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*“The Imagined Presidency”: Political Communication  
as “Narrative” and “Performance” – A Case Study of  
Barack Obama’s 2008 Presidential Campaign*

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*Es kam nicht darauf an, wie Martin Krüger [...] wirklich, ja ob er wirklich war. Kam es darauf an, ob Jesus von Nazareth aktenmäßig gelebt hatte? Ein Bild von ihm existierte, das der Welt einleuchtete. Durch dieses Bild war, nur durch dieses Bild, Wahrheit entstanden.*

Lion Feuchtwanger – Erfolg

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# 1. Introduction: Political Culture, Imagination and Meaning-Making in the Public Sphere

The political world of make-believe mingles with the real world in strange ways, for the make-believe world may often mold the real one. (Morgan 223)

National identities and their manifestation in governmental bodies and institutions depend on cultural imagination and meaning-making. The performative use of imagination is crucial for establishing and maintaining political power. This is of particular relevance with regard to the 21<sup>st</sup> century's political sphere.

Anthropologist David Kertzer remarks that “the state is invisible; it must be personified before it can be seen, symbolized before it can be loved, imagined before it can be conceived” (Kertzer 6). The socio-political institutions and processes of collective meaning-making that have defined human society since the 19<sup>th</sup> century developed from simpler social systems. According to cultural sociologist Jeffrey Alexander, ritual-driven symbolic communication and clear-cut social roles have become complex social systems defined largely by contingency and open-ended consensus building (“Pragmatics” 529). The explosion of complexity in a globalized and hypermedialized world, leading to a dissolution of boundaries at both, the micro and macro levels, has permanently changed the modern political sphere.

These circumstances have caused an increasing fragmentation of socio-political collectives, frequently leaving their individual members disoriented. This development requires political actors seeking power to respond appropriately. In what Andreas Dörner has called the modern “Multioptionsgesellschaft” that is defined by “Enttraditionalisierung” (Dörner, “Wahlkämpfe” 33) it has more than ever become necessary that the political process and its political actors bring abstract meaning systems to life, make them understandable, and revive the value and symbol systems underlying collective identities. During elections, the dramatic enactment of politics is an especially powerful tool.

The masterful storytelling by Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign illustrates how contemporary collective meaning-making in the political sphere is increasingly dependent on making credible imaginative offers and successfully staging them. Barack Obama, to a yet-unknown degree, re-fused the American collective by regenerating the public's belief in fundamental American narratives. The key to his election was his ability to performatively imagine a future version of the American Presidency, by telling stories about himself and staging them. Thereby he successfully offered himself to voters as an accessible and verisimilar version of their own collective self.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This strategy is also reflected in a training concept for volunteer campaigners applied by the Obama campaign in 2008. The training concept was developed by Harvard public policy scholar Marshall Ganz. Ganz's “Public Narrative Participant Guide” (Marshall, “Public Narrative”) revolves around the principle of “telling your story of self” (Marshall, “Public Narrative” 7). Ganz specifies that successful campaigning depends on performing different stories: “A ‘story of self’ tells why you have been called to serve. [A] ‘story of us’ communicates why our community in particular is called to act, and why we in particular have the capacity to lead. [A] ‘story of now’ communicates the urgent challenge we are called upon to face now” (Marshall, “Public Narrative” 7).

In this dissertation, I show that established concepts like the “Rhetorical Presidency” (Thuerow/Bessette 1981, Tulis 1987) and the “Symbolic Presidency” (Denton 1982, Hinkley 1990) require conceptual refinement, as they no longer adequately characterize the functional logic of the American Presidency in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s idea of the “Imagined Community” (1983) my project elaborates a new conceptualization of what Louis Koenig called the “Imagined Presidency” (1968).

Obama’s first presidential campaign serves as the dissertation’s case study, demonstrating how deeply rooted cultural concepts in the American socio-political sphere require an imaginative resignification of their identity-establishing power in the fragmented, globalized and hyper-mediated world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. My reading of the 2008 election campaign shows how collective identity formation resulted from Obama’s integration of core American collective self-concepts into storytelling, performing himself as a 21<sup>st</sup> century American Adam, bipartisan unifier, post-racial American and communitarian American Dreamer. In this context I also analyze Michelle Obama’s role in her husband’s 2008 campaign.

In the past decade, researchers in cultural studies, sociology, communication studies, and performance studies have increasingly focused on the performative implementation of imaginative structures in politics. It is generally acknowledged that major political institutions and the political sphere as a whole rely on “the centrality of images”, the power of “imaginative rhetoric” and “the role imagination plays in individual and social governance” (Butler, *Imagination* 16). The institution of the American presidency is at the center of a collective and national meaning-making process, and the presidency, according to Jeff Smith, was “born in storytelling” (*Presidents* 8).

The paper first reviews research at the crossroads of cultural studies, sociology and political science on collective meaning-making in the socio-political sphere. My analysis of collective identities and their underlying formation processes aligns with these approaches, and is particularly relevant for the examination of the United States of America which, in the words of Sacvan Bercovitch, “invented the meaning of their community, that is, ex verbo” (174). The United States, as one of the first modern democratic nation-states, was founded on abstract rules and ideals. With its highly heterogeneous population, America depended more than any modern European state on imagination to maintain its identity as a people.

Clinton Rossiter claims that the highest American political office is “the one-man distillation of the American people reflecting their perceived dignity and majesty” (4), and Robert Denton observes that the President must be “literally all things to all people” (Symbolic 2). As the power center of American political culture, the Presidency has always played a crucial role in the nation’s collective meaning-making process.

As communication scholar Vanessa Beasley notes, the American Presidency breathes life into “the otherwise abstract notion of American political community” (Beasley 8). I also see the American Presidency as central to the process of collective invention and

meaning-making in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A theoretical contextualization of the American presidential office will therefore serve as the conceptual foundation for this project.

Following Bruce, Gronebeck and Miller, I treat “the political campaign and election as an enlarged process of social construction” (8). In the interactive and ritualistic process of political election campaigning, the American people project their collective identity and define themselves as a nation. According to Andreas Dörner elections are won by the candidate who distinguishes his own offer of meaning-making and interpretation from his opponents’, by effectively staging and performing political meanings the voters can identify with (“Wahlkämpfe” 29). My concept of the Imagined Presidency takes this notion as fundamental. To establish my concept of the Imagined Presidency, I will examine theoretical approaches to performative staging in the public sphere and the role that narratives play in the context of related collective meaning-making processes. These concepts will then later, in the case study, serve as analytical tools to reveal and deconstruct the theatrical dimension of presidential storytelling in case of Barack Obama’s 2008 election campaign.

The idea of the Imagined Presidency, based on Anderson’s concept of the “imagined political community” (6), is central to my analysis. On these grounds my case study then shows how Obama used this socio-cultural process in a particularly effective manner and will explore the role that performative staging of narratives play in the process of regenerating the weakened projective and symbolic dimension of the public sphere.

With the establishment of my concept of the Imagined Presidency and my dissertation’s case study, I illustrate the indispensable role of imaginative processes in times when collective identity formation has become increasingly difficult. Also my case study will show how in his election campaign Barack Obama is unsurpassed in “creating” the presidency as a narrative.

Toward the end of his first term in office, during his second election campaign, Obama was asked to describe his biggest mistake. He replied,

[w]hen I think about what we’ve done well and what we haven’t done well, the mistake of my first term – couple of years – was thinking that this job was just about getting the policy right. And that’s important. But the nature of this office is also to tell a story to the American people that gives them a sense of unity and purpose and optimism [...] It’s funny – when I ran, everybody said, well he can give a good speech but can he actually manage the job? [...] And in my first two years, I think the notion was, “Well, he’s been juggling and managing a lot of stuff, but where’s the story that tells us where he’s going?” And I think that was a legitimate criticism. (“Interview CBS This Morning”, 2012)

In other words, one might say that the President, in order to successfully achieve and run the presidential office in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has to act as “narrator-in-chief” (Bai, “Still Waiting”).

## 2. A Cultural Sociology Perspective on Political Culture

This project takes a social constructivist viewpoint, centered on two notions: first, the world around us can be considered a text (Nullmeier 131); second, identity formation is “an interactional accomplishment, produced and negotiated in discourse” (Schiffrin 97). The focus on the performative dimension of nation and identity assumes that political processes are not defined by the rationality principle or purely pragmatic goal orientation. In the early 1990s anthropologist David Kertzer wrote,

[s]tudies of politics in modern states, with a few important exceptions, pay little attention to the role of the symbolic in the political process. In many studies, politics is examined a give and take in which people simply follow their material interests. These material interests are often taken to be self-evident. In other studies, people are viewed as consumers in a public relations market, or as empty slates socialized to reproduce the political views of their parents, peers or neighbors. (7)

Cultural mechanisms have been frequently underestimated or ignored in favor of a rationalized scientific analysis of socio-economic systems. However, as political scientist Murray Edelman notes, “most of the human race’s political history has been a record of the triumph of mystification over strategies to maximize well-being” (*Political Spectacle* 126). As Edelman makes clear, without the cultural dimension, affective experience and identification processes would be impossible, and thus the formation and maintenance of national identity would fail. A democratic system would have to be built on pure reason and a system of enforcement. This however contradicts the root paradigm of liberal political systems. Consensual socio-political systems depend on idealism and value based support, expressed symbolically (Devine 111). A “Willensnation”, such as the United States, relies on culture to bind identity. Language, religion and geography are not sufficient:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. [...] A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future. (Renan qtd. in Bhabha 19)

The use of symbols, myths, and narratives in political communication establishes influence and identity without coercion or force – in other words, through “soft power”, or “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” (Nye 256).

Andreas Reckwitz argues that political actors achieve political power through cultural hegemony, by formulating fundamental ideas about society such as liberty, equality, national interests, progressiveness, family ideals, etc. (50). Symbols, narratives and myths



expressed through language, visual staging and performative acting make abstract political concepts concrete and comprehensible. This is particularly true in the United States, with its ideational model of identity (Beasley 62). Drawing on their culture, political actors compete offer the most attractive identity and gain public support.

The media transmits the imagined political image to society. As we will see, political actors use media channels to present a plausible and culturally coherent performance. Cultural sociology emphasizes that the cultural patterns of perception and action in daily life are implicit; they are not consciously recognized (Dörner, “Politische Kulturforschung” 589). Karen Johnson-Cartee observes,

People use symbols without questioning or thinking about their origin. We use symbols nonchalantly without realizing the social, political, or personal ramifications for having used them. We often accept for ourselves the symbols created by others without analyzing the merits or appropriatedness of their symbolic logic. (15-16)

The electorate generally does not consciously process the symbolic dimension of the political sphere. The cultural structures and meaning-making systems examined in this thesis are largely invisible to most members of modern society. The lack of conscious awareness opens a performance space that turns culture into an even more powerful tool of political management.

Recognizing social reality as the negotiation of individual experiences in a shared world requires addressing how, and by what means, situations are defined and interpreted, as well as nature of the social construction of reality.<sup>2</sup> Social actors navigate their construction processes by simplifying reality, using symbols and idealized categories. The unconscious process of interpreting shared reality is an attractive source of potential power for those operating consciously within society’s structures. In contemporary postmodern nation-states, “taken-for-granted” knowledge lacks the power it once had. Understanding why this is so requires further attention to the interactional character of the meaning-making process.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, constructivist interpretations challenged the rational-choice view of social actors as homo oeconomicus, that is, “rational, self-centered wealth maximizers” (Adams 99). The long-established utilitarian and rational choice perspectives severely limit the potential for identity-formation studies. In contrast, a constructivist approach reveals the “Goffman”, who defines reality through his active creation of reality (Hitzler, “Goffmensch” 453).

Most culturally-informed analyses draw on Max Weber’s premise “[s]oziales Handeln deutend [zu] verstehen und dadurch seinen Ablauf und seine Wirkungen ursächlich [zu] erklären” (*Wirtschaft* 1). Weber considers qualitative analysis of social realities necessary for full understanding.

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<sup>2</sup> See: Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Systematic Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Anchor, 1967. Print.

[e]s gibt keine schlechthin „objektive“ wissenschaftliche Analyse [...] der „sozialen Erscheinungen“. [...] Die Sozialwissenschaft, die wir treiben wollen, ist eine Wirklichkeitswissenschaft. Wir wollen die uns umgebende Wirklichkeit des Lebens, in welches wir hineingestellt sind, in ihrer Eigenart verstehen – den Zusammenhang und die Kulturbedeutung ihrer einzelnen Erscheinungen. (Weber, „Objektivität“ 170)

Eric Voegelin established a similar line of argument, adding a historical dimension. In order to grasp the “Ordnung des Menschen in der Gesellschaft” (Voegelin, “Memorandum” 71), he says, one must include historical cultural knowledge.

Representations of society must be seen as “sinnerfülltes Kosmion” or “kleine sinnhaltige Welt” (Voegelin, *Neue Wissenschaft* 67). We access this only through the symbols representing the order (Voegelin, *Neue Wissenschaft* 43). Voegelin says, “every society is constituted by a self-interpretation of its order; and this is why every known society in history brings forth symbols – mythical, revelatory, apocalyptic, gnostic, theological, ideological, and so on – whereby it expresses its experience of order” (Voegelin, *Anamnesis* 342). Voegelin can be seen as an early proponent of Cultural Semiotics, which aims to expose the implicit meaning-making structures that define social entities. Analyses of socio-political power structures cannot force their models onto reality. “Hidden” meaning structures can only be revealed and decoded through qualitative research.

Alternative approaches such as Voegelin’s expanded the field of political science. In anthropology, Clifford Geertz developed similar ideas<sup>3</sup>. Thus culturally-informed perspectives were used in political science long before research on political culture became an independent scholarly field in the 1960s. In *The Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel L. Huntington writes that since the end of the Cold War, “cultural identity is what is most meaningful to most people” (20). The research on political culture addresses exactly this. The overall aim of research on political culture is to examine

durch welche Besonderheiten historischer, ökonomischer, kultureller, geopolitischer, ethnischer, religiöser, sozialstruktureller Art sich die politische Kultur eines bestimmten Territoriums auszeichne und welche Auswirkungen diese Besonderheiten auf die Entstehung und Funktionsweise des auf dieses Territorium etablierten politischen Systems haben. (Löffler 128-129)

The eclecticism of cultural studies and its integration of a broad range of other research subfields offers a broad perspective on a research topic defined by a “bedeutungsgeladene Diffusität” (Soeffner, “Kulturmythos” 4).

Political culture became an acknowledged field of social science research with the 1963 publication of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba’s *Civic Culture* studies. They created the first structured analysis of political culture, investigating a measurable parameter: attitudes. First aim of the *Civic Culture* study by Almond and Verba is to inquire political

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<sup>3</sup> According to Geertz culture is “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life” (*The Interpretation of Cultures* 89).

attitudes towards a political system. The aggregation of attitudes thus then constitutes the political culture of a political system (Almond/Verba 153). The second aim of Almond and Verba's study is the establishment of typologies of political systems (114) and the question of what defines a system's stability. The focus on typological categorization of political attitudes in different state forms reflects the pronounced interest in communist states and related issues during the Cold War era.

Lowell Dittmer criticizes their study as reductionist for equating political culture with "an aggregate of individual psychological orientations towards politics" (554). A focus on individual attitudes as the "subjektive Dimension der gesellschaftlichen Grundlagen politischer Systeme" (Berg-Schlosser 345), as political scientist Dirk Berg-Schlosser suggests, constricts research and oversimplifies complex and multifaceted collective environments. "What is it about political culture that is inherently 'cultural'", Dittmer asks (557). He uses symbols as basic units of analysis to overcome assumptions that political culture functions primarily to reinforce the status quo and minimize of intra-system conflict (562).

Dittmer's definition entails that political culture is not only conservative or passive; we must acknowledge its innate empowering potency. Further Dittmer argues that political culture, like language, has an "underlying grammatical structure" (555). Following Ernst Cassirer's cultural semiotics, he defines political culture "as a system of connotations codified to interpret a denotative system of messages" (Dittmer 565).

In German cultural sociology, Karl Rohe complemented and developed Dittmer's approach. He recommends a hermeneutic approach, and applying a "softer concept of culture" (Rohe 328). He rejects the exclusive concern with participation, value and ideology research, and shifts the focus to tacit cultural knowledge structures, such as symbols and narratives. Rohe believes that political culture is best seen as a framework filled with connotations, within which rationally and emotionally acting political agents practice politics (333).

As the role of mass media in political discourse increased, the meaning construction process itself became the subject of research. The "Inhaltsseite" of political culture relates to the cognitive and normative dimension, while its "Ausdrucksseite" attends to the affective and, particularly, the aesthetic dimension (Rohe 338). The "Ausdrucksseite" of political culture is essential to the collective identity and thus to a political system's viability. Extending Dittmer's semiotic approach, Rohe examines the performance space of the creative process because "speech acts and performative acts do not take place in empty space" but must always be seen in the context of "stored political meaning structures and formulas" (Rohe 339). The performative dimension is a means to an end, and essential for creating and sustaining a socio-political entity. What makes Rohe's approach most interesting in the context of my research is his view that the political sphere is defined by its semiotic dimension based on interactive processes.

More recently, Jeffrey Alexander developed a theoretical approach that counters the static notion of political culture. Like Rohe, he rejects the tendency to see cultural nar-

ratives as epiphenomenal. Alexander reconceptualizes meaning-making processes in our global environment of heterogeneous collectives. Identity is an increasingly diverse mediated fantasy that engages all members of an audience (Nimmo 8). In complex democratic and post-democratic power structures<sup>4</sup>, he argues, socio-political rituals have lost descriptive and prescriptive power (Alexander, “Pragmatics” 527). Structures formerly taken for granted have lost authority and legitimacy, and social processes are increasingly characterized by contingency and fragmentation (Alexander, “Pragmatics” 544).

Political actors, as they compete to present the most persuasive and verisimilar interpretation of social realities, confront increasing performative challenges. The convincing embodiment and effective re-empowerment of power and identity structures has become their key task. These contemporary socio-political developments require an appropriate research program. When dealing with sign-based systems, the process of meaning-making is central, and for this reason I analyze the case study of the 2008 Obama campaign from a social constructivist perspective.

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<sup>4</sup> See: Beyme, Klaus. *Von der Postdemokratie zur Neodemokratie*. Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 2013. Print.; Crouch, Colin. *Post-Democracy*. London: John Wiley & Sons, 2004. Print.; Della Porta, Donatella. *Can Democracy be Saved?*. London: Polity Press, 2013. Print.

### 3. Defining the American Presidency of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Political Communication and the Imaginative

Before examining Obama's 2008 presidential election campaign, we turn for context to a historical overview of the American Presidency, its functions in the American socio-political sphere, and how it has changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is necessary in order to get a better understanding of why the presidential office remains central to American political culture and meaning-making processes taking place in America's political sphere of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Korzi 293).

Further it is necessary to get a closer understanding of the central mechanisms and processes underlying the imaginative and performative creation of socio-political collectives. This is of particular relevance when examining collective meaning-making processes taking place in an environment that is defined by a continuously increasing degree of individualization (Beck 22/29) and dissolution of traditional boundaries defining the nation as collective entity (Pauković/Vidović 221).

#### 3.1. The Presidency in American Political Culture

As Udo Kempf and Jürgen Hartman claim "der [amerikanische] Präsident ist letztlich die sichtbarste Verkörperung eines demokratischen Prozesses, in dem alle wahlberechtigten Amerikaner über dieselbe personelle politische Alternative entscheiden können" (209). The political system of the United States centers around the office of the President on many different levels. As Gary Gregg puts it:

By placing so many responsibilities in that office and by investing so much of our hopes in incumbent presidents and presidential candidates, the American people and the nation's political class have made a pact with our presidents. [...] Without formal constitutional amendment we have reformed the political system and have made the presidency rather than congress the first branch of government and our primary institution in political representation in the United States today. (188)

Why do American citizens ascribe such a wide set of expectations to the institution of the American Presidency? And what exactly are these expectations?

As Robert Denton and Jim Kuypers note, most American kindergarten students have knowledge of past and present presidential officeholders (58)<sup>5</sup>. Public expectations of the President, in Thomas Cronin's description, are impossible to fulfill: "The unwritten Presidential job description, the one we carry around in our heads, calls for a President to be a visionary problem-solver, a unifying force for the nation, a healer and sage" ("Anti-Politics").

The "final greatness of the presidency", in Clinton Rossiter's words, "lies in the truth that it is not just an office of incredible power but a breeding ground of indestructible

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<sup>5</sup> Also see: Easton, David & Robert Hess. "The Child's Political World." *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 6 (1962): 229-246. Print.

myth” (103). This expanded role the chief of state plays in American political culture, derives from America’s specific history as a nation that emerged from a culturally and ethnically diverse civic public to become the modern world’s first republican democracy.

### 3.1.1. The History and Development of the American Presidential Office

The emergence of the American nation quickly became a grand narrative: “in the New World the self-made nation was as familiar as the self-made man” (Commager 4). Nation-building in the New World was defined by a unique factor. Unlike the Old World, “in America the state came before the nation” (Commager 3), dependent on nothing other than “clarity of conviction” (55), as Vanessa Beasley termed it.

To cement conviction and compensate for the lack of shared history and tradition, early American political leaders developed concrete, easily recognized images, symbols, and stories (Commager 3). On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1776, the very day the Declaration of Independence was proclaimed, the Second Continental Congress formed a committee to create a seal and a motto for the new nation (“Original Design Great Seal”). This illustrates the importance of American origins as a “political experiment”. As Hans Vorländer describes it, the origins of American national identity, “in seiner historischen Voraussetzungen” is very different from “Nationalismen europäischer Staaten”. The latter can be described in “Begriffen organisch gewachsener, zum Teil völkischer, zum Teil kultureller Traditionen und Staatslichkeit” while the American case “hingegen über politische und kulturelle Definitionen, über die Verständigung von Prämissen der Amerikanischen Gesellschaft bestimmt werden kann” (Voländer 36). In other words: the American republic was not founded on an already existing and stable cultural identity. It was affixed to collective will, a “Willensnation” (Holtz/Von Dahlern 181).

In addition to a “missing past” and a clear orientation toward the future<sup>6</sup>, the newly-formed United States depended completely on its members’ adherence to its values and principles:

Die Menschen wanderten freiwillig nach Amerika aus und waren beseelt von einem dort besseren Leben. Unabhängig von ihrer Herkunft entwickelten Sie dort den freien Willen, einen eignen Staat aufzubauen, dessen freiheitliches und republikanisches Grundprinzip überzeugend wirkte. (Holtz/Von Dahlern 182)

The liabilities of relying on abstract principles and value systems were overcome in various ways, all of which center around a creative imaginative process.

For example, the meaning of “[t]he American people” had yet to be determined; in the beginning, it was a fictional concept (Smith, *Presidents* 8). In promoting political ideals which were merely potential sources of collective identity, the Continental Army’s first Commander in Chief, George Washington, became a highly visible symbol of abstract

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<sup>6</sup> See: Reichardt, Ulfried. “The ‘Times’ of the New World: Future-Oriented, American Culture, and Globalization.” *Theories of American Culture, Theories American Studies*. Ed. Winfried Fluck. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2003. 247-268. Print.



concepts of independence and nationhood.

Abstract notions require a material form, but the colonists' experiments with independence and republicanism also needed a unifying focus. Given the sectionalism in the founding colonies (Schwartz 82), interest groups needed something to concretely represent the collective momentum of their mission. Writing in opposition to federalism in the debate over constitutional ratification, the anonymous "Federal Farmer" wrote:

In every large collection of people there must be a visible point serving as a common center in the government, toward which to draw their eyes and attachments. The constitution must fix a man, or a congress of men, superior in the opinion of the people to the most popular men in the different parts of the community, else the people will be apt to divide and follow their respective leaders. ("Federal Farmer No. 14", 1788)

Emile Durkheim's conception of totemism is useful for understanding the seemingly natural need to focus a national formation process on "one man", as the American Farmer puts it. According to Durkheim, totemism characterizes a quasi-religious clan-cult whose adherents feel spiritually connected with the totem (277). In order to define and distinguish itself, the clan adopts a totem representing "the species of things which serves to designate the clan collectively" (Durkheim 102). Durkheim describes the self-concept of a nation as a solidly unified clan-like group (102). By extension, the equivalent to a clan totem in American society is the head of state – both the institution and its incumbent<sup>7</sup>.

From the beginning, the American people sought great men to serve as leaders who they could then revere as heroes (Denton/Woodward, *Political Communication* 206). This natural impulse can be explained by recognizing that "the totem is before all a symbol, a material expression of something else" (Durkheim 206). The god of a clan, represented by the totem, is nothing other than the personification and visual representation of the clan itself (Durkheim 206). Heroic figures are not admired so much for what they are, as for what they reveal and reflect about the people themselves (Denton/Woodward, *Political Communication* 207). By this means, individuals can strongly identify with the abstract institutions of their nation and political system. For the United States, it was essential to make the abstraction of nationhood concrete and easy to recognize. The American head of state became the designated embodiment of the American political system (Schwartz 20).

America's transformation from a colony defined by the British system of rule to an independent national entity required adapting the rejected monarchical structures to support the new republican order. George Washington, as first Commander in Chief, leader of the new republic, and George III's *de facto* replacement, was the starting point for the creative process of building an accessible new political order. "[T]hrough the good will occasioned by his mediation of national, local, and military interests, [he became]

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the central role of the American presidential office in this context see: Schwartz, Barry. *George Washington – The Making of an American Symbol*. New York: Free Press, 1987. Print.; Schwartz, Barry. *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory*. Chicago: UP of Chicago, 2000. Print.

a focal point of America's political consensus" (Schwartz 27). In the years following the war, Washington remained a focus of national life and defined the office of the American presidency.

The new nation needed unifying elements and the hero of the Revolutionary War was the ideal choice. "His prestige was so great that he commanded the loyalty of the leaders of the different factions as well as the general populace. Thus, in a political entity marked by much cleavage he, in his own person, provided a basis for unity" (Lipset 22). David Hackett Fisher calls Washington "the symbol of America's republican cause" (428). As "symbol of the cause" (Flexner qtd. in Schwartz, "Heroic Leadership" 21), different narratives were built around him, and these became fused with the office of the American presidency in its formative years.

Washington was more than a "mere symbol" of the new nation, Lipset writes. "[H]e legitimize[d] the state, the new secular government, by endowing it with his 'gift of grace'" (Lipset 18). The new government needed legitimacy. An atmosphere of trust between citizen and administration was indispensable. The colonies' split from the British Empire also symbolized a final separation between the innocent new world on the American continent and the corrupted world of Old Europe (Tuveson viii). With all they had experienced under British rule and an innate suspicion of powerful leadership stigmatized as the source of Old World corruption, the American people were extremely suspicious of powerful men, including their revered war hero. Washington's immediate resignation at war's end, and his perceived indifference to military and political power, were seen as signs of strong moral character (Schwartz 48). His resignation "transformed Washington into an absolutely credible symbol of the nation's [...] morality" (Schwartz 48).

After the war and before the adoption of the United States Constitution, there was a lively discussion of the characteristics necessary for the future president. Alexander Hamilton argued that the presidential office could only be filled by someone "pre-eminent for ability and virtue" (qtd. in Miller 220). John Adams claimed that "[p]ublic Virtue cannot exist in a Nation without private virtue, and public Virtue is the only foundation of Republics" (qtd. in Cooper 221). Respect for his resignation made Washington a role model of morality and civic virtue (Schwartz 108)<sup>8</sup>. He was described as the "American Cincinnatus"<sup>9</sup>. Numerous popular biographical accounts and iconographic depictions of the private Washington at his plantation home Mount Vernon, Virginia<sup>10</sup>, demonstrate the relevance of these narratives<sup>11</sup>. The depiction of Washington's private life in many

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<sup>8</sup> Also see: "Parson Weems: Biography – A Life of the Clever Cleric who invented Washington's 'Little Hatchet.'" *The New York Times*. New York Times Archive. 9 Mar. 1911. Web. 20 Oct. 2010. <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9B02E6D61331E233A2575AC1A9659C946096D6CF>>; Weems, Mason Locke. *The Life of Washington*. Ed. Peter S. Onuf. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1996. Print.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the conception of George Washington as "American Cincinnatus", see: Wills, Garry. *Cincinnatus – George Washington and the Enlightenment*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1984. Print.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example: David Edwin, *George Washington and Family* (1798); Brutus Stearns. *Washington as a Farmer at Mount Vernon* (1851); Rossiter and Mignot, *Washington and Lafayette at Mount Vernon* (1859); Farrell. *General Lafayette's Departure from Mount Vernon 1784* (1860).

