning the topic of race should take note of Obama’s direct and honest dialogue employed in his race speech and follow suit.

A more in-depth analysis of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright episode and the famous race speech that followed is explored in Rowland & Jones’ (2011) article, *One Dream: Barack Obama, Race, and the American Dream*. Rowland & Johns (2011) argue that Obama’s use of dream narratives within the race speech changed the course of his presidential campaign and shed new light on the powerful role of narratives in political discourse. The authors proposed that Obama’s “prophetic voice” illuminated a “three-part retelling of the American dream as it relates to race” (Rowland & Johns, 2011, p. 127). According to this view, a “rhetorical dream is best understood as a progressive myth in which the heroes are ordinary, rather than extraordinary” and where “the dream of a better society” is achieved through an active citizenry (Rowland & Johns, 2011, p. 131). By situating the American dream narrative at the forefront of his speech, Obama was able to create a sense of community for his audience. And in hindsight, his decision to candidly address racial injustice in American society proved to be an advantageous political move because of its focus on inclusivity.

Drawing on Rowland and Johns (2011), I argue that Obama’s mixed racial heritage enabled him to combine two archetypal stories that resonate with American constituents, the Horatio Alger myth and the New Deal myth. Horatio Alger is likely to resonate with

conservatives because of its focus on personal achievement. Moreover, Obama's race made him an especially attractive narrator of this myth to conservatives, because it confirmed the ideological assumption that anyone can succeed in America regardless of their race. The New Deal mythos is likely to resonate with liberals because of its focus on social welfare. And, for liberals, Obama was an especially attractive spokesperson for this myth because of his personal experience—he returned from the Ivy tower of Harvard to work in the community. Obama not only gave voice to these mythologies; he embodies them. He is the son of an African native who (arguably) pulled himself up by his own bootstraps (a modern Horatio Alger archetype); he then (arguably) proceeded to work with community groups to help the poor (a social welfare crusader archetype). Finally, he was able to construct this complex mythology with himself as bi-racial, bi-partisan hero through the use of nuanced narratives, which I discuss in the following section.

#### Narratives

One persuasive component of Obama's rhetoric is his unique ability to deliver moving personal narratives that forge identification and unity. According to Hammer (2010), Obama's pre-election discourse "embrace[d] the one over the many and present[ed] his vision of an America united as a nation based on commonly held political principles referred to as 'the American Creed'" (p. 270). During the primary campaign of 2008, the presidential hopeful used campaign narratives to address the broadest constituency possible. Hammer's (2010) analysis of Obama's rhetoric specifically focuses on five speeches that were delivered during pivotal moments of the campaign. According to the author, each of these speeches contained two key persuasive concepts: a shared belief in the American Creed and the use of "the symbolic dimension of American Nationalism" (Hammer, 2010, p. 184). Hammer (2010) posits that Obama successfully united his audience through political ideology by consistently using the

rhetorical tool of personal narratives. Hammer (2010) also suggests that the presence of civil religion throughout Obama's speeches is paramount because it draws from elements of faith that are central to the idea of patriotism. Obama framed his personal narratives through the principles of civil religion which draw upon universally held beliefs, symbols, and rituals. Uniting his audience through commonly held beliefs, Obama constructed his own patriotic persona and simultaneously brought his constituents (symbolically, at least) closer together.

Similar to aforementioned themes of racial neutrality, the findings of Hammer's study also provide evidence that Obama successfully constructed a coherent and persuasive narrative by maintaining an "ethnically and racially neutral position" (Hammer, 2010, p. 186). Obama's campaign narratives united the American people through a "common faith in the political principles of the American Creed and a belief in the sacredness of the American nation" (Hammer, 2010, p. 186). The principles of the American Creed transcend cultural, racial, and socio-economic boundaries and, therefore, make it a very powerful tool of unification. Barack Obama recognized this and incorporated 'American Creed' principles throughout his campaign speeches. In doing so, he was received by many voters as a patriotic and diverse American who understood the need for nationalism and had a sincere concern for the well-being of each and every U.S. citizen.

A similar study examined Obama's use of personal narratives in his 2006 campaign manifesto *The Audacity of Hope*. George Weigel (2009) claimed that the persuasive, intimate nature of *The Audacity of Hope* overshadowed more unfavorable characteristics of Obama's political profile. According to Weigel (2009), Obama's narratives "tended to crowd out everything else, particularly any serious examination of [his] political pedigree and his relationships with some of the more unsavory creatures from the violent fever swamps of the

1960's" ( p. 24). While pundits can argue about whether this shift in focus was ultimately for the good, there is little question that Obama's ability to reframe himself *through* personal narratives took much needed attention off of his political inadequacies and ultimately allowed him to reinvent himself as a beacon of change and hope.

In fact, Obama's rhetorical success in using personal narratives was so well known it became a focus of criticism for his opponents and detractors. Many of Obama's opponents praised his rhetoric but criticized the substance of these messages. According to Sweet & McCue-Enser:

Despite the favorable public reviews for Obama's rhetoric, there were those who criticized his eloquence. Hillary Clinton, for example, positioned Obama's rhetoric as long on style and short on substance when she remarked, "we can't just have speeches. We've got to have solutions...because while words matter, the best words in the world aren't enough unless you match them with action." (2010, p. 603)

Rhetorical opposition towards Obama in the 2008 campaign posited that Obama was all talk and very little action. Many conceded that he was gifted in garnering support and having a firm grasp on the perspectives of the American people, but there was deep seeded concern about his ability to put his well-articulated words into action. In any case, even his critics have agreed that Obama was able to successfully market himself to the American people in the 2008 campaign, and most people would support the notion that his success was due in large part to his effective use of personal narratives. Which begs the question: Why didn't he maintain a strong narrative voice upon taking office?

Post-inaugural research

The majority of academic research concerning Obama's rhetorical style has focused on race and/or his unique rhetorical flare with personal narratives. One of many challenges Obama encountered in creating and delivering a convincing post-inaugural narrative was the devastating economic crisis that ultimately forced the U.S. government to produce a large and controversial stimulus package. James Barnes (2010) investigates the effectiveness of Obama's economic narrative in defending the stimulus package that Congress eventually passed in early 2010. According to Barnes (2010), Obama's attempt to reframe the economic crisis by blaming previous administrations had a detrimental effect on the president's voter approval ratings. Barnes (2010) asserts, "The blame game is not effective once your party has controlled both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue" (p. 2). American constituents saw a powerful democratic force in Washington and did not accept Obama's attempt to reframe the story of the economic crisis as a product of the previous Republican administration. As a result, Obama failed to deliver the sort of convincing, optimistic narrative for the American people that helped to get him elected.

One potential explanation for this rhetorical failure is the static state of the unemployment rate (Barnes, 2010). While this may appear to be an insurmountable obstacle to overcome, Obama regularly overcame a variety of seemingly "insurmountable obstacles" during the campaign (Barnes, 2010). The rhetorical strategies used throughout the presidential campaign gave Americans a sense of hope. In his post-election economic rhetoric that sense of optimism has been sorely lacking. Of course, the economic crisis was not part of Obama's pre-term agenda. The top priority of the Obama administration was to pass historic health care legislation that would make the health care industry a more fair and equitable system. If Obama's economic rhetoric was less than hopeful, one might expect the president's health care rhetoric to be full of the forceful, rich narratives that helped to get him elected.

Robert Patterson (2011) also explores Obama's rhetorical difficulties by analyzing the "Beer Summit" held on the White House lawn in July of 2009. More specifically, the author analyzes narratives, rhetorical networks and metaphors evident throughout the event in order to understand Obama's limited rhetorical agency. In light of the media blitz that surrounded the highly contentious incident where a Harvard professor (Henry Louis Gates) accused a White police officer (James Crowley) of racial profiling, Obama attempted to extinguish (once again) a racial firestorm. This meeting of the minds was an attempt by Obama to ease racial tensions in public discourse similar to his speech delivered as a result of the Reverend Wright controversy. Patterson (2011) juxtaposed the media's tendency to highlight polarized narratives to garner attention and boost profits to the arresting officer's response and support for the Harvard professor thus illustrating a deviation from typical polarized tropes (p. 445). The tendency to pit Black versus White in traditional and mainstream media ultimately traps Obama, Crowley and Gates in the context of historical narratives and ultimately reduces their actions "to simple stereotypes [and] base motives" (Patterson, 2011, p. 444). Each actor in this modern-day drama is rhetorically confined because of the media's predisposition to highlight stories where conflict occurs. Obama, above all others, is rhetorically confined because of his racial heritage and his position of power as president.

Obama's initial reaction to the controversy was heavily scrutinized by constituents and the mainstream media. Patterson (2011) suggests that Obama's role as "the unifier" was immediately altered when he criticized the Cambridge Police Department for acting "stupidly" (p. 448). Assuming the voice of a unifier allows for greater rhetorical agency because of its overarching goal of pulling together "competing cultural and partisan visions" (Patterson, 2011, p. 448). The media alongside American constituents viewed this criticism as a tilt from "the

unifier to the ‘judge’” (Patterson, 2011, p. 448). Taking on a judgmental posture evokes divisive notions of bias which ultimately diminished his rhetorical role in the whole controversy. In addition, Patterson (2011) attributes Obama’s rhetorical restraint to his position as “our first African American president” (p. 449). Not only does Obama inherit the role of President (mediator), he is also confined by his racial heritage. Obama ‘the candidate’ could transcend “deeply rooted metaphoric and symbolic meanings” in a direct, assertive way because he was not yet in a position that demanded complete and total objectivity (Patterson, 2011, p. 449). Instead, Obama was rhetorically confined throughout this event because of his obligation to reconcile “historical legacies and rhetorical networks of both the enslaved and the enslaver” (Patterson, 2011, p. 449). Obama’s limited rhetorical agency is evident throughout his presidency. Confounding issues of race, power and a shift in rhetorical style all contribute to the overall diminished efficacy of Obama’s presidential rhetoric. The mid-term elections were a pivotal point in the presidency due to the dramatic shift in political power from Democrats to Republicans. This shift in power ultimately encouraged additional scholarship to examine the rhetorical failures of Obama and his administration.

Halper (2011) provided a detailed analysis of President Obama’s political stance after the defeating blow of the mid-term elections by examining Gallup polls and linking the results to specific difficulties Obama faced throughout his first two years in office. The most critical component of Halper’s (2011) article was his analysis of the logical and persuasive components of speeches delivered by Obama in an attempt to highlight legislative successes of the administration. Halper (2011) recognized Obama’s obvious struggle in framing legislative successes of the administration in an optimistic light and suggests a rhetorical failure in utilizing personal narratives (which were evident throughout the 2008 campaign) to facilitate

understanding. Obama spent more time defending the administration's actions rather than *relating* them to the American public. Large segments of his speeches were dedicated to clearing up political and social misunderstandings of public policy rather than reframing this technical rhetoric through comprehensible stories the American people could understand.

### *Scope*

The literature reviewed thus far provides significant insight into the rhetorical strategies Obama has utilized throughout his recent political career. Scholars have utilized a wide range of rhetorical methodologies to attempt to understand the implications of Obama's political discourse. One area where there seems to be much agreement about Obama's rhetoric is that the most persuasive rhetorical tool evident in Obama's pre-inaugural discourse was his ability to tell compelling stories that highlight his personal and political beliefs. Most, if not all, of the scholarship regarding Obama's use of narratives focus on campaign speeches and his two memoirs, *Dreams from my Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*. The few studies that seek to understand Obama's presidential discourse tend to focus on the confounding issues faced by his administration (e.g. race, the economy, legislative failures). Or these studies simply analyze the overarching themes of President Obama's political discourse without paying any significant attention to his use of effective narrative framing. Many scholars and journalists have noted a distinct rhetorical shift in Obama's political discourse, yet few have taken a systematic look at the differences between Obama's campaign narratives and presidential narratives. This thesis will extend the current literature regarding Barack Obama's political discourse by comparing his use of narratives from both pre- and post-inaugural addresses to understand the full extent of his rhetorical shift. This thesis will also examine the implications of fully developed dramas within



political addresses and analyze the potential pitfalls of partial narrative dramas in contemporary political discourse. More specifically, I will examine the development of narrative dramas evident in Obama's speeches stemming from his 2008 campaign for the Democratic nomination to his first State of the Union address. The six pre/post inaugural speeches I have chosen to analyze are as follows:

#### Pre-Inaugural Speeches

1. A more perfect union speech – Delivered March 18, 2008
2. North Carolina primary speech - Delivered May 6, 2008
3. Democratic party nomination acceptance speech – Delivered August 28, 2008

#### Post-Inaugural Speeches

4. Presidential address before joint session of congress – Delivered February 24, 2009
5. Presidential address to Congress on health care – Delivered September, 9 2009
6. State of the Union Address – Delivered January 27, 2010

The goal in choosing these particular speeches was to find a wide variety of remarks that address significant issues throughout the campaign and throughout Obama's first year in office. It is also significant to note that each of these addresses drew extensive media attention and marked a pivotal moment in Obama's political career. It is difficult to distinguish between what constitutes an important speech versus an unimportant speech given that there is no meaningful measurement of discernment. However, these particular speeches all reflect meaningful moments in Obama's political career and will therefore serve as valuable evidence in understanding the overarching differences between Obama's campaign rhetoric and presidential rhetoric.

## *Significance*

Some insight into the communicative failures of the Obama administration could be interpreted through Gallup poll statistics concerning the President's job approval ratings one year after taking office. According to Kara Rowland of *The Washington Times*, President Obama headed into the summer after his first term in office with the highest disapproval ratings of his presidency largely due to the highly contested health care initiative which still "remains a largely toxic" subject amongst Republican and Independent voters (Rowland, 2010, p. 4). Gallup Incorporated (2011) revealed that Obama's approval ratings have continued to decline since his first term ultimately reaching an all-time low of 38 percent in October of 2011 at the time of this writing. Academic scholars and political journalists have attributed this decline in public support to a distinct shift in Obama's rhetoric; however, few have sought to examine specific rhetorical components of Obama's pre- and post-inaugural speeches to unveil concrete evidence of a rhetorical shift.

Obama's campaign narratives mirrored principles of American exceptionalism, and he framed his pre-inaugural discourse around notions of "restoration, innovation, and renewal" (Ivie & Giner, 2008, p. 360). In using the mythos of American exceptionalism throughout his campaign narratives, Obama was able to resolve uncertainty amongst his constituents and articulate a unique political vision for the future (Ivie & Giner, 2008, p. 360). The use of this myth, however, is the only allegorical reference evident in his campaign narratives. Obama's personal narratives revealed a distinct correlation with the Horatio Alger myth of "rags-to-riches" which offered personal insight into Obama's humble beginnings and "which stimulated a strong motivation[s] for personal achievement" (Sarachek, 1978, p. 439). These two mythic references combined with Obama's blended racial heritage allowed his narratives to cross

cultural, racial, and political boundaries to reach American constituents on a personal level and were ultimately proved successful as evidenced by his 2008 election.

One would expect Obama to utilize the same persuasive narratives throughout his presidency to achieve both legislative and communicative success. The legislative successes of the Obama administration remain a highly debatable subject and will take years to accurately assess given the nature of policy enactment. However, understanding the differences between Obama's campaign narratives and presidential narratives is a manageable and valuable form of analysis which will hopefully unveil potential reasoning for the underwhelming support of American constituents.