<sup>11</sup> In his farewell speech, Washington himself claimed "virtue and morality" to be "a necessary spring of popular government" (qtd. in Litke 79).



paintings, prints and stories as ordinary, something others would want to imitate, allayed fear that he would become a tyrant (Thistlewaite, “Illustrious Washington”; Schwartz, “Heroic Leadership” 25-26). His dutiful return from his private retreat to a post-war political career as president of the Constitutional Convention and first President of the United States furthered his image as the caring and selfless “Father of the Nation”.<sup>12</sup>

Because of the cult-like adoration of Washington as a moral character who selflessly shouldered responsibility for the nation, moral authority and national leadership became identified with the presidential office. And because Americans identified Washington with the nation, he sanctified the new American republic and its self-concept (Schwartz 45), defining the institution of the presidency, and public expectations towards it, to this very day.

In summary, the American presidency, with its Constitutionally vague “responsibilities, dimensions, and roles of the office”<sup>13</sup> (Denton, *Moral* 25) met the challenges of the new republic “so well primarily because of its fundamentally symbolic nature” (Denton, *Moral* 25). Washington’s defining impact as the office’s first incumbent and “founding father” made the American Presidency “ein Körper, in dem Zeichen- und Machtfülle zusammenkommen”, and turned the American President into “eine Symbolgeschichte Amerikas” that allows the whole nation to understand itself (Distelmeyer 24).

### 3.1.2. The Pragmatic and Symbolic Functions of the Presidency

Understanding the American presidency requires differentiating two dimensions of the office: the real and the symbolic. Barbara Hinckley notes that, “[p]eople compartmentalize the presidency – separating the symbolic from all the other things the president supposedly is or does” (*Symbolic* 2). The question is how the pragmatic and symbolic dimensions of the office interact and influence each other to make “something present that is not in fact present” (Gregg 13), something that provides “symbolic equivalence” (Gregg 5) to the American political self.

As the only nationally elected public official, the President is the clearest exemplar of political legitimacy. He embodies the nation’s fundamental values and ideals, a legitimizing force (Beasley 63) functioning as the “[v]oice of the people” (Rossiter 27). Franklin D. Roosevelt expressed this in his second inaugural address: “In taking again the oath of office as President of the United States, I assume the solemn obligation of leading the American people forward along the road over which they have chosen to advance. While his duty rests upon me I shall do my utmost to speak their purpose and to do their will” (“Second Inaugural Address”, 1939). As Gary Gregg puts it, the symbolic nature of the office stabilizes the tension between “presidential power and democratic accountability through the system of institutional representation” (2). Because American society is

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<sup>12</sup> For more on Washington’s representation in popular culture such as paintings etc., see: Rasmussen, William and Robert Tilton. *George Washington – The Man behind the Myths*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999. Print.

<sup>13</sup> See: “Article II – Section 1-4” U.S. Constitution. *Legal Information Insitute*. Cornell University Law School. Web. 13 Mar. 2012. <<https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/articleii>>.

deeply skeptical of political leadership<sup>14</sup>, presidential candidates and incumbents embrace the representational imperative of the office.

In addition to symbolizing and legitimizing American government, a second major function of the presidency is moral leadership and orientation (Stuckey 29). The image of the President as a national moral role model continued after Washington, as evidenced by statements from subsequent presidents. For example, Franklin D. Roosevelt declared:

The Presidency is not merely an administrative office. That is the least of it. It is more than an engineering job, efficient or inefficient. It is pre-eminently a place of moral leadership. All our great presidents were leaders of thought at times when certain historic ideas in the life of the nation had to be clarified. (qtd. in Grover 17)

In his eyes, the office carried the power to reconstitute the moral purpose of American life (Shogan 61)<sup>15</sup>. Campaigning in 1960, John F. Kennedy, too, emphasized the moral authority of the presidential office:

When our next President takes office in January he must be prepared to move forward on three broad fronts: as a legislative leader, as Chief Executive, and as a moral leader. [...] [A]s a moral leader, the next President must play his role in interpreting the great moral issues which are involved in our crusade for human rights. He must exert the great moral and educational force of his office to help bring about equal access to public facilities from churches to lunch counters – and to support the right of every American to stand up for his rights – even if that means sitting down for them. (“Speech Shrine Auditorium”, 1960)

These examples illustrate the link between moral leadership and the institution of the presidency. The incumbent becomes the focus of the society’s moral self-concept and serves as active moral guide.

The President also acts as a symbolic “chief legislator” (Schmidt et. al 388), although he is not empowered to actually introduce legislation, vote on it, or participate in other lawmaking activities by the legislative branch. His role in legislation involves signing or vetoing legislation, proposing new legislation for introduction by members of Congress, and negotiating the national budget with Congress. The practical dimension of the presidential office has ramifications for the negotiative exchange between the President and the politically engaged public. When the President acts as “chief legislator”, he articulates “the principles of the Constitution but also a set of policies that respond to the problems of contemporary society” (Ellis 33). As agenda setter, the President is “charged with defining, articulating, and focusing the national character and national mission” (Stuckey 39). Because he commands national attention, the President can inspire public discussion and focus the attention of political actors on specific issues (Kingdon 23). As Theodore

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<sup>14</sup> For more on this aspect, see: Schwartz, Barry. *George Washington – The Making of an American Symbol*. New York: Free Press, 1987. Print.; Wills, Garry. *Cincinnatus – George Washington and the Enlightenment*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1984. Print.

<sup>15</sup> For more on this aspect, also see: Shogan, Colleen. “The Politics of Reinforcing Moral Rhetoric.” *The Moral Rhetoric of American Presidents*. Ed. Colleen J. Shogan. Austin: Texas A & M University Press, 2007. 44-83. Print.

Roosevelt said, “I suppose my critics will call that preaching, but I have got such a bully pulpit!” (qtd. in Abbott, “Review Roosevelt’s Administration”). Using the so-called “bully pulpit”, the President guides discourse about the government’s political agenda and the permanent quest for a stable, accessible national identity.

As chief executive, responsible for executing laws, appointing national officials, granting pardons and conferring national honors, the President functions as a representative of the entire government (Hinckley 38), as well as the nation’s “figurehead” (Campbell, *Rhetorical* 188) or “ceremonial head” (Gregg 27). Literally and symbolically representing the government, the President is a “cognitive aid” (Greenstein 130-131) who makes national unity explicit and meaningful. Seen as “above the heat of political strife” (Rossiter 17), the President is the sole government office empowered to negotiate for the nation as a whole.

Finally, public identity discourses are affected by the President’s role as military Commander-in-Chief and chief diplomat. In 1800, John Marshall, then a member of Congress, described the representative function of the American President in a statement that clearly conveys the symbolic importance of the presidency for foreign affairs:

The president is the sole organ of the nation in its external relations, and its sole representative with foreign nations. Of consequence, the demand of a foreign nation can only be made on him. He possesses the whole executive power. He holds and directs the force of the nation. Of consequence, any act to be performed by the force of the nation is to be performed through him. (qtd. in Oster 247)

The American President is *the* institutional entity who negotiates foreign policy on behalf of the American people. He thus represents the nation both internally and externally.

The American presidency displays the nation’s greatness to the world and makes it tangible to the American public. Occupying the most important and visible intersection between America and other nations, the President symbolizes America’s power (Stuckey 26) and sense of superiority. According to Colin Campbell, all presidents have dutifully served this function as “the U.S. presidency has dominated the skyline of high political office in advanced democracies at least since World War II.” (*Executive* 6). As a result of both the original construction of the office, and the cultivation and negotiation of presidential authority over the years, the President occupies a unique position, speaking in the name of the American people while also speaking to the nation about the nation.

### 3.1.3. Presidential Roles in the American Civil Religious Landscape

As the nation’s ceremonial head, the President is a “living symbol” (Gregg 3). This is evident on Inauguration Day and during other national celebrations like Memorial Day and the Fourth of July<sup>16</sup>. On such occasions, the President is “the one figure who draws together the people’s hopes and fears for the political future” (Barber 4). The most widely

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<sup>16</sup> These events can be considered rituals or ritual-like events that reaffirm a collective’s national ideals and their ongoing validity (Tsang/Woods 5-6).

recognized presidential symbolic roles are “priest, patriarch, prophet, judge, father figure, chief or shepherd” (Arnold et al. 8). Michael Novak collapses these into three categories: the king, the prophet, and the priest (*King* 52).

The most obvious symbolic role of the President is as “Pater Patriae”, which is traditionally associated with kings. Clinton Rossiter writes,

[t]he framers of the Constitution took a momentous step when they fused the dignity of a king and the power of a prime minister into one elective office. And, if they did nothing else, they gave us a “father image” that should satisfy even the most demanding political Freudians. (5)

Kings have long been cast as caring fathers, and this symbolism became particularly popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Gruder 289), including in the United States, where “[s]ociety is conventionally viewed as a family with the state as parent and citizens as children” (Kovacs 63)<sup>17</sup>. Washington was on countless occasions declared the “father of the nation”<sup>18</sup>. For example, in James Fenimore Cooper’s popular novel *The Spy*, the character symbolizing Washington is the embodiment of justice and benevolence, saying “[a]ll who dwell in this broad land are my children, and my care” (412). As a father figure, the President is seen as a protector (Lakoff, *Don’t Think* 7) or a nurturing caretaker (Lakoff, *Whose Freedom* 218). This became an established characteristic of the presidential office.

The United States has been called the “Nation with the Soul of a Church” (Mead 1985). In a religious sense, presidential fatherhood is often also associated with the shepherd, a metaphor of God as pastoral caretaker and leader (Mills et al. 819). For example, one of the titles assigned to Washington was the “American Moses”<sup>19</sup>. A popular interpretation of the Revolutionary War was a fight against the “worse than Egyptian bondage of Great Britain” (qtd. in Hay 781). The identification of Washington as a God-given Commander in Chief gave the American people the sense of participating in a divine mission (Schwartz, “Heroic Leadership” 24). By attaching this image to their designated leader, the public reassured itself about the future and the prospects for their republican experiment.

The second symbolic role of the American President is the prophet. “He is prophet – [...] in the sense of chief interpreter of our national self-understanding, establishing the terms of national discourse” (Novak, *Choosing* 52). In other words, he actively directs the nation onto its future path. “In the prophetic mode [...] the nation’s actions in relations to transcendent values” are assessed (Davis 483). In this role, the President as “interpreter-in-chief” (Stuckey 1) opens up a transcendental discourse and manifests public understanding of the nation as grand and spiritual. By extension, this means that voting for the President is a quasi-religious duty.

National myths, such as America as the New Israel, ennoble political discourse with

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17 See: Zagarell, Sandra. “E Pluribus Unum – All in the Family.” *The Heath Anthology of American Literature, Volume C: Late Nineteenth Century*. Ed. Lauter, Paul & Richard Yarborough. Florence: Cengage Learning, 2009. 928-931. Print.

18 Examples for visual representations of this theme, e.g.: Gilbert Stuart, *George Washington* Lansdowne Type (1796); Rembrandt Peale, *George Washington (Patriae Pater)* (1824).

19 For more, see: Hay, Robert P. “George Washington: American Moses.” *American Quarterly* 21.4 (1969): 780-791. Print.

a higher meaning (Hart 83). As a Weberian “ideal type”, the prophet attracts followers in a process of negotiating and re-evaluating established beliefs or practices (Swatos 269). A central responsibility of the President is redefining the American national mission when necessary, and recalibrating the American belief system to make it fit for future endeavors<sup>20</sup>. The role of the prophet is more prominent during transitions and crises, when the President is the most visible and seemingly knowledgeable guide “who draws together the people’s hopes and fears for the political future” (Novak, *Choosing* 6). He thus becomes the visible center of national security and stability. Against the backdrop of the Puritan idea of America as the Promised Land, the President consoles and reassures citizens that the nation is blessed and on the path of righteousness (Pierard 158).

Finally, the President is a priest, as Novak says, “[i]n the sense of incarnating our self-image, our values, our aspirations, and expressing these through every action he selects, every action he avoids” (*King* 52)<sup>21</sup>. As politico-spiritual authority and master of ceremonies, he offers and affirms collective identity, celebrates America’s underlying value system, brings its ideals to life, praises the nation and reminds the people of their mission. The ideal type of the priest further underscores this interpretation: a priest is “one who holds leadership status by virtue of office in the religious community, functionally maintaining religious tradition through interpretation and control of its authoritative body of scripture or custom” (Swatos 269). This characterization of a priest applies almost word-for-word to expectations of the President. With the prerogative of authoritative interpretation, the American President thus becomes the stabilizer of the nation’s sense of self. As “national shepherd”, “national pastor” or “high priest of civil religion” (Linder 735), the President praises and celebrates his political flock (Davis 483), constantly reinvigorating the people’s feeling of spiritual elevation<sup>22</sup>.

#### 3.1.4. The American Presidency as Center of Meaning-Making

A final question remains. Why is the presidency so central to American national identity? Would we not expect a parliamentary body to dominate the symbolic imagination of the nation that considers itself the birthplace of democracy? What makes the office of the presidency more symbolically potent than other political bodies like the Congress?

The concept of representation is the key to this question. The President represents the nation as a “one-man distillation of the people” (Rossiter 4). As Durkheim suggests, the notion of “peoplehood” requires concrete answers to abstract ontological questions about the nature of the state.

We are unable to consider an abstract entity. For we can represent only laboriously and confusedly the source of the strong sentiments which we feel. We cannot explain them

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<sup>20</sup> According to Derek Davis Lincoln, Kennedy and Carter most actively assumed this role and its duties (483).

<sup>21</sup> Also see: James, David. “The Priestly Functions of the Presidency. A Discussion of the Literature on Civil Religion and its Implications for the Study of Presidential Leadership.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 11 (1981): 214-232. Print.

<sup>22</sup> The presidents most actively engaged in the priestly dimension of the presidential office include Franklin D. Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, and both Bushes (Davis 483).

to ourselves except by connecting them to some concrete object of whose reality we are vividly aware. Then if the thing itself does not fulfill this condition, it cannot serve as the accepted basis of sentiments felt [...]. (Durkheim 220)

To be successful, the “concrete object” connected to an abstract notion must evoke a sense of elevation, a summoning of an ideal self. In the American cultural sphere, the Presidency helps the public overcome its limited ability to imagine this utopian collective self. This representation of the collective self must embody the extraordinary. President William Howard Taft noted that the President “is the personal embodiment and representative of (the people’s) dignity and majesty” (150). The President serves as a mirror of what people perceive as best and exceptional about their national self (Denton/Woodward, *Political Communication* 221). The office of the Presidency, in other words, promotes the “idea of American people to American people” (Beasley 22) in the form of a semi-utopian fantasy. Electing the President, Novak says, is electing oneself in an idealized version (*Choosing* 31 & 46).

While offering an idealized national self to the public, the presidency must also bring alive the “abstract notion of American political community” (Beasley 8), making it concrete and accessible. The President acts as both a physical and metaphysical identification figure. The public “uses” the President to access a living socio-political self:

So far as his national actions go, they live in him. His acts are theirs. He is their persona. He is the people, not in a sense that subsumes them under him but in the sense that he is their agent, their spokesman, their image of themselves. (Novak, *King* 164)

The President faces a paradox inherent to the constructive identity process: embodying the extraordinary, while being the ordinary. The openness of the presidential office, resulting from its interactional nature, at the same time becomes its greatest trial:

It has been said that the American People crave to be governed by a president who is greater than anyone else but not better than anyone else. We are inconsistent; we want our president to be one of the folks but also something special [...]. A president or would-be president must be bright but not too bright, warm and accessible but not too folksy, down to earth but not pedestrian [...]. We persist [...] in wanting an uncommon common man as president. (Cronin, *State* 13)

Balancing these seemingly irreconcilable opposites requires the office to generate a “symbolic equivalence” (Hinckley 5) among those participating in the meaning-making process: the President, the people, and the nation as socio-political body. For the representational aspect of the office to successfully integrate heterogeneous individuals into a communal and unified body politic, the presidency must create a sense that “he is just like me”.



### 3.2. Performance and Narrative Imagination in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Politics

The history of twentieth century American Presidents was defined by “a gradual loosening of the signifier from the signified” (Rubinstein 31), making the ongoing integration of the American body politic more challenging. The symbolic meaning and theoretical conceptualization of the post-modern presidency requires re-evaluation. The simple symbolism of the office has become less important. The decoupling of the signifier and the signified opens the post-modern presidency to meaning-making processes defined by performance and narration. Once the “Interpreter-in-Chief” responsible for “a collage of images, hopes, habits, and intentions shared by the nation” (Denton, *Symbolic* 75), today’s presidency requires a “Narrator-in-Chief”.

The case study for this project focuses on how national identity is established in the context of presidential election campaigns. The presidential election is a complex ritual-like process that goes beyond choosing a new political leader. Elections provide collective reassurance in the wider context of cultural self-fashioning and nation-building. Story-telling is an indispensable structural element of political campaigns. My project describes the interplay between these two processes, establishing a dialogue between the ritual theory of social performance and the research field of narratology. Juxtaposing textual and contextual framings gives greater insight on how complex ritual-like processes such as presidential campaigns are designed, performed, and mediated in contemporary media landscapes. I examine Obama’s 2008 campaign’s performative design (How does Obama perform his stories?) and a narratological reading of his campaign appearances (What stories did Obama actually “tell”?) to demonstrate how narrative is a key component of American presidential elections in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### 3.2.1. Collective Meaning-Making and Political Communication in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

America is often diagnosed with a “weakening sense of the national community” (Baltzell 3)<sup>23</sup>. Recent scholarship also examines the demise of community (Bradbury/McFarland 27) and the erosion of public confidence in democracy (Dalton 191).

Durkheim suggests that collective identities are established by projecting collective feelings of self “upon external tangible objects” (419). Many institutions that helped make national collectives tangible have been severely challenged by two developments: media and technological developments, like the growth of digital communication, and the erosion of longstanding socio-political principles, like the end of the Cold War and increasing globalization. The American Presidency is among these challenged institutions.

Feelings of insecurity and alienation increasingly dominate collective identity. With socio-political environments shifting, their boundaries dissolving, the world is experienced as chaotic. The loss of traditional meaning-making structures and the dissolution of communities (Wodak 170) call into question the possibility of the stable and fixed col-

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23 Also see: Nisbet, Robert. *The Making of Modern Society*. Brighon: Wheatleaf Books, 1986. Print.

lective identities that were “born out of necessity in earlier times” (Beasley 3). In short, with “the paradigms of fragmentation and heterogeneity” (Higham qtd. in Levine 672), and a globalized hyper-complex social environment (Blühdorn 300), late-modern society is fraught with contingency (Johansson 70).

A shift has taken place, “from believing in a reality behind the [...] performance” to the understanding that “the performance is reality” (Bruzzi 150). Creating a coherent and collectivizing imaginative identity supplants the need to detect “the real” in a performance. “Realness” surpasses “reality”, as coherence and “mimetic verisimilitude” (Parry-Giles 5) replace questions of authenticity and artificiality. In other words, the imaginative quality of the offered identity is more important than the truth or falsity of the offered fantasy. Erica Seifert claims that a “new age of authenticity” (208) began with the 2008 presidential campaign. I suggest we define this new age as a shift from the quest for authenticity or reality to a desire for plausibility and verisimilitude.

Presidential candidates, in this context, do not fail “because the public sees [the] falseness” of their performances (Crawley 128). Rather, they fail if they do not provide an appropriate performative mimetic offer – an active mimetic offer not designated by “a passive process of reproduction”, but by a “process of creation” (Gebauer/Wolf 11). The process of publicly storifying an Imagined Presidency in a ritual-like process is a locus for the experiential realization of the national collective’s “realness”.

The mechanisms underlying an Imagined Presidency contradict the so-called “Manipulations-Theorem” (Arnold et al. 11), which claims that the performative side of the political sphere is characterized by fakeness and deception. In this view, the performative staging of politics in the media or digital age is merely a “means of deceiving, ruling and exploiting the masses” (Blühdorn 323). It reduces mimetic renditions, like the ritual-like performative staging of narratives, to “mere replicated fakery” (Gebauer/Wolf 31) or political spin.

The “Manipulations-Theorem”, however, does not capture the current negotiation of socio-political collectives in the public sphere. On an existential level, these negotiations depend on processes of mimetic performance, a space for regenerating a collective’s “gemeinsames Interpretationsrepertoire” (Benhabib 30). The “Gutenberg Galaxy” (McLuhan 1962) is supplanted by post-modern representational structures of performed realness. Therefore, I suggest we return to Benedict Anderson’s concept of the Imagined Community to understand the Presidential office as site of collective meaning-making. Anderson hypothesizes that imagined communities are not constituted by their “falsity or genuineness” but by the style and quality “in which they are imagined” (*Imagined* 6). I see the Imagined Presidency functioning in a similar way. Weak collective meaning-making structures can be regenerated by the performative staging of coherently imagined stories.

Theoretical approaches from ritual studies and narratology offer interesting insights on identity formation in the context of presidential election campaigns. To establish the analytical framework for my reading of Obama’s 2008 Imagined Presidency, the next two chapters focus on my approaches to ritual and narrative theory.



### 3.2.2. Staging Politics: Ritual-like Performances and Political Campaigns

There are two fundamentally different approaches to understanding collective identity: an essentialist and a constructivist approach (Schlenker-Fischer 29)<sup>24</sup>. Essentialists assume that collective identities derive from given or primordial socio-cultural structures. Clifford Geertz writes,

[b]y a primordial attachment is meant one that stems from “givens” of existence, or more precisely [...] the assumed givens of social existence: immediate continuity and kin connection mainly, but beyond them the givens that stems from being born into a particular [...] community, speaking a particular language [...] and following particular social practices. These congruities of blood, speech, costume and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves. One is bound to one’s kinsman, one’s neighbor [...] as the result not merely of personal affection, tactical necessity, common interest or incurred moral obligation, but at least in great part by virtue of some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself. (259)

This interpretation of collective identity relies on a naturally existing essence inherent to the members of a collective entity. The constructivist approach, in contrast, sees collective identity formation as a discourse-based process. For constructivists collective identity is based on individuals’ participation in communal and performative negotiations. Randall Collins describes participants engaging in discursive creation of a common reality, whereby they also negotiate a collective self (999-1000). Collective identity cannot be considered “a datum or essence” (Melucci 51) or solely defined by “an individual’s cognitive, moral and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution” (Polletta/Jasper 285). According to Melucci, collective identity results from “an interactive and shared definition produced by several individuals” (Melucci 44). Thus understood, collective identity is not exclusively situated within or generated from within individual members. The site where the collective self is negotiated must be accessible by all participants. The formative process therefore must take place in the public sphere, using shared culturally determined symbol systems (Assmann, “Problem Identität” 16). Only by manipulating their cultural symbols can individuals create a “discourse of commonness” (Ku 42). Culture is both the source of “Identitätsofferten” (Assmann, “Problem Identität” 16) and the “Erfahrungs-, Erwartungs- und Handlungsraum” (Assmann “Kollektives Gedächtnis” 16) where the process occurs.

National identity as a collective expression of self is particularly interesting given Stuart Hall’s claim that, in the “global postmodern” world (619), national identity is severely challenged by other collective meaning-making structures. As with collective identities in general, there are two approaches to national collective identities. While some see national identity as “primordial”, existing “naturally”, others propose a communicative construction of national identity.

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<sup>24</sup> Also see: Cerulo, Karen. “Identity Construction: New Issues, New Directions.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 23 (1997): 385-409. Print.

For perennialists, national identity emerges from fixed quasi-natural parameters determined by birth, or by shared language and history. In this view, national collectives exist simply because members feel naturally associated with them. Modernist, constructivist conceptions find an invented quality in national identity (Guibernau 12).<sup>25</sup> The publication of Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* created a constructivist turn in national identity research<sup>26</sup>. He argues that social structures have become less ascriptive and more contingent, and older concepts cannot adequately explain the nation as form of collective identity.

Anderson defines national identity as

[...] an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members even of the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (6)

Although “the image of their communion” exists exclusively in the mind of each member, it has a sustained impact on individuals’ lives.

[R]egardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much as to kill, as willing to die for such limited imaginings. (Anderson 7)

Eric Louw says the imagined community explains what “makes it possible to regard national communities as valuable entities which can assist their members to interact more effectively with each other and the environment” (105).

The formation of such socio-political structures requires “cultural frames”, “master fictions” or “cultural presuppositions” (Hunt 87). From a constructivist perspective, the key is participation in the discourse that forms national identity. The crucial factor is interaction sites for participation in imaginative meaning-making. Imagined communities thus require experiential spaces (Anderson 145) and discursive forms of “re-presentations, re-symbolizations and theatrical manifestations” (Chilton/Schäffner 147) to materialize and concretize the nation as collective.

Rituals constitute a central space for the engagement of individuals in an interactive negotiation of identity. Jörg Zirfas and Christoph Wulf claim that ritual processes “sind gleichsam die emotionalen, symbolischen und performativen Generatoren von Gemeinschaften” (19). Ritual processes, broadly conceived, are “culturally constructed”, “marked off from the routine of everyday life”, “structured; patterned; ordered; sequenced; rule-

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<sup>25</sup> Also see: Anthony Smith: “A nation can therefore be defined as a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members” (*National Identity* 14).

<sup>26</sup> Also see: Gellner, Ernest. *Nation and Nationalism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983. Print; Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983. Print.; Bhabha, Homi K. *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge, 1990. Print.

governed”, “formally stylized”, “standardized”, and “based on a script” (Snoek 13).

Ritual processes serve various purposes. From a Durkheimian perspective, rituals reinforce the collectively negotiated and projected representation of the group:

There can be no society, which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas, which makes its unity and its personality. Now this moral remaking cannot be achieved except by the means of reunions, assemblies and meetings where the individuals, being closely united to one another, reaffirm in common their common sentiments. (Durkheim 427)

Ritual processes are sites for the tangible representation, embodiment, visualization and affirmation<sup>27</sup> of what would otherwise remain abstract. Guro Rønningsgrind writes that “performative generation of identity” is always “a process of embodiment” (109)<sup>28</sup>. Without embodiment, a collective cannot form an integrated entity. From this perspective, expressive action is the most important aspect of ritual processes. Applied to national identity formation, ritual processes are indispensable in forming modern political collectives, allowing people to treat the abstract concept of the collective as something they can actually experience (Kertzer 7).

Ritual action as a means of identity formation has a dynamic and interactive dimension. Roy Rappaport notes that performing a ritual goes beyond creating or communicating something. It “is taken by those performing in it to be ‘doing something’ as well” (Rappaport 429). Rituals have a dramatic quality that assigns agency to both actor and audience. William Sax says that rituals have an integrative quality, because actors and audience participate in a shared activity (26-27). Participation and interaction create feelings of identification, and participants can imagine themselves embodying roles and notions offered in the ritual performance.

Participants’ feeling of agency generates a sense that they occupy an important position in the collective identity. Identification generated by such processes has great depth and persistence. In short, ritual processes create, structure and bring to life a socio-political collective (Kertzer, “Ritual, Politik, Macht” 371). They also serve as a mimetic space of transformative fusion on a meta-level, allowing the perceptual realms of “the imagined” and “the real” to merge into a third space of identity (Rao 146). The initial sense of the imagined community as transient is overcome through such socially shared ritual performances, and for participating individuals, the collective is jointly performed into a state of “factual” existence.

Some, like Barbara Stollberg-Rillinger, claim that rituals are inconsistent with modern societies and their political systems.

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<sup>27</sup> Also see: Göhler, Gerhard. “Der Zusammenhang von Institution, Macht und Repräsentation.” *Institutionen – Macht – Repräsentation: Wofür politische Institutionen stehen und wie sie wirken*. Ed. Gerhard Göhler et. al. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 1997. 579-599. Print.

<sup>28</sup> Also see: Butler “Performative Acts” 521.

Modern political culture is founded on the idea that political power and social order should not rest on images, symbols, and rituals that emotionally overpower people, but solely on words, good reasons, and rational procedures. This was the message of the Enlightenment and the democratic revolutions. (Stollberg-Rillinger 20)

With today's hypermedialized communication structures, the symbolic negotiation of politics through rituals or the like has been labeled aesthetization or deceptive illusion<sup>29</sup>, an "aesthetic sham" (Soeffner, *Figurative Politik* 17), "politics without policy" (Eppler 80), a "political placebo" (Dörner, *Politischer Mythos* 53). Many scholars, however, question whether modern political systems are rational on the inside and purely aesthetic on the outside<sup>30</sup>.