### *Method*

Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm provides the necessary theoretical framework for clarifying the nature and function of narratives in public discourse. Fisher (1987) asserts that "human communication should be viewed...as stories or accounts competing with other stories or accounts purportedly constituted by good reason" and that every human being has the capacity to be rational under the narrative paradigm (p. 58). Fisher's overarching view depicts the pervasive nature of narratives and lends support to the claim that constituent understanding and knowledge is formed and precipitated by a politician's ability to tell good stories. Fisher (1985) suggests "there is no genre, including technical communication, that is not an episode in the story of life" (p. 347). This broad but useful definition of narrative ultimately legitimizes a narrative analysis of any unit of discourse. This is especially true because, as Fisher (1985) argues, "all human discourse is meaningful and is subject to the tests of narrative rationality" (p.

351). This definition of narrative discourse is particularly useful given the convoluted nature of Obama's post-inaugural narratives.

A thorough understanding of the efficacy of Obama's political narratives requires a strategic form of rhetorical analysis. This thesis will specifically examine the rhetorical elements of selected narratives found throughout the chosen speeches to assess whether or not a coherent fantasy theme exists. By utilizing Bormann's fantasy theme analysis, implications for narratives within Obama's political discourse will be assessed. Bormann's (1972) concept postulates that "fantasy themes help people transcend the everyday and provide meaning for an audience" (p.402). More importantly, the sharing of fantasies within a particular group or community ultimately establishes an assumptive system which is predicated on a unique rhetorical vision that becomes engrained within the community's communication style (Bormann, 1982). Using fantasy theme analysis as a rhetorical strategy for understanding the differences in Obama's pre- and post-inaugural narratives will illuminate the absence of any rhetorical vision in Obama's post-inaugural narratives. Subsequently, the usefulness of this rhetorical analysis is justified given its ability to identify key differences between the two sets of narratives that will ultimately shed light on significant reasons Obama has lost constituent support upon taking office.

This rhetorical methodology is especially helpful given its critical assessment of elements within a given drama. Bormann (1972) defines a drama as "the content that consists of characters, real or fictitious, playing out a dramatic situation in a setting removed in time and space from the here-and-now transactions of the group" (p. 397). Specific narrative elements must be present for a given story to come to life in the form of a drama. This thesis seeks to uncover those elements to determine whether or not Obama's narratives constitute a complete, dramatic story. The specific narrative elements that will serve as the constructed data for this

thesis are: (1) setting (where are the dramas set and does that provide any significance to the story?); (2) protagonists (who are the heroes? how are they characterized?); (3) Antagonists (who are the villains? how are they characterized?); (4) Action (what acts are being performed by these characters?); (5) Fantasy theme (what meanings are inherent in these dramas?) (Bormann, 1972). Additionally, I will attempt to answer the evaluative questions regarding the efficacy of each narrative. These questions include: (1) How concrete and detailed are the characterizations; (2) What types of emotions are elicited from the drama; (3) How does the fantasy theme work to attract the unconverted; (4) How does the fantasy theme work to generate a sense of community and cohesion (Bormann, 1972). Each narrative will be evaluated within the context of these fantasy theme elements to determine any differentiation between Obama's pre- and post-inaugural narratives. In doing so, a more thorough understanding of the role of narratives within Obama's political discourse will be developed.

### CHAPTER III PRE-INAUGURAL RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF OBAMA'S 2008 CAMPAIGN NARRATIVES

An analysis of Obama's pre-inaugural narratives reveals distinct fantasy themes for which Obama reshapes Republican ideology by adding the liberal component of civic responsibility. In doing so, Obama creates a unique rhetorical vision that embodies principles from both conservative and liberal political philosophies. In the narratives Obama situates himself alongside American constituents as a means of setting himself apart from other politicians and expressing an altruistic approach to solving the nation's greatest problems. Obama's use of concrete characterizations clearly defines the drama's central protagonists and antagonists. The narrative's protagonists are characterized as middle-class heroes who take the form of: Michigan autoworkers, military families, college students, or working mothers. The villains of the dramas are depicted through abstract characterization and take the form of war, capitalism or Republican ideology. These antagonists cause the needless suffering of the drama's well-received heroes and help in articulating the overarching rhetorical vision of community.

The following inquiry will examine three political speeches delivered by Barack Obama before his inauguration. The speeches are organized in chronological order as a means of demonstrating the evolution of his rhetorical tactics throughout the 2008 campaign. The first speech was delivered on March 18, 2008 shortly after the Rev. Wright controversy. Beginning this analysis with a speech that centers on issues of racial indignation lays the groundwork for a greater understanding of the historical significance of Obama's presidency. More specifically, this speech highlights Obama's use of the Horatio Alger myth and advantageous nature of his blended racial heritage which allowed Obama to successfully negotiate racial tensions. An analysis of this speech reveals the persuasive power of the metaphorical narrative and its ability

to symbolically situate Obama alongside characters within the drama as a means of indirectly negotiating his race through historical and social contexts. By framing the issue of racial tension through these contexts, Obama is adhering to a persuasive rhetorical approach similar to the principles of emergent thinking. In using this approach, Obama is calling on the audience to critically assess the ideological issues of racial inequality, transcend preconceived notions of racial identity and liberate our society of the racial stigmas that still reside in the minds of both black and white Americans. These narratives call on the audience to engage in some sort of action, thus invoking rhetorical agency. The second speech analysis focuses on Obama's use of archetypal characters within metanarratives to facilitate—for his audience—a transition from emergent thinking (as evident in the first speech) to analytical thinking. In this speech, Obama uses narratives to depict generalized characters (i.e. mother figure, war hero) as a means of identifying with the audience by way of logical deduction. Audience members see themselves in these characters and are therefore more likely to view the narratives as truthful representations of the American experience. The final speech marks the end of Obama's race in becoming the Democratic Party nominee. In this speech, delivered on August 28, 2009, Obama sets the stage for the presidential race by using archetypal characterization for the explicit purpose of delineating himself from his Republican opponent, Senator John McCain. An analysis of these narratives reveals a deliberate attempt on Obama's part to villainize McCain and the party he represents. For the purpose of understanding the evolution of Obama's pre-inaugural rhetoric, this speech is particularly significant because for the first time Obama explicitly blames Senator McCain and his conservative ideology for the social and economic grievances that plague American citizens. More significantly, these narratives reveal clearly defined protagonists and

antagonists which enhance the overall efficacy of drama and help in articulating a clear rhetorical vision.

This analysis will combine theories that examine the use of narratives in persuasive political communication. Specifically, I will draw from the methodology of Ernest Bormann's fantasy-theme analysis to understand the corresponding elements that are necessary in creating a persuasive drama (Foss, 1996, p. 123). Specific elements mentioned in the analysis below include: setting, archetypal characters and action themes. Analyzing the critical roles these three elements play in Obama's narratives allows for further understanding of his unique rhetorical vision. Additionally, Burke's pentadic criticism is used to analyze the relationship between elements of the narratives (i.e. act, agent, purpose). Most significant is Burke's insight into the role of agency in a given drama. Obama's campaign narratives illustrate abstract characters (i.e. capitalistic system, conservative ideology) that perform various acts throughout the speech and also support the overarching ideological premise. Additionally, I will reference Obama's use of specific rhetorical devices such as repetition and rhetorical questioning.

Finally, Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm will serve as an overarching tool to understand exactly *how* constituents construct a given reality through Obama's pre-inaugural narratives. There is no specific method of analysis in using the narrative paradigm. However, its usefulness is paramount in understanding through interpretation and assessment whether or not Obama's narratives facilitate understanding and demonstrate sound reasoning in regards to audience perception. Fisher's paradigm seeks to determine exactly how people come to adopt stories and how that interpretation ultimately guides behavior (1985, p. 348). Particularly significant to this analysis is Fisher's concept of narrative rationality and how it relates to probability and fidelity in regards to whether or not constituents find truth in the narratives



Obama uses. Using the narrative paradigm as an overarching tool of analysis will allow for a more accurate assessment of the perceived legitimacy of Obama's pre-inaugural narratives and greater insight into the implications of the rhetorical shift evident in his post-inaugural narratives.

### Obama Addresses the Reverend Wright Controversy

The issue of race seems like an unavoidable subject with regards to Barack Obama. The election of our nation's first black president demonstrated a metaphorical movement towards a post-racial era in American society. However, scholars concede that the historical election tended to contribute to false notions of a post-racial era in society and politics. Obama's election led many individuals to believe that our nation had moved past racial indignation and had ultimately reached a color-blind state. Throughout the campaign, Obama and his aids avoided the issue of race and decided instead to focus on inclusivity rather than divisive issues of race and politics. This was a strategic choice by the Obama team to ignore the obvious racial divide between himself, his opponents, and candidates that ran before him.

This political tactic proved successful until the media unearthed some incendiary remarks made by Obama's minister a few years prior. These comments started an intense fire storm of media scrutiny which ultimately turned the topic of race into a heated debate. Obama immediately condemned the remarks but many critics were not satisfied with the lack of specificity with regards to his relationship to the Reverend. On March 18, 2008, Obama decided to address the issue by reframing Wright's comments through social and historical contexts by way of personal and metaphorical narratives. The setting in which Obama delivered this speech is of particular interest. Obama and his team decided to address this contentious issue in Philadelphia approximately one month prior to the Pennsylvania primary. At the time of the

speech, Obama and Senator Hillary Clinton were neck-in-neck in the race to win the Democratic candidacy. Obama eventually lost the primary vote to his opponent Hillary Clinton, but only by a small margin. Delivering this speech in a highly contested state, one month prior to the Democratic primary, further demonstrates the strategic political maneuvering of Obama's campaign.

A variety of personal narratives concerning Obama's relationship with Rev. Wright were used towards the beginning of the speech to demonstrate the positive relationship the two shared. Obama made sure to frame Wright's accomplishments as a community activist and church leader before he illustrated the positive relationship between himself, his family and the Reverend. Personal narratives revealing the racist sentiments of his white grandmother emphasized Obama's message of tolerance and authenticated his empathy for the black community. These personal narratives were instrumental in justifying and clarifying Obama's relationship with Rev. Wright. However, this was not the ultimate goal for giving this speech. Obama needed to approach the issue of race indirectly by reframing the antagonistic comments through a social and historical context as a means of alleviating any blame and demonstrating a neutral, balanced voice. Obama's use of narratives concerning the grievances of both races accomplished just that. Following his remarks, the situation was ultimately diffused and critics across the board were silenced therefore indicating rhetorical success.

The overarching purpose of a narrative is to provide a comprehensive illustration of a particular event or idea from the past through vivid characterizations. The first narrative analysis involves a story directed towards white audiences. In this narrative Obama refers to the white community as both the character of the drama and the setting for which the story takes place:

In fact, a similar anger exists within segments of the white community. Most working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race. Their experience is the immigrant experience — as far as they're concerned, no one handed them anything. They built it from scratch. They've worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pensions dumped after a lifetime of labor. They are anxious about their futures, and they feel their dreams slipping away. And in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense. So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear 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're told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time.

The setting of this drama is both abstract and bounded given that the action within the drama resides within the grievances of white experience. By setting this drama within the white community Obama is expressing support and sympathy, thus attempting to cross a racial divide. The setting directly coincides with the characters of the drama because the protagonists are characterized as any individual who harbors resentment towards the black community. Obama provides legitimacy to the white experience within the first line of the narrative by paralleling their feelings of resentment to the immigrant experience, an historical reference which exudes notions of determination, hard work, and commitment. Obama describes these characters as individuals who work tirelessly, without any help, only to see their jobs taken away. In doing so, Obama recognizes the conservative sentiment of independent success while also including liberal sentiments of a corrupt capitalistic system. As a means of broadening his audience while simultaneously demonstrating the pervasive nature of this unique experience, Obama extends the central characters of the drama to include white, working individuals who fall within the margins of the middle-class. The heroes of this drama are the white, middle-class individuals who work hard to build a life for themselves only to face the inequalities of an unjust system. Obama is quick to dispel any correlative assumption that black people are to blame for societal inequalities. Instead, Obama assigns the role of antagonist to the capitalistic nature of our

economic system. He blames the inequities felt by the white community on global competition and its adverse effects on the middle-class. The villain is personified when Obama describes the corrupt system as stealing the aspirations and opportunities away from deserving members of the white community. Obama went on to further illustrate the act of thievery by illustrating real-life instances of the unfair practices of affirmative action thus giving the fantasy rhetorical agency. Obama frames affirmative action in a negative light by describing instances like the redistricting of schools, unfair hiring practices and biased accusations of prejudice concerning the fear of urban crime.

The specific purpose for this narrative is two-fold. First, it pacifies white resentment and redirects potential white anger away from the black community and towards a corrupt, unjust system. Secondly, it strategically frames Obama as the ultimate legitimizer allowing him to directly address the resentment felt by members of the white community. The characters are depicted in an abstract manner but the actions of the characters are quite clear. Obama frames the white community in a positive light by illuminating notions of hard work and perseverance. The drama elicits empathy for the grievances of the white experience by legitimizing their claim of inequality. The rhetorical vision set forth by this narrative is quite unique in that Obama situates the white experience alongside preconceived notions of the black experience. The inequalities perpetrated by a corrupt system strike a similar resemblance to the historical inequalities faced by members of the black community. Instead of directing these inequalities to members of the black community, Obama illustrates how similar inequalities plague members of the white community thus creating a shared rhetorical vision for both white and black Americans.

The second narrative mirrors the overall structure and setting of the first. Instead of addressing the white community, Obama designates this narrative towards members of the black community. In similar fashion, the setting for this narrative is both abstract and bounded:

For the African-American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances — for better health care and better schools and better jobs — to the larger aspirations of all Americans: the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man who has been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family. And it means taking full responsibility for our own lives — by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe that they can write their own destiny.

The roles of the protagonist and antagonist in this particular narrative are a bit more convoluted.

Before, the protagonist exclusively referred to members of the white community who were victimized by an unjust system. Members of the black community are still assigned the role of protagonist; however, it is not the unjust system that causes grievances but rather the black community members themselves. Obama reframes the unjust system in this particular narrative through an historical context by referring to the antagonist as ‘burdens of our past’; potentially referring to Jim Crow and notions of slavery. Instead of legitimizing the grievances of the black community and blaming them on a corrupt system, Obama calls on the black community to embrace these burdens rather than becoming the victim. Obama situates himself alongside the black community using ‘we’ language as he frames the inequalities experienced by white characters as ‘shared inequalities’. Contrary to the first narrative where Obama used rhetorical agency as a means of personifying the protagonist, the context in which these instances take place serves to illustrate the similarities between the two experiences. He does this by using less explicit incidents of adversity thus expanding its applicability to both white and black Americans. Obama references nondescript characters (women and immigrants) to insinuate the

notion that ‘minority’ doesn’t necessarily mean black American. In doing so, he demonstrates the overarching effect of injustice as a means of transcending racial divides.