While many scholars agree that symbolic communication through ritual is central in modern society, there has been a shift in how these symbolic structures are conceptualized (Alexander, "Pragmatics" 527-528), with increased use of terms from theatrical performances replacing classic ritual terms. Many symbolic communication researchers believe that classical interpretations of ritual processes are outdated because rituals have become a form of spectacle (Wolford 116)<sup>31</sup> due to the fragmentation and segmentation of complex pluralist societies (Alexander, "Pragmatics" 540) and a "restless and corrosive dissolution of traditional social relations into the atomized and quantified aggregates of the market system" (Wagner-Pacifici 274)<sup>32</sup>. Theatrical conceptions of symbolic communication allow more topical examination of identity formation because they accommodate changing perceptions of the participants in these processes and go hand in hand with the broad-scale transformation of sign and symbol-systems conditioned by a feeling of a "loss of reality" (Meyer et al. 66).

Application of a dramatist perspective is a logical step, says Robin Wagner-Pacifici, because "the genre-rich theater is situated in a middle ground between ritual and spectacle" (277). Theatrical performances constitute a dialogic interface. The strength of the dramatist approach is underlined by the claim that, in a postmodern society, "die Szene, das Szenische" are the "entscheidende Bedingung der Möglichkeit von Bedeutung" (Bolz/Bosshart 74).

Over the last twenty years, views on the performative realization of the symbolic dimension of political culture have oscillated between two poles. Some see symbolic politics as acclamatory pseudo-political show (Arnold 14), while others characterize it as an indispensable constitutive manifestation of the political sphere itself (Abeles 78). Murray Edelman exemplifies the first position, with his double stage<sup>33</sup> model in which symbolic

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29 As Hans-Georg Soeffner notes, "[d]ie Ästhetisierung des Politischen wie des Lebens insgesamt wird in Folge der Entgrenzung zwischen Kultur und Warenwelt als Grundübel der Zeit diagnostiziert" (*Figurative Politik* 17).

30 Also see: Denton/Woodward *Political Communication* 53; Kaird 147; Shils, Edward. "Ritual and Crisis." *The Religious Situation: 1968*. Ed. Donald Cutler. Boston: Beacon Press, 1968. Print.

31 Also see: MacAloon 272.

32 Also see: Jameson, Fredric R. "The Symbolic Inference; Or, Kenneth Burke and Ideological Analysis." *Critical Inquiry* 4.3 (1978): 507-523. Print.

33 Erving Goffman considers the existence of a front stage/back stage continuum a given reality of any form of human performance, thus addressing this dimension of social life in general sociological terms (*Presentation* 78-79).

performances merely cover “real” political processes. What people consider “real” politics is only a show, disguising what takes place backstage. Performative staging engages the public in pseudo-participation, so politics becomes a “spectator sport” (*Symbolic Uses* 5). “Politics as theater” characterizes performative staging as manipulation or deceit, an elaborated *a posteriori* show without genuine interaction or actual meaning. This perception of symbolic communication, Meyer, Ontrup and Schichta claim, follows “einer langen metaphysischen bzw. normativen Tradition: Auf der einen Seite stehen positiv besetzte Begriffe wie Wahrheit, Sein, Authentizität, auf der anderen Seite negativ bestzte Begriffe wie Schein, oder Täuschung” (55)<sup>34</sup>.

My research relies on a value-neutral conception of performative staging, the view that “theatricalized politics is neither a necessarily good or necessarily bad thing” (Wagner-Pacifi 283). My understanding of performative staging treats the term as simply the expressive side of political culture. In the words of Fischer-Lichte:

Inszenierung lässt sich durchaus als Schein, Simulation, Simulakrum begreifen. Es handelt sich bei ihr jedoch um einen Schein, eine Simulation, ein Simulakrum, die allein fähig sind, Sein, Wahrheit, Authentizität zur Erscheinung zu bringen. Nur in und durch die Inszenierung ermöglichen sie uns gegenwärtig zu sein. (89)

Thus performative staging is the only way to make a potential transcendent reality visible. Negotiations of conflict, consensus or political legitimization, from this vantage point, rely completely on symbolic “meaning-constituting objectivations”<sup>35</sup> (Arnold 17). In the view of Fischer-Lichte, successful symbolic performances merge the represented and the representation, transcend both, and transform the actor into a medium and the performance into an interface where the collective’s self-image is manifested. This view permits a distinction between “Inszenierung als ‘einseitigem’ Produktionsakt und Repräsentation als ‘zweistelligem’ Akt der – Produktion und Rezeption einschließenden – Stellvertretung” (Soeffner, *Figurative Politik* 22), thereby resolving a one-sided understanding of performative staging as a one-way process (Hitzler, “Mediale Inszenierung” 215)<sup>36</sup>.

Applying a dramatic approach permits an epistemological examination of the visible side of symbolic communication. The overarching objective of such analyses is a semi-otic reading of performatively enacted political discourses. “Political discourse”, as David Apter puts it, “becomes relevant as the means whereby interpretive ‘raw materials’ are collectivized in the form of master narratives and transcribed as texts” (Apter 220).

My analysis uses Alexander’s recent macro-sociological concept of “Cultural Prag-

<sup>34</sup> Also see Miller/Gronbeck, who claim that “[w]hat must be made absolutely clear [...] is that politics is not somehow unreal or false because it is freighted with symbols and visualized in images. We cannot somehow dismiss showmanship, political ritual, speeches, and televised debates as ‘mere politics.’ Politics, after all, is a human or social activity” (8).

<sup>35</sup> “sinnkonstituierende Objektivationen” (Arnold et al.17).

<sup>36</sup> What a theatrical approach to symbolic political communication therefore effectively captures, is the circumstance that successful meaning-making processes always rely on social performances’ reciprocal nature. This sets fourth two determining parameters: the existence of productively and receptively, as well as actively and passively accessible interpretational schemata that are known to all participants engaged in the meaning-making process, and a space of discourse openly accessible by all participants (Hitzler, “Mediale Selbstinszenierung” 215); Also see: Warner, Michael. *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books, 2002. Print.



matics". His dramatist approach to social performances as ritual-like theatrical processes (Alexander, "Pragmatics" 540) offers highly useful tools for analyzing symbolic communication and identity formation.

Alexander writes that ritual processes have lost their meaning in societies characterized by "open-ended conflicts between parties who do not necessarily share beliefs" (Alexander, "Pragmatics" 528). Cultural Pragmatics investigates socio-political collectives' continued reliance on symbolic communication to secure their existence. Of particular interest in this regard is Alexander's claim that social actions, "by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation" (Alexander, "Pragmatics" 529), must always be considered a "cultural performance". This is directly relevant to the American presidency as a central site of American collective meaning-making.

Alexander's point of departure is the assumption that in less complex and differentiated collectives, social performances, like rituals, were determined by a natural fusion of single performative components. "[T]he more complex and segmented and differentiated the collectivity", however, "the more the elements of social performance become *defused*" (Alexander, "Pragmatics" 529). A successful social performance in a complex socio-political system therefore relies on a performative re-fusion of relevant elements in a theatrical performative staging of a ritual-like performance. As with ritual, the theater-like performance aims to make the audience perceive the performative staging as reality (Alexander, "Pragmatics" 549).

Such performative processes require the multi-directional fusion of diverse performative elements: collective background culture, actor, script, and audience (Alexander, "Pragmatics" 531). Let me now briefly sketch out the central elements and relationships in Alexander's model.

As noted above, complex societies are defined by growing fragmentation, polarization and open-endedness. As a result, performative staging has become more contingent and less a matter of evoking well-established and socially ascriptive structures by given performative authorities (Alexander, "Pragmatics" 545). The single elements of socio-dramatic performances no longer fuse automatically (Alexander, "Pragmatics" 558). This gives rise to "the organizational form of socio drama"<sup>37</sup> (Alexander, "Pragmatics" 547).

Socio-dramatic stagings re-establish crucial interactional relations among a society's members. These symbolic performances are not a "charade of participatory involvement" (Apter 227), or a "symbolic screen or metaphor" (Denton/Woodward, *Persuasion* 66). Rather, socio-drama constitutes a space in which a "group fantasy" (Bormann 5) is collectively created and communally consumed in order to achieve identification and integration. Alexander says that "pragmatic and symbolic dimensions are intertwined" (Alexander, "Pragmatics" 566). As David Apter notes

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37 For more on the concept of "Socio/Social Drama" see: Wagner-Pacifici, Robin. *The Moro Morality Play: Terrorism as Social Drama*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986. Print.; Turner, Victor. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975. Print.

[p]olitics as theatre is thus both much like ordinary theatre, acting out a plot within a composed, bounded, and limited space towards which all gaze is directed and individuals transported beyond themselves. But with politics as theater such focused attention requires sufficient intensity to enable the play to serve both as surrogate for what it represents and a microcosm, or better, a simulacrum, of larger truths so embodied. (237)

The aim of performative staging in this context is to overcome “social-dramatic defusion” (Alexander, “Pragmatics” 545). For a presidential candidate, this must be the highest aim. “Script, direction, actor, background culture, mise-en-scene, audience, means of symbolic production – all these separate elements of performance [have to] become indivisible and invisible” (Alexander, “Pragmatics” 549). Successful symbolic performative actions merge “psychological identification and cultural extension” (Alexander, “Pragmatics” 547). A “seamless” fusion of all performative elements implies that the performance aspects of the symbolic action are forgotten or blanked out by participants (Alexander, “Pragmatics” 549). The success of a symbolic performative staging depends on generating perceived verisimilitude.

Under these circumstances, Alexander notes, “social powers manifest themselves not as external or hegemonic forces that facilitate or oppose the unfolding performance but merely as sign-vehicles, as means of representation, as conveyors of the intended meaning” (Alexander, “Pragmatics” 549). The simulative quality of symbolic theatrical action is fully determined by the “mutual referentiality” (Giessen 357) of the single performative elements. During the performative staging, the individual elements – actor, audience, stage & background, script and role – ideally all become “part of the performance to such an extent that it cannot be distinguished from it” (Feral 173).

The first essential performative element is the background culture. Ernest Renan claims that having and incessantly evoking a “rich legacy of memories” (qtd. in Bhabha 19) is crucial to a national collective<sup>38</sup>. Alexander suggests that the culture constitutes the performance’s symbolic background and is the source of the performative scripts. “Behind every actor’s social and theatrical performance lies the already established skein of collective representations that compose culture – the universe of basic narratives and codes and the cookbook of rhetorical configurations from which every performance draws” (Alexander, “Pragmatics” 550). Negotiations of the collective’s self take place in public, and the public is not a vacuum or a neutral space. Social performances always take place in a semiotized space<sup>39</sup>. These “patterns of signifiers whose referents are the social, physical, natural, and cosmological worlds within which actors and audiences live” (Alexander, “Pragmatics” 530) are the logical vehicles for symbolic meaning. Myths, traditions and icons are a rich source for performative scripts. From this vantage point, socio-political meaning-making processes follow rules of engagement set by the culture.

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38 Also see: Commager, Henry Steele. “The Search for a Usable Past.” *American Heritage Magazine* 16.2 (1965): 3-27. Print.

39 This counters Habermasian definition of the public space as neutral. See: Habermas, Jürgen. *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1990. Print.; for critique of the latter see: Calhoun, Craig. *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992. Print. Warner, Michael. “Publics and Counterpublics.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88.4 (2002): 413-425. Print.

The second performative element at play is the actor. “The protagonists of the ‘social drama’”, writes Wagner-Pacifci, “respond to and clothe themselves in their culture’s stock of sedimented symbols, archetypal characters, and rhetorical appeals” (7). On a very basic level, the actor is a representative in the Schützian sense: he is a semiotically determined “*zeichenhaft installiertes Symbol*” (Schütz/Luckmann 178-200). Dramatists view the actor as an active agent in the communicative process, offering access to a transcendental understanding of the collective self (Hitzler, “*Medial Inszenierung*” 215). To be effective in this role, the actor’s performance has to be accepted by all participants as plausible and convincing (Alexander, “*Pragmatics*” 530).

The figure of the actor is the dynamic unity of an entire set of signs the carrier of which may be the actor’s body, voice, movements, but also various objects, from parts of the costume to the set. The important thing is, however, that the actor centers meanings upon himself, and may do so to such an extent that by his actions he may replace all the sign’s carriers. (Veltrusky 84)

For the actor, the socio-dramatic process has several parameters. Social performances are “produced and experienced bodily by actors in a shared situation and in a local site” (Giessen 342). A symbolic action therefore necessarily involves a physical place – a stage – where the performance can be carried out, as well as performative props (Alexander, “*Pragmatics*” 532).

The role the actor assumes must be aligned with the performance’s background culture. According to Alexander actors are challenged by the multidirectional processes of merging required for a successful performance. In postmodern society the actor is increasingly “separated from the role” which leads to “the challenge of double fusion” (Alexander, “*Pragmatics*” 560): actor – role and actor – audience. The overall aim of the actor is overcoming these distinctions, and the re-fusion of the performative elements “into a seamless and convincing whole” (Alexander, “*Pragmatics*” 548).

The relationship between actor and role is determined by the key question of verisimilitude (Alexander, *Power* 7). The actor’s challenge is to succeed at conveying naturalness and sincerity, with no discernable “separation between the acting person and his or her role – both are merged in the ritual performance” (Giessen 343)<sup>40</sup>. Especially for actors in politics, staging should seem artless and unassuming, as symbolic action in the political context must avoid any suggestion of a “puppet on a string” (Alexander, “*Pragmatics*” 548).

The relationships between audience and performance, and between audience and actors, are the most difficult to control. The line between actor and audience, Bernhard Giessen notes, frequently “coincides with the opposition between leaders and followers, rulers and the people” (355), the participants become a community of agents who share

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<sup>40</sup> Also see: Hagen, Uta. *Respect for Acting*. New York: Macmillan, 1973. Print.; Roach, Joseph R. *The Player’s Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985. Print. Stanislavski, Constantin. *An Actor Prepares*. London: Methuen, 1988. Print.



the same realm of experience<sup>41</sup>. In a successful performance, the audience is so absorbed into the performance that its own self becomes indistinguishable from the self-generated on stage: the line between actor and audience is blurred.

When mimetic magic<sup>42</sup> is successful, the actor and audience occupy an integrated experiential space. The actor does not merely represent something. He becomes an avatarian space which allows the conversion of “the audience into the play itself” (Apter 222)<sup>43</sup>. The audience is drawn into “a world that appears to be their own making and with all their own conflicts, tensions, competition, jockeying for power” (Apter 228). What is gained, from the perspective of a political actor, is the audience’s “willing suspension of disbelief” (Ferri 1; Alexander, *Power* 134). When the audience fuses with the performance it overcomes its separation from the stage, the actors, the roles, and the cultural texts, becoming so involved that the creation on stage “drops ‘as if’ qualifiers to speak in terms of truth and reality” (de Rivera/Sarbin 314).

What complicates this process is the contingent and heterogeneous nature of the audience. Actors in the public sphere are often confronted with “multidimensional recipients” (Soeffner, *Figurative Politik* 36), who are “internally divided among themselves” (Alexander, “Pragmatics” 564) and frequently “represent social statuses orthogonal to the status of the performer” (Alexander, “Pragmatics” 531).

In presidential campaigns, pre-existing experiential structures determine the perception, interpretation and integration of the candidates’ performative staging.<sup>44</sup> What unifies audiences in the first place is a shared decision to consume a performance<sup>45</sup> or, as Alexander puts it, “the same need” (Alexander, “Pragmatics” 564). With the increasing fragmentation and individuation of the public sphere, based on such factors as “ideology, race, ethnicity, class, religion, and region” (Alexander, “Pragmatics” 564), audience interpretations of performative stagings have grown more differentiated.<sup>46</sup>

The final and most critical performative element is the script. In a performative staging, actors must choose what to communicate and project. The script structures the actor’s decision on how to configure his performance. From a scenographic perspective, the script is always directed at a “seamless synthesis” (Howard 130) of all elements. A scenographic design is not only

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41 According to Bernhard Giessen, in a social drama participants consider themselves to be not just an audience, but, instead, to be participating actors (355). This, as Giessen goes on to explain, transforms outsiders into audience and audience into participants and thus profoundly affects the nature of the performed reality (355).

42 See comment by Parry-Giles/Parry-Giles, that “[m]imesis refers to the ability of a discourse to imitate, or copy, actual experience. The mimetic experience is a meaningful one, generating ‘a world of appearances, of semblance, and the aesthetic’” (4).

43 According to David Apter, the audience becoming followers in the degree they come to identify with, and recognize themselves in, the events of the drama and so share in common experiences with the leaders “on stage” (237).

44 Also see: Baumgartner, Jody and Peter L. Francia. *Conventional Wisdom and American Elections: Exploding Myths, Exploring Misconceptions*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008. Print.; Wayne, Stephan. *The Road to the White House 2016*. Santa Barbara: Cengage Learning, 2015. Print.

45 According to Meyer et al. “der gemeinsame Konsum wird zur Basis der Gruppenidentifikation” (69).

46 Also see: Liebes, Tamar & Elihu Katz. *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of Dallas*. Hoboken: Wiles-Blackwell, 1994. Print.; McQuail, Denis. *Media Performance: Mass Communication and the Public Interest*. London: Sage Publications, 1992. Print.

concerned with creating and presenting images to an audience; it is concerned with audience reception and engagement. It is a sensory as well as an intellectual experience, emotional as well as rational. (McKinney/Butterworth 4)

Actors in social performances cannot simply draw on “out of the box” scripts that emerge from cultural texts. As Alexander points out,

[s]cripts are cultural, but the reverse is not equally true: background cultures are not themselves scripts. It is not “culture” that creates scripts, but pragmatic efforts to project particular cultural meanings in pursuit of practical goals. (“From the Depth” 95)

Actors in symbolic performative staging therefore must create their own performative choreography, independently developing a script that “allows for the coordination between the expectations of the audience and the actual performance on stage” (Giessen 349). For the actor, the script is the performative element presenting the largest space for independent decision-making and the most challenges. The script implicates all performative decisions and designs. In making these decisions, actors “become protagonists in their chosen narrative” (Alexander, “Pragmatics” 551). Although actors may enjoy creative freedom in performance design, the formulation of a successful script never takes place in a vacuum. A credible script needs a sufficient concentration of background cultural narrative, and must facilitate a plausible link with the actor. Successfully implementing the script also requires establishing congruence between given cultural texts and the audience. The script as immediate referential text must be both accessible and credible so the participants in the social performance blend indistinguishably in the collective fantasy.

Like David Apter (Apter 229), I consider the most vital aspects to be the specific narrative structure and the performance design. In my view, the actor can only achieve a successful performative staging when he is an able and convincing storyteller. A successful performative staging depends on the actor’s exploitation of the imaginative space offered in the script to effectively revitalize and integrate the collective’s cultural and socio-political self. A verisimilar story prompts the audience to believe in the background cultural codes and narratives again. Failure to provide this in an election campaign is tantamount to total failure.

### **3.2.3. Collective Meaning-Making as Narrative Event: “Telling a Story of Who We Are”**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has been declared the age of performance (McKenzie 171) and narrative (Goodson 12). This rise of the narrative seems to counter post-enlightenment societies’ invocation of rationality, reason and secularization as fundamental principles, as well as skepticism toward mythical narrative structures (Jameson 70). Narratives and storytelling have re-emerged in response to multiple, fragmented realities and the difficulty of discerning and negotiating agreement on the one, true reality. “Narrative performances that create stories rather than [...] referential statements about an extralinguistic reality”, Sebastian Herrmann claims, “allow for a polite bracketing of the question of truth”

(62), thereby avoiding permanent disagreement over “what the other side perceives as fact” (62). Generating coherence, meaningfulness and referentiality are the prime objective of meaning-making processes. Narrative replaces logic and rationality in managing and framing a perceived multiplicity of realities.

The narrative turn in cultural studies and social sciences is reflected in a “virtual explosion of interest in narrative and in theorizing about narrative” (Kreiswirth 629). The post-classical narratological approach assumes that storytelling, like language in general, is a ubiquitous interactional phenomenon, “a tool of reality construction rather than its passive mirroring” (Czarniawska 12)<sup>47</sup>. Storytelling is not reconstructing or re-telling something in the past or present. The narrative process itself constructs and restructures reality. Narratives are “the vehicle for our experience of the real” (Jameson 48). From this perspective, communicative processes in the socio-political sphere have the status of stories.

The key to storytelling as the narrativization of social reality is emplotment (Herrmann 62). Through emplotment, “specific events, otherwise represented as lists or chronicles, [...] brought into one meaningful whole” (Czarniawska 7). The narrative offers access to a shared space of collective meaning and identification. The seemingly arbitrary social world gains logic and order. The storyworld mapped by narrative emplotment can be read according to a narrative “logic or syntax” (Polkinghorne 160)<sup>48</sup>. In socio-political entities such as nation-states, narrative and storytelling access the imaginary and performative dimension of public life and expressions of collective social identity.

A very basic definition of storytelling is proposed by Jerome Bruner. A narrative, he says,

is composed of a unique sequence of events, mental states, happenings involving human beings as characters or actors. These are its constituents. But these constituents do not, as it were, have a life or meaning of their own. Their meaning is given by their place in the overall configuration of the sequence as a whole. (Bruner, *Acts* 43/44)

Narrative deliberately configures unrelated elements into a new form. Thus a narrative is always more than the sum of its parts. Donald Polkinghorne suggests that narrative is aimed at constructing a new, thematically meaningful entity, “thematically unified goal-directed purposes” (Polkinghorne, “Narrative Configuration” 5). Narrative processes, therefore, have an ontological dimension<sup>49</sup>.

Narratives can be seen as a way of “world-making”. “[M]any different world-versions”,

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47 Increasing interest in storytelling in different fields of study (sociology, history, psychology, business studies, etc.) e.g.: Koschorke, Albrecht. *Wahrheit und Erfindung: Grundzüge einer Allgemeinen Erzähltheorie*. Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 2012. Print.; Nünning, Ansgar und Vera Nünning. *Erzähltheorie Transgenerisch, Intermedial, Interdisziplinär*. Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2002. Print.; Strohmaier, Alexandra. *Kultur-Wissen-Narration: Perspektiven Transdisziplinärer Erzählforschung für die Kulturwissenschaften*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2014. Print.

48 Also see: Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990. Print. Veyne, Paul. *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984. Print.

49 Establishing the internal cohesion of a group can only be attained through narration or, as Marcus Llanque claims, through the provision of convincing “Verbindlichkeitsnarrationen” (Llanque 18). Such narratives, Agnes Ku remarks, “form the very core of every society” (Ku 59).

Nelson Goodman says, “are of independent interest and importance, without any requirement or presumption of reducibility to a single base” (4). In social entities, these different versions must be negotiated into an accessible order, and are therefore processed through the activation of corresponding symbol systems. Through narrativization, a myriad of socio-political realities can be negotiated into a coherent whole.

A central aspect of narratives is their situatedness, their specific environments. Situatedness has cultural, spatial and temporal dimensions. “Narrative representations”, as David Herman claims, “are situated in specific discourse contexts, or embedded in occasions for telling” (Herman 9). Narratives therefore cannot exist independent from the socio-communicative environment<sup>50</sup>.

From a post-narratological perspective, another key characteristic is the experiential dimension of stories. The experiential dimension of narratives constitutes an interactional space for negotiating the link between actually experiencing the world, and processing it in representational structures. Monika Fludernick writes that “[a]ll experience is [...] stored as emotionally charged remembrance, and it is reproduced in narrative form” (29), so narratives are “the quasi-mimetic evocation of real-life experience” (Fludernick 12). This mimetic quality of narratives provides access to an avartarian space where the recipient can consume a subjective sense of experience. David Herman terms this the “What it’s like” dimension (21).

Narratives are also defined by a high degree of openness (Czarniawska 7) and polyvalence (Nünning et al., *Cultural Ways* 229). Narrative openness makes storytelling a participatory or dialogic process<sup>51</sup> between producer and recipient. Barbara Czarniawska says that the “power of the story does not depend on its connection to the world outside the story but its openness for negotiating meaning” (Czarniawska 9). This makes storytelling a viable way of negotiating collective identity, as storyteller and audience collaborate in constructing a common reality. Narratives do not require a “top-down” identity offer, fixed truth, or perfect clarity and consistency. Haziness and ambiguity make imaginative storytelling a powerful tool (Polletta ix). The ambiguity that emerges from the narrative’s polyphony enhances its “Suggestivkraft” (Koschorke 21).

Narratives also feature referentiality. There is no causal relation between the narrative and the real world, so narratives “do not provide us with a possible means of verification of the narrative’s ‘facts’” (Nünning et al., *Cultural Ways* 227). Verification and falsification play no role. Narrative success depends on recipients’ willingness to buy into the offered story. The relevant evaluative parameters concern “acceptability” (Bruner, “Construction” 5) and “versimilitude” (Bruner 13-14). What matters is a story’s fidelity – is it credible? – and probability – is it coherent? (Czarniawska 10).<sup>52</sup>

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50 Accordingly the interpretation or production of narratives is conditioned by a space of “shared values, beliefs, canons, and stories” (Nünning et al. *Cultural Ways* 223).

51 Also see: Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination – Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982. Print.

52 According to Walter Fisher, “[h]uman communication is tested against the principles of probability (coherence) and fidelity (truthfulness and reliability)” (47).

Contemporary political campaigns can be seen as competitions for the narrative prerogative. According to political consultants James Carville and Paul Begala, communication cannot succeed without storytelling.

Facts tell, but stories sell. Human beings process information in that narrative form. That's why, from the Greek myths to the griots of Africa, the history of humanity has been told in stories. If you're not communicating in stories, you're not communicating. (Begala/Carville 108)

In assessments of the 2008 presidential campaign, the topics of storytelling and narrative appear everywhere. While Richard Wolffe claims that Barack Obama's secret lay in his effort to "include everyone in a common epic" (Wolffe, "When Barack became Barry"), Matt Bai claims that, "after the election, Democratic consultants and elected officials came to sound like creative-writing teachers" ("Framing Wars").

Narratives help to establish a collective identity and consensus about what is good and acceptable in a community. In the socio-political sphere, narratives facilitate a "consensual definition of 'political reality'" (Shenav 248). They are a medium for "internal integration" (Bruner, *Making* 25). As Jeff Smith notes, a shared story – "[t]he fiction of 'we the people'" (Smith, *Presidents* 8) – helps establish consent among the governed.

With their interactions between the performer and the audience, narratives also function as a source of participation. Logically, "each party must be individually motivated to participate" (Bal 112). A narrative creates a site where the audience can actively contribute to and participate in the process of meaning-making in a way that suggests a status equal to the narrator. The audience feels empowered by storytelling because they can add something to the story, insert themselves into the story or incorporate the narrative into their own self-making. They are not mere consumers. The audience can be constituted as "co-authors" or "actors" in the narrative process (Czarniawaska 5). The process of storytelling is thus a less authoritative mode of communication and exchange. Narratives allow people to actively "participate in the on-going 'fiction' that is America" (Smith, *Presidents* 9). Storytelling thus constitutes a powerful means of political communication. With regard to the American presidency, Evan Cornog has therefore fittingly remarked that "[t]he essence of American presidential leadership, and the secret of presidential success, is storytelling" (Cornog 1).

My examination of the performative staging of Barack Obama's 2008 presidential election campaign includes visual narrative modes as well as textual and verbal forms of storytelling. Visuals are not treated as mere illustrative supplements to an otherwise established narrative. As Wolfgang Hallet notes, "it is generally agreed that stories can also be rendered in visual form" (142) and that images "can also play a pivotal role in plot construction itself" (142). As my case study demonstrates, in Obama's 2008 campaign, visual elements and images are a central element of the narrative itself.

Visual images are particularly important for narratives of order and the corresponding (collective) identity in the political sphere. Abstractions of political order and the body



political become graspable through strategies of visualization (Münkler 223; Soeffner/Tänzler 21)<sup>53</sup>. The narrative construction of identity in and of a political entity can never rely solely on verbal expression; it must also be visually embodied. According to Robert Hariman and John Lucaites,

[b]ecause the public is a body of strangers constituted solely by the acts of being addressed and paying attention, it can only acquire self-awareness and historical agency if individual auditors “see themselves” in the collective representations that are the material of public culture. (365)

Visual narrative cues are therefore indispensable in the process of collective political identity-formation. The visualization of rulers and political leaders, therefore, has more than a “politische Repräsentationsfunktion, sondern können als identitätsstiftende, visuelle Narrative in gesellschaftliche Diskurse hinein wirken” (Heck 312).

This is particularly relevant in the American political sphere. Compared to Europe (“the Old World”) the imaginative plays a larger role in the United States, where “the state came before the nation” (Commager 3). European political entities developed gradually from collective histories going “far back” and deeply rooted in old traditions. The newly founded United States had to first imagine itself as collective political entity. Storytelling, in its verbal and visual form, played a crucial role in this process. “In the first decades after American independence”, Melissa Walker notes,

American writers and artists engaged in the national project of defining and celebrating an American national identity. Artists spotlighted a heroic American past through portraits of Revolutionary War heroes and history paintings. (105)<sup>54</sup>

The American presidency was central to the efforts to make the new political order palpable and credible.

Visualization played a specific role during the political transition from colonies to independent nation. As described in Chapter 3.1, the first American President, George Washington, “helped the country formulate an identity and institutionalize a competitive electoral democracy” and “facilitated the formation of the culture and institutions that were necessary for a state and [...] effective democratic system” (Lipset qtd. in Rozell 30). Images were central to establishing and “marketing” the new nation, as well as for promoting its foundational identity-narratives. George Washington established and per-

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53 Also see: Hofman, Wilhelm. “Statt eines Vorwortes: Die Sichtbarkeit der Macht. Überlegungen zum Paradigmenwechsel von der logozentrischen zur ikonozentrischen Politik.” *Die Sichtbarkeit der Macht, Theoretische und empirische Untersuchungen zur visuellen Politik*. Ed. Wilhelm Hofman. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1999. 7-11. Print.; Warnke, Martin et. al. *Handbuch der politischen Ikonographie*. München: Beck, 2011. Print.; Zanker, Paul. *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder*. München: C. H. Beck, 2003. Print.

54 Also see: Ayres, William and Barbara Mitnick. *Picturing History*. New York: Rizzoli/Fraunces Tavern Museum, 1993. Print.; Barnhill, Georgia B. “Visualizing American History: The Role of Prints in Expressing Nationalism.” *Visual Culture in the American Studies Classroom*. Ed. Udo J. Hebel and Martina Kohl. Vienna: RPO, 2005. 25-41. Print.; Burnham, Patricia and Lucretia Giese. *Redefining American History Painting*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Print.; Commager, Henry Steele. “The Search for a Usable Past.” *American Heritage Magazine* 16.2 (1965): 3-27. Print.; Hebel, Udo. “Sites of Memory in U.S.-American Histories and Cultures.” *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*. Eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning. Berlin: DeGruyter, 2008. 46-60. Print.

manently influenced “the visual component of the presidency” (Peretti 13). The revered war hero and first President was the ideal site for the visual embodiment of America’s new collective self<sup>55</sup>:

Contemporary artists sensed this crucial role of the presidency and provided visual images that revealed and shaped perceptions of the president as the champion of the Union. (Cunningham 109)

American presidential campaigns are deeply rooted in this visual culture. The importance of this historical legacy is intensified by the increasingly image-oriented modes of mass-communication. American presidential campaigns have become inextricably linked to a visual mode of communication and representation<sup>56</sup>. Characterizing contemporary political communication Robert Grünwald speaks of a “Drang zum Visuellen und zur Bilderproduktion” (15) or even a “Bilderzwang” (20)<sup>57</sup>. Understanding the narrative structures of contemporary election campaigns therefore requires careful attention to the visual as a central and independent element of campaign-related storytelling.

### 3.2.4. The Concept of the “Imagined Presidency”

The American presidential office constitutes a negotiative space where shifts in socio-political meanings are immediately reflected. Since the 1970s and 1980s, as discussed in chapter 3.2.2 and 3.2.3., research and popular discussions focus less on manipulation and fakery in political staging, and more on how imaginative processes bridge the complex relations among political reality, representation and performance. Already the 2004 presidential campaign inspired many presidential scholars to reconceptualize the presidency as a negotiative space of identity-formation.

With my concept of the Imagined Presidency, I hope to refine existing communication theory concepts of the American presidency. The most prominent of these concepts are the “rhetorical” and “symbolic” presidency<sup>58</sup>. While it is widely accepted that (post)

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<sup>55</sup> Also see: Depkat, Volker. “The Grammar of Postrevolutionary Visual Politics.” *Pictorial Cultures and Political Iconographies: Approaches, Perspectives, Case Studies from Europe and America*. Eds. Udo Hebel and Christoph Wagner. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011. Print.; Fitz, Karsten. *The American Revolution Remembered, 1830s-1850s: Competing Images and Conflicting Narratives*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2010. Print.; Mitnick, Barbara. *George Washington: American Symbol*. New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1999. Print.; Thistlethwaite, Mark. *The Image of George Washington: Studies in Mid-Nineteenth-Century American History Painting*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1979. Print.

<sup>56</sup> Also see, for example: Müller, Marion G. *Politische Bildstrategien im amerikanischen Präsidentschaftswahlkampf, 1828-1996*. Akademie Verlag, 1997. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997. Print.

<sup>57</sup> Also see: Bermbach, Udo und Horst Bredekamp, Paula Diehl, et al. *Strategien der Visualisierung: Verbildlichung als Mittel politischer Kommunikation*. Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2009. Print.; Knieper, Thomas und Marion G. Müller. *Visuelle Wahlkampfkommunikation*. Köln: Halem Verlag, 2004. Print.

<sup>58</sup> The concept of the “Rhetorical Presidency”, a structural and communicative theory of the American Presidency in the media age, is based on the premise that the key to political power is the use of public speech as space of instructive deliberative negotiation to mobilize the masses. “The original proponents of the theory credited three developments with the rise of the rhetorical presidency; changing ideas of leadership from silent executive authority to more powerful rhetorical achievements, a presidential shift from governing to campaigning, and the rise of the modern mass media” (Drury 139). Also see: Ceaser, James W., & Glen E. Thuerow, Jeffrey Tulis, Joseph M Bessette. “The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 11.2 (1981): 158–171.; Tulis, Jeffrey. *The Rhetorical Presidency*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987. Print. The concept of the “Symbolic Presidency” is a structural theory of the American Presidency defining it as a place of symbolic representation: “The Presidency is itself a significant symbol: [...] The institution reflects the beliefs, attitudes, and values of the public already established through socialization. All occupants, therefore, must demonstrate that they possess the perceived qualities of the office” (Denton, *Political Communication in America* 229). Also see: Denton, Robert E. *The Symbolic*

modern nations are "imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions" (Brennan 49), scholarly conceptualizations of the presidential office have not yet sufficiently integrated these developments. In the shifting communicative environment of postmodern election campaigns, the concept of the Imagined Presidency reconceptualizes the American presidency as the locus of public identity formation.

Presidential scholar Louis Koenig first used the term the Imagined Presidency in 1968. He coined the phrase to highlight the division of the American presidency into a "real" and an "imagined" position. According to Koenig, "[t]he imagined Presidency is vested in our mind with more power than the President really has" (17). Koenig sees the Imagined Presidency as an obstacle to effective presidential leadership (17). The "imaginative dimension", he explains, only "exaggerates the office's strength" (17), creating a highly problematic situation. Koenig's conception of the Imagined Presidency interprets its imaginative dimension as a liability rather than a functional necessity, and certainly does not recognize it as crucial for winning and serving in the office.

My conception of the presidential office, in contrast, is based on Anderson's idea that socio-political communities *inevitably* rely on imaginative processes<sup>59</sup>. My concept of the Imagined Presidency offers a positive conceptualization of imaginative processes in politics, and specifically in electoral campaigns. Imagination is indispensable to the difficult negotiations among political reality, performance and representation. My concept thus corrects negative assessments of imagination as manipulative<sup>60</sup>, a "recipe for citizen disillusionment" (Koenig 9). I suggest that a successful presidential candidate or incumbent must performatively stage stories that resonate with the audience to create an elaborated imaginative identity-offer.

My understanding of the "imaginative" proceeds from the general assumption that imagination is equal to "the mind's power for making similitudes" (Harwood qtd. in Bewernick 77). The imaginative constitutes a culturally determined knowledge system. It creates a space where a particular understanding of reality can operate. The imaginative, in this context, is not fantasy, but rather a truly creative process that actually brings something into being. I see the imaginative as *the* space for identity-formation in the socio-political context. My concept of the Imagined Presidency centers around the idea that the narrative and the act of storytelling facilitates the interactive development of a collective identity which is then made available in a performative staging<sup>61</sup>.

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*Dimensions of the American Presidency: Description and Analysis*. Prospect Heights: Waveland Press Inc, 1982. Print. Hinckley, Barbara. *The Symbolic Presidency: How Presidents Portray Themselves*. London: Routledge, 1990. Print.

In a hyper-fragmented and differentiated environment of endless communication channels and audiences, these rather "paternalistic top-down" takes on the role of the president (Stuckey, "Joshua Generation" 17) do no longer work, as they, according to Vanessa Beasley, are "not responsive" ("Task Force Presidency and Deliberative Democracy") enough in their communicative nature, to meet the challenges of a postmodern political culture.

59 As Benedict Anderson notes, "[c]ommunities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (6).

60 See: The "Manipulations-Theorem" (Arnold et al. 11).

61 Approaching the idea of the imaginative with regard to the establishment of a collective European public, Annette Knaut defines the imaginative in a similar fashion: "kulturell gebundene Wissensordnungen beschreiben, die in Diskursen (re) produziert werden und die eine übergreifende Narrativstruktur bereitstellen, die wiederum mit Erfahrungswissen und für das Imaginativ typische Argumentationsstrukturen und Symboliken (Tropen) behaftet ist" (Knaut 98).



Given the increasingly complex relation between reality and how it is represented, my concept of the Imagined Presidency emerges from the understanding that presidential performance and presidential reality are two sides of the same coin<sup>62</sup>. Writing about televised presidential politics, Joshua Meyrowitz says you cannot “simply *be* the president” (303). Rather, the role of President must be performed from the outset (Meyrowitz 303). Seeking and occupying the office of the presidency therefore requires a high level of imaginative and performative proficiency. Along the same lines, I suggest that in the current communicative and representational circumstances, the presidency cannot simply be assumed and represented as a candidate’s authentic merging with the symbolic body of the office. Instead, the presidential office, above all, must be brought into being through an *a priori* performative imagination of the presidency. This is supported by Stella Bruzzi’s study of television documentaries’ impact on public perception of the presidency. She writes, “to enforce the distinction between the presidential candidate or President as ‘real’ person and the performance is futile, as the presidency is necessarily performative” (148).

In my conception, the reality behind the imaginative performance plays no role in the representational function of the American presidential office. In the current hyper-medialized environment, the performance of the presidential office can be nothing other than the reality of the presidential office itself. Imaginative processes never take place in a socio-political or cultural vacuum. The “imaginative” is always determined by its context. The context of the American presidency is set by the office’s legal configuration, its history, and contemporary value landscapes.

The communicative success of a candidate or incumbent is not determined by keeping the public from realizing that what they see is imaginary. Rather, communicative success results when the candidate infuses his performed imaginative offer with verisimilitude. This requires using the socio-cultural framework to construct an imaginative offer that the audience accepts as reality. The presidential office is only as real as its interactively performed imaginative projection is verisimilar. Comparing real Presidents with *The West Wing*’s fictional President, Vanessa Crawley says that a fictional President is judged by how close he comes to meeting the “visual truth” of the “real” presidency, while a real presidential candidate’s success depends on “how real his performance is in its fiction” (136).

My concept of the Imagined Presidency recognizes that America’s representative system has been succeeded by a simulative or performative one. The simulative space of the Imagined Presidency constitutes a site of “mimetic experience” in which, according to Trevor and Shawn Parry-Giles “an actual experience” is imitated (4). At this experiential intersection, the performed and the real presidency have become one. Ingolf Blühdorn, writing on the simulative nature of 21<sup>st</sup> century politics, says that “simulation substitutes the sign for the signified, and presents the visibility of the former as evidence for the real-

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<sup>62</sup> For more on this aspect see Crawley 27-28.

ity of the latter” (321). Simulations bring forth the actual space for “the production of societal self-descriptions” (Blühdorn 321), thus enabling “the performative regeneration of the modernist foundations of democracy” (Blühdorn 323). If simulation characterizes postmodern political functioning, then conceptualizations of the American presidency, which is the center of socio-political meaning-making in one of the world’s largest democracies, should acknowledge the shift towards the simulative. Candidates performing as a potential American President, who thereby offer societal self-descriptions for what America will be like under their leadership, must go beyond *symbolically representing* the office. Their success depends on using the presidency as an imaginative space where they can make a simulative offer that bridges the gap between fantasy and reality.

The shift from representation to simulation and performance also demands rethinking the identity-formation processes in the postmodern presidential office. The dramatist staging of specific narratives configures meaning-making in politics. The Imagined Presidency relies on ritual-like performative principles and storytelling. “[T]he presidency”, as Smith says, is “born in storytelling” (*Presidents* 8), and political campaigns should be seen as a “socio-dramatic event or process” (McLeod 360). Successful performative staging thus depends on offering participants a credible embodiment “of [their] own internal world”, and simultaneously recognizing that it is a “representation of its collective identity” (Apter 358).

In the fragmented and hyperreal postmodern environment, the Imagined Presidency makes possible three important processes. First, it facilitates the regeneration of belief systems that hold together and stabilize society. The resignification of the presidency as embodying specific American values, beliefs and self-understandings that cement the national collective can only be achieved through a candidate’s imaginative and performative engagement.

Secondly, the Imagined Presidency offers a concrete image of the society’s future. The Imagined Presidency creates a vision of the future that delineates what is possible and politically conceivable. The “imaginative”, Molly Andrews says, is the “bridge traversing the pathway between what is known, and what can be known, between the present and possible futures” (5).

Finally, the Imagined Presidency is where members of the socio-political entity can engage in a “objectively perceived shared reality” (Rubinstein 7). Where patterns of identity construction are “consumption-oriented” (Blühdorn 319), this facilitates the formation of a collective identity. The Imagined Presidency makes possible the realization and expression of a collective socio-political identity through shared consumption of a performed storyline.

In fragmented and hypermedialized communicative environments, symbolic representation and identification alone cannot create and sustain collective meanings anymore. Slavoy Zizek writes that symbolic identification is representational condensation defined by inimitability (105). Imaginary identification, on the other hand, follows the principle

of merging the self and the other so that the one becomes the other (Zizek 107). Recognizing the American Presidency as an imaginary, rather than a merely symbolic space, more fully recognizes the office's increased "metaphorical liminality" (Wagner-Pacific 275; Turner, *Dramas* 28). The Imagined Presidency is less a symbolic space than an avatarian one. A politician striving for the presidential office must first turn himself into an avatar. Simply assuming the role of a symbol is not adequate.

The consequences for understanding the presidential office are clear. Those aspiring to occupy the presidency, and therefore physically embody it, should not be focused on assuming an established representational role. Rather, they should offer themselves as a mimetically intriguing space for the collective imagination. In other words, rather than simply assuming a representational function and tapping into the existing reservoir of cultural symbolism, they have to create a imaginative space in their public performance that allows the simulative participation in the imaginative (re)creation of the collective's self.

The essence of contemporary presidential leadership, therefore, is the creation of an accessible and interactive avatarian space of projection that, *ipso facto*, is a site for the experience and consumption that creates America's collective self. A secure collective identity requires constantly resignifying representational structures. America's "crisis of representation" can be overcome by the ongoing re-imagination of the presidency by those seeking and holding the office. In concrete terms, the narrative imagination and performative staging of an Imagined Presidency is an indispensable political practice, and the most viable way of dealing with the multifarious challenges to identity formation in the postmodern world.

## 4. Obama's "Imagined Presidency": A Case Study of Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential Election Campaign's Public Performance

### 4.1. Obama as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Adamic Innovator

Epitomized by the slogans "Change we can believe in" and "Yes we can" (Spiller 42), Barack Obama's 2008 campaign emphasized change, innovation, and progress as central themes. Newness, renewal and innovation are central to Obama's styling as an icon of a New American Century.

In early 2007, in announcing his Presidential exploratory committee, Obama argued that change is necessary for a positive future, and overcoming challenges requires a common effort:

A change in our politics can only come from you – from people across our country who believe there's a better way and are willing to work for it. Years ago, as a community organizer in Chicago, I learned that meaningful change always begins at the grassroots [...]. So even in the midst of the enormous challenges we face today, I have great faith and hope about the future – because I believe in you. ("Presidential Exploratory Committee Announcement", 2007)

A month later, in officially announcing his candidacy, Obama then further elaborated on newness and innovation as integral part of his presidential mission:

Each and every time, a new generation has risen up and done what's needed to be done. Today we are called once more – and it is time for our generation to answer that call. [J]oin me in this improbable quest, if you feel destiny calling, and see as I see, a future of endless possibility stretching before us; if you sense, as I sense, that the time is now to shake off our slumber, and slough off our fear, and make good on the debt we owe past and future generations [...]. ("Announcement Speech", 2007)

Throughout his campaign, Obama declared that his presidential mission is "the next great chapter in the American story" ("New Hampshire Primary Speech", 2008), as "it is that American spirit – that American promise – that pushes us forward even when the path is uncertain; that binds us together in spite of our differences; that makes us fix our eye not on what is seen, but what is unseen, that better place around the bend" ("Acceptance Speech", 2008). Obama and his future presidency represent the "march into the future" ("Acceptance Speech", 2008). The Democratic party platform reinforced his message, declaring an Obama presidency the only choice for "all Americans who hunger for a new direction" ("Democratic Party Platform", 2008). Candidate Obama stands for the "renew[al of] America's promise", "a new era", "new hope and new ideas", the "renewing [of] American leadership on the world stage" and the creation of "a new kind of government" ("Democratic Party Platform", 2008).

This message is also promoted by all aspects of the campaign logo, including the typographical design. The sans-serif Gotham typeface, designed for the magazine *GQ*, to "look very fresh, yet very established, to have a credible voice to it" ("Interview Film *Helvetica*"),

graphically reinforced Obama's message of "freshness" and renewal<sup>63</sup> (cf. [Fig. 1](#)).

*New York Times* commentator Alice Rawsthorne wrote,

[n]o typeface could seem better suited to a dynamic, yet conscientious, American public servant. [...] You don't have to be a typographic historian to get the message. A glance at the lettering on the "Change" banners at Obama's rallies conveys a potent, if unspoken, combination of contemporary sophistication (a nod to his suits) with nostalgia for America's past and a sense of duty. ("Brand Obama")

The same is true of the logo's visual design. The designer, Sol Sender, said,

[w]hen we received the assignment, we immediately read both of Senator Obama's books. We were struck by the ideas of hope, change and a new perspective on red and blue (not red and blue states, but one country). There was also a strong sense, from the start, that his campaign represented something entirely new in American politics — "a new day," so to speak. (Heller, "The 'O' in Obama")

The idea of a "new day" or "new dawn" is expressed visually in the logo, the campaign's most ubiquitous design element. The logo connects a message of hope and change ("new day", "new perspective"), with a patriotic claim to American exceptionalism ("red and blue"). The main form is the blue "O", which clearly stands for Obama. The white inner part looks like a rising sun over a rolling red and white landscape representing the American nation. The dynamic structure of the design elements enhances the call for action (cf. [Fig. 2](#))<sup>64</sup>.

Newness has always been a cultural marker for both the image and self-image of America<sup>65</sup>. The American experience was always interpreted as naturally connected to the "New World". John O'Sullivan says, "our national birth was the beginning of a new history, the formation and progress of an untried political system, which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only; [...] We are the nation of human progress" ("Manifest Destiny")<sup>66</sup>.

The "nation of futurity" (O'Sullivan, "Futurity") is rooted in the "myth of the fall, and of perpetual beginnings" (Patea 23). The hero of perpetual renewal and progress is "Adam". R. W. B. Lewis, discussing the American Adamic "new man", writes that the New World is

a divinely granted second chance for the human race, after the first chance had been so disastrously fumbled in the darkening Old World, [that] introduced a new kind of hero,

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<sup>63</sup> For more on this aspect, see: Lupton 32-33; Eskilson 414-415; *General*: Heller, Steven. "To the Letter Born." *The New York Times*. 2. Apr. 2008 Web. 12 Aug. 2009. <[http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/04/02/to-the-letter-born/?\\_r=0](http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/04/02/to-the-letter-born/?_r=0)>; Dadich, Scott. "What You See Is What You Get." *The New York Times*. 9 Oct. 2004. Web. 13 Aug. 2009. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/09/opinion/what-you-see-is-what-you-get.html>>.

<sup>64</sup> For further reading on the question of design see: Yanes, Nicholas A. and Derrais Carter. *The Iconic Obama, 2007-2009: Essays on Media Representations of the Candidate and New President*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2012. Print.

<sup>65</sup> Viorica Patea says the American notion of self was always determined by an "ethos of the new" (26).

<sup>66</sup> See: John Winthrop, *A Modell of Christian Charity* (1630), *The History of New England from 1630-1649*; J. Hector St. John Crevecoeur: "Letter III: What is an American"; Thomas Jefferson *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787); Frederik Jackson Turner "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893).

the heroic embodiment of a new set of ideal human attributes, a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. (5)

Representing innocence and a future unburdened by the past, the American Adam is the hero of a “genuine culture of newness and nextness” (Fisher, *Still New World* 18). Constant progress, renewal and overcoming are deeply embedded in American identity discourse.

In his performative staging, Obama taps into and actively evokes the Adamic self in several ways. He presents himself as youthful, athletic, fit, as well as up-to-date with American popular culture. On the March 2008 cover of *Rolling Stone* (cf. [Fig. 3](#)), he strikes a firm pose, and although his hands are not visible, the viewer knows they are set on his hips in an assertive manner. He stares into the distance with a confident expression. The white light around Obama’s head and torso impart an otherworldly aura. He looks like a broad-chested superhero.

Obama used several strategies to draft a performative role characterized by youthfulness. This image was later reinforced by tapping into the cultural memory of John F. Kennedy, the presidential icon of youth and renewal. Obama presented himself visually in contexts associated with a young, dynamic, and energetic audience, like the covers of *GQ* cover and *Men’s Health*<sup>67</sup>. The first cover (cf. [Fig. 4](#)) shows Obama in a firm, yet casual pose with an almost playful expression on his face. His relaxed, impish smile conveys a vibrant youthfulness. His youthfulness is positively connoted by surrounding captions: “Barack Obama Rules”, “Dress like a Winner” and “All Hail the Young QBs”. Obama obviously stands for success, and it is implied that youthfulness enables achievement. As presented here, Obama and a magazine with the motto “live smart/look sharp” are an ideal fit.

Obama offers a similar performance on the cover of *Men’s Vogue*<sup>68</sup> (cf. [Fig. 5](#)). Although less playful, his dynamic pose styles him as a “man of action” with a determined and energetic body. Obama’s fisted right hand reinforces the impression of strength and determination. He is again surrounded by captions, including “Storm Tech: Classic Gear Goes Cutting Edge” and “Visionaries – Ten Icons of Genius and Style”. The caption describing the story – “Barack’s Thrill Ride – Stowing away on O-Force One” – has a similar tone. The photo is taken on a plane, and Obama is presented as a source of energy and move-

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67 Obama and his campaign team extensively controls the media and its representation of Obama, as the following articles suggest: Harenden, Toby. “White House Aide says Barack Obama’s Team ‘Controlled’ the Media.” *The Telegraph*. 19 Oct. 2009. Web. 13 Sep. 2014. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/barackobama/6377910/White-House-aide-says-Barack-Obama-team-controlled-the-media.html>>; Rutenberg, Jim. “Obama’s Campaign Tightens Control of Image and Access.” *The New York Times*. 19 Jun. 2008. Web. 16 Sep. 2014. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/19/us/politics/19campaign.html>>; Seymore, Lesley-Jane. “Behind The *More* Magazine Shoot: Who Dictates Michelle Obama’s Personal Style?.” *Huffington Post*. 29 Oct. 2008. Web. 14 Sep. 2014. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lesley-jane-seymour/dressgate-who-is-dictatin\\_b\\_128067.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lesley-jane-seymour/dressgate-who-is-dictatin_b_128067.html)>; Van Tine, Dennis. “Annie Leibovitz Photographs Barack Obama’s Campaign.” *Open All Night Media*. 09 Apr. 2008. Web. 14 Sep. 2014. <[http://www.oanmedia.com/2008/04/annie\\_leibovitz\\_photographs\\_ba.php](http://www.oanmedia.com/2008/04/annie_leibovitz_photographs_ba.php)>; Wallstein, Peter. “Getting to Know the Obamas, on their Terms.” *Los Angeles Times*. 20 Apr. 2009. Web. 14 Sep. 2014 <<http://articles.latimes.com/2009/apr/20/nation/na-obama-presidency20>>; “Annie Leibovitz Following Barack Obama Around – *Men’s Vogue* Feature Coming Soon?.” *Huffington Post*. 22 Apr. 2008. Web. 14 Sep. 2014. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/04/14/annie-leibovitz-following\\_n\\_96560.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/04/14/annie-leibovitz-following_n_96560.html)>

68 The October issue of *Men’s Vogue* was available at newsstands at the beginning of October.



ment. Again he appears young and full of energy, hence able to bring true change as President.

*Newsweek* commentator Andrew Romano wrote, “Obama looks like change” (“Anti-Obama-Strategy”). When Obama visited the morning talk show the *The View* in July 2008, Barbara Walters joked about his ostensible distant kinship with film actor Brad Pitt. “We were just saying before you came out...maybe we shouldn’t say that but...can we say it? ...We thought you are very sexy looking” (“Barack Obama The View”, 2008). Obama’s efforts to establish himself in the role of an attractive and “manly” young man were thus reinforced.

Obama’s youthfulness was emphasized by the extensive display of his athleticism and his passion for sports and fitness<sup>69</sup>. A 2007 photo shoot with the magazine *Sports Illustrated* presents Obama as an active athlete (cf. [Fig. 6](#) & [7](#)). All images show him as a dynamic and engaged competitor. His engagement in physical exercise seems both effortless and enjoyable (cf. [Fig. 8](#) & [9](#)).

On the campaign trail, Obama engaged in similar performances with local, usually young, campaign volunteers and voters<sup>70</sup>. He also gave a number of interviews on *ESPN* on the role basketball played throughout his life (*ESPN*, “Transcript Interview Obama” 2008).<sup>71</sup> The strategy of presenting his athleticism to indicate youthful vigor is seen in the display of his body-surfing skills during his campaign-trail Hawaiian vacation. His well-trained body illustrates his claim to be young and dynamic (cf. [Fig. 10](#) & [11](#)).

*Washington Post* columnist Lynn Sweet wrote of these photos on her campaign blog: “Will he get bounce from riding the waves?” (“Body Surfing”).

The success of Obama’s staging strategy in this regard is demonstrated by how it was received and reproduced in the mainstream media. For example, Obama graces the November 2008 cover of *Men’s Health*<sup>72</sup> under the caption “20 Heroes of Fitness and Health”<sup>73</sup> (cf. [Fig. 12](#)). Captions like “Strong & Fit” and “What Great Leaders Know” imply

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69 Also see John F. Kennedy’s strategic use of sports activities for his public staging: e.g. Cover *Sports Illustrated*: “Sport on the New Frontier.” (1961). *Getty Images* <<http://www.gettyimages.de/detail/nachrichtenfoto/december-26-1960-sports-illustrated-cover-yachting-nachrichtenfoto/97414789>>; Photos; Peskin, Hy. “Senator John F. Kennedy and fiance Jacqueline Bouvier go sailing while on vacation at the Kennedy compound.” (1961). *Getty Images* <<http://www.gettyimages.de/detail/nachrichtenfoto/senator-john-f-kennedy-and-fiance-jacqueline-bouvier-nachrichtenfoto/461571101/gallery>>; Peskin, Hy. “Senator John F. Kennedy and fiance Jacqueline Bouvier play baseball while on vacation at the Kennedy compound.” (1953). Stoughton, Cecil. “President Kennedy on the links of Hyannisport Club.” (1963). *John F. Kennedy Library*. <<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Exhibits/Past-Exhibits/Presidential-Getaway.aspx>>; Kudsens, Robert. “President John F. Kennedy sits aboard the United States Coast Guard boat Manitou in Narragansett Bay.” (1962). *CBS NEWS*. <<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-images-that-created-camelot/>>

70 Also see: Hamby, Peter. “Obama will play 3-on-3 basketball to register Indiana voters.” *CNN*. 28 Mar. 2008. Web. 27 May 2014. <<http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2008/03/28/obama-to-play-3-on-3-basketball-to-register-indiana-voters/>>; Jackson, Margaret. “Early morning workout for Obama.” *The Denver Post*. 28 Mar. 2008. Web. 26 May 2014. <[http://www.denverpost.com/politicswestnews/ci\\_10325630](http://www.denverpost.com/politicswestnews/ci_10325630)>; Zeleny, Jeff. “It’s Hoops for Votes in Indiana.” *The New York Times*. 25 Apr. 2008. Web. 26 May 2014. <[http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/04/25/its-hoops-for-votes-in-indiana/?\\_r=0](http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/04/25/its-hoops-for-votes-in-indiana/?_r=0)>.