Another critical difference between the two narratives is the role of Obama as the narrator of the drama. When appealing to the white community, Obama played the role of ultimate legitimizer to justify white resentment, redirect their anger, and demonstrate a sense of empathy and understanding. Obama’s role in this particular drama is altered completely, mainly because of his own blended racial heritage. Since Obama shares the same race as his audience members he is afforded the ability to speak more critically about the black experience. Specifically, Obama expresses the need for self-reliance and accountability on the part of black fathers. He stresses the importance of teaching their children responsibility and self-reliance so they too never become victims of historical inequalities. By introducing the notion of accountability to the narrative, Obama ultimately alters the role of the antagonist. Accountability postulates that an individual is socially obligated to accept responsibility for their own failures. Stressing the need for accountability amongst members of the black community ultimately shifts the role of antagonists from an abstract concept (i.e. burdens of the past) to the protagonists. Henceforth, members of the black community play the dual role of antagonists and protagonists wherein any failure to overcome adversity is a failure on the part of the black community. Obama is able to illustrate the power of choice in determining one’s own fate, simultaneously highlighting the conservative notion of ‘pulling yourself up by your bootstraps’. Addressing members of the black community in such a critical way is made possible by Obama’s own racial identity. Obama’s blended heritage allows him to critically assess the black community because he too overcame adversity and persevered. Author Shankar Vedantam (2010) provides further insight into Obama’s unique approach in his book “*The Hidden Brain: How Our Unconscious Minds*

*Elect Presidents, Control Markets, Wage Wars and Save Our Lives.*” According to Vedantam (2010) racist beliefs are best left unchallenged when attempting to persuade an audience to vote for you. Instead of challenging racist beliefs, Obama legitimized both claims of inequality and maintained a neutral, balanced voice. More specifically, Obama reframed racist thinking through an historical context which ultimately took the blame off any particular group.

The characters depicted in this narrative are far more abstract than those illustrated in the first narrative yet the actions of the characters are quite clear. Obama situates the actions of other minority groups who struggle to overcome adversity alongside the black experience. In doing so, he was able to draw distinct correlations between the two experiences and create an overarching rhetorical vision of community. Obama uses the conservative boot strap metaphor to instill a sense of power and independence as a means of encouraging self-determination by way of conservative ideology. And yet, he still maintains a somewhat egalitarian approach to solving the problems of inequality by stressing that these grievances are shared by *all* Americans. This dual-ideological approach appeases both political parties and stresses a neutral rhetorical voice.

Obama ended this speech with a touching story of a 23-year old white girl named Ashley Baia. The setting of this particular narrative is Florence, South Carolina where a group of supporters participated in a roundtable discussion concerning the reasons why they joined the campaign:

And Ashley said that when she was 9 years old, her mother got cancer. And because she had to miss days of work, she was let go and lost her health care. They had to file for bankruptcy, and that's when Ashley decided that she had to do something to help her mom. She knew that food was one of their most expensive costs, and so Ashley convinced her mother that what she really liked and really wanted to eat more than anything else was mustard and relish sandwiches — because that was the cheapest way to eat. That's the mind of a 9-year-old. She did this for a year until her mom got better. So she told everyone at the roundtable that the reason she joined our campaign was so that

she could help the millions of other children in the country who want and need to help their parents, too.

The clear protagonist in this story is the young girl Ashley. Ashley is depicted as the hero of the drama who struggles to take care of her ailing mother after she lost her job and was bankrupted from the high cost of medical bills. The central act in this portion of the narrative occurs when the young girl makes an attempt to resolve any feelings of guilt felt by her mother by expressing her fondness for an inexpensive meal. This act is particularly significant because it situates the two characters in unconventional roles. Typically, a parent cares for a child but in this case the daughter finds a way to help her mother during a trying time. By convincing her mother to buy an inexpensive meal she ultimately resolves any feelings of guilt which often afflict parents when they are unable to provide. Reversing the traditional parent-child role has tremendous emotional appeal. By specifically targeting working parents, Obama is able to elicit emotions from a wide audience who can empathize with the struggle and need to provide for their kids. After explaining Ashley's personal story, Obama transitions back to the setting of the round table discussion:

Anyway, Ashley finishes her story and then goes around the room and asks everyone else why they're supporting the campaign. They all have different stories and different reasons. Many bring up a specific issue. And finally they come to this elderly black man who's been sitting there quietly the entire time. And Ashley asks him why he's there. And he does not bring up a specific issue. He does not say health care or the economy. He does not say education or the war. He does not say that he was there because of Barack Obama. He simply says to everyone in the room, "I am here because of Ashley."

The central act in this final section of the drama is perhaps the most significant. Obama describes the heart-wrenching story of a young girl struggling to help her ailing mother as a means of setting the scene for the larger narrative. The fantasy theme depicted in the first half of the narrative centers on a young child who acts heroically on behalf of her mother. Obama begins the drama by describing Ashley's character and her emotive struggle to care for her ailing



mother and in doing so establishes identification with audience members. The stereotypical role of females as nurturer is positively reinforced by the act (easing her mother's guilt) and the parent-child role reversal promotes further identification with working parents who are struggling with unemployment across the nation. Both character themes provide support for the overarching fantasy theme of Ashley as a moral model. A strong fantasy theme of community is reinforced by this short drama as Obama stresses the unlikely role of a child taking care of a parent. Another critical component to the first drama is evident in Obama's characterization of Ashley as a young white girl. Ashley's role as a member of the white community brings to fruition the reality of a white supporter in favor of a non-white political candidate. In referencing Ashley's race, Obama ultimately demonstrates a cosmopolitan approach to political campaigning. Through this short narrative, Obama represents an ideology in support for a multiethnic community intrinsically linked by a shared sense of community.

This ideological premise is reemphasized in the second half of the narrative when Obama describes the reaction of an elderly black man. After Ashley's story, she goes around the roundtable and asks others why they joined the campaign. When she finally asks the elderly man, he simply states, "I'm here because of Ashley." The introduction of this final character establishes a new and significant fantasy theme. By describing the elderly man as a black, Obama is reaffirming the previous fantasy theme of community and stressing the need to transcend racial divide. Illustrating the care and concern the black man has for the young white girl also signifies a greater rhetorical vision. Through symbolic association, Obama interjects himself into the narrative to express his own care and compassion for white constituents. In doing so, he is able to present himself as an unprejudiced citizen without seeming as if he is pandering to the audience.

Obama characterizes Ashley through rich, concrete depictions of a young girl who emerges as the hero of the drama. The fantasy theme of community and care establish this heroic character by appealing to society's value for children. The elderly black man serves as a heroic figure in the narrative as well. Specifically, this character emulates an ideal behavior with which all audience members should adhere to. This character also serves as a symbolic representation of Obama himself. In doing so, he is able to express care and concern for white constituents through indirect means thus framing him in a positive, heroic light. This narrative represents an unlikely kinship between two characters of different races therefore constituting an overarching rhetorical vision that centers on transcending racial divide and stressing the need for brotherly love.

After the Rev. Wright controversy, Americans needed to know where Obama stood on the issue of racial biases. Obama revealed his personal and political position on the issue through shared fantasies of both white and black Americans. By means of symbolic association, Obama showcased feelings of compassion, empathy and support for white constituents thereby resolving accusations of racial bias. Bormann's (1985) symbolic convergence theory exemplifies this claim by describing the applicability of shared fantasies as a means of resolving psychological apprehension. Bormann (1985) argues that the use of shared fantasies "refers to the creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfills a group psychological or rhetorical need" (p. 130). The narratives used throughout this speech allowed Obama to attack the issue of race sideways by first describing the grievances of both black and white community members then legitimizing their feelings of resentment through historical references. The parallels between the two experiences create a shared fantasy for both black and white Americans and resolve any psychological apprehensions by alleviating blame from any one race. Obama appeals to

conservative Americans by referencing the “hegemonic values of bootstrap ideology” by depicting members of the white community who achieved success through hard working and perseverance. Obama also appeals to liberal Americans by referencing the New Deal myth through a fantasy theme that stresses the need to help your fellow man. The combination of these two ideological references allows Obama to reach both black and white constituents through shared fantasies that reflect the personal and political principles of both communities, uniting his audience in one rhetorical vision.

#### Archetypal Characters and a Transition from Emergent to Analytical Thinking

The May 6 primaries in Indiana and North Carolina proved to be tight races between candidate Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton. Historical trends indicate that North Carolina has traditionally been a reliably Republican state. On the night of May 6<sup>th</sup>, North Carolina was deemed a swing state when Barack Obama won 56% of the delegate votes to clinch the democratic electorate over his opponent Hilary Clinton. Following the announcement of Obama’s victory in North Carolina Tim Russert, NBC News Washington Bureau Chief, was asked about the implications of the win. Russert blatantly stated, “We now know who the Democratic Nominee is going to be and no one is going to dispute it” (Russert, 2008). Political commentators across the board agreed that Obama and Clinton’s vie for the Democratic nomination ended on May 6<sup>th</sup> in Raleigh, North Carolina. A rhetorical analysis of the speech delivered on the night of such a significant victory will provide valuable insight into the rhetorical vision set forth by the Obama campaign. From this point on, Obama’s campaign rhetoric strikes a far more divisive tone mainly because of Obama’s attempt to delineate himself from his Republican opponent, Senator John McCain. In this speech, Obama focuses on setting the stage for a new campaign discourse, a discourse focused solely on winning the presidency

and defeating his Republican opponent. A rhetorical shift which encourages deductive over emergent thinking is evident in this speech as Obama portrays several detailed characters to promote identification with his audience members.

Obama begins the speech by congratulating Senator Clinton on her victory in the state of Indiana and also reiterating concepts of political ideological neutrality. It is of particular interest to examine the introduction of this speech insofar as the inclusive tone was aimed at encouraging Clinton supporters (who had just suffered a defeating blow) to view Obama's victory as a victory for the Democratic party and consider supporting his campaign for presidency. Obama reframes the victory of his political campaign to include Clinton supporters mainly to discourage divisive political commentary which pitted the two against one another since the beginning of the race.

Obama begins by expressing admiration for his opponent and then redirects the narrative towards American constituents:

This has been one of the longest, most closely fought contests in history. And that's partly because we have such a formidable opponent in Senator Hillary Clinton. Tonight, many of the pundits have suggested that this party is inalterably divided – that Senator Clinton's supporters will not support me, and that my supporters will not support her. Well I'm here tonight to tell you that I don't believe it. Yes, there have been bruised feelings on both sides. Yes, each side desperately wants their candidate to win. But ultimately, this race is not about Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama or John McCain. This election is about you – the American people – and whether we will have a president and a party that can lead us toward a brighter future.

The speech starts with Obama recognizing Clinton as an inspiring, competitive opponent whose political competence yielded a historically tight race for the Democratic Party. Obama recognizes the tumultuous political relationship between himself and Clinton and reaffirms the divisive atmosphere of political campaigning. However, instead of accepting the victory on behalf of his own campaigning efforts, Obama reframes the win as a victory for 'the American

people.’ Pushing inner-party politics aside, Obama continues by expressing to all Democratic constituents the common goal of ending the Republican reign over the executive branch. Obama stresses, “We cannot afford to give John McCain the chance to serve out George Bush’s third term.” This statement is particularly significant because it indicates a distinct shift in Obama’s political discourse; his sole purpose as the Democratic nominee henceforth is to draw stark contrasts between himself and his Republican opponent. In framing the victory over Senator Clinton as a victory for all Democratic constituents Obama is arguing the need for party unification. Furthermore, in minimizing his own successes Obama inadvertently portrays himself as a humble candidate whose humility coincides with a common hero fantasy type.

The theme of unification continues throughout the speech and is also evident in many of the narratives Obama uses in describing the plight of middle-class Americans. Applying Bormann’s fantasy theme analysis to a wide variety of narratives within Obama’s speech illustrates the influential power of group fantasizing. Obama’s narratives depict separate mini-dramas wherein a dramatic situation plays out and emotions are elicited through concrete settings, characters, and plots. Bormann (1972) postulates that “when group members respond emotionally to the dramatic situation they publicly proclaim some commitment to an attitude” (p. 397). In utilizing narratives that depict the grievances of average Americans, Obama is able to establish distinct fantasy chains which constituents can latch onto, thus becoming part of a greater rhetorical vision. A distinct rhetorical vision begins to take shape when Obama describes the economic troubles of a woman from the state of Indiana:

The woman I met in Indiana who just lost her job, lost her pension, lost her insurance when the plant where she worked at her entire life closed down – she can’t afford four more years of tax breaks for corporations like the one that shipped her job overseas. She needs us to give tax breaks to companies that create good jobs right here in the United States of America. She can’t afford four more years of tax breaks for CEOs like the one

who walked away from her company with a multi-million dollar bonus. She needs middle-class tax relief of the sort I've proposed. Relief that will help her pay the skyrocketing price of groceries, and gas, and college tuition. That's why I'm running for President of the United States of America.

The setting for Obama's first narrative is rhetorically significant for two reasons. Indiana was a state where Obama had lost the primary vote to his opponent. Describing the plight of a woman from a state in which he was deemed the unfavorable candidate demonstrates overarching concern for the plight of each American. Secondly, in referencing the struggles of an Indiana constituent Obama is establishing himself as a humble candidate whose care and concern reaches past divisive political elections. Prior to delivering this speech, Obama was defeated by Senator Clinton in the state of Indiana. The protagonist depicted in this narrative is a woman who lost her job, pension, and insurance as a direct result of corrupt governmental policies. Obama establishes identification with his audience by framing the protagonists as the victim of a capitalistic system. Audience members who have struggled with unemployment or economic insecurity empathize with the protagonist's grievances and share in the character's difficult experience. Immediately Obama establishes a shared fantasy between the protagonist of the drama and his audience.

The antagonist in this story coincides with many of Obama's previous narratives (specifically Obama's ideological references to The New Deal myth) because it casts the villain of the story as the corrupt system. Here, Obama establishes the same rhetorical vision evident in his previous narratives by revealing an unjust system and a disadvantaged sect of Americans. Framing the protagonist as the victim in the unfair practices of a capitalistic system allows Obama to stress how powerless we all are with regards to securing economic stability. In doing so, both characters (protagonist and antagonist) are contextualized through archetypal character portrayals of good versus evil thus giving these characters greater emotional appeal. The empathy audience members feel for the protagonist leads to feelings of indignation when they hear of the unfair actions precipitated by a corrupt system. Obama uses repetition throughout the narrative to emphasize hypothetical solutions while simultaneously positioning the

audience at the forefront of a dilemma. Obama calls on audience members to take part in demanding equality for the victim of the story thereby creating a fantasy theme centered on action and collectivism.

This repetitious strategy is evident throughout the subsequent narratives. However, the overarching purposes for each narrative message highlight distinct issues. In this following drama, Obama addresses the vital need for reform in health care and tax policy. Obama continues to mirror the same sentence structure as he transitions into a narrative about a college student from the state of Iowa:

The college student I met in Iowa who works the night shift after a full day of class and still can't pay the medical bills for a sister who's ill – she can't afford four more years of a health care plan that only takes care of the healthy and the wealthy; that allows insurance companies to discriminate and deny coverage to those Americans who need it most. She needs us to stand up to those insurance companies and pass a plan that lowers every family's premiums and gives every uninsured American the same kind of coverage that Members of Congress give themselves. That's why I'm running for President of the United States of America.