71 Also see: Murphy, Austin. “Obama discusses his Hoops Memories at Punahou High.” *Sports Illustrated*. 21 May 2008. Web. 01 Jun. 2013. <<http://www.si.com/more-sports/2008/05/21/obama-0521>>; Scott, Stuart. “Interview of Barack Obama on ESPN.” *ESPN*. 28 Aug. 2008. Web. 13 Jun. 2013. <[http://sports.espn.go.com/broadband/video/videopage\\_ray?videoid=3553404&categoryid=3313263&n8pe6c=3](http://sports.espn.go.com/broadband/video/videopage_ray?videoid=3553404&categoryid=3313263&n8pe6c=3)>

72 The November issue of *Men’s Health* was available at newsstands end of October.

73 The issue included an interview addressing e.g. questions such as Obama’s motivation to work out every day and how he kept healthy and fit on campaign trail. See: Moore, Peter. “Lessons in Life from the President.” *Men’s Health*. Nov. 2008. Web. 07 Jun. 2013. <<http://www.menshealth.com/best-life/barack-obama?fullpage=true>>.

that Obama exemplifies these messages.

The message of newness and renewal was also conveyed by an extensive display of Obama's pop cultural currency as a young hipster. He chose easily recognized pop culture stages, including features in popular entertainment magazines and appearances on prime time TV talk shows. As early as September 2007, he was the feature interview and cover of the music magazine *Vibe* (cf. [Fig. 13](#)).

His dress and posture, arm cocked to check "It's Obama Time" on his watch, imply casual relaxation. The role Obama establishes turns him into a medium that is in itself the message: the hip way he presents himself as presidential candidate merges with the indirect call that it is time to "do something" ("the ticking clock").<sup>74</sup>

The ongoing staging of Obama as the cool modern politician is also evident in the July 2008 cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine (cf. [Fig. 14](#)). The viewer sees Obama's face and upper torso, no caption. He appears relaxed and jovial. The easy-going image is reinforced in the interview, where he discusses the playlist on his iPod and presents himself as a knowledgeable appreciator of hip hop music – "I know Jay-Z. I know Ludacris. I know Russell Simmons" (Wenner, "Interview Obama Rolling Stone")<sup>75</sup>. By associating himself with such pop culture icons, Obama communicates that he is immersed in contemporary pop culture. He cultivated this role by including Jay-Z as a prominent campaign spokesman (cf. [Fig. 15](#)), and by referencing a well-known Jay-Z video clip with a hand gesture known as the "dirt-off-my-shoulders" move (cf. [Fig. 16](#) & [17](#)).

On television Obama used the same "young hipster" strategy. His appearance on Ellen DeGeneres's talk show is a case in point. To the surprise of the host and audience, Obama danced onto stage to the tune of Beyonce Knowles' pop hit "Crazy in Love". Grooving to the song, Obama then greeted Ellen DeGeneres with a casual swing of the hips (cf. [Fig. 18](#)).

Obama's young, cool performance is particularly effective in contrast to his much older competition, like Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican John McCain<sup>76</sup>.

The last strategy for presenting Obama as the "young and new" candidate is the simplest. In a contrast with traditional campaign communication, Obama associated himself and his mission with the younger generation of voters by surrounding himself with young people. Many official campaign images by Obama's personal photographer Pete Souza show this very effectively (cf. [Fig. 19](#)). Obama's image appears only in the *Time* magazine held by a young woman surrounded by other young people who, like her, gaze admiringly at something outside the frame. The magazine cover and campaign signs indicate they are at an Obama event.

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<sup>74</sup> Obama was on the cover of *Vibe* for a second time during the campaign, shortly before election day. The cover shows a close-up of Obama's face and is captioned by a personal call to vote by Obama himself: "Dear *Vibe* Readers, I am running for President to take this country in a new direction. But I can't do it alone. I need you" ("An Exclusive Letter from Obama"/ Cover *Vibe* Nov. 2008).

<sup>75</sup> Also see comments such as that his musical taste ranges "from Howlin' Wolf to Yo-Yo Ma to Sheryl Crow to Jay-Z" (Wenner, "Interview Obama Rolling Stone") or that he nonchalantly mentions in the interview that he chats with rapper Jay-Z every once in a while (Wenner, "Interview Obama Rolling Stone").

<sup>76</sup> Also see: Seelye, Katharina. "In Clinton vs. Obama, Age Is One of the Greatest Predictors." *The New York Times*. 22 Apr. 2008. Web. 15 Jun. 2013. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/22/us/politics/22age.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/22/us/politics/22age.html?_r=0)>; Jackson, Bud. "McCain's Age is a Legitimate Issue." *Politico*. 22 May 2008. Web. 14 Jun. 2013. <<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0508/10529.html>>

The strategy of connecting the “change” theme and the centrality of a younger generation to this socio-political mission is visible in other images as well (cf. [Fig. 20](#) & [21](#)).

This mise-en-scene is also vividly illustrated in the short “One Day to Change the World” ad (First Air-Date: 02 Nov. 2008) launched shortly before election day. The ad begins with a fast-forward sequence from dawn through sunrise and the start of a new day (cf. [Fig. 22](#) & [23](#)).

Over the course of thirty-second clip with an Obama voiceover, people hold up hand-lettered signs saying “HOPE”. The people are different ages and ethnically diverse, and include a large number of babies, children and young adults, indicating that Obama’s call for change and renewal is driven by those who are literally the nation’s future (cf. [Fig. 24 – 27](#)).<sup>77</sup>

The Obama campaign configured the stage for his performance as the youthful icon of hope by drawing on the cultural memory of the Kennedy presidency. This gave the audience a second level of access to the identity offers made by Obama, and secured the cultural extension between the audience and America’s background culture. On the most basic level, Obama aligned himself with the Kennedy era with the design of his official campaign poster. In layout, style and color, Obama’s poster is highly reminiscent of Kennedy’s 1960 campaign poster (cf. [Fig. 28](#) & [29](#)).

Kennedy stands for visionary political renewal and the resuscitation of American idealism. In American cultural memory, he symbolizes change, hope, optimism and tackling new challenges. Kennedy evoked these notions with the catchphrase “The New Frontier” (“Acceptance Speech”, 1960)<sup>78</sup>. This eventually became the label for his politics of innovation and renewal. As Patrick Garry says,

Kennedy appealed to a nation needing to recover a sense of purpose, to renew its strength and refresh its idealism after a decade in which it was somewhat adrift and complacent in its outlook. Signs of fading national optimism became evident in the late 1950s. The slowing of economic growth, the Soviet launch of Sputnik, and demonstrations of hostility toward the U.S. in supposedly friendly Latin America and Japan spurred America toward a spirit of activism and progress. Kennedy brought this activist spirit, a sense of purpose, and promise of progress to Washington. (74)

Kennedy frequently urged leaving behind outmoded and dysfunctional political approaches. His 1962 Yale commencement speech is but one example: “[W]e cannot understand and attack our contemporary problems in 1962 if we are bound by traditional labels and worn out slogans of an earlier era” (Kennedy, “Yale Commencement Speech”, 1962). Kennedy regularly invoked the end of the old era and the rise of a new generation, claiming in his acceptance speech that “[t]oday our concern must be with that future. For the world is changing. The old era is ending. The old ways will not do” (“Acceptance

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<sup>77</sup> Also see campaign ads “Signs of Hope and Change” (01 Sep. 2008) or “We have a lot of Work to Do” (2 Nov. 2008).

<sup>78</sup> Also see: “We stand at the edge of a New Frontier – the frontier of unfulfilled hopes and dreams, a frontier of unknown opportunities and beliefs in peril. Beyond that frontier are uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered problems of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus” (Kennedy, “Acceptance Speech”, 1960).

Speech”, 1960).

It is time, in short, for a new generation of leadership. All over the world, particularly in the newer nations, young men are coming to power, men who are not bound by the traditions of the past, men who are not blinded by the old fears and hates and rivalries, young men who can cast off the old slogans and the old delusions. (Kennedy, “Acceptance Speech”, 1960)

The same rhetoric and tone was used by Obama time and again to ground his performance. In his announcement speech, he said,

[e]ach and every time, a new generation has risen up and done what’s needed to be done. Today we are called once more – and it is time for our generation to answer that call. (“Announcement Speech”, 2007)

In his acceptance speech, Obama argued, in Kennedy’s spirit, that past judgment is “not the judgment we need. That won’t keep America safe. We need a President who can face the threats of the future, not keep grasping at the ideas of the past” (Obama, “Acceptance Speech”, 2008)<sup>79</sup>. Obama’s visit to Berlin in July 2008 was another unambiguous allusion to Kennedy. His speech at the Siegessäule made clear reference to Kennedy’s iconic 1963 speech in Berlin’s Rudolph Wilde Platz. Press images of the two events demonstrate how the campaign visually equated Obama with Kennedy (cf. [Fig. 30](#) & [31](#)).

Obama’s fashioning of his “private role” also taps into the cultural memory of the Kennedy era. Kennedy, according to John Barnes, “pioneered the use of style in modern American politics; that is, he created an aesthetically appealing image of himself” (50). Obama staged himself as Kennedy’s reincarnation. An article in the *Washington Post* said that Obama orchestrated his private appearance as a “second coming of John F. Kennedy” (Week Staff, “Second Coming”). For example, Kennedy chose not to wear a hat on certain occasions, which was quite a statement at the time (Betts, “The Cool Factor”). Similarly, Obama’s rolled-up shirtsleeves and frequent appearance in a suit jacket with no necktie were perceived as a fashion trend for the casually chic (Petroff, “Obama Runway”).

Obama’s staging of his family also summoned the Kennedys as icons of the young and new, notably in the photo shoot for the July 2008 *People Magazine*. The Obama family photo (cf. [Fig. 32](#)) replicates one widely promoted during the Kennedy presidency (cf. [Fig. 33](#))<sup>80</sup>.

A similar strategy established Michelle Obama’s public role. She frequently evoked Jacqueline Kennedy’s style by wearing a shift dress and pearl necklace (cf. [Fig. 34](#) & [35](#)).

This was so successful that the media swiftly dubbed her “Michelle O.” (Branch,

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<sup>79</sup> A similar rhetorical parallel between Obama and Kennedy can be found with regard to the call for meeting contemporary challenges by assuming collective responsibility. See: Kennedy, “Acceptance Speech” (1960) & Obama, “Acceptance Speech” (2008).

<sup>80</sup> Also see John F. Kennedy’s performative strategy of surrounding himself with children to promote his own youth: Cover *Look Magazine* showing Kennedy riding a golf cart full of children: “The New Frontier”. 2 Jan. 1962. <<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/2jT9rtFyWkOc25AKGMJvAQ.aspx>>; Cover *Look Magazine* showing Kennedy and his son John Jr.: “President Kennedy and His Son”. 13 Dec. 1963 <<http://store.jfklibrary.org/original-look-magazine-president-kennedy-and-his-son/padcibomgknaagib/product>>.

“Michelle O.”).

In summary, Obama cultivated his image as a reincarnation of John F. Kennedy and the Camelot era to reinforce his role as a reformer and prophet of a new political age. He fused his youth and hipness, the call for renewal, the Kennedy image, and the well-established image of America as the nation of continuous progress and innovation. Using newness as a performative category, Obama set a believable stage for the performance of his narrative script.

#### 4.1.1. Ending Business as Usual: Politics and Corruption in Washington D.C.

One consistent narrative thread in Obama’s public staging in this context is the call to end rule by a corrupt and complacent Washington political elite. Having firmly established Obama as a fresh, youthful political face, his script promoted him as inheritor and custodian of innocence. “Hope and change have been the cause of my life” (“Acceptance Speech”, 2008), he said in his acceptance speech. As a “radically new personality”, Obama’s narrative scripts cast him as the “hero of the new adventure” (Lewis 5).

Hillary Clinton, the “inevitable candidate”, and John McCain, the heroic Vietnam Veteran, were both long associated with Washington machinery. Obama styled himself as the untainted candidate. He turned his opponents’ frequent charge that he was too young and politically inexperienced to his advantage by scripting himself as the unlikely candidate, the political virgin unsullied by the quagmire of Washington politics. Thus Obama reinforced the trope of the “American Adam” in his narrative, turning his biggest weakness into a strong advantage. As the central character in the story of the 21<sup>st</sup> century “American Adam” or “Youthful Moses”, Obama gained an aura of trustworthiness and credibility. According to this storyline, Obama, the untainted and innocent hero of renewal, was the only presidential candidate who could clean up what “had been so disastrously fumbled in the darkening *Old World*” of Washington D.C. and grant America its desired “second chance” (Lewis 5). Only Obama could lead the people to safety while remaining virtuous and pure in his dedication to truth and justice.

Central to his narrative script was the notion that only with new leadership could America leave behind the “bad past”, i.e. the two-term George W. Bush presidency, which included two unsuccessful military conflicts, Guantanamo, an economic downturn and a severely ruptured national community. Only a “new majority [...] can lead this nation out of a long political darkness” (“Primary Speech New Hampshire”, 2008), Obama said. “The choice in this election is not between regions or religions or genders. It’s not about rich versus poor; young versus old; and it is not about black versus white. It’s about the past versus the future” (“Victory Speech South Carolina”, 2008).

*The Audacity of Hope*, Obama’s second autobiography, was his unofficial 2008 campaign platform. Here, he writes, Americans “are weary of the dead zone that politics has become, in which narrow interests vie for advantage and ideological minorities seek to impose their own versions of absolute truth” (8-9). He suggests that a self-inter-



ested minority controls America's political machinery. In his announcement address, he claimed that the established political elite sees politics as nothing but a game, criticizing

[t]he cynics, and the lobbyists, and the special interests who've turned our government into a game only they can afford to play. They write the checks and you get stuck with the bills, they get the access while you get to write a letter, they think they own this government, but we're here today to take it back. The time for that politics is over. It's time to turn the page. ("Announcement Speech", 2007)

Many of the stories Obama presented capitalize on his inexperience and a high degree of self-criticism. For example, he stressed that he was frequently asked by voters if he was really "cut out" for the political business: "You seem like a nice guy. Why do you want to go into something dirty like politics?" (*Audacity* 2). But, he added, enough of the people he met in his early political career "appreciated my earnestness and youthful swagger that I made it to the Illinois legislature" (*Audacity* 2). Although people show confidence in him, he explained, he had doubts about going to Washington D.C., as it might endanger his status as an independent and virtuous representative. After six years in politics, he writes,

when I decided to run for the United States Senate, I wasn't so sure of myself. [...] I had preserved my independence, my good name, and my marriage, all of which, statistically speaking, had been placed at risk the moment I set foot in the state capitol. (*Audacity* 2)

Obama describes how many citizens worried that he would fall victim to the bad influences in Washington. At meetings with his constituents, he writes,

[S]omeone will grab my hand and tell me that they have great hopes for me, but that they are worried that Washington is going to change me and I will end up just like all the rest of the people in power. "Please stay who you are", they will say to me. "Please don't disappoint us". (*Audacity* 121)

His constituents worry he might become corrupted because they see him as untainted.

A few pages later, Obama goes even further, explaining that he *himself* is well aware of Washington's potential impact on him:

The longer I served in Washington, the more I saw friends studying my face for signs of a change, probing me for a new-found pomposity, searching for hints of argumentativeness or guardedness. I began examining myself in the same way; I began to see certain characteristics that I held in common with my new colleagues, and I wondered what might prevent my own transformation into the stock politician of bad TV movies. (*Audacity* 125)

In pondering what might prevent his transformation into a stock politician, Obama presents himself as a natural outsider to the Washington establishment. He lays claim to political purity by emphasizing how he frequently, consciously and critically examines his own development. As he said in a 2007 campaign interview,



My argument is not that we're perfect. I suffer from the same original sin of all politicians, which is we've got to raise money [...]But my argument has been and will continue to be that the disproportionate influence of lobbyists and special interest is a problem in Washington (and) in state capitals. (qtd. in Fournier "Clean Up Washington")

And although Obama acknowledged that he is not the perfect politician, he repeatedly offered his audience stories of how he rigorously adheres to higher ideals. His remarks in a 2007 interview with George Stephanopolous nicely illustrate this. Obama elaborated extensively on his involvement with ethics reform in the Illinois state legislature and the fact that he would not even go to lunch with lobbyists ("Obama Interview This Week").

In Obama's presidential bid, the narrative line about "Washington's original sin" was central to his public performance. In his Presidential Exploratory Committee Announcement (2007), he said,

[C]hallenging as they are, it's not the magnitude of our problems that concerns me the most. It's the smallness of our politics. America's faced big problems before. But today, our leaders in Washington seem incapable of working together in a practical, commonsense way. Politics has become so bitter and partisan, so gummed up by money and influence, that we can't tackle the big problems that demand solutions. And that's what we have to change first. ("Presidential Exploratory Committee Announcement", 2007)

According to Obama, the major obstacle to solving America's socio-political problems is the corrupted and bitter politics that dominate "our leaders in Washington". It is exactly because he was "unlikely" to succeed that he was, he said, an ideal candidate: "I recognize there is a certain presumptuousness – a certain audacity – to this announcement. I know I haven't spent a lot of time learning the ways of Washington. But I've been there long enough to know that the ways of Washington must change" ("Announcement Speech", 2007).

In a televised campaign ad (First Air-Date: 09 Apr. 2008), Obama reiterated the storyline that his inexperience was an asset.

The pharmaceutical industry wrote into the prescription drug plan that Medicare could not negotiate with drug companies. And you know what? The chairman of the committee who pushed the law through went to work for the pharmaceutical industry making 2 million dollars a year. Imagine that. That's an example of the same old game playing in Washington. You know I don't want to learn how to play the game better, I want to put an end to the game playing. ("Billy")

Not striving "to play the game better" suggests his inexperience and disdain for the ways of Washington. Styling himself in the role of "Mr. Smith" from the classic film *Mr. Smith goes to Washington*, Obama's greenhorn status implies moral innocence. He even went so far as equating his fight for moral integrity with the revolutionaries who fought British tyranny during the American Revolutionary War.

The genius of our founders is that they designed a system of government that can be

changed. And we should take heart, because we've changed this country before. In the face of tyranny, a band of patriots brought an Empire to its knees. ("Announcement Speech", 2007)

By evoking the Revolutionary War, represented in the American cultural sphere as the 18<sup>th</sup> century fight between the "corrupt old" world and the "innocent new" one, Obama presents his own purity and independence as the antithesis of political corruption and tyranny.

The story of Obama's grassroots campaign was developed into a related narrative thread. Early in his campaign, he pitted the image of a lobbyist-run government against a government responsible solely to the people. At a town hall meeting in April 2008, he declared, "We are going to change how Washington works. They will not run our party. They will not run our White House. They will not drown out the views of the American people" (qtd. in Luce, "Aggressive Campaign Strategy"). A variety of measures, including a small donor fundraising strategy and solitictating grassroots participation on *MyBarackObama.com* (cf. [Fig. 36](#) & [37](#)), suggested that his "bottom-up" approach could counter the "top-down" Washington system (cf. [Fig. 38](#)).

In his second autobiography, Obama's aura of honesty, innocence, and political virginity were reinforced by his approach to campaign financing:

While in the state legislature, I never needed to spend more than \$ 100,000 on a race; in fact, I developed a reputation of being something of a stick-in-the-mud when it came to fundraising: refusing meals from lobbyists, rejecting checks from gaming and tobacco interests. When I decided to run for U.S. Senate, my media consultant, David Axelrod, had to sit me down to explain the facts of life. Our campaign plan called for a bare-bones budget, a heavy reliance on grassroots support and "earned media". (*Audacity* 131)

The claim that he worked hard to stay independent of special interests, lobbyists, and bought media, made Obama's effort to spearhead a true grassroots movement even more credible<sup>81</sup>. The *Rolling Stone* cover caption, "A New Hope: Inside the People Powered Revolution" (cf. [Fig. 3](#)), reflects this perception. Obama's performance as an Adamic or Moses figure, an independent outsider and honest broker for change, succeeded in countering his image as a naïve political greenhorn.

#### 4.1.2. Identity Politics for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: America's Universalist Promise

America's changing racial and ethnic composition was a central issue in the 2008 presidential campaign. The media discourse on race and ethnicity reveals how this question vexes the American nation's negotiation of its self-understanding.<sup>82</sup> For example, much

<sup>81</sup> As comments by voters, such as, for example, the following by Robert Euken, a 79-year-old truck driver from Cumberland, make clear, that Obama's offered narrative theme is also received as such: "He [talks] about the wrongs that they're doing in Washington, D.C. If he can fix that, he's the man we want" (Helman, "Obama Shows").

<sup>82</sup> See for example: Traub, James. "The Emerging Minority." *The New York Times*. 02 Mar. 2008. Web. 15 Jul. 2013. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/02/magazine/02wwIn-lede-t.html?pagewanted=all>>; Roberts, Sam. "In a Generation, Minorities May Be the U.S. Majority." *The New York Times*. 13 Aug. 2008. Web. 15 Jul. 2013. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/14/washington/14census.html?pagewanted=all>>; Rodriguez, Richard. *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*. New York: Penguin, 2003.

attention was given to the rapidly growing influence of the Latino vote<sup>83</sup>. Obama's evocation of the Adamic trope was particularly effective in his narrative promise of a new era in American society<sup>84</sup>. A mid-2008 *New York Times* editorial suggested that Obama's candidacy allowed for positive discourse about those of mixed race in America (Porter, "Mixed Race America").

Obama's story of overcoming limits imposed by ethnic identity opened up a space for people to imagine a new American identity inspired by America's universalist promise<sup>85</sup>. Because of his skin color, Obama could not evade the question of race. Instead of taking a race-specific stand in his public staging, or letting the question become a disadvantage in his campaign, he offered himself as the personified humanist pathway to a potentially "guilt-free" age of a universalist American identity. Obama presented himself as "emancipated from history" and "untouched and undefiled by the *usual* inheritances of family and race" (Lewis 5).

Although identifying himself as black, Obama presented himself as decidedly removed from a "classic" racial experience and the identity politics and social history connected to it. He made no secret of the fact that he had been the victim of racial discrimination time and again. For example, he explained in a *CNN* interview, "If I'm outside your building trying to catch a cab, [the taxi driver's] not saying, oh, there's a mixed race guy" ("Interview Race CNN")<sup>86</sup>. But he also repeatedly explained that his upbringing hardly typified a racialized experience (*Audacity* 273). By excluding himself from the framework of a specific racial discourse, Obama turned the story of his racial background into a powerful and advantageous narrative of leading America into a humanist future, unburdening it from its difficult racial history and thus fulfilling the original universalist promise of a society based on civic values<sup>87</sup>.

To explain and demonstrate his suitability as catalyst for a future grounded in humanist universalism, Obama's performative narrative offered his Imagined Presidency as a place where the true meaning of America's promise of diversity could finally be fulfilled. He told *GQ* magazine, "I come from a varied background. I feel that there is a piece of me in everybody" (Lizza, "Above"). As a "black man with a mixed heritage" (*Audacity* 10), he emphasized that his own upbringing was defined by cultural pluralism:

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83 See: Preston, Julia. "Issues Start Rush to Vote by Hispanics." *The New York Times*. 05 Feb. 2008. Web. 20 Jul. 2013. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/05/us/politics/05hispanic.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/05/us/politics/05hispanic.html?_r=1&oref=slogin)>; Kiely, Kathy. "Hispanic Vote 'up for Grabs', could Swing Election Outcome." *USA Today*. 27 Jun. 2008. Web. 23 Jul 2013. <[http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2008-06-26-Hispanics\\_N.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2008-06-26-Hispanics_N.htm)>

84 See: Lee, Jennifer, and Bean Frank. "America's Changing Color Lines: Immigration, Race/Ethnicity and Multiracial Identification." *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (2004): 221–242. ; US Census Bureau. "An Older and More Diverse Nation by Midcentury." *Census Bureau*. 14. Aug. 2008. Web. 25 Jul. 2013. <<http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/population/012496.html>>

85 See: "Part I: Empire, Nation, Diaspora". *American Studies: An Anthology*. Ed. Janice Radway, Kevin Gaines, Barry Shank. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2009. 7-57.

86 Also see Obama's comments on self-experienced racial discrimination in his second autobiography: "security guards tailing me as I shop in department stores, white couples who toss me their car keys as I stand outside a restaurant waiting for the valet, police cars pulling me over for no apparent reason. I know what it's like to have people tell me I can't do something because of my color, and I know the bitter swill of swallowed-back anger. I know as well that Michelle and I must be continually vigilant against some of the debilitating story lines that our daughters may absorb – from TV and music and friends and the streets – about who the world thinks they are, and what the world imagines they should be" (*Audacity* 233).

87 See: Rana, Aziz. "Colonialism and Constitutional Memory", *UC Irvine Law Review* 5 (2015): 263-288.

I was raised as an Indonesian child and a Hawaiian child and as a black child and as a white child [...]. And so what I benefited from is a multiplicity of cultures that all fed me. (qtd. in Nelson, "Life Before")

Obama's multicultural upbringing offered a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's description of "the American, this new man" ("Letters from an American Farmer")<sup>88</sup>. His performative narrative offered his family history as the ultimate proof of the long-sought redemption of America's promise:

When I meet people for the first time, they sometimes quote back to me a line in my speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention that seemed to strike a chord. "There is not a black American and white American and Latino America and Asian American – there is the United States of America." For them, it seems to capture a vision of America finally freed from the past of Jim Crow and slavery, Japanese internment camps and Mexican braceros, workplace tensions and cultural conflict – an America that fulfills Dr. King's promise that we be judged not by the color of our skin but by the content of our character. I have no choice but to believe this vision. As the child of a black man and white woman, born in the melting pot of Hawaii, with a sister who is half-Indonesian, but who is usually mistaken for Mexican, and a brother-in-law and niece of Chinese descent, with some relatives who resemble Margaret Thatcher and others who could pass for Bernie Mac, I never had the option of restricting my loyalties on the basis of race or measuring my worth on the basis of tribe. (*Audacity* 231)

Obama redefined the melting pot in multicultural terms, leaving behind its assimilationist frame and celebrating it as identity principle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The constant emphasis on growing up in culturally hybrid and diverse environments styled him as the embodiment of diversity. Obama turned his story into an emancipating moment of empowerment that became a key element in his narrative script<sup>89</sup>.

A closer look at Obama's narrative offer shows substantial reliance on the life stories of his mother and grandparents. As he explained in his first autobiography, overcoming morally questionable race conventions was always important to his family. He cited examples of his family following their humanist ideals. His grandmother rejected social convention and addressed the black janitor at her office as "mister" (*Dreams* 18). His mother befriended a black girl when it was not considered acceptable for a white girl (*Dreams* 19-20). And his grandfather accepted his daughter's black husband, Obama's father (*Dreams* 21-23). His grandparents adopted an integrationist and humanist mindset, breaking established norms. Obama then also promoted his grandparents' move from Kansas to Hawaii as motivated by their open-minded spirit (*Audacity* 203). Visually, this narrative was reinforced throughout the campaign by family photos. [Figure 39](#), for exam-

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<sup>88</sup> See Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's description of "the American": "He is either an European, or the descendant of an European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners [...]" ("Letters from an American Farmer").

<sup>89</sup> Another example: "Our family's story is one that spans miles and generations; races and realities. It's the story of farmers and soldiers; city workers and single moms. It takes place in small towns and good schools; in Kansas and Kenya; on the shores of Hawaii and the streets of Chicago. It's a varied and unlikely journey, but one that's held together by the same simple dream" ("Speech El Dorado", 2008).

ple, appeared in a number of campaign clips and ads<sup>90</sup>.

The major figure in these narratives and stories is Obama's mother. Instilled with her parents' values, she functions in the narrative as the direct source of Obama's openness and progressiveness towards the other and the new. This storyline plays a central role in both of his autobiographies. Obama's mother grew up during the post-war 1950s and early 1960s, the child of the World War II generation. Obama's mother was not dissuaded from befriending a black schoolmate in Texas (*Dreams* 19) or from marrying a black man from Africa (*Dreams* 18-19). The frequently-published photo of Obama's parents in the late 1960s visually illustrates this narrative (cf. [Fig. 40](#)).

As implied here, his mother followed a natural impulse, reinforced by her parents, that it is simply important to "treat people decently" (*Dreams* 21). Time and again, Obama described his mother as a paragon of the American version of humanism (*Dreams* 50), thus implying that he had absorbed this value system with his mother's milk. Obama recalls that his mother, inspired by the civil rights movement, would "whenever the opportunity presented itself, [...] drill into me the values that she saw there: tolerance, equality, standing up for the disadvantaged" (*Audacity* 29). The narrative of his family's biography as instilling a drive for progressive change and a naturally innovative approach to race, ethnicity and identity, becomes particularly clear in Obama's campaign film "A Mother's Promise". The film relies heavily on the story of how his mother taught him a humanist spirit<sup>91</sup>.