The setting of this second narrative holds less rhetorical significance than the first but is just as textually prominent. Obama presents the protagonist as a college student struggling with the demanding schedule of academia and a full time job. This particular character portrayal is far more specific than the first; Obama directs this story towards young, college-age audience members consequently inviting young constituents into the fantasy theme. The protagonist plays the dual role of hero and victim in this particular drama. Despite working a full time job on top of pursuing a degree, this protagonist still struggles to help her family member pay for expensive medical bills. By situating the protagonist as the hero of the story Obama creates an affable character the audience can admire and relate to.

The protagonist is also depicted as the victim of the narrative wherein their heroic actions are diminished by an antagonistic system that Congress supports. Referencing the selfish actions of Congress further illustrates the corrupt nature of the system and inadvertently places blame on the government. Obama is careful to separate himself from members of Congress by situating

himself alongside his audience members. This rhetorical tactic legitimizes Obama as a narrator since the audience now perceives him as the ‘Washington outsider’ who understands the plight of rising health care costs and the need to mend the blunders of current health care policies.

Framing the character as both a hero and a victim ultimately illustrates a moral protagonist whose valiant efforts to help a family member are challenged by the unjust practices of a corrupt system. This fantasy demonstrates that young, college-age constituents also share in the grievances of middle-class Americans because they too suffer from the corrupt practices of an unfair economic system. Subsequently, framing the protagonist as a college student encourages younger constituents to take part in a greater rhetorical vision that legitimizes the grievances of all Americans and unifies a diverse audience through shared values and experiences. This political tactic proved to be an advantageous move on Obama’s part given the key role young voters played in the 2008 election.

The third narrative in this sequence differs from all the rest. In this particular narrative, Obama addresses the combative issue of the war on terror by using inclusive rhetoric to emphasize a collectivist approach to solving this issue:

The mother in Wisconsin who gave me a bracelet inscribed with the name of the son she lost in Iraq; the families who pray for their loved ones to come home; the heroes on their third and fourth and fifth tour of duty – they can't afford four more years of a war that should've never been authorized and should have never been waged. They can't afford four more years of our veterans returning to broken-down barracks and substandard care. They don't want to see homeless veterans on the streets. They don't want to see veterans waiting years to get disability payments or having to travel for hours or miles just to get treatment. They need us to end a war that isn't making us safer. They need us to treat them with the care and respect they deserve. That's why I'm running for President.

The setting of this narrative is both textually prominent and metaphorical. At first, Obama references a mother from the state of Wisconsin who lost her son and gave Obama a bracelet with his name inscribed. This personal narrative has tremendous emotional appeal because of the



implied action and its association with societal values. Remembering our troops has become a societal value with which many Americans can identify. The potential for identification is also evident in the narrative's focus on highlighting the experience of a mother who has lost her son. Illuminating a mother's bereavement and her gesture towards Obama ultimately creates a fantasy theme centered on remembrance and grief. The values evident in this section of the narrative constitute a building block towards unification and the need for change.

The other characters appearing throughout the rest of the narrative are depicted in a metaphorical setting as a means of describing the prevalence of this issue. These characters include all of the military veterans who fall victim to substandard care. The antagonist of this narrative is two-fold. The war itself plays an overt role as antagonist. More significant, is the role of the Bush administration in providing substandard care for veterans. Obama refers to veterans as 'heroes' thus depicting them as the narrative's central protagonists. Obama targets the Bush administration and its failed policies for initiating an unnecessary war and providing substandard care for the nation's veterans. The act performed by the antagonist is particularly significant given its serious nature. Obama illustrates this characterization by describing the heroes of the story being sent into battle repeatedly to fight a useless war. This dramatic scenario elicits emotions and values that condemn an unjust war and call attention to the victimization of the narrative's heroes. A fantasy theme emerges that depicts the war and the Bush administration in a negative light, thus contributing to the rhetorical vision of the need for change.

Obama then mirrors the same sentence structure utilized in prior narratives to reinforce a call to action by situating the constituents within the narrative. Obama states, "they can't afford four more years of a war that should've never been authorized and never been waged." Mirroring

the same inclusive terminology reiterates the fantasy theme of collectivism simultaneously proclaims that the power of change resides with American constituents.

The final narrative in this speech is most similar to the opening narrative where Obama tells the story of a woman he met in Indiana. Obama describes an incident in Pennsylvania where he met a man who was suffering with the arduous reality of unemployment:

The man I met in Pennsylvania who lost his job but can't even afford the gas to drive around and look for a new one – he can't afford four more years of an energy policy written by the oil companies and for the oil companies; a policy that's not only keeping gas at record prices, but funding both sides of the war on terror and destroying our planet. He doesn't need four more years of Washington policies that sound good, but don't solve the problem. He needs us to take a permanent holiday from our addiction from oil by making the automakers raise their fuel standards, corporations pay for their pollution, and oil companies invest their record profits in a clean energy future. That's the change we need. And that's why I'm running for President of the United States of America.

Similar to the first narrative, the setting of this story takes place in a state in which Obama lost the Democratic primary vote. Setting the final narrative in the state of Pennsylvania is particularly significant given the tumultuous political battle that took place between himself and Senator Clinton. The importance of winning this state was illuminated by Obama's choice to deliver his much-anticipated 'Race speech' in Philadelphia nearly one month prior to the Pennsylvania Democratic primary. The protagonist in this narrative is a man who struggles with the economic burdens of unemployment. Again, the character in this scene is situated in a powerless position as a direct result of the detrimental policies of administrations past that have conceded to the capitalistic nature of our economic system. Interestingly, the role of the villain is cast as the policy which allowed gas prices to soar thus inhibiting the protagonist from finding employment. The policy is also to blame for funding an unnecessary war and contributing to the deterioration of the planet. Instead of explicitly blaming any particular person or administration, Obama blames an intangible noun to avoid any direct blame. However, the power of the drama

remains intact given Obama's vivid depiction of the narrative's protagonist. The man from Pennsylvania represents any and all Americans who are struggling with unemployment and high gas prices. Obama provides clear depictions of the issues and hypothetical solutions but maintains a neutral voice by avoiding any direct blame. The fantasy types depicted throughout each individual drama identify with American constituents by way of shared grievances. Constituents are able to identify with these characters because they too have experienced such hardships and can envision themselves within the drama facing similar situations. The rhetorical vision of unification and collectivism is carried throughout each narrative by unifying these grievances and calling on American constituents to push for a change.

Thus far, we have seen how shared fantasies were utilized throughout Obama's narratives to illustrate shared grievances of average Americans. Obama illustrates common issues that afflict archetypal characters like the working college student, the bereaved mother, and the war hero. Concrete character portrayals of the drama's protagonists and antagonists were employed to shed light on the dichotomy of good versus bad. Specific character depictions highlighted the heroic struggle of average Americans and the villainistic nature of a corrupt system. Obama began and ended this narrative sequence with two significant settings to emphasize the need for party unification and communicate to constituents that he understands the American plight. By narrating the grievances of American constituents, Obama was able to delineate himself from Washington politicians and situate himself alongside his audience members thus emulating a rhetorical vision of community that constitutes the act of solving the nation's problems together.

Obama Refutes the Materialistic Myth

Throughout the campaign for the Democratic Party nomination, Obama utilized narratives and archetypal character themes to relate to American voters in a somewhat unconventional way. Supporters found his conversational style of language both inspirational and powerful. His use of a wide range of narratives deviated from the norm of political rhetoric and coincided with his overarching message of change. Critics of Obama's rhetorical style expressed a far different sentiment. Both Clinton and McCain attacked Obama's rhetorical style by arguing that his eloquent use of language offered little substance with regards to solving actual problems. Criticism of Obama's oratory was best exemplified in the campaign ads of John McCain. In his campaign ad entitled "Love America Enough" McCain directly attacked Obama's rhetorical style in saying, "I didn't go to Washington to win the Mr. Congeniality award; I went to Washington to serve my county" (McCain, 2008).

Obama made a valiant attempt to put these accusations to rest during his Democratic Party nomination speech on August 28, 2008 by using narratives that explicitly illustrated a thorough understanding of policy issues and also criticized Senator McCain for not understanding the grievances of American constituents. Obama immediately establishes an intimate tone with his audience in the beginning of the speech by referencing a personal story from his own life:

Four years ago, I stood before you and told you my story — of the brief union between a young man from Kenya and a young woman from Kansas who weren't well-off or well-known, but shared a belief that in America, their son could achieve whatever he put his mind to. It is that promise that has always set this country apart — that through hard work and sacrifice, each of us can pursue our individual dreams but still come together as one American family, to ensure that the next generation can pursue their dreams as well.

Utilizing a personal narrative towards the beginning of the acceptance speech reaffirms the notions of the Horatio Alger myth setting him apart from his political opponent. The actors

depicted throughout the drama are real-life characters with whom Obama is intimately connected. Obama's mother and father are both conveyed through archetypal character traits whose life stories coincide with the immigrant experience. As previously mentioned, the immigrant experience evokes sentiments of determination, perseverance and independence. The Horatio Alger myth resonates throughout the illustration of Obama's parents as disadvantaged members of society who shared a common vision of success for their young son. Referencing this myth establishes a fantasy theme predicated on conservative ideology in which independent success is achieved through hard work and dedication. A variation of this theme is utilized throughout Obama's campaign speeches but is most explicit when Obama tells the story of his humble beginnings. This theme coincides with a shared American value that postulates that any individual, regardless of their upbringing, can achieve independent success through hard work. Once again, Obama establishes a shared rhetorical vision with his audience, a vision that unifies this shared fantasy of a "rags to riches" story which ultimately provides a credible interpretation of his own success.

The personal narrative of political and personal success also serves as an antithetical narrative to highlight the differences between Obama and his opponent, Senator McCain. Unlike Obama's previous narratives, the stories depicted throughout this speech place direct blame on the failed policies of George W. Bush and the Republican Party. Obama draws distinct connections between McCain and a failed Republican administration through his use of narratives. Specifically, Obama depicts two commonly used archetypal characters throughout the dramas to position himself as the hero and his political opponent as the villain. In short, Obama is setting the stage for the presidential campaign by expounding any accusations of an ability to

lead while setting himself apart from Senator McCain. The first narrative I will explore centers on Obama's attempt to highlight the confounding issues of McCain's voting record:

But the record's clear: John McCain has voted with George Bush 90 percent of the time. Sen. McCain likes to talk about judgment, but really, what does it say about your judgment when you think George Bush has been right more than 90 percent of the time? I don't know about you, but I'm not ready to take a 10 percent chance on change.

The truth is, on issue after issue that would make a difference in your lives — on health care and education and the economy — Sen. McCain has been anything but independent. He said that our economy has made "great progress" under this president. He said that the fundamentals of the economy are strong. And when one of his chief advisers — the man who wrote his economic plan — was talking about the anxiety Americans are feeling, he said that we were just suffering from a "mental recession," and that we've become, and I quote, "a nation of whiners."

A nation of whiners? Tell that to the proud autoworkers at a Michigan plant who, after they found out it was closing, kept showing up every day and working as hard as ever, because they knew there were people who counted on the brakes that they made. Tell that to the military families who shoulder their burdens silently as they watch their loved ones leave for their third or fourth or fifth tour of duty. These are not whiners. They work hard and give back and keep going without complaint. These are the Americans that I know.

In this excerpt, Obama begins by candidly pointing out the fallacies in McCain's perceived maverick persona. As a means of separating himself from his fellow Republicans, McCain and his advisors cultivated a political persona of a willful independent who challenged party politics. Obama disputes this claim by referencing specific facts concerning McCain's tendency to vote alongside President Bush 90 percent of the time. Obama questions McCain's judgment by referencing his legislative allegiance with the Bush administration. In doing so, Obama assigns McCain with the antagonist role within the drama. Obama continues to frame McCain through antagonistic characterization as he undermines his professional judgment by referencing an unfavorable comment made by one of his chief advisors. In a brief statement made by McCain's advisor he mistakenly invalidated the anxiety felt by many Americans in regards to the economic recession. This attack grounds the subsequent narrative by framing McCain as an unsympathetic

politician who is completely out of touch with the grievances of American constituents. Obama has established McCain as the villain of the drama and set up a scenario where he can then step in and speak for the American people.

The rhetorical questions evident at the beginning of the narrative insinuate the absurdity of referring to Americans as whiners. The autoworkers of Michigan are depicted as the heroes of the drama who exemplify principles of civic responsibility and commitment. This characterization establishes a fantasy theme of hard work and commitment. This theme is shared amongst many working class Americans who associate their own experiences with that of the Michigan workers as well. The protagonists of the second narrative (veterans and their families) already possess preconceived notions of heroism. This narrative provides further justification for the claim that McCain is out of touch with American constituents by depicting a character McCain frequently aligns himself with. McCain's close ties with the military and his tendency to express an understanding for the plight of military families illustrates a profound disconnect between the two and ultimately frames Obama as the understanding candidate.

The fantasy theme of this narrative centers on Obama's ability to redirect the blame that McCain inadvertently placed on the American people. In doing so, Obama was able to illustrate stories of struggle, hard work, and perseverance. McCain takes on the role of an antagonist who simply doesn't understand the plight of the American people. Obama frames the heroes of the narrative through a liberal ideological premise that calls upon notions of The New Deal myth. Obama depicts these American heroes as individuals who selflessly give back, without complaint, to contribute to the greater good of society. The rhetorical vision set forth by this narrative alludes to the ideological premise of civic responsibility by depicting specific incidents

where Americans decided to give back to their communities thus reaffirming principles of the New Deal myth.

Obama's reference to the Michigan workers is reiterated yet again when he describes his role in the fight to keep a local plant open in his hometown of Chicago. Obama states, "When I listen to another worker tell me that his factory has shut down, I remember all those men and women on the South Side of Chicago who I stood by and fought for two decades ago after the local steel plant closed down." In this short narrative Obama frames himself in a heroic light by illustrating how he fought alongside steel plant workers in a fight for justice. Interestingly, this narrative also depicts Obama as a true political maverick as he challenges the status quo for continual improvement of workers rights. Obama cleverly framed his own experience by using a trait on which McCain had built his political persona. The narrative suggests that it is Obama who fought next to the steel worker and demanded economic equality, framing him as the unorthodox candidate who rebels against an unfair system. Utilizing a fantasy type commonly associated with Senator McCain encourages wavering constituents to view Obama in a similar light, thus creating shared fantasies from both ends of the political spectrum.

Obama continues to vilify McCain through a powerful narrative that demonstrates a clear dichotomy between both candidates' ideological perceptions of economic success:

Now, I don't believe that Sen. McCain doesn't care what's going on in the lives of Americans. I just think he doesn't know. Why else would he define middle class as someone making under 5 million dollars a year? How else could he propose hundreds of billions in tax breaks for big corporations and oil companies but not one penny of tax relief to more than 100 million Americans? How else could he offer a health care plan that would actually tax people's benefits, or an education plan that would do nothing to help families pay for college, or a plan that would privatize Social Security and gamble your retirement?