The only time I ever saw my mother really angry was when she saw cruelty, when she saw somebody being bullied, or somebody being treated differently because of who they were. And if she saw me doing that, she would be furious. And she would say to me, "Imagine standing in that person's shoes. How would that make you feel". That simple idea I was not always sure if I understood when I was a kid, but it stayed with me. ("A Mother's Promise")<sup>92</sup>

This narrative is reiterated on the April 2008 *Time Magazine* cover (cf. [Fig. 41](#)) and the accompanying article. According to the article, "Obama's nascent career peddling hope is a family business" (qtd. in Ripley, "The Story"). In the interview, Obama explicitly traces his take on questions of race and identity to his mother who "believed that people were all basically the same under their skin, that bigotry of any sort was wrong and that the goal

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<sup>90</sup> See for example: Barack Obama's introductory video clip at the 2008 Democratic Convention: "A Mother's Promise".

<sup>91</sup> Further example: "This isn't to say that she provided me with no religious instruction. In her mind, a working knowledge of the world's great religions was a necessary part of any well-rounded education. In our household the Bible, the Koran, and the Bhagavad Gita sat on the shelf alongside books of Greek and Norse and African mythology. On Easter or Christmas Day my mother might drag me to church, just as she dragged me to the Buddhist temple, the Chinese New Year celebration, the Shinto shrine, and ancient Hawaiian burial sites. But I was made to understand that such religious samplings required no sustained commitment on my part—no introspective exertion or self-flagellation. Religion was an expression of human culture, she would explain, not its wellspring, just one of the many ways—and not necessarily the best way – that man attempted to control the unknowable and understand the deeper truths about our lives" (*Audacity* 203).

<sup>92</sup> Also see: "Like most of my values, I learned about empathy from my mother. She disdained any kind of cruelty or thoughtlessness or abuse of power, whether it expressed itself in the form of racial prejudice or bullying in the schoolyard or workers being underpaid. Whenever she saw even a hint of such behavior in me she would look me square in the eyes and ask, 'How do you think that would make you feel?'" (*Audacity* 66); or "And when I travel from town to town, I see Americans going through the same things my family has gone through. I was reminded of what my mother always said: 'Imagine what its like being in somebody else's shoes. [...] We recognize ourselves in each other'" ("Mothers Promise").



was then to treat everybody as unique individuals” (qtd. in Ripley, “The Story”). Although she died years ago, his mother played a central role in his March 2008 Philadelphia “Race” speech: “When I was writing that speech her memory loomed over me. [...] Is this something she would trust?” (qtd. in Ripley, “The Story”).

To deal with burning questions about demographic shifts in the ethnic makeup of 21<sup>st</sup> century America, the Obama campaign staged themes of hope and change, stressing the Obama family history of non-ideological approaches to culture and ethnicity.<sup>93</sup> Obama implies that he inherited from his parents and grandparents a humanist spirit of tolerance and faith that struggles pay off with progress.

The *Time Magazine* cover photo for the edition headlined “Raising Obama: How his mother made him who he is” (cf. [Fig. 41](#)) visually emphasizes this narrative. It shows Ann Dunham supporting her young son on the top of a fence establishing a visual narrative of Obama overcoming the obstacle of the fence with help of his mother. In conjunction with the title and article, the photo implies that she instilled the spirit of overcoming, openness and tolerance in her son. The white mother lifting her dark-skinned son in a warm embrace further demonstrates the potential of this relationship.

Obama suggested that his upbringing made him especially qualified to deal with haunting questions of ethnic identity in America. For example, in an *NPR* interview he said,

there has always been some tension between speaking in universal terms and speaking in very race-specific terms about the plight of the African-American community. By virtue of my background, you know, I am more likely to speak in universal terms. (qtd. in Inskip, “Selma March”)

Obama’s second autobiography illustrates how the Imagined Community evoked by his Imagined Presidency promised to replace racialized American identity with the ideal of “American universalism”:

This book grows directly out of [...] conversations on the campaign trail. Not only did my encounters with voters confirm the fundamental decency of the American people, they also reminded me that at the core of the American experience are a set of ideals that continue to stir our collective conscience; a common set of values that bind us together despite our differences; [...] Whether we’re from red states or blue states, we feel in our gut the lack of honesty, rigor, and common sense in our policy debates, and dislike what appears to be a continuous menu of false or cramped choices. Religious or secular, black, white, or brown, we sense – correctly – that the nation’s most significant challenges are being ignored, and that if we don’t change course soon, we may be the first generation in a very long time that leaves behind a weaker and more fractured America than the one we inherited. Perhaps more than any other time in our recent history, we need a new kind of politics, one that can excavate and build upon those shared understandings that pull us together as Americans. (*Audacity* 8)

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<sup>93</sup> See: Renshon, Stanley. *The 50% American: Immigration and National Identity in an Age of Terror*. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005. Print.; Renshon, Stanley. *Non-Citizen-Voting and American Democracy*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009. Print.



Another narrative thread in the story of Obama leveraging a new era of change and renewal for America's collective self-understanding is his birth state of Hawaii. Michelle Obama said in a campaign interview, "You can't really understand Barack until you understand Hawaii" (qtd. in Rucker, "Hawaii's Influence"). In his second autobiography, Obama speaks of his birth "in the racial melting pot of Hawaii" (*Audacity* 231) as formative to his life. In *Dreams from my Father*, Obama addresses how his life in Hawaii formed his natural openness to other cultures.

[T]he legend was made of Hawaii as the one true melting pot, an experiment in racial harmony. My grandparents – especially Gramps, who came into contact with a range of people through his furniture business – threw himself into the cause of mutual understanding. [...] He made himself a wide circle of friends. A Japanese American man who called himself Freddy and ran a small market near our house would save us the choicest cuts of aku for sashimi and give me rice candy with edible wrappers. Every so often, the Hawaiians who worked at my grandfather's store as deliverymen would invite us over for poi and roast pig, which Gramps gobbled down heartily [...]. Sometimes I would accompany Gramps to Alii'i Park where he liked to play checkers with the old Filipino men who smoked cheap cigars and spat up betel-nut juice as if it were blood. And I still remember early morning, hours before the sun rose, a Portuguese man to whom my grandfather had given a good deal on a sofa set took us out to spear fish on Kailua Bay. (*Dreams* 24)

He grew up at his grandfather's side with a positive and open interest in the unknown other.

I do think that the multicultural nature of Hawaii helped teach me how to appreciate different cultures and navigate different cultures, out of necessity. That carries over now to the work that I do because obviously that's part of my job, not just as a candidate but also as a senator. The second thing that I'm certain of is that what people often note as my even temperament I think draws from Hawaii. People in Hawaii generally don't spend a lot of time, you know, yelling and screamin' at each other. I think that there just is a cultural bias toward courtesy and trying to work through problems in a way that makes everybody feel like they're being listened to. And I think that reflects itself in my personality as well as my political style. (qtd. in Walsh, "Obama's Hawaiian Roots")

Obama cited his father's ideas, too, in his first autobiography.

One thing other nations can learn from Hawaii, [my father] says, is the willingness of races to work together toward common development, something he has found whites elsewhere too often unwilling to do. (*Dreams* 26)

Countering conservative and nativist discourses that the American identity be "protected" from minority and foreign influence<sup>94</sup>, Obama staged himself as facilitator of a new era of American universalism, living embodiment of a new dawn in 21<sup>st</sup> century identity politics. With himself as an imaginative space, the American nation could embrace immigration

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<sup>94</sup> See: Council on Foreign Relations. "The Candidates on Immigration." *Foreign Relations Council*. 24 Aug. 2008. Web. 26 Jul. 2013. <<http://www.cfr.org/world/candidates-immigration/p14766>>; Hirschfield-Davis, Julie. "McCain Retools Immigration Stance." *Washington Post*. 27 Feb. 2008. Web. 27 Jul. 2013. <[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/27/AR2008022702495\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/27/AR2008022702495_pf.html)>.

and ethnic shifts and renew America's promise of universal civic liberty and equality. As Obama remarked:

The reason I'm here today is because I believe that if we can just put an end to the politics of division and distraction, and reclaim that sense that we all have a stake in each other, that we rise and fall as one nation; if we can just unite this country around a common purpose – black, white, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American; labor and management; Democrats, Republicans, and Independents – there's no obstacle we cannot overcome, no destiny we cannot fulfill. ("Speech Building Trades Conference")

Obama's narrative appropriation of the adamic trope of innocence, rebirth, and casting off burdens was key to his performance as a credible figure on the threshold of a new era of hope and progress. The imaginative offer of his future presidency revived the core cultural narrative of America as the virgin land of new beginnings. At the same time, his public performances made an easily accessible collective identity-offer to the multi-ethnic electorate. Through the performative establishment of an adamic narrative of unburdened renewal, Obama turned his inexperience and his ethnic background into assets.

## 4.2. Michelle Obama: The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Angel of the House

Political scientist Susan MacManus calls the 2008 presidential election “the year of the spouse as surrogate” (1)<sup>95</sup>. Understanding the 2008 campaign requires analyzing the performance of the candidate and his wife in conjunction. I suggest that Michelle Obama’s performative involvement in the 2008 campaign was indispensable. Obama’s narratives of renewal and hope could not have succeeded without his wife’s involvement in the campaign. His storyline depended on being either reinforced or counterbalanced by his wife’s campaign narrative.

The cultural background of Michelle Obama’s performance is the understanding of the nation’s “first ladies” as the site of American womanhood<sup>96</sup>. Betty Boyd Caroli writes that the first ladies always reflected “the status of American women of their time while helping shape expectations of what women can properly do” (xx). The gender structures of socio-political spaces traditionally characterized the public sphere as male, while women’s acceptable socio-political influence was restricted to the private sphere (Burns 19). In the American cultural sphere, the first lady is expected “to reflect ideals of home, family and womanhood” (Mayo/Meringolo 8). First ladyship is constituted as society’s negotiative space for the “cult of true womanhood”: the ideal woman as pure, supportive, submissive, domestic and, above all, feminine (Hill-Collins 72). The position is often labeled “the most tradition-bound and antiquated model of American womanhood” (Carson qtd. in Nolan 159). For example, the image is criticized by Germaine Greer as “decorative servitude” (“Abolish”), as it reduces the first lady to “the archetypal lipstick-skirt-high-heels beside the archetypal suit” (“Abolish”).

These archetypal understandings of femininity and motherhood delimit the performative scope of presidential contenders’ wives. The prospective first lady can support her husband’s candidacy by displaying a positive and credible image of her private life. On the campaign trail, she is supposed to underscore her husband’s positive qualities and his qualifications as a leader by giving the public insight into his private self. To be an asset to her husband’s campaign, his wife must conform to the highly gendered performative space of the private, with imaginative offers related to marriage, motherhood and domesticity. In short, she should embody womanhood conceived as “republican motherhood” and “the angel of the house”<sup>97</sup>.

The 2008 campaign’s call for change and renewal was notably co-communicated through Michelle Obama’s public performance. In the early phase of the campaign,

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95 Also see: Winfield and Friedman’s proposed four categories defining first ladies as escort to their spouses, in: Winfield, Betty & Barbara Friedman. “Gender Politics: News Coverage of the Candidates’ Wives in Campaign 2000.” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* Vol. 80.3 (2003): 548-566. Print.

96 For a more extended discussion of this aspect, see: Anderson, Karrin Vasby. “The First Lady: A Site of ‘American Womanhood.’” *Inventing a Voice: Rhetoric of American First Ladies of the Twentieth Century*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004. 17-30. Print.; Beasley, Vanessa. “Gender in Political Communication Research: The Problem with Having No Name.” *The Sage Handbook of Gender and Communication*. Ed. Bonnie J. Dow and Julia T. Wood. London: Sage Publications, 2006. 201-215. Print.; Burns, Lisa. *First Ladies and the Fourth Estate Press Framing of Presidential Wives*. Chicago: North Illinois University Press, 2008. Print.

97 For more on the concepts of “Republican Motherhood” and the “Angel of the House”, see: Plant, Rebecca J. “History of Motherhood: American.” *Encyclopedia of Motherhood*. Ed. Andrea O’Reilly. London: Sage, 2010. 507-516. Print.

Michelle Obama's "Politics of Candor" got the most media attention (Collins, "Other")<sup>98</sup>. Not long after the stir caused by Barack Obama's 2004 Democratic National Committee keynote address, Michelle Obama shared her perception of gender in a *Chicago Tribune* interview. "What I notice about men, all men, is that their order is me, my family, God is in there somewhere, but me is first. And for women, me is fourth, and that's not healthy" (West, "Plan Awry"). To emphasize Obama's otherness and newness, she deviated from traditional performative frames of the supportive, devoted, and admiring wife. At a fundraiser in February 2008 she said,

I am always a little amazed at the response that people get when they hear from Barack. A great man, a wonderful man. But still a man. I have some difficulty reconciling the two images I have of Barack Obama. There's Barack Obama the phenomenon. He's an amazing orator, Harvard Law Review, or whatever it was, law professor, bestselling author, Grammy winner. And then there's the Barack Obama that lives with me in my house, and that guy's a little less impressive. For some reason this guy still can't manage to put the butter up when he makes toast, secure the bread so that it doesn't get stale, and his 5-year-old is still better at making the bed than he is. (qtd. in Dowd, "Buttering")

Stories of his incompetence with household chores gave the candidate a human face. There are other examples of this narrative strategy. In a 2007 *Glamour* magazine interview, Michelle Obama said that she and her daughters do not let Barack snuggle up in bed because he is too "snore-y and stinky" in the morning, (*Glamour*, "Next First Lady"). In a *Vanity Fair* interview she described her unhappiness as a working mother whenever her husband left her to deal family and domestic issues (childrearing, routine household chores, an overflowing toilet) (*Vanity Fair*, "In Waiting"). Offering unconventionally critical insight into the family's domestic and private spheres, she indirectly supported the Obama's campaign claim to epitomize a new era. In an interview with *More* magazine, she explicitly called for change in "work-family balance":

What I found myself – and most of my friends – doing, is we just cope. We're taught that as women: Just handle it. Just adjust. We accommodate things that aren't healthy instead of turning around and going, 'This has got to change'. (qtd. in Brooks, "Reinvention")

Already a novelty as the first black-skinned prospective first lady, Michelle Obama's straightforward communications styled the Obamas as a new kind of first couple, her "candid" narrative offers supporting her husband's call for change.

Some prospective first ladies, like Hillary Clinton and Theresa Heinz Kerry, were perceived as too dominating or emasculating.<sup>99</sup> To avoid this, Michelle Obama also per-

<sup>98</sup> See, for example: Jaffe, Ina. "Michelle Obama: Candor, Controversy on the Stump." *NPR*. 18 Apr. 2008. Web. 05 Aug. 2013. <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89750285>>; Newton-Small, Jay. "Michelle Obama Finds Her Voice Too." *Time*. 24 Jan. 2008. Web. 08 Jul. 2013. <<http://content.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1706706,00.html>>; Dowd, Maureen. "She's Not Buttering Him Up." *The New York Times*. 25 Apr. 2007. Web. 10 Aug. 2013. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/25/opinion/25dowd.html>>; Wangsness, Lisa. "Michelle Obama's Candor Cuts 2 Ways." *Boston Globe*. 21 Feb. 2008. Web. 09 Aug. 2013. <[http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2008/02/21/michelle\\_obamas\\_candor\\_cuts\\_2\\_ways/?page=full](http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2008/02/21/michelle_obamas_candor_cuts_2_ways/?page=full)>.

<sup>99</sup> See for example: Burrell, Barbara and Laurel Elder, Brian Frederick. "Polls and Elections: From Hillary to Michelle: Public Opinion and the Spouses of Presidential Candidates." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41.1 (2011): 156–176. Print.; Burns, Lisa.

formed a role that conformed to the established image of first ladyhood. In public staging with a traditional performative narrative, Michelle Obama presented herself as a prospective “Mother of the Nation”. This required that she stage herself in three different roles: the mother, the wife and the homemaker. One public appearance stands out in this regard: her appearance at the 2008 Democratic National Convention. From the beginning, she took a traditional perspective on her femaleness as the frame for her speech. She introduces herself in her roles as “sister”, “wife”, “mother” and “daughter”:

I come here tonight as a sister, blessed with a brother who is my mentor, my protector and my lifelong friend. And I come here as a wife who loves my husband and believes he will be an extraordinary president. And I come here as a mom – as a mom whose girls are the heart of my heart and the center of my world. They’re the first things I think about when I wake up in the morning and the last thing I think about before I go to bed at night. Their future – and all our children’s future – is my stake in this election. And I come here as a daughter, raised on the South Side of Chicago by a father who was a blue-collar city worker and a mother who stayed at home with my brother and me. My mother’s love has always been a sustaining force for our family, and one of my greatest joys is seeing her integrity, her compassion, her intelligence reflected in my daughters. (“Convention Speech”, 2008)

Describing herself only in relation to her family members intensifies a traditional gender allocation of the different roles she evokes: her brother is described as her “mentor” and “protector”, her husband is admiringly characterized as “extraordinary”, while her kids are affectionately referred to as “heart of my heart” and “the center of my world” (“Convention Speech”, 2008). Her performance is further enhanced by her soft-spoken style and the performance she offered with her two daughters on stage (cf. [Fig. 42](#)).

Michelle Obama’s intimate disclosure of family matters, the tone of her voice and the interaction with her daughters on stage establish her role as loving caretaker. Creating an atmosphere of emotional softness in this space, she makes an imaginative offer to her audience that amplifies the traditional image of the first lady as devoted family person. By implying that deeply engrained cultural understandings of the American family will endure, Michelle Obama’s performance balanced her husband’s “change” narrative.

The performative narrative offered in nonpolitical contexts present a similar storyline. Women’s magazines depict her as a faithful and supportive wife:

Michelle Obama’s body language on both covers – embracing her husband who holds her in his arms – is complemented by her inviting smile at the audience (cf. [Fig. 43](#) & [44](#)). Her staging in a traditional feminized role is amplified by key words on the magazine covers that unambiguously associate her with stereotypical realms of femininity: “Shopping at Target”, “Sex and the City”, and her girls’ recitals that she never misses (cf. [Fig. 43](#)). The cover of *Ladies Home Journal* suggests that Michelle Obama supports her husband as his “advisor in chief” (cf. [Fig. 44](#)). To secure this storyline, she explicitly denied her inter-

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“Collective Memory and the Candidates’ Wives in the 2004 Presidential Campaign.” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8.4 (2005): 684-688. Print.

est in the “public sphere”. Calling herself the “steward” of “those little girls” transition to the White House, she says, “[t]here are a ton of issues I deeply care about. But the notion of sitting around the table with a set of policy advisors – no offense – makes me yawn” (*Ladies Home Journal*, “Michelle and Barack”, 2008).

The performative script of the couple’s relationship is similarly narrated. *US Weekly*, for example, reduces their relationship to a prototypical romantic love story, signaled by the wedding photo on the cover (cf. [Fig. 43](#)). Michelle Obama’s performative in this context reinforces the clichéd female image of the “Angel of the House”<sup>100</sup>. The 2008 *People Magazine* cover also illustrates her performance as caring mother and wife, with the family cuddled together and a headline indicating that the Obama family does not challenge established gender roles: “From piano practice and pillow talk to who does the chores (not him!)” (cf. [Fig. 45](#)). The coquettish tone implied by “(not him!)” emphasizes this performative narrative.

In Michelle Obama’s public performances, she both augments and tones down Barack Obama’s demand for a new era. These should not be interpreted as separate, isolated themes—they are merged. To accomplish this merger, Michelle Obama appropriates a cultural icon deeply embedded in the nation’s collective memory by tapping into the image of Jacqueline Kennedy.

As the epitome of traditional womanliness for a modern lifestyle, Jackie Kennedy seems the ideal performative frame for a prospective first lady (Perry 18)<sup>101</sup>. Mary Tomer, author of a blog about Michelle Obama’s fashion style<sup>102</sup>, and of the book *Mrs. O: The Face of Fashion Democracy*, said, “[In Obama] my generation had found its Jackie O.” (qtd. in Franke-Ruta, “Mrs. O’ Author”). What fueled the comparison between Jacqueline Kennedy and Michelle Obama is that both were young prospective First Ladies with two very young children. The *People Magazine* image (cf. [Fig. 45](#)) illustrates how Obama’s mise-en-scene as a family at the dawn of a new era echoes Kennedy’s embodiment of “New Frontier”.

By appropriating Jackie Kennedy, Michelle Obama established a stage allowing her to merge the two narrative threads of her imagined first ladyship. She merged her narrative of the new first lady for a new age with a narrative staging her in the traditional role. The former supported her husband’s call for change, while the latter countered fears of her husband’s otherness and newness. On this stage, Michelle Obama established the image of herself as an energetic, dynamic, hip and youthful woman who enjoys her role as mother and spouse. Conformity to traditional roles is communicated as fun and fulfilling. Thematic frames stereotypically associated with femininity serve as the main narrative

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100 Another example for this performative script established through Michelle Obama’s narrative offers is her appearance on the TV-Cooking-talk show *Paula’s Party*. While cooking together with talk host Paula Deen, Michelle Obama offered personal anecdotes about what she first cooked for her future husband when she first met him or what is the best recipe to win a man’s heart. As the narrative offers made in her performative staging suggest, Michelle Obama casually manages the domestic sphere. (“Michelle Obama cooks with Paula Deen”).

101 Also see Bowles 88.

102 See Mary Tomer’s blog: “Mrs-O.com is a blog dedicated to chronicling the fashion and style of First Lady Michelle Obama. Founded September 2008.” <<http://mrs-o.com/>>



contexts: fashion, shopping, fitness, styling and cosmetics. Sticking to the tradition of spousal campaign involvement and staying well within traditional cultural boundaries, Michelle Obama nonetheless refreshed traditional performative frames.

Like her husband, Michelle Obama emphasized her youthfulness with a narrative focus on physical fitness. Her well-toned arms were a staple of media campaign coverage<sup>103</sup> and she turned physical fitness into an important narrative thread. In an interview for *USA Today*, for example, she discussed her workout routine: ninety minute sessions of cardio, free weights, treadmill or the like, four times a week (Lawrence, “Busy Summer”). Her youthfulness is reinforced every time she mentions that for years she got up at 4:30 a.m. to train, as there was no other time to do it (*Glamour*, “Next First Lady”; *Ebony*, “Hottest Couple”).

Michelle Obama’s appearance on the TV talk show *The View* is a further case in point. Here the audience is offered “girl talk” in its purest form. She enters arm in arm with Barbara Walters (cf. [Fig. 46](#)) and joins a discussion staged as an intimate hen party with her five best friends. The seating arrangement and the coffee cups reinforce this mise-en-scene (cf. [Fig. 47](#)).

The topics discussed situate the exchange in the stereotypical feminine realm: styling and fashion, husband and kids. When more heated discussion develops, Barbara Walter’s calls for “no more hair-pulling” (“Michelle Obama The View”, 2008). Conforming to the performative frame, Michelle Obama offers a storyline establishing her in a traditional feminine role: While Barack puts on a suit and tie in the morning, she has to do her “hair, make-up, the kids, I got to brush their hair – and he’s always like, where are you? Where are you going?” (“Michelle Obama The View”, 2008). Within the traditional performative framework of the First Lady, Michelle Obama also communicates that she enjoys all this: “It’s fun to look pretty” (“Michelle Obama The View”, 2008). The expression of joy from the typically female duty to style herself promotes a narrative of effortless fun. Quizzed about the dress she is wearing, a clearly delighted Michelle Obama tells the audience, “It’s a simple dress”, but just “[p]ut a little pin on it and you’ve got something going on!” (“Michelle Obama The View”, 2008). Reactions from the regulars on the show demonstrate the narrative’s success, as one of the hosts declares, “You’re hip” (“Michelle Obama The View”, 2008). In her performative staging on *The View*, Michelle Obama demonstrated her up-to-datedness and established that the fun of being the attractive “Angel of the House” can be decoupled from idea of dutifulness<sup>104</sup>.

Michelle Obama’s performance made the role of First Lady seem fun and fashionable. Like Jackie Kennedy, Michelle Obama infused the traditional image of the First Lady

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<sup>103</sup> See, for example: Westfall, Sandra. “The Obama’s get Personal.” *People Magazine*. 04 Aug. 2008. Web. 03 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20221617,00.html>>; “Get Michelle Obama’s Arms.” *Woman’s Day*. 21 Dec. 2007. Web. 03 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.womansday.com/health-fitness/workout-routines/advice/g133/workout-series-get-michelle-obama-arms-70059/>>

<sup>104</sup> The same can be said with regard to her appearance on Ellen DeGeneres’ show *The Ellen Show* where Michelle Obama thematically focused on her role as mother, while at the same time staging herself as youthful and up-to-date see: Michelle Obama on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, 03 Oct. 2008.

with a flair for a modern casual lifestyle. Although a story in *More*, a women's magazine, is a traditional choice for a prospective First Lady's staging, Michelle Obama turns it on its head in the cover photo. Her hand-on-hip body posture and open, confident facial expression (cf. [Fig. 48](#)) clearly establish her energy and dynamism. Her hairstyle further complements this visual narrative of her performance. The editor-in-chief says, she picked on her own (Seymour, "Personal Style"), directly ties her visual staging to a look made famous by Jackie Kennedy.

The central narrative script promoting her as "new" kind of first lady is located in a realm usually associated with a conservative image of womanhood: motherhood and marriage. Michelle Obama made clear in numerous interviews that she considers herself a modern "mother-in-chief" (*Marie Claire*, "Keeps it Real"). During the campaign, her first priority is to insure that her two daughters are "happy and comfortable during what would be a major transition for them. Throughout this campaign, I've built my schedule around the girls and their activities" (*Marie Claire*, "Keeps it Real")<sup>105</sup>. As "mother-in-chief" she repeatedly offered a storyline explaining that unlike her husband, she was raised

with a more traditional notion of what family is. [...]It was what I knew growing up – the mother at home, the father works, you have dinner around the table. I had a very stable, conventional upbringing, and that felt very safe to me. And then I married a man who came from a very different kind of upbringing. He didn't grow up with a father; his mother traveled the world. So we both came to this marriage with very different notions about what children need, and what does a couple the need to be happy. (*Vanity Fair*, "In Waiting")

On the one hand Michelle Obama establishes that she was shaped by a traditional notion of family and motherhood. On the other hand, she capitalizes on her credibility to revise the traditional notion of the first lady.

One day I woke up and said, 'I can't live my life mad. This is just not fun. [...]For a period in my life, I sought the help I needed had to come from Barack. It wasn't that he didn't care, but he wasn't there. So I enlisted moms and babysitters and got help with the housecleaning, and I built a community myself. [...] When he comes home, he's taking out the garbage and he's doing the laundry and he's making up the beds, because the girls need to see him doing that, and he knows I need him do that. And that was a meeting the minds that we had to reach. I wasn't content with saying, 'You're doing important things in the world, so go off and be important and I'll handle everything else here' – because the truth is, if I did that, I'd probably still be angry. (*Vanity Fair*, "In Waiting")

This suggests that her duties as wife and mother are tolerable if she is happy. This understanding promotes a different notion of motherly and wifely duties. Michelle Obama

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<sup>105</sup> Also see interview Michelle Obama with *Glamour* in 2007: Q: "Let's talk some more about your career. As First Lady, would you continue to work at your outside job?" MO: "We'll have to see. My priority will be making sure my family is happy and settled. No one can predict what Americans will need from their First Lady a year from now, so I will be whatever I need to be for the country. My sense is that being a First Lady is a full-time-job, but I'll know more when the time comes" (*Glamour*, "Next First Lady").

openly questions the idea of the woman serving at any cost as the sole domestic caretaker. Only a happy mother is a good mother, and, she suggests, not every mother is automatically happy simply because she has children. Furthermore, she suggests, it is perfectly fine for a mother to have a support system for backup. In discussing marriage and family in this way, she is reinforcing her husband's call for change and renewal.

Michelle Obama repeats that happiness is a prerequisite for being a responsible mother and good role model, using the storyline of the importance of her workout schedule after her two children were born:

Being fit has become even more important as I've had children, because I'm also thinking about how I'm modeling health to my daughters. [...]I'm trying to teach my daughters moderation and constancy, that exercise is not luxury, it is a necessity. (*Ebony*, "The Real Michelle")

In other words, serving as an example to your children requires that you "practice what you preach". This sometimes requires adjusting gender roles in the household:

Before I got married, I exercised. I had time to do that, but then what I found was when I had children, [...]that's usually when we as women take ourselves off the list. [...] Barack and I talk about this. We had some challenges over how do you balance responsibility as the kids [...] required much attention. He was in the state senate and away a lot [...] and I was trying to figure out why is he getting in his exercise and I'm putting on weight. [...] I had to prioritize. This is when I started working out at 4:30 in the morning. I found it wasn't that Barack wasn't interested in helping. It's just that when the baby cried at 4.a.m., I got up faster than he did because I would hear the baby and get up. [...] If I'm not here and I'm working out, he'll get up. Whether it takes him five minutes to get up or 15, the baby's fine. (*Ebony*, "The Real Michelle")

Instead of giving in to established notions of gender roles in child rearing, Michelle Obama questions these structures in order to be a better mother. Being a good mother does not imply being available all the time. Her answer to the campaign interview question "How do you balance traveling with family duties?" implies a similar understanding: "I do day trips so that it creates less disruption for the girls. I usually leave in the morning after the kids are out, and I'm back home by bedtime" (*Glamour*, "Next First Lady"). Although the prospective first lady does everything to be there for her children in the mornings and evenings, she is not a full time mother. She works hard so that her girls will be better off in the future:

I thought politics was a mean, rough business. And the last thing I wanted was to turn my girls' lives upside down. But then I took a step back, and I thought about the world I want my girls to grow up in – a world where they'll be paid fairly for their work. Where they won't have to choose between their kids and their careers." (Michelle Obama, "Luncheon 800 Women for Obama")

Michelle Obama uses the narrative frame of motherhood to promote progressive demands with regard to general gender questions. Throughout the campaign, she presented a pro-

gressive notion of the domestic caretaker. As she explained to the *Ladies Home Journal*,

I think it's a unit that raises a child. In this couple, Barack is the person who has the skill, the inclination, the desire, the ability, to be in politics. I have no desire. So that's a good thing, in my view, since someone has to be focusing on the kids, and that's me. But it could easily be him. There's no reason why the nurturing has to come from Mom – it just has to be there. (*Ladies Home Journal*, "Michelle and Barack", 2008)

*Ladies Home Journal* promotes a rather conservative image of womanliness and female responsibilities. Saying that the main domestic caretaker might just as well be a man further reinforces Michelle Obama's call for rethinking established gender structures and portrays her as the embodiment of her husband's call for change and renewal.

### 4.3. Being Lincoln: Obama's Promise of Unifying America

Two centuries after Abraham Lincoln's birth, everybody suddenly wants a piece of him – from the man who has his old job to the owner of a diner who sells burgers named after him. He's the subject of an avalanche of new books. New Lincoln pennies are being minted. The U.S. Postal Service released four new Lincoln stamps. And it seems like every state is staking a claim – how matter no tenuous – on his legacy. (Babwin, "The Big 200")

The lively presence of the former President reflects the relevance of symbolic figures for today's society. Understanding what is behind the Obama campaign's appropriation of Lincoln's image requires a brief explanation of the public perception of the 16<sup>th</sup> American President. His enduring popularity and cult status is easy to understand. In American cultural memory Lincoln is remembered as the "Man of the People" (Schwartz, *Lincoln* 143), who was born in a log cabin, raised in poverty, and had a pioneer upbringing. During the Civil War, still considered one of the greatest threats to the then "young" nation's survival, he was admired for demonstrating strong leadership skills deriving from his perceived humanity, humility and magnanimity (Spragens 93-94). According to historian Gary Gallagher, "the Civil War proved that the Union – the nation", symbolically embodied in Lincoln's person, "could survive a potentially lethal internal threat" (47). Lincoln led the country through the Civil War, unified it and shortly after it ended, died as its martyr.

In American collective memory, Lincoln represents a deliberative, conciliatory and inclusive leader, the savior of the United States as a unified nation, a symbol of unity, bipartisanship and American democracy (Peterson 175). Except for Washington, no public figure is more consistently identified with these notions. Popular for his eloquence, humility, religiously inspired modesty and pragmatism (Deininger, "Beste Hoffnung"), Lincoln has always been a role model for political actors and presidential candidates. Linking his persona with bipartisanship evokes his success in dealing with political factions. Lincoln, according to Doris Kearns Goodwin,

managed to unite the disparate elements of his state's fledgling Republican Party – that curious amalgamation of former Whigs, antislavery Democrats, nativists, foreigners, radicals, and conservatives. (8)

He brought his disgruntled opponents together, created an unusually mixed cabinet, and marshaled its members' talents to the task of winning the war and preserving the Union.

Lincoln's handling of the post-war situation further enhanced his reputation as a reconciler who facilitated the reconstruction of American society (Kearns-Goodwin 592). He was quickly elevated as a moral role model and ideal democratic leader. In addition, Lincoln was sacralized as the "Great Emancipator" who ended the official institution of slavery in the United States. In American cultural memory, he is intertwined with the African-American struggle for equal rights (Arsenault 255), probably most explicitly in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech on the steps of the

Lincoln Memorial<sup>106</sup>.

In the 2000 presidential election, many Americans hoped Bush would heal the partisan divisions that had ruled the nation over the last years of the Clinton Presidency and the 2000 election campaign. Instead, Bush's governing style left the American nation even more divided. A public yearning to move past party divisions explains Obama's unremitting efforts to appeal to the American electorate by demonstrating his abilities to unite the nation. The Obama campaign used the collective memory of Lincoln to set the stage for Obama's vision of a nation that could be healed. The performative exploitation of the connection between the first African-American President and the Great Emancipator is no surprise: the circle that began with Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation is closed in the space of Barack Obama's Imagined Presidency. A "special relationship" between Obama and Lincoln was narratively evoked and staged by Obama throughout his 2008 candidacy.

One strategy applied by Obama was to frequently mention Lincoln as his political role model. In an interview with *CBS* he told Katie Couric that, aside from the Bible, the book he found essential for his work at the Oval Office was Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals*, a book expounding Lincoln's political strategies during the Civil War (Thomas, "Obama Looks").<sup>107</sup> Obama's direct mention of Lincoln as inspiration for his own political strategies is the most basic means by which he makes Lincoln a performative platform. He extends the strategy of using Lincoln as a political role model:

My goal is to have the best possible government. And that means me winning. So, I'm very practical in my thinking. I'm a practical guy. One of my heroes is Abraham Lincoln. Awhile back, there was a wonderful book written by Doris Kearns Goodwin called 'Team of Rivals', in which she talked about how Lincoln basically pulled all the people he'd been running against into his Cabinet. Because whatever personal feelings there were, the issue was, 'How can we get the country through this time of crisis?' I think that has to be the approach one takes to the vice president and the Cabinet. (qtd. in Romano, "Team")

Obama implies that as "practical" men committed to public service, he and his hero Lincoln are much alike.

In addition to citing Lincoln as an inspiration, Obama set the stage for his performative narrative by describing his own political standpoint in Lincolnian terms. Speaking of his future cabinet, for example, Obama said,

The lesson is to not let your ego or grudges get in the way of hiring absolutely the best people [...]. I don't think the American people are fundamentally ideological. They're pragmatic ... and so I have an interest in casting a wide net, seeking out people with a wide range of expertise, including Republicans, for the highest positions in this government.

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<sup>106</sup> For more on the image of Lincoln in the cultural memory during the era of the Civil Rights Movement, see: Schwartz, Barry. *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era: History and Memory in Late Twentieth-Century America*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008. 125-145. Print.

<sup>107</sup> Central to the work is Lincoln's appointment of his fiercest rivals to key cabinet positions. Following his role model, Obama thoroughly staged the appointment of former factional contender Hillary Clinton to the position of the secretary of state and allowed the Bush's Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to remain in office. This can also be seen as image cultivation that alludes to Lincoln's strategy of demonstrating unification within his own cabinet.



[...] I really admire the way the elder Bush negotiated the end of the Cold War – with discipline, tough diplomacy and restraint [...] and I'd be very interested in having those sorts of Republicans in my Administration, especially people who expedite a responsible and orderly conclusion to the Iraq war and who know how to keep the hammer down on al-Qaeda. (qtd. in Klein, "Team")

Obama as a pragmatic and non-ideological politician who seeks solutions above all is an allusion to Lincoln. In his second autobiography, he writes,

Lincoln [...] like no man before or since understood both the deliberate function of our democracy and the limits of such deliberation. We remember him for the firmness and depth of his convictions – his unyielding opposition to slavery and his determination that a house divided could not stand. But his presidency was guided by a practicality that would distress us today. [...] It was a matter of maintaining within himself the balance between two contradictory ideas – that we must talk and reach for common understandings, precisely because all of us are imperfect and can never act with the certainty that God is on our side; and yet at times we must act nonetheless, as if we are certain, protected from error only by providence. (*Audacity* 116-117)

Obama goes well beyond the common practice of evoking Lincoln as a role model. Early on, he began to stress biographical similarities between himself and Lincoln. His contribution to a *Time Magazine* special issue on Lincoln serves as a further example.

During my first six years in the state legislature, Democrats were in the minority, and I couldn't get a bill heard, much less passed. In my first race for Congress, I had my head handed to me. So when I, a black man with a funny name, born in Hawaii of a father from Kenya and a mother from Kansas, announced my candidacy for the U.S. Senate, it was hard to imagine a less likely scenario than that I would win – except, perhaps, for the one that allowed a child born in the backwoods of Kentucky with less than a year of formal education to end up as Illinois' greatest citizen and our nation's greatest President. In Lincoln's rise from poverty, his ultimate mastery of language and law, his capacity to overcome personal loss and remain determined in the face of repeated defeat – in all this, he reminded me not just of my own struggles. He also reminded me of a larger, fundamental element of American life – the enduring belief that we can constantly remake ourselves to fit our larger dreams. (Obama, "What I see")

Both Lincoln and Obama began their political careers as young men in the Illinois state legislature and neither fit the conventions of a typical statesman. The parallels, in this telling, equate the two men.

Obama also appropriated Lincoln's cultural memory as staging site by calling on others to testify to the connection between Obama's performance and the spirit of Lincoln. For example, Cassandra Butts, a member of his campaign team, claimed that Obama's conciliatory nature came from his own history.

Barack has an incredible ability to synthesize seemingly contradictory realities and make them coherent. [...] It comes from going from a home where white people are nurturing you, and then you go out into the world and you're seen as a black person. He had to figure out whether he was going to accept this contradiction and be just one of those things, or find a way to realize that these pieces make up the whole. In the state senate, this skill

served him well—he was unusually dexterous with opponents, and passed bills that at first were judged too liberal to have a chance [...]. (qtd. in MacFarquar, “Conciliator”)

Similarly, David Axelrod, Obama’s chief campaign strategist in 2008, enriched the characterization of Obama by evoking Lincolnian traits:

Obama’s history is that he’s been progressive and pragmatic and been able to work with both sides of the aisle and people across the ideological spectrum to get things done [...]. He comes to the table with a point of view, but he’s not dogmatic or rigid. He’s willing to compromise on details without sacrificing his principles. (qtd. in Allen, “Liberal”)

The message was reinforced by other, unexpected witnesses like Tom Coburn, a hardcore right wing Republican Senator:

What *Washington does* is *cause everybody* to concentrate on where *they* disagree as opposed to where *they* agree, [...] But leadership changes that. And Barack’s got the capability, I believe – and the pizzazz and the charisma – to be a leader of America, not a leader of Democrats. (qtd. in Senior, “Dreaming”)

These statements suggest that Obama, although African-American, is not a polarizer. His Lincolnian pragmatism offers true leadership to all Americans.

#### 4.3.1. Overcoming the Rift: Offering a Post-Bush Consensus

Evoking Lincoln Obama constructed a performative stage metaphorically connecting the United States during and after the Bush Jr. era with the Civil War and antebellum period. Again there is a clear-set narrative script: Obama as the 21<sup>st</sup> century unifier who could fulfill Lincoln’s will.

Obama’s more eye-catching imaginative offer starts with the deep divisions experienced since the George W. Bush presidency. His 2004 DNC keynote address famously called for a unified America (“there’s not a liberal America and a conservative America”). Divisive politics violate his personal belief in a communitarian spirit of mutual responsibility (“I am my brother’s keeper, I am my sisters’ keeper”). America is traditionally a single family (*e pluribus unum*), and divisive socio-political discourse is not an intrinsic to its nature. When Obama says “we worship an awesome God in the blue states”,<sup>108</sup> he references Lincoln’s second Inaugural address, and thus merges his call for unity with Lincoln’s.

Obama reused the 2004 DNC keynote speech throughout his campaign to reinforce that his Imagined Presidency constituted a site in which the internal divisions that plagued the nation could be overcome. The campaign clip “One Voice” (First Air-Date: 16 Apr. 2008), for example, begins with a recording of the 2004 DNC speech, accompanied

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<sup>108</sup> See Lincoln: “Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered” (“Second Inaugural”, 1865).

by background music with drum and fanfare reminiscent of an Aaron Copeland composition for a Civil War film and 19<sup>th</sup> century military ceremonial music (“One Voice”). The parallel with Lincoln becomes clear in the second half, when the music fades as Obama calls out to the audience:

One voice can change a room. And if one voice can change a room, then it can change a setting, and if it can change a setting, it can change a state, and if it can change a state, it can change a nation. And if it can change a nation, it can change the world. (Obama, “One Voice”)

Images show masses of people forming one body, with Obama as the leader who helps recreate one American voice (cf. [Fig. 49 – 51](#)).

Reinforcing his role as reconciler, Obama targeted the source of American political divisiveness:

[T]oday, our leaders in Washington seem incapable of working together in a practical, common sense way. Politics has become so bitter and partisan, so gummed up by money and influence, that we can’t tackle the big problems that demand solutions. And that’s what we have to change first. We have to change our politics, and come together around our common interests and concerns as Americans. (“Presidential Exploratory Committee Announcement”, 2007)

Obama augments his claim to expertise and the need for change by defining himself in contrast to the ideological partisanship of current politics, making his election even more urgent. Announcing his presidential candidacy in Illinois, Obama equated the contemporary political divisiveness to the Civil War:

It was here, in Springfield, where North, South, East and West come together that I was reminded of the essential decency of the American people – where I came to believe that through this decency, we can build a more hopeful America. And that is why, in the shadow of the Old State Capitol, where Lincoln once called on a divided house to stand together, where common hopes and common dreams still, I stand before you today to announce my candidacy for President of the United States. I recognize there is a certain presumptuousness – a certain audacity – to this announcement. I know I haven’t spent a lot of time learning the ways of Washington. But I’ve been there long enough to know that the ways of Washington must change. (Obama, “Announcement Speech”, 2007)

Obama literally referenced Lincoln and then went a step farther: he merged himself with Lincoln:

But the life of a tall, gangly, self-made Springfield lawyer tells us that a different future is possible. He tells us that there is power in words. He tells us that there is power in conviction. That beneath all the differences of race and region, faith and station, we are one people. He tells us that there is power in hope. As Lincoln organized the forces arrayed against slavery, he was heard to say: “Of strange, discordant, and even hostile elements, we gathered from the four winds, and formed and fought to battle through.” That is our purpose here today. That’s why I’m in this race. Not just to hold an office, but to gather with you to transform a nation. (Obama, “Announcement Speech”, 2007)

The “tall, gangly, self-made lawyer” could describe Obama himself. Speaking at the Old State Capitol in Springfield, Obama appropriates Lincoln’s former stage and Lincoln as a means to shape his stage to intensify the imaginative dimension of his performed narrative offer. Political division, partisanship, and the pressing need to overcome both were thus established as a central narrative category in Obama’s 2008 campaign<sup>109</sup>.

In his acceptance speech in Denver, the analogy between current politics and the civil war era was obvious in how he described the consequences of partisanship and ideological extremism:

The times are too serious, the stakes are too high for this same partisan playbook. So let us agree that patriotism has no party. I love this country, and so do you, and so does John McCain. The men and women who serve in our battlefields may be Democrats and Republicans and Independents, but they have fought together and bled together and some died together under the same proud flag. They have not served a Red America or a Blue America – they have served the United States of America. (Obama, “Acceptance Speech”, 2008)

The military reference has a particular effect in this context: with “battlefields” and “fighting together” and the “same flag”, Obama evokes the civil war and Lincoln as unifier.

We have now won east and west, north and south, and across the heartland of this country we love.[...] We are bringing together Democrats and independents and, yes, some Republicans. I know this. I meet them when I’m shaking hands afterwards. There’s one right there, an Obama can, that’s what we call them. They whisper to me. They say, “Barack, I’m a Republican, but I support you.” And I say, “Thank you.” We’re bringing Democrats, independents, Republicans, blacks and whites, Latinos and Asians, and Native Americans, small states and big states, red states and blue states, all into the United States of America. That’s our project. That’s our mission. This is the new American majority. (Obama “Primary Speech Feb. 12”, 2008)

Obama’s “shaking hands” anecdote communicates that he has already assumed and practiced the role of conciliator in America’s 21<sup>st</sup> century civil war. At this early stage in the campaign, using the rhetoric of his announcement speech, Obama confidently claimed to have successfully fulfilled the role of the Lincolnian unifier as even Republicans support him in his undertaking. He seems to suggest that he has restored the voice of the American nation. The Republican base in the “silent majority”, will be supplanted by an empowered “new American majority” (Obama, “Primary Speech Feb. 12”, 2008).

Obama also harnessed the narrative frame of a 21<sup>st</sup> century civil war climate by recounting anecdotes demonstrating his long-time bipartisan political spirit:

My experience in the state legislature is instructive. The first seven years I was there I was in the minority, and I think that I passed maybe ten bills; maybe five of them were substantive. Most of the bills that I did pass were in partnership with Republicans,

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<sup>109</sup> Another example is the campaign speech held at Independence, Missouri, where Obama said, “It is worth considering the meaning of patriotism because the question of who is – or is not – a patriot all too often poisons our political debates, in ways that divide us rather than bringing us together” (“The America We Love”, 2008).

because that was the only way I could get them passed. The first year we were in the majority party I passed twenty-six bills in one year. (qtd. in Silverstein, “Obama Inc”)

Appearing on *The View*, Obama indirectly supported this storyline by explaining that,

I’ve got friends across the political spectrum. And part of what my role in politics has tried to have been, is to get people who normally don’t listen to each other, talk to each other, to say crazy things, who are offended by each other ...for me to understand them and make them help understand each other”. (“Barack Obama The View”, 2008)

Obama realized very early on that “good politics” requires working with political opponents to do what is best for the country<sup>110</sup>. In a late 2006 *New Yorker* magazine interview, he said,

I constantly see opportunities for collaboration across ideological lines to get stuff done. But you have to be the one who’s dictating how the compromises work. If it’s somebody who’s not interested in compromising who’s in charge, you can come up with all sorts of good ideas, and they’ll stiff you. If you’re the person who somebody else has to come to, you can actually engage, and that’s how, for example, we got the death-penalty reform. We set up the first videotaping of interrogations and confessions on capital cases. We were in the majority at that point, but I still reached out to all the law-enforcement folks, and we just sat down in a room. And that is, by the way, the most gratifying feeling in politics, for me: when you hit that sweet spot where everybody concludes that the law that we’ve just passed works and is going to make things better, and everybody across party lines has to confess that we’re probably better off with this thing than not. (qtd. in Remnick, “Testing”)

Not only does Obama collaborate “across ideological lines”, he also finds his reward in facilitating mutually acceptable solutions. His visual mis-en-scene further underscores this storyline, as shown in a photograph by Pete Souza of Obama shaking hands with another political representative over what looks like a newly-signed bill (cf. [Fig. 52](#)).

The handshake is staged as an act of work and engagement, suggested by the pens. The bystanders evoke the admiration, support and respect they feel for the successful negotiation between the two protagonists. Through the bird’s eye perspective, the metaphor of “reaching across” is intensified.

Other images show Obama in intimate conversation with Republican colleagues (cf. [Fig. 53](#) & [54](#)). These photos show that Obama, in “reaching across” political party lines, is unafraid of compromise and humble enough to be a bipartisan national leader. He

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<sup>110</sup> Also see the comment Obama made on “dirty campaigning” and his presidential contenders Hillary Clinton and John McCain: during his appearance on *The View*: “But the truth is... look Senator Clinton is a bright, dedicated public servant, who was my friend before this contest started, she’s gonna be my friend after this contest ends. And what I’m absolutely convinced of is hat once we’re all done, the Democrats will come together, that they will have a nominee that they’re proud of and that’s gonna work hard on their behalf. In the same that after I beat John McCain, I trust that I’m gonna be able to... (Applause)...I am not somebody who believes he has the monopoly on wisdom. I think that Republicans – look I come from the land of Lincoln – Abraham Lincoln was a pretty good Republican – And one of the things I’ve been trying to communicate: I’ve got some very strong views about how we need to move the country forward, but I don’t presume I’m right all the time. I wanna listen to people, some things I think our current President hasn’t done. Get a diversity of opinion. And the one thing I’m convinced of as I’m travelling around the country is, we have so much more in common than what drives us apart [...] When you talk to the people, they basically want the same things” (“Barack Obama The View”, 2008).

appropriates Lincoln, “the humble politician”, to substantiate his own imaginative offer. A similar narrative thread can be detected in another 2006 interview:

I probably can make a unique contribution in helping to bring people together and bridging what I call the ‘empathy deficit’, helping to explain the disparate factions in this country and to show them how we’re joined together, helping bridge divides between black and white, rich and poor, even conservative and liberal. (qtd. in Enda “Great”)<sup>111</sup>

Describing himself as natural “empathizer” with a talent for taking the perspective of others, Obama taps into the image of “Lincoln’s empathy and love for citizens” (Smith, *Faith* 495)<sup>112</sup>. Styling himself as the consensus-seeking collaborator, Obama repeatedly insists that campaigns should not be about “making each other look bad” (qtd. in Ambinder, “Teacher”), but instead should focus on

figuring out how we can all do some good for this precious country of ours. That’s our mission. And in this mission, our rivals won’t be one another, and I would assert it won’t even be the other party. It’s going to be cynicism that we’re fighting against. (qtd. in Ambinder, “Teacher”)

Obama presented his Imagined Presidency as the future site of consensus and reconciliation by contrasting it to the hyper-ideologized politics of recent years:

In 2008, we will have a window of opportunity to renew our global leadership and bring our nation together. [...] I want to be straight with you. If you want conventional Washington thinking, I’m not your man. If you want rigid ideology, I’m not your man. If you think that fundamental change can wait, I’m definitely not your man. But if you want to bring this country together, if you want experience that’s broader than just learning the ways of Washington, if you think that the global challenges we face are too urgent to wait, and if you think that America must offer the world a new and hopeful face, then I offer a different choice in this race and a different vision for our future. (“DePaul Speech”, 2008)

Addressing what he is not – conventional and ideologically oriented – underscored his pragmatic “Lincolnian” mindset.

Obama’s staging as a unifier included a rather unexpected use of discourses on religion and religious faith. During the early phase of the presidential campaign, Obama began to connect policy questions with religious standpoints. One interesting example is his appearance at the *CNN* “Sojourners’ Presidential Candidate Forum” in June 2007. While candidates John Edwards and Hillary Clinton focused mostly on the role of faith in their personal lives, Obama used religion to cement his role as political unifier figure.

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<sup>111</sup> As he goes on later in the interview: “The story that I’m interested in telling is how we can restore that sense of commitment to each other in a way that doesn’t inhibit our individual freedoms, doesn’t diminish individual responsibility, but does promote collective responsibility” (qtd. in Edna “Great”).

<sup>112</sup> A nice example for a more recent iconification of Abraham Lincoln is Doris Kearns Goodwin’s Lincoln biography *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, where she for example describes Lincoln as follows: “Lincoln’s abhorrence of hurting others was born of more than simple compassion. He possessed extraordinary empathy – the gift or curse of putting himself in the place of another, to experience what they were feeling, to understand their motives and desires” (104).



Asked if he thought God took sides in a war, Obama answered with Lincoln:

Well, you know, I always remember Abraham Lincoln, when, during the Civil War, he said, “We shouldn’t be asking whose side God is on, but whether we’re on his side.” And I think that the question that all of us have to ask ourselves during any battle that’s taking place, whether it’s political or military, is, are we following his dictates? Are we advancing the causes of justice and freedom? Are we our brother’s keeper, our sister’s keeper? And that’s how I measure whether what we’re doing is right. (CNN, “Sojourners”)

Obama transfers the concrete question about God’s role in war to the more general context of socio-political debates and uses the religious concept of one another’s keeper to promote his own role as unifier. Asked about the “moral and political imagination” (CNN, “Sojourners”) that will characterize his presidency, Obama again promotes a communitarian religious faith in the spirit of Lincoln (White 221):

Well, I think our starting point has to be based on the notion that I just expressed, that I am my brother’s keeper, I am my sister’s keeper, that we are connected as a people, that when, as I said in my speech at the Boston convention, when there’s a child somewhere here in Washington, D.C., who is impoverished in a crumbling school without prospects and hope for the future, then that impoverishes me. [...] So the starting point is that, “I’ve got a stake in other people, and I’ve got a set of responsibilities towards others, not just towards myself”, and that those mutual responsibilities, those obligations, have to express themselves, not just through our churches, and our synagogues, and our mosques, and our temples, not only in our own families, but they have to express themselves through our government. That, I would argue, is part of what created this amazing country that we live in. (CNN, “Sojourners”)

Obama promotes Lincoln’s reconciliatory religious rhetoric based on the understanding that “theology must be translated into ethics” (White 221). Emulating Lincoln, “the nation’s most profound theologian” (Smith, *Faith* 176), Obama uses religious rhetoric and discourse to inject his role of the American nation’s 21<sup>st</sup> century conciliator with performative efficacy and meaning.

It is striking how frequently Obama credits religion for his ability to overcome and bridge ideological divides. In *The Audacity of Hope*, he describes how his mother urged understanding different religions:

In her mind, a working knowledge of the world’s great religions was a necessary part of any well-rounded education. In our household the Bible, the Koran, and the Bhagavad Gita sat on the shelf alongside books of Greek and Norse and African mythology. On Easter or Christmas Day my mother might drag me to church, just as she might drag me to the Buddhist temple, the Chinese New Year celebration, the Shinto shrine, and ancient Hawaiian burial sites. (*Audacity* 241)

Just as Lincoln’s “early and growing opposition to slavery” was seen as “anchored in his religious beliefs” (Djupe 259)<sup>113</sup>, Obama consistently incorporated narratives of faith and

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113 According to Paul Djupe, “[i]n his pre-presidential years, Lincoln made public religious references in speeches such as his ‘Young Man’s Lyceum Address’ in 1838, and he cleverly used quotes and references to the Bible in his famous ‘House Divided’

religion in his discussion of politics:

I have a deep faith. I'm rooted in the Christian tradition. I believe that there are many paths to the same place, and that is a belief that there is a higher power, a belief that we are connected as a people. That there are values that transcend race or culture, that move us forward, and there's an obligation for all of us individually as well as collectively to take responsibility to make those values lived. (qtd. in Falsani, "I have a deep Faith")

Anecdotes by political colleagues reinforce the religion-tinged storyline of Obama as a truly open-minded personality. In a 2008 *Newsweek* cover story on "Barack Obama's Christian Journey", Ira Silverstein, Obama's former Illinois state Senate colleague and an Orthodox Jew, describes Obama as incredibly keen to learn about the Orthodox way of life. The religious rules of Orthodox Jews prohibit work on the Sabbath, from Friday night through Saturday night. "On the Sabbath", Silverstein said, "if I ever needed anything, Barack would always offer. [...] Some of the doors are electric, so he would offer to open them ... I didn't expect that" (qtd. in Miller, "Christian Journey"). Such anecdotes reinforce that Obama's religious values include open-mindedness. And on the campaign trail, he emphasized the communitarian and reconciliatory spirit that his faith instilled in him:

I think it's very important to think that you do not have to have the same faith as me to be a moral person – there are a lot of Jewish people who are as moral, or more moral than I am, there are a lot of Muslims who are decent kind of people. I don't think they are any less children of God. (qtd. in Healy, "Obama Talks About his Faith")

It is not the religious faith, but the morally valid behavior that makes you a "child of God", Obama suggests, again promoting a narrative of inclusiveness. Calling upon God as ultimate source of strength, Obama taps into the moral argument against divisiveness used by Lincoln during the Civil War. Colleen Shogan says, "[i]nstead of portraying God as tribal or territorial, Lincoln emphasized the role of God as unifier" (111).

Obama's Imagined Presidency is based on the inclusive mindset of his religious and moral worldview. In his address "Call to Renewal", Obama developed this storyline by distancing himself from the instrumentalization of faith during election campaigns:

I am hopeful that we can bridge the gaps that exist and overcome the prejudices each of us bring to this debate. And I have faith that millions of believing Americans want that to happen. No matter how religious they may or may not be, people are tired of seeing faith used as a tool of attack. They don't want faith used to belittle or to divide. They're tired of hearing folks deliver more screech than sermon. ("Call to Renewal", 2006)

By warning against greater fragmentation, Obama, on a meta-level, reinforced his role as Lincolnian figure. A comment to the *Washington Post* is another example of how the campaign appropriated religion:

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speech in 1858" (259).