Here Obama uses rhetorical questions throughout the narrative to emphasize the absurdity of McCain's views on economic success. By pointing out these blatant misconceptions, Obama is simultaneously revealing multiple fantasy themes that demand the need to support middle-class Americans. Obama pinpoints several instances that allude to McCain's allegiance to another antagonist, a corrupt capitalistic system. Obama describes this allegiance by way of rhetorical questions which serve to highlight the victimization of middle-class Americans. Shared fantasies of a disadvantaged middle-class constitute a greater rhetorical vision which provides a coherent interpretation of the reality of economic inequalities.

Interestingly enough, Obama's use of rhetorical questions throughout this narrative gives the audience a sense of autonomy and freewill so that they can decipher the validity of his argument for themselves. Scholars Rohini Ahluwalia & Robert Burnkrant (2004) note the significance of this rhetorical device in their article "Answering Questions about Questions: A Persuasion Knowledge Perspective for Understanding the Effects of Rhetorical Questions." The authors postulate that "it is possible that the use of rhetorical questions creates the impression of a minimal intent to persuade" (p. 28). The use of rhetorical questions throughout the narrative potentially leads the audience to believe that Obama is confident in his audience's expertise, thus cultivating the perception of a less pressuring, less threatening political character (Ahulwalia & Burnkrant, 2004).

The rhetorical vision of this narrative could also be interpreted as an argument against Fisher's concept of the materialistic myth. Obama frames McCain as withholding ill-conceived ideological assumptions and proposed policies. Through rhetorical questioning, Obama suggests that McCain only understands economic progress through principles of the materialistic myth. According to Fisher (1973) "the materialistic myth does not require a regeneration or sacrifice of

self; rather it promises that if one employs one's energies and talents to the fullest, one will reap the rewards of status, wealth, and power" (p. 161). Obama depicts McCain's perception of economic progress as one which solely relies on the successes of big corporations, oil companies, and Fortune 500 billionaires. In doing so, Obama is able to further distance McCain from average Americans. In addition to depicting McCain's negative ideological assumptions about the economy, Obama simultaneously demonstrates concern for the well-being of average middle-class Americans, thus aligning his ideological perception of economic success through the moralistic myth. Instead of expressing concern for economic stability, Obama expresses concern for the well-being of American constituents therefore emulating a moralistic principle focused on collective prosperity rather than the materialistic gains of individual Americans. Evident within the rhetorical questions are specific references for the need for middle class tax relief, health care policy reform and affordable education for every American family. Framing these references through the moralistic myth emphasizes values that are strategically used to promote altruistic ideology, equality and reform (Fisher, 1973). Throughout the speech Obama continually characterizes the American people as a community whose values signify principles of self-sacrifice and renewal, thus paralleling the moralistic myth with shared values of American constituents and creating a new rhetorical fantasy founded on the principles of an altruistic ideology.

## CHAPTER IV POST-INAUGURAL RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF OBAMA'S PRESIDENTIAL NARRATIVES

Barack Obama's post-inaugural narratives are markedly different from his campaign narratives. In fact, many of the post-inaugural "narratives" I will analyze diverge from customary definitions of narrative altogether. (They do not fully embrace the conventional rhetorical elements that comprise a complete and comprehensive narrative because they lack vital dramatic elements.) Foss (1996) defines narrative as "a way of ordering and presenting a view of the world through a description of a situation involving characters, actions, and settings" (p. 400). This definition assumes that a narrative functions as a rhetorical argument wherein the narrator conveys a convincing interpretation of a group's experience. (Foss, 1996). However, Fisher (1985) argues that all forms of human discourse can be evaluated as narratives because every form of discourse is an "episode in the story of life" (p. 347). In what follows, I analyze Obama's post-inaugural discourse, with a special focus on the portions of his speeches that contained the greatest number of narrative elements (e.g. setting, characters, plot, or action). An evaluation of these narrative elements reveals stark differences from the stories he told on the campaign trail. Specifically, this chapter will argue that Obama's post-inaugural discourse lacks the nuanced characterizations, action themes, and ideological premises found in his pre-election discourse.

Obama's post-inaugural narratives fail to embrace archetypal character themes or concrete characterizations that expose a clear villain or hero within the drama. As a result, his speeches have lost their dramatic element. Bormann's notion of dramatizing allows for clarification of a narrative's central fantasies. These fantasy themes are precipitated by a dramatic situation that allows the narrator to express a clear rhetorical vision. This rhetorical vision encourages audience members to envision themselves within the drama thus constituting a

rhetorical community (Foss, 1996). By not providing clear character types, Obama renders his narratives ineffective because audience members have no way of identifying with the characters.

The failure to articulate a clear character type (e.g. single mom, Michigan autoworker) is only one of the many components missing in Obama's post-inaugural narratives. These stories also lack a guiding ideological principle and underlining values that Obama's previous supporters could relate to. Obama's campaign narratives were composed of two opposing ideological myths to bring forth a unique rhetorical vision based on conservative and liberal philosophies working with one another. The Horatio Alger myth combined with the New Deal myth to represent a rhetorical vision that valued altruistic government policies and simultaneously gave credence to the conservative philosophy of hard work and independent success. Obama references the Horatio Alger myth in his presidential narratives, but he fails to complete the myth by articulating a story of success for the drama's given protagonist. Without the later component of the myth, the narrative falls short of providing a cohesive story that constituents can envision enacting.

Another critical difference evident in Obama's post-inaugural narratives is his unusual framing of the economic recession. Instead of villainizing a corrupt system or policy, Obama blames the recession on the collective failures of the government and its citizens. By blaming Americans for the economic recession Obama alienates his audience and in turn devalues their economic struggles therefore making it increasingly difficult to express any sincere concern or understanding for their grievances.

Similar to the pre-inaugural analysis, this chapter will cover three presidential speeches delivered by Barack Obama, and organized in chronological order. The organizational purpose,

however, deviates slightly from the first analysis. Instead of demonstrating the rhetorical evolution of Obama's campaign discourse, this chapter seeks to understand exactly how Obama attempted to positively frame proposed legislation. Specifically, I compare the differences between Obama's pre- and post-inaugural narratives to shed light on the implications for the use of narrative framing as it relates to political discourse.

The first speech I will examine was delivered on February 24, 2009 before a joint session of Congress. In this speech Obama introduced his highly contested health care reform initiative. Similar to presidents before him, Obama pushed for a somewhat controversial piece of legislation within the first month of his presidency to take advantage of what scholars deem the "honeymoon" phase. Chappell and Keech (1985) refer to the honeymoon phase as "an assumption that voters attach a lesser weight to average performance early in an administration's term" due to the popularity presidents historically have when taking office for the first time (p. 15). Obama's political tactic in pushing a contentious piece of legislation early on is similar in important respects to Ronald Reagan's unveiling of his now famous economic initiative (often referred to as Reaganomics) which he delivered a mere two weeks after taking office. The two legislative initiatives, although very different in content, were similar in that both policies were deemed ambitious and both policies needed to be passed quickly to avoid anticipated opposition (Walker & Reopel, 1986). Walker and Reopel (1986) argue that Reagan's ability to frame legislative successes throughout his presidency was partly predicated on the rhetorical success of positively framing his economic reform initiative (p. 735). The comparison between Obama's controversial health care initiative and the success of Reagan's economic initiative highlight the importance of effective communication within the first year of a president's term in office.

Obama was faced with a great deal of opposition during his push for healthcare reform, suggesting that the “honeymoon” phase didn’t necessarily exist for Obama in the same way it did for Reagan. Reagan delivered a televised address to the nation on September 24, 1981 advocating a firm and steady course for his new economic policy by illustrating the ways in which the mandate would carry into the following year (Walker & Reopel, 1986). Obama delivered a speech to Congress on September 9, 2009 (similar in time to Reagan’s televised address) to clear up public misconceptions about his proposed legislation and to attempt to bridge the contentious gap between Democrats and Republicans. This speech provides significant insight into the rhetorical tactics Obama took in resolving public misconceptions, framing public policy, and promoting party unification.

The final speech analysis marks the first State of the Union address by President Obama delivered on January 27, 2010. Typically, a State of the Union address provides an opportunity for a president to explain, in whole, the current problems facing the nation and how those problems are affecting American citizens. More significantly, it gives a president the opportunity to frame the legislative successes of the administration thus far and propose new legislative solutions to fix the problems that afflict the nation. An analysis of the narratives found within these pivotal speeches illustrates a distinct rhetorical shift from Obama’s campaign discourse by unearthing incomplete, incoherent narratives that fail to speak to American constituents.

#### President Obama’s Rhetorical Debut

Obama’s first public address delivered before a joint session of Congress on February 24, 2009 marked his rhetorical debut as President of the United States. Obama begins his speech by speaking directly to the American citizens:

I have come here tonight not only to address the distinguished men and women in this great Chamber, but to speak frankly and directly to the men and women who sent us here. I know that for many Americans watching right now, the state of our economy is a concern that rises above all others, and rightly so. If you haven't been personally affected by this recession, you probably know someone who has: a friend, a neighbor, a member of your family. You don't need to hear another list of statistics to know that our economy is in crisis, because you live it every day. It's the worry you wake up with and the source of sleepless nights. It's the job you thought you'd retire from but now have lost, the business you built your dreams upon that's now hanging by a thread, the college acceptance letter your child had to put back in the envelope. The impact of this recession is real, and it is everywhere.

Obama begins this address with a narrative that recognizes the anxieties and apprehensions American constituents have about the economic recession. Obama sets up this narrative by explicitly framing his own discourse as direct and frank. In doing so, he establishes a conversational style of discourse that mirrors the rhetorical style of his campaign discourse. In the first line of the narrative Obama highlights the power dynamic between voters and politicians by uncovering the power constituents hold in electing a representative of their choosing. He situates the audience in a position of power that ultimately deemphasizes his own political power. In the same manner, Obama employs inclusive terminology to deemphasize his executive role in the legislative process, thereby stressing the need for unification and bipartisanship.

In a recent study, scholars Connell, Kowal, Sabin, Lamia, and Dannevik, (2010) investigated the start-up rhetoric (opening remarks) utilized by Obama in a number of his presidential addresses from May to September of 2009. Their analysis confirms Obama's skillfulness in emphasizing dialogical interaction between himself and his audience members within the opening remarks of his presidential addresses (Connell et al., 2010). This research is significant because it recognizes oratorical moments of success evident in President Obama's addresses. However, the present chapter will highlight the limits of this sort of approach by

providing a more encompassing lens of evaluation (i.e., an evaluation of Obama's use of narrative framing *throughout* his presidential addresses).

From a narrative perspective, the rhetorical elements of this opening offer unclear character depictions of the drama's central characters. While Obama does recognize the relevance of the economic downturn by offering some sort of credence to feelings of worry and distress felt by American citizens, he fails to include nuanced characters that might promote identification and also highlight the reality of these economic grievances. Obama prefaces the vague character portrayals by stating, "If you haven't been personally affected by the recession, you probably know someone who has." This preface deemphasizes the overarching message of the entire narrative by pointing out individuals who have *not* been negatively affected by the recession. As a result, Obama inadvertently minimizes the importance of the issue and the grievances of those affected by the economic recession. The characters mentioned in the narrative are described as friends, neighbors and family members who struggle with unemployment and rising costs. These characters lack specific traits and motivation which aids in audience identification. Failing to clarify these two key character themes ultimately results in a failure to provide any sort of resolution for the audience members. If audience members can't identify with the characters of the narrative then the drama that unfolds loses all credibility. A narrative's persuasive power is predicated on a clear fantasy theme brought about by the central characters. If the narrative's character portrayals are vague and unclear, the audience cannot envision themselves in the fantasy, and as a result the narrative loses its power to persuade.

In addition, the setting of this narrative is neither textually prominent nor highly developed. Rather, it is metaphorical and bounded. Setting themes often describe the place where the characters act out their roles in a given drama and also serve to illustrate the characteristics of



the scene (Foss, 1996). A metaphorical setting can only be deemed effective when audience members are able to identify with the characters in the drama. Without character identification the setting becomes obsolete therefore rendering the narrative incomplete.

The role of the antagonists in this narrative is of particular interest because it clearly deviates from previous villains evident in Obama's campaign narratives. The antagonists in Obama's campaign narratives (e.g., corporations, capitalism, and insurance companies) suggest that the blame for economic grievances is a direct result of corporate greed and a corrupt system. While these are abstract entities, their presence in a given drama has the potential to elicit a strong emotional reaction from audience members because they respond to a particular ideology. The antagonist in this narrative (the economic recession) has convoluted ties with either entity therefore making it difficult for the audience to place blame on any fixed figure. As a result, Obama disaffirms any association between the narrative's central characters and the antagonist, failing to articulate a credible interpretation of reality.

By way of comparison, Obama's race speech contained a clear depiction of a particular protagonist who was classified in explicit terminology. "The white community" served as a central character that white middle class constituents could identify with. This more concrete character portrayal helped Obama create a credible fantasy audience members could envision. The rhetorical confinements of the previous narrative reveal distinct differences between these two stories, particularly with regard to Obama's use of concrete character themes or the lack thereof.

Obama continues on in the spirit of direct, conversational dialogue as he specifies the shared responsibility of the government and its people in contributing to the weakened state of

the economy. An evaluation of this narrative is particularly significant considering the strong rhetorical stance Obama took throughout his campaign where he framed American constituents as the victims of corporate greed and capitalism. Obama continues with his use of inclusive terminology by expressing the need for *all* parties to accept responsibility for their roles in contributing to the economic recession:

Now, if we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit that for too long, we have not always met these responsibilities as a Government or as a people. I say this not to lay blame or to look backwards, but because it is only by understanding how we arrived at this moment that we'll be able to lift ourselves out of this predicament. The fact is, our economy did not fall into decline overnight, nor did all of our problems begin when the housing market collapsed or the stock market sank. We have known for decades that our survival depends on finding new sources of energy, yet we import more oil today than ever before. The cost of health care eats up more and more of our savings each year, yet we keep delaying reform. Our children will compete for jobs in a global economy that too many of our schools do not prepare them for. And though all these challenges went unsolved, we still managed to spend more money and pile up more debt, both as individuals and through our Government, than ever before.

In this narrative Obama constructs an argument that completely contradicts the ideological premise of his previous narratives. This premise focused on blaming capitalism, corporate greed and the previous administration's policies for the economic sufferings of American constituents. A shift in the role of antagonist is evident in the first line of the narrative as Obama stresses the need for audience members to accept responsibility for the nation's economic downturn. Henceforth, the government and its people are ascribed the role of antagonist in the economic drama that unfolds. Situating the audience as the unfavorable antagonists of the economic decline suggests that American constituents are to blame for their own grievances. This unusual character portrayal creates a problematic fantasy theme and is unlikely to spark the emotions of many Americans.

Obama's inclusive rhetoric functioned as a significant tool of unification throughout his campaign discourse. In the above narrative, Obama uses inclusive rhetoric to illustrate the shared

responsibility of the audience in ignoring the problems that precipitated a massive economic decline. In an apparent attempt to minimize the blame placed on the audience Obama situates himself within the narrative alongside the central characters. By way of inclusive terminology, Obama explains instances in which the collective group contributed to the recession. Each illustration is prefaced with “our economy” or “our problems” as a means of reiterating the theme of “shared responsibility.” However, Obama fails to draw a clear association between the characters in the scene and the actions they perform. For instance, Obama claims that “our survival depends on finding new sources of energy, yet we import more oil today than ever before.” The central characters do not directly participate in importing oil into the country; therefore, the action theme has no credibility and the audience is not likely to envision themselves engaging in this act. Even worse, Obama frames hypothetical solutions for fixing the economy by inadvertently placing the blame on average Americans citizens: “we have known for decades...yet we.” By framing the negligent acts in this manner, Obama is suggesting that the central characters knowingly caused the economic recession. In doing so, Obama ascribes character motivations that frame the central characters (average Americans) as the villains of his drama.

Obama’s campaign narratives made clear distinctions between American citizens and the government, usually by situating them in opposing roles. As a means of emphasizing “shared responsibility” Obama combines the government and American citizens into one narrative role. This is evident towards the end of the narrative when Obama references “our” children and blames their lack of competence on “our” schools. In this drama, children become the victims of a failed educational system that “we” (the people) created. In framing children as the victims of the narrative and American citizens as the antagonists, Obama essentially blames parents for

failing to provide their children with the proper education needed to compete in a global economy.

It is important to note that Obama frequently cited the declining state of the economy throughout his campaign narratives. However, those stories pinpointed consistent characters in polarized roles. Constituents were represented as average, middle-class, Americans with real-life grievances who were the victims of a corrupt capitalistic system and corporate greed (a rhetorical vision that resonated with many people). While the presidential narrative above references a similar scenario, the powerful fantasy theme Obama crafted throughout his campaign narratives is rendered useless because here he fails to isolate the drama's protagonist and antagonist.

After an attempt to articulate the pervasive impact of the economic recession in this speech, Obama shifts his focus to a more solution-oriented approach. The first piece of legislation Obama discusses involves the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Obama begins to frame the legislation in a positive light by describing exactly who has benefited from the implemented policy:

Because of this plan, there are teachers who can now keep their jobs and educate our kids, health care professionals can continue caring for our sick. There are 57 police officers who are still on the streets of Minneapolis tonight because this plan prevented the layoffs their department was about to make. Because of this plan, 95 percent of working households in America will receive a tax cut; a tax cut that you will see in your paychecks beginning on April 1st. Because of this plan, families who are struggling to pay tuition costs will receive a \$2,500 tax credit for all 4 years of college, and Americans who have lost their jobs in this recession will be able to receive extended unemployment benefits and continued health care coverage to help them weather this storm.

Obama identifies several specific characters throughout the narrative (i.e., teachers, children, health care professionals, police officers, families and the unemployed). These characters are similar to the types of characters found in Obama's campaign narratives. The difference between

the two is evident, however, when we examine the role of the protagonist. Instead of placing American citizens in the role of protagonist, Obama frames the legislative policy as the protagonist of the story. Each action that takes place within the narrative is predicated on the benefits of the implemented policy, thus characterizing the policy as the hero of the drama. As a result, the characters listed earlier become secondary to the narrative's central protagonist. Typically, secondary characters are utilized in literature to carry out the mechanics of the fiction; they are also used to highlight the positive characteristics of the drama's central protagonist (Galef, 1995). The same can be said for Obama's use of secondary characters in this narrative. These characters serve as narrative tools to personify the positive acts of the policy, therefore attributing motivation to the policy rather than the people. The pitfall in situating the policy as the protagonist of the narrative is that the audience must struggle to envision themselves within the narrative because the focus has become an abstract figure.

More significantly, this narrative is absent a clear antagonist. In Obama's campaign narratives, rhetorical agency unfolded when an antagonist (e.g., capitalism, corporate greed, corrupt policies) caused some sort of problem for the main character. This rhetorical situation launched the central characters into the plotline of the drama. In these dramas the protagonists/heroes (the American people) were called upon to fight back or fall victim to the actions of the antagonist. The arduous battle between good and evil has tremendous emotional appeal, particularly within the context of political rhetoric wherein rhetorical agency of this nature reinforced political action. In this case, the lack of a clear antagonist and the narrative's overarching purpose to frame the legislative successes of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act supersedes any effort in establishing an intriguing plotline. This ultimately hinders the potential for dramatic intrigue.

Obama's description of the legislative benefits of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is followed by a series of technical references wherein he stresses the need for reform in the areas of renewable energy and financial regulation. When Obama finally reaches the topic of health care reform the speech is nearly three quarters of the way finished. The short narrative below is Obama's only reference to health care reform in the entire speech. He begins by discussing the high costs of health care and the detrimental effects these costs have on American citizens:

And for that same reason, we must also address the crushing cost of health care. This is a cost that now causes a bankruptcy in America every 30 seconds. By the end of the year, it could cause 1.5 million Americans to lose their homes. In the last 8 years, premiums have grown four times faster than wages. And in each of these years, 1 million more Americans have lost their health insurance. It is one of the major reasons why small businesses close their doors and corporations ship jobs overseas. And it's one of the largest and fastest growing parts of our budget. Given these facts, we can no longer afford to put health care reform on hold. We can't afford to do it. It's time.

The narrative elements of this drama are most evident in the action theme that depicts broad illustrations of bankruptcy, foreclosure, unemployment and the loss of health insurance. These actions are carried out by the narrative's central character. The perpetrator of these occurrences is established in the beginning of the text when Obama frames the central character as "the crushing cost of health care." Here again, Obama assigns the role of antagonist to an abstract concept with convoluted ties to a fixed, blamable figure. This characterization is unlikely to elicit strong emotion from his audience because Obama doesn't offer a concrete central character that can be held accountable for the audience's pain and suffering. In addition to the vague character depiction of the narrative's antagonist, this speech includes a similarly vague description of the secondary characters, American citizens. American citizens are confined by their role and their characterization. As previously mentioned, secondary characters take a back seat to the narrative's central character. As a result, the primary focus of the story centers on the actions of

the central character. American citizens become an afterthought and their vague characterizations are less likely than the nuanced characterizations in Obama's pre-election speeches to resonate with particular Americans.

The role of a clear, definitive protagonist is also a critical component to a narrative's success. The failure to include a hero can create a scenario wherein there is no agent who can address the grievances experienced by the characters, and this has the potential to elicit feelings of hopelessness amongst members of the audience. Obama fails to articulate a narrative hero who works to combat the high cost of health care. Instead, he focuses the entirety of the narrative on the negative effects that ultimately overshadow the prospect of a successful policy. Had Obama combined the positive framing of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act with the action themes evident in this narrative, a cohesive narrative might have been articulated. The combined rhetorical elements of these two narratives would have created a fantasy theme of good conquering evil. In other words, the harmful actions of the rising cost of health care could have been combated by a heroic piece of legislature.

Obama ends the narrative by describing the negative effects of high health care costs. "Given these facts," he says, "*we* can no longer afford to put health care reform on hold." By using inclusive terminology Obama places blame on American constituents for the dysfunctional state of the health care system. This final statement implies that the audience hindered reform and contributed to high health care costs. Again, Obama inadvertently positions the audience in the role of an antagonist ultimately alienating himself from his constituents and their grievances.

The final narrative in this speech is the closest Obama gets to mirroring the rhetorical elements of his campaign discourse. Here Obama tells an emotional story of a young girl from

Dillon, South Carolina who embodies the ideological principles of the American Dream myth.

Obama ends his first speech as President by stressing the need for community and bipartisanship:

I think about Ty'Sheoma Bethea, the young girl from that school I visited in Dillon, South Carolina, a place where the ceilings leak, the paint peels off the walls, and they have to stop teaching six times a day because the train barrels by their classroom. She had been told that her school is hopeless, but the other day after class she went to the public library and typed up a letter to the people sitting in this Chamber. She even asked her principal for the money to buy a stamp. The letter asks us for help and says: "We are just students trying to become lawyers, doctors, Congressmen like yourself, and one day President, so we can make a change to not just the State of South Carolina but also the world. We are not quitters." That's what she said: "We are not quitters."

Obama sets the stage for the narrative by depicting a young girl from a small town in South Carolina whose school is falling apart. The setting is described as a school with leaking ceilings and deteriorating walls situated right next to train tracks. This setting creates vivid imagery in the minds of audience members and also establishes an emotional tone that has the potential to elicit both sympathy and dismay. The central character of the narrative, Ty'Sheoma Bethea, is characterized as a young girl who struggles to succeed despite the declining state of her educational environment. This is an interesting persona. The minority child, typically characterized by politicians as victim, appears here as a protagonist fighting for a more conducive learning environment. By framing the young girl in this manner, Obama ascribes the role of hero to the young girl, thus establishing a critical component in creating a cohesive narrative and potential fantasy theme.

Obama strategically incorporates principles of the American Dream myth into the narrative by telling his audience about how the young girl went to the library one day after class and wrote to her Congressmen asking for help. Obama focuses not on her plea for help, but rather on her determination and perseverance. However, despite this positive portrayal, Obama fails to create a truly compelling drama because he does not assign an antagonist to the narrative.



Obama's intention in describing the impoverished state of the school was to provide the narrative with context. Instead, what Obama ended up doing was assigning the role of antagonist to the setting itself by not delineating reasons why the school facilities were failing. In not framing a failed policy or a corrupt system as the antagonist of the story, Obama makes it difficult for the audience to pinpoint exactly who is responsible for the central character's grief. The setting of the narrative is the only clear antagonist in the story. Similar to the antagonists before, this character has blurred ties to any fixed figure the audience can blame for the central character's suffering. Because of this, the narrative loses a critical dramatic element found in most successful fantasy themes.

The main purpose of ending his first address to Congress with this particular narrative is to serve as an abstract metaphor that illustrates the adverse effects of divisive party politics. Throughout the campaign Obama frequently referenced the divisive nature of party politics mainly to emphasize the importance of bipartisanship. The school's leaky ceilings and cracked walls symbolize the supposed failings of the current government. More significant is the symbolic association of the young girl in the narrative and President Obama. The young girl's plea to her congressional representative symbolizes Obama's plea for bipartisanship and allows Obama to frame himself as the ultimate unifier. Through symbolic association Obama is able to unearth the grievances caused by divisive party politics while references to the American dream myth reiterate Obama's firm belief in party unification. The overarching purpose of this narrative is to demonstrate the dire need for politicians to put aside their petty differences and work together in solving the issues that plague American constituents, a theme that appears in all of Obama's narratives I examine in this chapter. While this approach helped Obama get elected, as

president it has often meant that his stories lack a cohesive antagonist against whom an audience might align.

Finally, it is telling that the final and most nuanced narrative in Obama's first speech as president centered on the theme of bipartisanship rather than highlighting a critical piece of legislation—the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. According to Walker and Roepel (1986), “if a new administration wants to exploit, not foreclose, its honeymoon [phase], it must . . . develop strategies to clear the congested campaign agenda and focus on [one idea]” (p.755). As evident in the final narrative, Obama continued with his campaign theme of unification failing to combine the burdens *and* solutions of a given problem into one cohesive story. Furthermore, in adopting a balanced rhetorical approach, the policies Obama *did* reference were lost amongst convoluted, incomplete narratives that failed to articulate any concrete solution or offer constituents any feelings of resolution. The one policy that was positively framed lacked a clear hero and villain. As a result, even Obama's best narrative failed to provide a rhetorical vision that was likely to chain out amongst his constituents.

#### Obama's Reconciliation Speech on Health Care Reform

Obama's address on September 9, 2009 before a joint session of Congress primarily focused on clearing up misconceptions about his proposed health care legislation. Obama's success in eradicating misconceptions with his race speech was predicated on his ability to articulate a cohesive narrative that reshaped conservative and liberal ideologies. The following analysis reveals a distinct ideological shift from Obama's campaign narratives. This evaluation will also highlight the absence of essential narrative elements, drawing upon existing evidence of a distinct rhetorical shift in Obama's presidential narratives.

Obama begins his speech by thanking American constituents and Congress for their efforts in helping him pass the economic stimulus package. He then abruptly shifts to the topic of health care, stating,

Our collective failure to meet this challenge, year after year, decade after decade, has led us to the breaking point. Everyone understands the extraordinary hardships that are placed on the uninsured who live every day just one accident or illness away from bankruptcy. These are not primarily people on welfare; these are middle class Americans. Some can't get insurance on the job. Others are self-employed and can't afford it since buying insurance on your own costs you three times as much as the coverage you get from your employer. Many other Americans who are willing and able to pay are still denied insurance due to previous illnesses or conditions that insurance companies decide are too risky or too expensive to cover.

Similar to the first speech, Obama utilizes inclusive terminology to stress the “collective failure” to repair a broken system. This inclusive rhetoric demonstrates how far-reaching the issue is, but it also sets a critical tone by holding everyone responsible for the failures of the health care system. The only other antagonistic reference found in this narrative is towards the end where Obama briefly mentions insurance companies denying coverage for Americans with preexisting conditions. Given this vague depiction, one could conclude that the central antagonist in this narrative is Obama's audience. Thus, Obama fails to adhere to the rhetorical vision of his campaign narratives that typically framed American constituents as hard-working heroes who were victimized by a corrupt system and its practices. Obama explicitly references middle-class Americans; however, he fails to characterize them as heroes, rather these characters are hoisted by their own petard.

Obama's characterization of the individuals affected by a broken health care system is predicated on a clear distinction he makes between middle-class Americans and Americans who receive welfare. Obama clarifies perceived misconceptions about the beneficiaries of the health care initiative by stating that the majority of Americans who are uninsured are classified as

middle-class citizens. This characterization alienates Americans who fall below the poverty line which ultimately contradicts a key ideological premise frequently referenced throughout Obama's campaign narratives. In doing so, Obama not only alienates lower income Americans, he also undermines their struggle with issues related to health care by deeming them minor characters in the health care narrative.

In separating the policy's beneficiaries from welfare recipients Obama is clearly attempting to dissolve any connotation between the proposed legislation and notions of socialism. Many opponents of the policy deemed the health care initiative as a form of socialized medicine. As one columnist argued, "within the context of modern America's political terminology, the word 'socialist' is considered foul..." (Friesen, 2009). Obama recognized this negative perception, and attempted to address it by drawing clear lines between welfare recipients and the uninsured. This ultimately contradicted the ideological myth of the New Deal; a myth Obama had utilized to frame many of his previous narratives. The predominant focus on middle-class Americans subsequently resulted in the alienation of low-income Americans. The rhetorical vision Obama crafted throughout his campaign was predicated on a unique ideological premise. This premise crafted a specific identity with which constituents came to know President Obama; failing to include this premise has the potential of creating the perception that Obama has betrayed some of his constituents.

Obama references insurance companies towards the end of the last narrative, but he fails to ascribe specific characterizations to establish a fixed actor within the narrative. Instead, Obama simply states that Americans were denied coverage because they were deemed "too risky" or "too expensive" by insurance companies. Obama's campaign utilized emotive language that framed insurance companies as unethical, greedy characters thus cultivating a clear

antagonist with corrupt motivations. That sort of dramatic framing is absent in this narrative and as a result the drama is less than compelling.

Obama's most blatant use of narrative framing is evident in the story that follows. This narrative is the first and only clear illustration of actual citizens who are suffering from the lack of health insurance:

One man from Illinois lost his coverage in the middle of chemotherapy because his insurer found that he hadn't reported gallstones that he didn't even know about. They delayed his treatment, and he died because of it. Another woman from Texas was about to get a double mastectomy when her insurance company canceled her policy because she forgot to declare a case of acne. By the time she had her insurance reinstated, her breast cancer had more than doubled in size. That is heart-breaking, it is wrong, and no one should be treated that way in the United States of America.

In this short narrative, Obama describes two American citizens who suffered from cancer and were denied coverage at a critical point in their treatment. The first character is described as a man from Illinois who fails to report a preexisting condition. As a result, his chemotherapy was delayed, and he died because of it. The insurer is depicted as the antagonist of the story.

However, Obama fails to elaborate on the corrupt practice of health insurance companies who seek out these illnesses as a means of cutting corners and saving money. Had he done so, the insurer would have been cast as a truer villain. This short drama takes up a total of two sentences and fails to provide the sort of details necessary to promote a genuine rhetorical vision.

Obama quickly transitions into the next story that depicts a woman from Texas who forgot to report a case of acne and ultimately lost her health insurance. The woman's breast cancer doubled in size in the time it took to reinstate her health insurance. Similar to the first narrative, the antagonistic qualities of the insurer are implicit and vague. Obama implies that the insurer is acting in a corrupt manner by referencing inconsequential ailments (i.e., acne) to demonstrate the absurdity of the pre-existing conditions clause that enables insurers to drop their

customers to increase profits. The issue with this reference is that it doesn't explicitly present a complete drama for the audience to envision. Instead, Obama calls on the audience to infer that the antagonist is acting in a corrupt manner.

A clear transition is evident mid-way through the speech as Obama begins clarifying specific misconceptions individuals have about the health care reform. This is especially significant in light of Reagan's successful strategy of focusing on policy implementation during his televised address on September 24<sup>th</sup>. By focusing on policy implementation Reagan was able to advocate a steady economic course and focus on specific advantages of his policy (Walker & Reopel, 1986, p. 746). Obama's attempt to clarify misconceptions gave the impression the policy was poor and in need of defense, which ultimately overshadowed the positive aspects of the policy. Tensions noticeably rose as Obama explicitly blamed the media and many Republicans for spreading inflammatory lies about a bureaucratic panel that supposedly had the power to kill off senior citizens. Obama denounces these accusations, stating, "It is a lie, plain and simple."

The second misconception Obama addressed in this speech was the issue of covering illegal immigrants. An unexpected outburst from a Republican Representative from the state of South Carolina caused quite a stir during and after the public address which ultimately detracted from the speech itself. Speaker of the house, Nancy Pelosi, was visibly appalled by the comment, but Obama maintained his composure, brushed off the insult, and continued on, discussing the misconception that the proposed policy would enable a government takeover of the health care system:

So let me set the record straight here. My guiding principle is, and always has been, that consumers do better when there is choice and competition. That's how the market works. Unfortunately, in 34 States, 75 percent of the insurance market is controlled by five or fewer companies. In Alabama, almost 90 percent is controlled by just one company. And

without competition, the price of insurance goes up and quality goes down. And it makes it easier for insurance companies to treat their customers badly by cherry-picking the healthiest individuals and trying to drop the sickest, by overcharging small businesses who have no leverage, and by jacking up rates.

The opening lines of this narrative reveal Obama's attempt to frame the health care policy in a manner that answers his critics who see the policy as "socialized medicine." Obama indirectly gives credence to the inner workings of a capitalistic economy by affirming the positive effects of choice and competition. This affirmation is followed by a critical assessment of the current state of the system wherein Obama highlights a failure to uphold these "principles."

Obama frames insurance companies in this narrative as monopolistic enterprises that knowingly refuse to help sick individuals. The insurance companies are personified when Obama describes how they handpick healthy customers and purposely raise fees to avoid covering sick customers. For the first time Obama ascribes character motivation to the antagonist therefore classifying insurance companies as the villains of the narrative. This character portrayal resembles the antagonists depicted throughout Obama's campaign narratives who were habitually described as cruel entities that knowingly took advantage of American constituents.

However, Obama completely undermines the antagonistic role of insurance companies in the narrative that follows:

Insurance executives don't do this because they're bad people; they do it because it's profitable. As one former insurance executive testified before Congress, insurance companies are not only encouraged to find reasons to drop the seriously ill, they are rewarded for it. All of this is in service of meeting what this former executive called "Wall Street's relentless profit expectations."

This character portrayal humanizes the previous narrative's antagonist by pointing out that those who engage in the negative behavior are good people who are just doing what they're told. The

antagonist here is shrouded in mystery (who is responsible for “Wall Street’s relentless profit expectations?”) and, therefore, Obama ultimately avoids assigning direct blame to any fixed entity. By the end of this narrative the audience is unsure who or what is responsible for the corrupt practices of health insurance companies. Obama’s technical language and conflicting messages produce a convoluted, incomplete narrative (hardly the sort of rhetorical vision that might chain out amongst constituents).

#### President Obama’s First State of the Union Address

On January 27, 2010 Obama delivered his first State of the Union address. The primary focus of this speech was to address any concerns about the current state of the economy and provide clear legislative solutions to move the nation toward economic recovery. Similar to his other post-election speeches, Obama uses incomplete narratives throughout the State of the Union address. These stories lack critical narrative elements that help establish a clear fantasy theme that might offer a credible interpretation of reality for audience members. In this case, the narratives include mixed ideological premises and obscure character portrayals that hinder the opportunity for audience identification.

Obama begins his address by describing the troubling state of the nation when he first stepped into office. He lists a series of issues ranging from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to the accrument of government debt. Obama references political experts who warned of “a second great depression” and credits his administration for acting “immediately and aggressively.” In an attempt to frame his administrative success in preventing “a second great depression” Obama also highlights the insurmountable obstacles his administration faced upon taking office. Obama’s purpose in beginning with this reference was to alleviate some of the blame his



administration had received for the weakened state of the economy. Thus, he attempts to give voice to some of the grievances experienced by Americans across the country as a result of the economic recession:

But the devastation remains. One in ten Americans still cannot find work. Many businesses have shuttered. Home values have declined. Small towns and rural communities have been hit especially hard. And for those who'd already known poverty, life's become that much harder. This recession has also compounded the burdens that America's families have been dealing with for decades: the burden of working harder and longer for less, of being unable to save enough to retire or help kids with college. So I know the anxieties that are out there right now. They're not new. These struggles are the reason I ran for President. These struggles are what I've witnessed for years, in places like Elkhart, Indiana; Galesburg, Illinois. I hear about them in the letters that I read each night. The toughest to read are those written by children asking why they have to move from their home, asking when their mom or dad will be able to go back to work. For these Americans and so many others, change has not come fast enough.

The characters referenced throughout this narrative cover a wide range of categorizations. They include the unemployed, small businesses, the housing market, and those living in poverty.

Beginning the first series of narratives with such expansive character depictions demonstrates the pervasive effect of the economic recession. The pitfall to this tactic, however, is that these characters are undifferentiated from one another since the action of the narrative is the same for each individual character. Obama notes how hard life has become, but fails to provide specific action themes that help bring the story and its characters to life. The overarching theme of hardship was utilized throughout Obama's campaign narratives. The difference between the two lies in the specificity of the grievances and action themes that unfolded throughout the pre and post-election narratives.

In his pre-election narratives, Obama regularly presented nuanced antagonistic characters whose detrimental actions led to the suffering of the story's protagonists. The characters referenced at the beginning of this narrative are suffering from an abstract figure (i.e., the

recession) whose harmful acts are vague and obscure, making it difficult for the audience to envision a responsible party. Failing to provide this key narrative element prevents Obama from providing a resolution for audience members. Obama also discusses the declining values of homes and references hard hit rural communities. This is the only attempt he makes in establishing a concrete setting for the narrative. By associating the recession with rural communities Obama hopes to illustrate how far-reaching his care and concern is for Americans who are struggling with economic instability. However, the narrative lacks a specific action related to the economic hardships experienced by audience members in rural communities. Thus, this narrative does not capitalize on the potential of the setting to establish identification with constituents from rural communities.

Obama briefly mentions the impact of the recession on American families by noting their inability to save for retirement or to help their children with the high cost of tuition. Here he reveals his personal agenda when he claims that hearing about the struggles of American families is what persuaded him to run for President. While this statement illustrates a compassionate point of view, it also alludes to notions of an ineffectual government. Obama reiterates that notion by pointing out that these economic grievances are “not new” and that he has witnessed these struggles for years in places like Elkhart, Indiana and Galesburg, Illinois. The distinct difference between many of Obama’s campaign narratives and this particular narrative is most evident in Obama’s use of descriptive terminology. Descriptive language allowed Obama to individualize the grievances and personify the narrative’s central characters in his pre-election discourse. Obama’s lack of specificity in this narrative signifies a detached speaker who seems out of touch with the economic grievances of American constituents.

Obama's first attempt to positively frame a policy begins with a narrative concerning The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. In the following narrative Obama makes an attempt to resolve feelings of insecurity with regards to the high unemployment rate. This piece of legislation, commonly referred to as the stimulus, was signed into law on February 17, 2009, nearly a full year prior to this speech. Obama focuses on economic opportunities by indicating specific situations where the policy has helped create employment opportunities:

The plan that has made all of this possible, from the tax cuts to the jobs, is the Recovery Act. That's right, the Recovery Act, also known as the stimulus bill. Economists on the left and the right say this bill has helped save jobs and avert disaster. But you don't have to take their word for it. Talk to the small business in Phoenix that will triple its workforce because of the Recovery Act. Talk to the window manufacturer in Philadelphia who said he used to be skeptical about the Recovery Act, until he had to add two more work shifts just because of the business it created. Talk to the single teacher raising two kids who was told by her principal in the last week of school that because of the Recovery Act, she wouldn't be laid off after all.

Obama's use of repetition in the beginning of the narrative emphasizes an authoritative voice and also challenges opponents who suggested the stimulus was ineffectual. The pointed comment towards the beginning ("That's right, the Recovery Act") reflects a somewhat presumptuous attitude towards the stimulus and ultimately establishes a smug tone towards the critics who were vehemently opposed to the policy. The three characters referenced throughout the story personify the positive actions of the narrative's central protagonist – The American Recovery Act. The policy acts as a hero within the narrative that bolsters a weak economy and provides employment to the narrative's secondary characters. These secondary characters are illustrated through vague, ambiguous terminology to emphasize the far-reaching qualities of the policy itself.

The first character introduced represents an actual business in Phoenix, Arizona that benefited from the stimulus by way of increasing its workforce. The second character is described as a window manufacturer from Philadelphia who was skeptical of the stimulus

package until he saw an increase in sales which allowed him to add additional work shifts for his employees. The final character is depicted as a single teacher with two kids whose job was protected because of the provisions set forth in the policy. Each story represents a situation where employment was created or secured, thus illustrating the positive nature of the legislation. Similar to the first speech, this narrative focuses on framing one positive component of the policy by emphasizing its ability to create and secure employment. In doing so, Obama leaves out a large pool of constituents who already have secured employment therefore failing to illustrate the far-reaching benefits of the stimulus. Another confounding issue with this narrative is Obama's failure to humanize any of the secondary characters. As previously mentioned, secondary characters typically take a backseat to the narrative's protagonist. The only personified character in the entire narrative is the policy which is ultimately perceived as an abstract figure given its non-human quality. The narrative's protagonist also predominately helps characters who are *already* employed. This narrative disregards citizens who are struggling with unemployment by failing to illustrate an instance where the stimulus has helped a specific unemployed American find work. Furthermore, the narrative fails to designate a true antagonist. The narrative depicts instances where employment was secured, but fails to frame the story in a dramatic manner that highlights the evil actions of a concrete antagonist. As a result, the stories are less dramatic than they might have been, and the policy cannot be seen in a genuinely heroic light.

The narrative framing of this piece of legislation is the only reference Obama makes to a specific policy. The American Reinvestment and Recovery Act had already been passed and implemented nearly a year prior to this speech. The health care policy, which had been proposed around the same time, had yet to be passed. The final two narratives discussed below are the only

instances in which Obama discusses this contentious piece of legislation. In these narratives Obama attempts to fan the flames of controversy that have surrounded the topic by directly confronting the accusations that he has ulterior motives for promoting the policy:

Now, let's clear a few things up. I didn't choose to tackle this issue to get some legislative victory under my belt. And by now it should be fairly obvious that I didn't take on health care because it was good politics. I took on health care because of the stories I've heard from Americans with preexisting conditions whose lives depend on getting coverage, patients who've been denied coverage, families, even those with insurance, who are just one illness away from financial ruin.

In similar fashion to the Recovery Act narrative, Obama begins by establishing an authoritative voice and clarifying any misconceptions about his own political motives. He even points out the backlash of the proposed policy to demonstrate an unbiased political position and emphasize his genuine concern for the wellbeing of American citizens.

It is particularly significant that Obama begins each policy narrative with a stern, almost defensive, tone. Typically, Obama's pre-election narratives began by placing the American constituents at the forefront of the story. These policy narratives repeatedly start with a clarifying statement that gives the impression of a defensive, authoritative narrator. This short narrative illustrates Obama as the central character. The secondary characters represent American citizens who suffer from the high costs of health insurance. Similar to previous presidential narratives, these characters are undifferentiated from one another and lack any specific character traits. The action theme provides a limited vision of the grievances experienced by Americans struggling with the high cost of health care. Obama describes the characters affected by an inadequate health care system as those with preexisting conditions and those who suffer from the high costs of insurance.

It is important to note that the narrative disregards audience members who cannot afford any form of health coverage. Instead, Obama focuses on citizens with preexisting conditions whose coverage was denied and insured families struggling with the high costs of health care. One could assume that these specific references are an attempt by Obama to distance the proposed policy from his opponent's claim that the policy is simply "socialized medicine." However, these characterizations are likely to alienate lower-income Americans who are unable to afford any form of health insurance. Thus, Obama fails to maintain to the fantasy themes of his campaign narratives—narratives infused with the ideological premise of the New Deal myth that established a commitment to helping the less fortunate and promoting principles of a collectivist's society.

Later in his speech, Obama continues discussing hypothetical situations that illustrate the fiscal benefits of decreasing the national deficit:

Our approach would preserve the right of Americans who have insurance to keep their doctor and their plan. It would reduce costs and premiums for millions of families and businesses. And according to the Congressional Budget Office, the independent organization that both parties have cited as the official scorekeeper for Congress, our approach would bring down the deficit by as much as \$1 trillion over the next two decades. Still, this is a complex issue, and the longer it was debated, the more skeptical people became. I take my share of the blame for not explaining it more clearly to the American people. And I know that with all the lobbying and horse-trading, the process left most Americans wondering, "What's in it for me?"

Obama reaffirms the need to protect American citizens who suffer from preexisting conditions by stating that the proposed policy would preserve the right for Americans to keep their doctors and choose their own health care plan. Again, Obama is seen as defending the policy from his opponent's accusations by emphasizing the patient's right to choose, which reaffirms a conservative economic principle.

Obama then transitions by reframing the policy as a cost-effective approach to tackling the issue of health care reform. This strategic move also works to demystify accusations that the health care policy will increase the national deficit. Obama references the Congressional National Budget Office and legitimizes the institution by emphasizing the fact that they are an independent organization that both parties rely upon for statistical information as it relates to the economy. Obama's use of technical language and primary focus on the fiscal benefits of the policy creates a confounding theme that deviates from the ideological premise of his campaign narratives. In tailoring this narrative to address conservative ideology, Obama fails to illustrate the grievances of the uninsured and specific examples where citizens suffer from the high cost of health care. The narrative ends with a rhetorical question to emphasize the public's need for clarification. Shockingly enough, Obama completely ignores *his own question* by reverting back to discussing the economic advantages of the policy. Instead of using the question as means of reflecting on his constituents' grievances, Obama continues to defend the policy to members of Congress.

This narrative is particularly significant because it conveys an important theme evident throughout Obama's post-inaugural discourse. This theme centers on Obama's disregard for the grievances experienced by American citizens. The final narrative exemplifies this theme by illustrating a narrator who appears more focused on catering to conservative Americans than telling the sort of stories about his constituents that got him elected. Obama's presidential narratives portray American citizens as undifferentiated characters who suffer at the hands of an obscure figure. These characterizations fail to include specific qualities or motives with which the audience might likely identify. Obama also failed to include a concrete antagonist to serve as the responsible party for citizens' pain and suffering. The failure to include the ideological

premise of the New Deal contributed to a major shift in Obama's political discourse. His tendency to cater to conservative constituents demonstrates a confounding ideological shift that left many constituents wondering: Where did Obama go?



## CHAPTER V CONCLUSIONS

### Major Critical Findings

Utilizing Ernest Bormann's fantasy-theme method for understanding the rhetorical differences between Obama's campaign and presidential narratives provided evidence of a distinct shift in Obama's political discourse. The purpose of a fantasy theme analysis is to unveil specific fantasy themes that "describe the world from the group's perspective" (Foss, 1996, p. 123). This evaluation is accomplished through a careful examination of the three necessary elements that make up a given drama: setting, characters, and actions (Foss, 1996). These fantasy themes work in cohesion to establish a unique rhetorical vision that provides a credible and coherent interpretation of reality for members of the audience (Foss, 1996). A comparative analysis of these dramatic elements revealed a clear difference in Obama's use of narrative framing as it relates to his pre- and post-inaugural narratives.

An analysis of Obama's pre-inaugural narratives reveals clearly defined actors who are formed through common archetypal characterizations. Obama pits the narratives' protagonists and antagonists against one another by characterizing them as heroes and villains. The heroes and villains of these stories were ascribed specific character traits and motives, and this enabled Obama to present clear action themes of good versus evil. The protagonists in these narratives were typically characterized as middle class heroes who took the form of Michigan autoworkers, military families, college students, or working mothers. By ascribing specific character traits Obama was able to provide his audience with central characters they could identify with. The antagonists were characterized through more abstract terminology (i.e. corrupt system, capitalism), but were still assigned evil motives that illustrated a specific moralistic code. This

moral code aligned with a unique ideological premise that subsumed both conservative and liberal values. Most notable was Obama's reference to the Horatio Alger myth and The New Deal myth, the combination of which constituted a rhetorical vision that valued altruistic government policies and simultaneously gave credence to the conservative philosophy of hard work and independent success. The fantasy themes were modeled after these principles by centering on concepts of community, civic responsibility, hard-work, and reform. These shared fantasy themes carried throughout Obama's campaign narratives and helped him to successfully promote a unique rhetorical vision. Constituents were able to envision themselves within these narratives therefore constituting a rhetorical community of individual constituents unified by a common symbolic ground and motivated by Obama's fantasy theme.

The post-inaugural analysis reveals distinct differences with regards to character portrayals and ideological premises. More specifically, these narratives fail to embrace archetypal character themes or specific traits that expose a clear villain or hero within the drama. As a result, Obama's rhetoric has lost much of its dramatic force. The characters were portrayed as vague, obscure figures that lacked basic character motivation. Giving a character motivation allows the audience to assess the underlying morals and values of the narrative. Establishing a moral or immoral character is critical in creating a persuasive story an audience can identify with and get behind. The stories also lack a guiding ideological principle Americans could relate to. Obama's predominant focus on the materialistic benefits of his proposed legislation left little room for the liberal ideological principle of community. The failure to include both conservative and liberal ideologies resulted in a confounding rhetorical vision that misrepresented the politician constituents had come to know and understand. In summary, Obama's presidential narratives

stray from customary definitions of persuasive narratives because they do not fully embrace traditional rhetorical elements that comprise a complete, comprehensive drama.

### Critical Implications

Chapter Two highlights the persuasive nature of a narrative's antagonist and ideological premise as it relates to political rhetoric. Obama's use of archetypes grounded the narratives in Chapter Two by way of prominent characterizations that featured an overarching shared experience. These depictions allow for an inescapably salient representation of the human experience. More specifically, archetypal characters embody basic human motivations and allow constituents to direct those motivational energies towards the speaker's recommendations. Without archetypal characters, listeners have nowhere to direct their action. Throughout Obama's campaign specific traits and motivations delineated his narratives' central protagonists and antagonists. These characterizations cultivated a powerful fantasy theme that carried throughout the campaign narratives and ultimately projected a unique rhetorical vision constituents associated with Obama. This rhetorical vision constitutes a concept referred to as fantasy type.

Bormann's concept of fantasy type holds that "once a fantasy type has been developed rhetors do not need to provide the audience details about the specific characters engaging in actions in particular settings" (Foss, 1996, p. 124). One could postulate that Obama did not provide the audience with specific characterizations once he had been elected because he had already crafted a powerful rhetorical vision throughout his campaign (something that Bormann suggests rhetors can do). Obama clearly maintained similar narrative themes by depicting constituent grievances, but he did so by merely referring to the characters and the actions without

providing the specific details that were necessary *in this particular case* to create a complete narrative and rhetorical vision. Bormann's concept suggests that the powerful rhetorical vision Obama cultivated throughout the campaign would have carried through in his presidential narratives by simply referring to similar characters, actions, and settings referenced in his campaign narratives. However, the rhetorical vision Obama established throughout his campaign represented a complex ideological premise constituted on notions of bipartisanship.

In the article "Deconstructing Left and Right: The Case for Bipartisanship," Eugene Goodheart (2010) discussed the adversity Obama faced in utilizing a bipartisan approach. Goodheart writes "the Right tends to reject his views outright and wholesale, making his critics on the Left wonder why he persists in pursuing bipartisanship, considering it a lost cause. The Left (from where Obama originates) views his reluctance to embrace its views fully as a sign of timidity" (2010, p. 292). Relaying a message of bipartisanship requires a complex fantasy theme that encompasses ideological premises that transcend party lines. In his post-election discourse, Obama utilized a simplistic fantasy type that ultimately failed to capture the complex nature of bipartisanship that had helped frame him as a rhetorical hero. As we saw in Chapter Four, the biggest danger in using a simplistic fantasy type to depict a complex political approach is that it can create incomplete dramas and inadvertently cast individuals who were previously described as heroes (i.e., various constituents) as villains.

Obama's use of a simplistic fantasy type also suggests a distinct shift in the ideological premise of his pre- and post-inaugural narratives. Ideologies allow us to ground our political selves within a given narrative. Narratives that embrace a unique ideological premise mirror some sort of fantasy with which the audience is familiar. Obama's campaign narratives were predicated on two distinct myths. Obama's combined use of the Horatio Alger myth and the New

Deal myth allowed for a unique rhetorical vision that depicted a candidate who was able to speak to and embody both conservative and liberal ideology. Rowland and Jones (2007) discussed this unique vision in their article “Recasting the American Dream and American Politics: Barack Obama’s Key Note Address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention.” Rowland and Jones note that for the last twenty-five years conservative pundits have controlled the American Dream myth (p. 427). This strong association with conservatism depicts an American Dream which privileges “individual over communal responsibility” and “has dominated political discourse” (p. 427). Obama’s recasting of the American Dream depended upon “a precise balance between communal and individual values” (p. 427). This recasting of the American Dream was made possible, in part, by Obama’s diverse racial background which allowed him to utilize the New Deal myth. Kenneth Burke (1937) refers to the New Deal myth as the liberal movement towards socialism that “draws upon the collective credit of the government for support of its private fortunes” (p. 98). Burke (1937) renames liberal policies that surround the myth as the “socialization of losses” (p. 98). This collectivist approach was combined by Obama with the Horatio Alger myth which supports conservative principles of independent success in order to create a unique moralistic frame for his campaign narratives.

As previously noted, Obama’s post-election narratives focused on the materialistic benefits of his proposed policies. In fact, even the narratives Obama used to describe constituent grievances relied heavily on materialistic values as they relate to economic stability. These narratives suggest a distinct shift from the moralistic frame utilized in Obama’s campaign narratives to a materialistic frame that promotes free enterprise. The materialistic frame rarely requires self-sacrifice or a regeneration of self, but instead it promises “that if one employs one’s energies and talents to the fullest, one will reap the rewards of status, wealth, and power” (Fisher,

1973, p. 161). This frame supports individual over communal responsibility. More significantly, the materialistic myth helps to promote the ideology that less government involvement is better. This shift suggests that Obama reverted back to the conservative vision of the American Dream referenced earlier by Rowland and Jones. The aforementioned tenets of the materialistic frame can illuminate Obama's rhetorical failures in his State of the Union address where he catered to the conservative arguments by focusing on the economic advantages of the proposed health care initiative. Obama's health care plan sought to provide services to the less fortunate by way of government support. In utilizing the materialistic myth, he essentially argued against a key component of his own rationale for the policy.

#### Limitations

One possible limitation to this research concerns the speeches selected for analysis. The goal in choosing these particular speeches was to find a wide variety of remarks that addressed significant issues throughout the campaign and throughout Obama's first year in office. However, it is difficult to distinguish important speeches and unimportant speeches given that there is no meaningful, unbiased measurement of discernment. In order to provide an extensive, all-encompassing analysis, the scope was narrowed down to six speeches—three pre-inaugural speeches and three presidential speeches. Given this scope, it was not possible to fully assess the collective rhetorical patterns of the president's political discourse.

Second, there is no general agreement as to the correlation between presidential discourse and public opinion. This is partially due to the confounding variables that effect a President's popularity. Thus, while I feel comfortable arguing that Obama's post-inaugural speeches were unlikely to chain out amongst constituents, a thorough analysis of media effects (especially as

they pertain to class, gender, and so forth) was outside the scope of this thesis. However, the selected methodology allows for a greater understanding of the complex web of ideology, narratives, and rhetorical shifts. Thus, this thesis has significant implications for the study of mediated political discourse.

Finally, since President Obama has not yet carried out his term, it is difficult to make a holistic assessment about the evolution of his political discourse. It will be interesting to see if Obama reverts back to his pre-inaugural narratives by recapturing the rhetorical voice of his campaign narratives which provided a complete narrative coupled with a clear ideological premise once the election cycle begins again.

#### Suggestions for Future Research

My intention for this thesis was to provide an explanation as to why so many constituents feel Obama has lost touch with the American people. The success of Obama's campaign was predicated on his ability to tell compelling stories of the grievances experienced by every day Americans. While there have been numerous studies that have examined the narratives Obama utilized throughout his campaign for president, this analysis indicates the need for a more in-depth evaluation of Obama's post-inaugural narratives. Obama's critics claim that he did not deliver "on the promise to be a transformative president" (Goodheart, 2010, p. 293). Obama's ability to reshape a conservative version of the American Dream myth gave the false impression of a discernibly liberal politician. Rowland and Jones (2007) confirm this notion in their analysis of Obama's keynote address at the Democratic National Convention. They state "what hasn't been recognized, however, about Obama's widely praised speech is that it was more about narrative than a defense of public policies associated with liberalism as ideology...he said

relatively little about particular policies, but instead focused on reclaiming the romantic narrative we have identified for liberals” (p. 428). Obama’s narrative incorporated liberal and conservative ideology therefore demonstrating a strong desire for bipartisanship. This thesis highlights Obama’s powerful use of fantasy themes which proved ineffectual in his post-inaugural narratives. Obama’s failure to include key narrative elements that identified with his constituents resulted in a failure to capture the American experience. Drew Westin (2011) said it best, “Americans needed their president to tell them a story that made sense of what they had just been through, what caused it, and how it was going to end. They needed to hear that he understood what they were feeling, that he would track down those responsible for their pain and suffering, and that he would restore order and safety.” Obama’s commitment to bipartisanship prohibited the effectual use of an antagonist character. Explanations regarding the dichotomy between bipartisanship and narrative framing would work to further clarify the confounding rhetorical issues faced by President Obama.

Furthermore, few rhetorical scholars have studied the effects of rhizomic metaphors as they relate to presidential rhetoric. Obama utilized this metaphor in his powerful campaign trope “yes we can” which ultimately served as tool of unification for his many followers. Kephart and Rafferty (2009) trace the evolution of the “yes we can” slogan and how it provides a critical case for hyper-modern campaign rhetoric (p. 7). The theoretical framework backing Kephart and Rafferty’s argument lies in the rhetorical rhizomic metaphor. According to the authors, “the term was developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri (1987) as a metaphor for knowledge that rejects top-down binary thinking and instead adopts a fragmented, non-hierarchical (horizontal) approach to knowledge allowing for multiple points of entry and departure in the construction of knowledge” (Kephart & Rafferty, 2009, p. 7). Rejecting contemporary viewpoints in traditional



academia allows the authors to study Barack Obama's campaign rhetoric outside of a "discrete, bounded, and purely rational" context (p. 8). The authors argue that Barack Obama's use of the political trope "yes we can" serves as a persuasive tool for rhetorical agency and inclusivity. The trope's "open-endedness provide[s]...limitless possibility to move through communicative ecologies in its development and presentation" which ultimately allowed Obama to transcend political, racial, and social boundaries and deliver an egalitarian message of hope and change (Kephart & Rafferty, 2009, p. 14). Based upon this understanding, one could postulate that rhetorical rhizomic metaphors could serve the same purpose in establishing a persuasive bipartisan message.

Several political pundits have suggested that Obama's commitment to bipartisanship was the key contributing factor to the steep decline in public support. My thesis supports this notion but delves much deeper into the rhetorical implications of a shift in Obama's political discourse. My hope for this thesis was to understand why such a beloved candidate had lost so much of his support almost immediately after taking office. Senator Obama had visited the University where I received my undergraduate degree and delivered a moving speech to an audience of students and professors. He told stories about college graduates struggling to find work and pay back student loans. These stories resonated with me and my fellow classmates. I believed in Obama's message of change and I wanted to see him succeed. Similar to fellow supporters, I too felt somewhat betrayed when Obama took office and appeared to have taken on an entirely different political voice. This confounding rhetorical shift had not been extensively explained or clarified because of a lack of focus on Obama's post-inaugural stories. Drew Westen (2011) stated "The stories our leaders tell us matter, probably almost as much as the stories our parents tell us as children, because they orient us to what is, what could be, and what should be; to the worldviews

they hold and to the values they hold sacred” (para. 2). This master’s thesis has attempted to clarify the confounding shift in Obama’s political discourse by examining the stories that made him so popular and unearthing fundamental differences which I believe led to a decline in public support.

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