I think people are hungry for a different kind of politics – the kind of politics based on the ideals this country was founded upon. The idea that we are all connected as one people. That we all have a stake in one another. That there’s room for pro-lifers and pro-choicers, Evangelicals and atheists, Democrats and Republicans and everyone in between, in this project of American renewal. (“Faith on Common Grounds”)

Campaign flyers promoting Obama’s standpoints on faith and religion make the narrative connection between his religious values and overcoming socio-political strife. The flyer claims that Obama’s Christian faith will help him “bring together Republicans and Democrats to address the problems facing our nation” (cf. [Fig. 55](#)).

The importance of this narrative strategy can be deduced from one of his most important speeches, “A More Perfect Union”, in which he positioned himself as an ethnic minority. Again he used religious values to call for healing the nation’s ruptures and rediscovering socio-political consensus:

In the end, then, what is called for is nothing more, and nothing less, than what all the world’s great religions demand – that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Let us be our brother’s keeper, Scripture tells us. Let us be our sister’s keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one another. (“A More Perfect Union”, 2008)

#### 4.3.2. “Perfecting the Union”: Finishing the Work of Lincoln and the Founders

The evocation of Lincoln’s spirit was furthermore particularly effective in Obama’s narrative about the Constitution’s promise of equality. On the critical issue of equal rights and opportunities, Obama’s story of “perfecting the Union” created a threshold space where the audience could imagine fulfilling promise of equality in the Declaration of Independence. Obama styled himself as trustee of Lincoln’s bequest, the long-awaited and naturally predestined deliverer of Lincoln’s promise – a prophet –, committed to the principles of the Declaration of Independence, and perfecting the “social and political equality of the races” (Jaffa 340).

One way he established the performative frame for his role as Lincoln’s successor, is evident in his reflections on negotiating challenging moments as a U.S. Senator. In difficult situations, he writes, he seeks the Lincoln in himself by running along the Mall (*Audacity* 361):

Most of the time I stop at the Washington Monument, but sometimes I push on, across the street to the National World War II Memorial, then along the Reflecting Pool to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, then up the stairs of the Lincoln Memorial. At night, the great shrine is lit but often empty. Standing between marble columns, I read the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address. I look out over the Reflecting Pool, imagining the crowd stilled by Dr. King’s mighty cadence, and then beyond that, to the floodlit obelisk and shining Capitol dome. And in that place, I think about America and those who built it. This nation’s founders, who somehow rose above petty ambitions and narrow calculations to imagine a nation unfurling across a continent. And those like Lincoln and King, who ultimately laid down their lives in the service of perfecting an imperfect union. And all the faceless, nameless men and women, slaves and soldiers and tailors and butchers, constructing lives for themselves and their children and

grandchildren, brick by brick, rail by rail, calloused hand by calloused hand, to fill in the landscape of our collective dreams. It is that process I wish to be a part of. My heart is filled with love for this country. (*Audacity* 361-362)

By taking his readers “on a walk” from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial where he then reflects his own political work, Obama aligns himself with the nation’s founding fathers and the savior of the American union. If the journey inspires him to continue what was started by Washington and Lincoln, he positions himself as the man to consummate their mission (*Audacity* 362).

A similar strategy appears in visual performances. At the 2005 dedication of the Lincoln Library in Springfield, Pete Souza’s photograph connects Lincoln and Obama, giving the impression that Obama’s future political decisions are guided by Lincoln and a continuation of his unfinished mission (cf. [Fig. 56](#)).

The mis-en-scene of the image is elaborated by Obama’s dedication speech, where he wonders if “the poor boy born in the backwoods of Kentucky ever dreamed” that “a black man [would] speak at that dedication as a United States Senator” (qtd. in Thomas, “Looks Lincoln”). The suggestion of a “special relationship” between Lincoln and Obama serves as the performative space for Obama’s narrative as a conciliator called to fulfill the founders’ promise of equal rights and Lincoln’s promise a more perfect union. Years before announcing his presidential candidacy, Obama aligned himself with Lincoln and the founders, who established and secured the American nation with the claim that “all men are created equal” (“Declaration”), and the inclusion of this principle in the American Constitution.

A 2008 photo of Obama in his Senate office by *Vanity Fair* photographer Jonas Karlsson further illustrates the candidate’s performative strategy in the campaign (cf. [Fig. 57](#)). The mis-en-scene of a relaxed Obama beneath framed images of Lincoln and Martin Luther King suggests that he feels comfortable as their successor and has no problem shouldering their legacy.

Interestingly Obama also announced his presidential candidacy in 2007, on the weekend commemorating Lincoln’s birthday. His stage was the Old State Capitol in Springfield, where Lincoln delivered his 1858 “House Divided” speech. Obama is juxtaposed with the Old Capitol Building in Pete Souza’s photograph (cf. [Fig. 58](#)). Obama took up the storyline of standing in the shadow of Lincoln:

In the shadow of the Old State Capitol, where Lincoln once called on a divided house to stand together, where common hopes and common dreams still live, I stand before you today to announce my candidacy for President of the United States. [...] For that is our unyielding faith – that in the face of impossible odds, people who love their country can change it. That’s what Abraham Lincoln understood. He had his doubts. He had his defeats. He had his setbacks. But through his will and his words, he moved a nation and helped free a people. It is because of the millions who rallied to his cause that we are no longer divided, North and South, slave and free. (Obama, “Announcement Speech”, 2007)

On this occasion he also explicitly scripted himself as the consummator of Lincoln’s

unfinished work:

As Lincoln organized the forces arrayed against slavery, he was heard to say: “Of strange, discordant, and even hostile elements, we gathered from the four winds, and formed and fought to battle through.” That is our purpose here today. That’s why I’m in this race. Not just to hold an office, but to gather with you to transform a nation. I want to win that next battle – for justice and opportunity. I want to win that next battle – for better schools, and better jobs, and health care for all. I want us to take up the unfinished business of perfecting our union, and building a better America. And if you will join me in this improbable quest, if you feel destiny calling, and see as I see, a future of endless possibility stretching before us; if you sense, as I sense, that the time is now to shake off our slumber, and slough off our fear, and make good on the debt we owe past and future generations, then I’m ready to take up the cause, and march with you, and work with you. Together, starting today, let us finish the work that needs to be done, and usher in a new birth of freedom on this Earth. (Obama, “Announcement Speech”, 2007)

“A new birth of freedom” (Lincoln, “Gettysburg”, 1863) comes from Lincoln’s 1863 “Gettysburg Address”. With the analogy between Lincoln’s fight against slavery and his own campaign, Obama assimilates Lincoln into his performative role. Vowing to “take up the unfinished business of perfecting our union” and “finish the work that needs to be done” (Obama, “Announcement Speech”, 2007), he styles himself as capable of completing Lincoln’s task, and by extension, exceeding Lincoln’s accomplishments.

Interestingly, on another occasion, Obama characterized Lincoln’s iconization as the “Great Emancipator” with a critical eye.

I cannot swallow whole the view of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator. As a law professor and civil rights lawyer and as an African American, I am fully aware of his limited views on race. Anyone who actually reads the Emancipation Proclamation knows it was more a military document than a clarion call for justice. (Obama, “What I see”)

This criticism, combined with his promise to finish Lincoln’s project, establishes Obama as not merely the heir to Lincoln’s project, but also as its perfecter. In his announcement speech, the constant use of “you”, “us” and “we” implies that he will lead an undertaking that is not his personal project, but rather the collective obligation of all Americans:

We all made this journey for a reason. It’s humbling, but in my heart I know you didn’t come here just for me, you came here because you believe in what this country can be. In the face of war, you believe there can be peace. In the face of despair, you believe there can be hope. In the face of a politics that’s shut you out, that’s told you to settle, that’s divided us for too long, you believe we can be one people, reaching for what’s possible, building that more perfect union. (Obama, “Announcement Speech”, 2007)

As if also closing a performative circle, Obama’s final campaign rally took place in Virginia, “the capital of the Old Confederacy” (MacAskill, “Tired Obama”), at Manassas, site of the notoriously bloody first battle of the civil war (McDonald xii). Manassas is where

the Civil War was first called the war of “Brother against Brother”<sup>114</sup>. The battle supposedly gave Lincoln the insight that the war would not end quickly (“First Manassas”).

At Manassas, the place Lincoln took only geographically and only after a long war, Obama, the black Senator and Presidential candidate, implied that he himself had retaken the South on a moral level.<sup>115</sup> In his role as unifier Obama offered a form of closure. Obama’s Imagined Presidency is offered to overcome the historical and contemporary trauma of “brother against brother”:

We tried to communicate for these last two years that we can’t afford the same political games, the same tactics that pit us against one another, that make us afraid of each other. We can’t afford that anymore. Not this time. Despite what our opponents might claim, there are no real or fake parts of Virginia anymore and then there are no real or fake parts of America. There is no city or town that is more pro-America than anywhere else. We are all one nation. All of us proud. All of us patriots. All of us salute this flag. The men and women who serve on our battlefields come from many walks of life, different political parties, but they fought together and they bled together. Some die together under the same proud flag. They have not served red America or blue America, they have served the United States of America. And that is what this campaign has been about, we’re calling us to serve the United States of America. (“Manassas”, 2008)

The traditional red, white, and blue bunting on stage, and Obama’s reference to patriots, the flag, “serving on our battlefields” – all are unifying images that evoke the Civil War and echo Lincoln’s rhetoric (cf. [Fig. 59](#)).

Obama implies that his presidency will heal the long-standing flaws of the American union. Lincoln ended his 1861 Inaugural address by saying, “[t]he mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched [...]” (“Inaugural”, 1861). Obama insists “We are all one nation”, completing Lincoln’s narrative claim that “a house divided cannot stand” (“A House Divided Speech”, 1858).

Obama’s so-called “Race Speech” at the Philadelphia Constitution Center in March 2008 also depicted his presidency as fulfillment of the promise of equal citizenship. The Constitution Center on Philadelphia’s Independence Mall is aligned along an axis with Independence Hall, the Liberty Bell complex, and the Independence Center. Independence Hall and the Constitution Center form a visual frame. The location thus constitutes a powerful narrative frame. The mis-en-scene connects Obama with the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution at Independence Hall. Lincoln used

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114 See, for example: “Terrible State of Affairs in South-Western Virginia” (*Richmond Examiner*, 20 Oct. 1862): “Unfortunately, the inhabitants of Southwestern Virginia have been divided in principles, and the whole country, till the last few weeks has been in the very agony of civil war, where neighbor is arrayed against neighbor, and often brother against brother, and father against son.”; Or, as a member of the Indiana legislature claimed in 1861, the Civil War will lead many people “to the dread consequences of imbruing our hands in brother’s blood” (Drapier, “Brevier Legislative Reports – Extra Session”, 1861).

115 This historical site takes up an important space in American cultural memory as other American politicians also included it in their public sermon of remembrance: Manassas National Battlefield: President Theodore Roosevelt visited Manassas National Battlefield in 1903 after a turkey hunt, and ate a luncheon in the Henry House. President William H. Taft visited Manassas battlefield in 1911 for the “Peace Jubilee” on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the first battle. see: “Did You Know?”. *National Park Service* <<http://www.nps.gov/inau/stories.htm>>; Also see: Upton Sinclair’s novel *Manassas: A Novel of the War*. New York: Macmillan, 1904.



Independence Hall in his 1861 whistle stop campaign tour, stopping to raise a flag and deliver a speech on admitting Kansas to the Union as a free state. Pondering “the men who assembled here, and framed and adopted that Declaration of Independence” and “the toils that were endured by the officers and soldiers of the army who achieved that Independence”, Lincoln discussed equal citizenship and the Founding Fathers’ statement that “all men are created equal”:

I have often inquired of myself what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the Colonies from the motherland; but that sentiment in the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but, I hope, to the world, for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weight would be lifted from the shoulders of all men. This is the sentiment embodied in that Declaration of Independence. Now, my friends, can this country be saved upon that basis? If it can, I will consider myself one of the happiest men in the world if I can help to save it. If it can't be saved upon that principle, it will be truly awful. But, if this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle – I was about to say I would rather be assassinated on this spot than to surrender it. (“Independence Hall Speech”, 1861)

Lincoln and Obama, at the same site, gave moral weight to their campaigns with a similar line of argument. Obama began by quoting the Constitution’s preamble, “We the people, in order to form a more perfect union”, establishing a narrative progression that ended with his own appearance on stage:

Two hundred and twenty one years ago, in a hall that still stands across the street, a group of men gathered and, with these simple words, launched America’s improbable experiment in democracy. Farmers and scholars; statesmen and patriots who had traveled across an ocean to escape tyranny and persecution finally made real their declaration of independence at a Philadelphia convention that lasted through the spring of 1787. (Obama, “A More Perfect Union”, 2008)

He evoked Lincoln early, using the Gettysburg Address to summon a key moment in the history of the effort to “perfect the union”<sup>116</sup>.

Obama said that the original Constitution “was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished”, requiring a final resolution for the future generations of a nation that was “stained by [the] original sin of slavery” (Obama, “A More Perfect Union”, 2008). With these lines, Obama positioned himself as the third actor posed to take on the challenge of equal citizenship. That he considers his presidency an opportunity to deliver what the Founding Fathers and Abraham Lincoln could not is made perfectly clear when he identifies the “perfection of the union” as “one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this campaign” (Obama, “A More Perfect Union”, 2008).

The Founding Fathers and Abraham Lincoln are appropriated both as role models

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<sup>116</sup> See Lincoln: “Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure” (“Gettysburg Address”, 1863).

and to substantiate Obama's unique potential. Obama's "American story" ("A More Perfect Union", 2008) is evidence of the American promise:

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave-owners – an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible. [...] [I]t is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts – that out of many, we are truly one. ("A More Perfect Union", 2008)

The American politicians most strongly identified with the promise of equal citizenship did not truly succeed. Obama promises to surpass his predecessors and so Americans can collectively fulfill their promise.

In a narrative addition to his script, Obama offers an anecdote from the campaign trail as evidence that he can bring closure to the question of racial equality in America. He draws on the story he heard from a white woman in his campaign headquarters. Ashley had sacrificed everything to support her seriously ill mother:

[...] 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 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." ("A More Perfect Union", 2008)

The episode encapsulates the perfection of the union:

"I'm here because of Ashley." By itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is not enough. It is not enough to give health care to the sick, or jobs to the jobless, or education to our children. But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger. And as so many generations have come to realize over the course of the two hundred and twenty one years since a band of patriots signed that document in Philadelphia, that is where the perfection begins. ("A More Perfect Union", 2008)

In these final sentences, Obama describes the overarching theme of his narrative script<sup>117</sup>:

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117 Also interesting in this context, is Obama's decision to give his Inauguration, under the title of "A New Birth of Freedom", a Lincolnian theme. This included, among other examples, Obama's "Whistlestop Tour" tracing Lincoln's 1861 inaugural tour, a speech at the Lincoln Memorial the evening before his inauguration, or the use of Lincoln's bible to be sworn as President. See: Obama, Barack. "Speech at the Lincoln Memorial." *The New York Times*. 18 Jan. 2009. Web. 14 Sep. 2013. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/18/us/politics/18text-obama.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/18/us/politics/18text-obama.html?_r=0)>; Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies. "Swearing-In Ceremony for President Barack H. Obama." *Presidential Inauguration Committee*. 20 Jan. 2009. Web. 19 Sep. 2013. <<http://www.inaugural.senate.gov/swearing-in/event/barack-obama-2009>>; Boyer, Dave. "Obama to Use Lincoln Bible at 2009 Inauguration." *The Washington Post*. 10 Jan. 2009. Web. 21 Sep. 2013. <<http://www.washingtontimes.com/blog/inside-politics/2013/jan/10/obama-use-lincoln-bible-2013-inauguration/>>; Zeleny, Jeff. "Obama Arrives in Washington After Train Trip". *The New York Times*. 17 Jan. 2009. Web. 27 Aug. 2013. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/18/us/politics/18obama.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/18/us/politics/18obama.html?_r=1&)>.

his potential to fulfill the promise first made by “a band of patriots” and secured by Lincoln 221 years earlier<sup>118</sup>.

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**118** In general the press, throughout the presidential campaign as well as afterwards, took up Obama’s public self-portrayal and further boosted this image. The 2008 cover of *Newsweek*, shows Lincoln as Obama’s overarching shadow, while a *Time* magazine cover features a portrait of Obama next to one of Lincoln: “Does Temperament Matter?” *Time* magazine 27 Oct. 2008 or *Newsweek* cover: “Obama’s Lincoln.” *Newsweek* 15 Nov. 2008.; In addition to that, Obama’s appropriation of Lincoln was also depicted up by many caricaturists: “Lincoln: Yes We Can”. Jim Morin, *Miami Herald*, 11 Jun. 2008.; “Lincoln in Chicago”, Dana Summers, *Orlando Sentinel*, 2 Aug. 2008; “Lincon with Him”, David Fitzsimmons, *Arizona Daily Star*, 4 Nov. 2008.

#### 4.4. On King's Mountaintop: Obama and the Way to a Post-Racial America

A major challenge to Obama's 2008 presidential campaign was the question of race. Obama declared early in his campaign: "I self-identify as African American – that's how I'm treated and that's how I'm viewed" (CBS, "Obama Racial Identity"). While many voices in the media predicted that the only reason Obama would never become American President was "the color of his skin" (Weisberg, "Racism"), others questioned if he was actually "black enough" (Coates, "Black Enough")<sup>119</sup> to become President. This put Obama in a double bind, requiring him to make an imaginative identity-offer incorporating a viable merger of these seemingly contradictory positions. This chapter investigates how Obama succeeded in presenting himself as both white enough and black enough to be elected.

In his highly visible appearance at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Obama set the tone for his public staging with his famous line, "[t]here's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America" (Obama, "Convention Speech", 2004). By evoking a "post-ethnic" approach to racial identity (Hollinger 7), Obama aimed to establish himself as a catalyst for overcoming racial divisions, a transformative leader who could put America on the path to a post-racial society. In 2006, he told *Newsweek* that his audiences respond most to his offer "to turn the page" and get beyond all forms of partisanship (Alter, "The Challenges"):

My peer group, I think, finds many of those divisions unproductive. We see many of these problems differently, on race, faith, the economy, foreign policy and the role of the military. Part of the reason the next generation can see things differently is because of the battles that the previous generation fought. But the next generation is to some degree liberated from what I call the either/or arguments around these issues. So on race, the classic '60s formulation was, "Is it society and institutional racism that's causing black poverty or is it black pathology and a culture of poverty?" And you couldn't choose "All of the above." It looks to me like both. The younger generation is much less caught up in these neatly packaged orthodoxies. (qtd. in Alter, "The Challenges")

What is interesting here is that Obama uses race to illustrate entrenched partisanship. He proposes letting go of the "either/or" line of argumentation, to move beyond race and established racial identities<sup>120</sup>. Throughout his presidential campaign, Obama's performative frame was a figure deeply entrenched in the cultural memory of race relations: the civil rights activist Martin Luther King.

After Lincoln abolished slavery, the next big step towards equality for African Americans came from the civil rights movement. King's image as the peaceful advocate for a racially integrated society was carved into stone after his assassination in 1968 (Carson,

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119 The following articles stand exemplary for the countless articles discussing Barack Obama's "too white"/"too black" problem: "The Obama Card." *Los Angeles Times*. 13 Feb. 2007. Web. 03 Jan. 2014 <<http://articles.latimes.com/2007/feb/13/opinion/ed-obama13>>; Fauntroy, Michael. "Obama and the Bradley Effect." *Huffington Post*. 21 Sep. 2008. Web. 14 Jan. 2014. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-fauntroy-phd/obama-and-the-bradley-eff\\_b\\_120286.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-fauntroy-phd/obama-and-the-bradley-eff_b_120286.html)>.

120 This allows him to remove himself from two extremely limiting discourses: that of "white guilt/supremacy" and "black grievance/loyalty" (Kruse 229).

“Great American Dialogue”). King’s acceptance by the general public was grounded in his skillful public performances and his integrative rhetoric. He presented the “brotherhood of man” (King, “March Detroit”, 1963) as the foundation of a racially integrated society<sup>121</sup>. In his famous speech at the Lincoln Memorial, King said, “[n]ow is the time to lift our nation from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood” (“I have a Dream Speech”, 1963), and repeatedly insisted that

[t]here is another element that must be present in our struggle that then makes our resistance and nonviolence truly meaningful. That element is reconciliation. Our ultimate end must be the creation of the beloved community. (“Statement Youth Leadership Conference”, 1960)

As Bart Schultz argues, “with the pacifist Martin Luther King, Jr., the emancipation of the oppressed and the emancipation of the oppressor went together” (132).

King drew on two key American principles: the American dream that “all men are created equal” and *e pluribus unum*<sup>122</sup>. In American cultural memory King is remembered as the honest mediator who tried to peacefully bridge the racial divide and establish a colorblind society where “children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character” (King, “I Have a Dream”, 1963). Transformative oratory, propitiatory public performances and unremitting calls to forge unity from diversity were characteristic of King’s public staging (Carson, “Great American Dialogue”). Despite achievements such as the *Civil Rights Act* (1964) and the *Voting Rights Act* (1965), the civil rights movement however failed in many respects.

The performative exploitation of the connection between the first major African-American presidential candidate and King, the revered icon of racial conciliation, is no surprise. Obama used the “special relationship” between himself and Martin Luther King to deal with the issue of race in his campaign. His approach is particularly interesting because of massive demographic shifts in America’s racial and ethnic composition and, in the words of Anthony Perez, “continued blurring of once-distinct racial and ethnic divisions” (“Changing Racial”)<sup>123</sup>. Obama offered a major redefinition of America’s approach to racial identity. Throughout the 2008 election, Obama styled his campaign as a space where the civil rights movement could be seen, not just as a black liberation movement, but also as a narrative of American progress in overcoming its greatest failure. With the storyline of his Imagined Presidency as site of racial reconciliation, Obama opened the door to King’s “beloved community”.

Obama delivered his 2008 election victory speech on November 4<sup>th</sup> in Grant Park,

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121 For the “brotherhood” theme also see: King, Martin Luther. “Letter from Birmingham Jail” 16 Apr. 1963; King, Martin Luther. “Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech” 10 Dec. 1964.

122 See, for example, Martin Luther King’s “The Man who was a Fool” sermon: “All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be” (“Man Who was a Fool”, 1961).

123 Also see: Renshon, Stanley. *One America? Political Leadership, National Identity, and the Dilemmas of Diversity*. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2001.

where King had spoken in 1966 after a large protest march<sup>124</sup>. In his speech, Obama called his victory a “defining moment” made possible by a collective effort (“Victory Speech”, 2008). Referencing King’s “Our God is Marching on” speech from the 1965 March on Montgomery, Obama narrated his electoral victory as the answer to King’s prophecy: “How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” (King, “Our God is Marching on”, 1965). Obama’s appropriation of King for his performance is particularly clear towards the end of the speech, where he used a style and lingo reminiscent of King’s speaking style. He initiated “call-and response”, having the audience echo his “Yes We Can” (“Victory Speech”, 2008). He also legitimized his claim by evoking an elderly African-American voter named Ann Nixon Cooper:

This election had many firsts and many stories that will be told for generations. But one that’s on my mind tonight is about a woman who cast her ballot in Atlanta. She’s a lot like the millions of others who stood in line to make their voice heard in this election except for one thing – Ann Nixon Cooper is 106 years old. She was born just a generation past slavery; a time when there were no cars on the road or planes in the sky; when someone like her couldn’t vote for two reasons – because she was a woman and because of the color of her skin. [...] She was there for the buses in Montgomery, the hoses in Birmingham, a bridge in Selma, and a preacher from Atlanta who told a people that “We Shall Overcome.” Yes we can. [...] The road ahead will be long. Our climb will be steep. We may not get there in one year or even one term, but America – I have never been more hopeful than I am tonight that we will get there. I promise you – we as a people will get there. This is our chance to answer that call. This is our moment. This is our time – to put our people back to work and open doors of opportunity for our kids; to restore prosperity and promote the cause of peace; to reclaim the American Dream and reaffirm that fundamental truth – that out of many, we are one. (Obama, “Victory Speech”, 2008)

Celebrating his success with a performance framed by King, Obama closed the narrative circle he had opened in his early campaign stump speeches. For example, Obama evoked King in his February 2007 speech at George Mason University:

[King] said two weeks after Bloody Sunday, I understand that you may be near despair, but let me just tell you something, the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice. But here’s the thing young people, here is the thing George Mason, it doesn’t bend on its own, it bends because you put your hand on that arc and you bend it in the direction of justice. [...] Think about all the power that’s represented here if all of you decide that you are going to get involved. If you all grab that arc, then I have no doubt, I have absolutely no doubt, that, regardless of what happens in this Presidential year and regardless of what happens in this campaign, America will transform itself. (Obama, “Speech GMU”, 2007)

Obama makes clear that he will help bend that arc and achieve what King could not<sup>125</sup>.

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124 See: Cremin 144-153; Burkart, Anna. “Martin Luther King Jr. Talks About Chicago In Grant Park.” *Tribune Broadcasting*. 1 Jul. 1966. Web. 14 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/video/martin-luther-king-jr-and-other-civil-rights-leaders-led-news-footage/464662376>>.

125 Asked in a television interview why he was in such a hurry to run for President, Obama answered, “You know the truth is I’m not. We have a narrow window to solve some of the problems that we face. Ten years from now, we may not be in a position to recover the sense of respect around the world that we’ve lost over the last six years. Certainly, when you look at our energy policy and environment and the prospects of climate change, we’ve gotta make some decisions right now. And so I feel a sense of urgency for the country” (“60 Minutes Interview”, 2007). In the interview following his speech at the George



Obama used various strategies over the course of his campaign to expand and develop his appropriation of Martin Luther King. The use of visual aids to support the narrative of Obama's kinship with King and other civil rights leaders began shortly before the official announcement of his candidacy in February 2007 and continued through the campaign's early phase. Celebrating King's birthday in January 2007, for his speech about King at a scholarship award breakfast in Chicago, this mis-en-scene shows King watching over Obama (cf. [Fig. 60](#)).

At the St. Mark's church later that day, Obama again adopted this mis-en-scene, this time on a meta-level. Appearing in the role of preacher while speaking about King's life, Obama established the iconic civil rights activist as site for the narrative performance of his Imagined Presidency (cf. [Fig. 61](#)).

The strategy of visually appropriating the 1960s civil rights movement as a stage is evident in images of his Senate office in Washington, D.C. put out during the 2008 campaign.

These photos, from interviews and other media appearances in 2006-2008, all use the civil rights movement as the performative setting. Visual references include the first African American Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall<sup>126</sup> (cf. [Fig. 62](#)), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Reverend Al Sharpton (cf. [Fig. 63](#)); a photo of King giving his "I have a Dream" speech, and Mahatma Gandhi, the champion of nonviolence (cf. [Fig. 64](#) & [65](#)). The 1965 *Life Magazine* cover in Figure 64 (left upper corner) shows the first march on Selma (cf. [Fig. 66](#)).

These visual frames establish the moderate, non-violent civil rights movement as the stage for the performance of Obama's narrative script.

The campaign appropriated King's civil rights movement as a performative site on a metaphorical level. For example, the visual theme of the 2008 DNC in Denver was its setting in the Rocky mountains, as shown in the convention logo (cf. [Fig. 67](#)). The image of mountains complemented Obama's Kingian narrative, evoking the "I've been to the mountaintop" wording in King's final speech<sup>127</sup>. Obama, as suggested here, has reached King's mountaintop.

[Figures 68](#) and [69](#) show the stage design for Obama's acceptance speech at Denver's Invesco Field *Mile High* stadium. The stage is reminiscent of the Lincoln memorial with its Doric columns. Obama's lectern on the steps evokes the steps of the Lincoln Memorial where King delivered his "I have a Dream" speech. On the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of King's

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Mason University Obama clarified later that he had entered the presidential race at this time because he felt a "sense of urgency for the country" ("60 Minutes Interview", 2007). By indirectly referencing King's "I Have a Dream" speech, "[w]e have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now" ("I Have a Dream", 1963), Obama emphasized his pragmatic approach toward going beyond ideological political self-interests.

<sup>126</sup> Thurgood Marshall was dubbed "Mr. Civil Rights" ("Victor Supreme Court") and "the legal champion of negro revolution" (King qtd. in Aldred 103) for his successful case "Brown vs. Board of Education" in 1954.

<sup>127</sup> See King: "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord" ("I See The Promised Land", 1968).

“I Have a Dream Speech”, Obama seized King’s stage and King himself as means to style the performative site where he enacted King’s prophecy as the incarnation of racial reconciliation and a colorblind America<sup>128</sup>.

Especially during the party primaries and in his nomination acceptance speech, Obama embraced widely-recognized rhetorical elements characteristic of King’s speeches.<sup>129</sup> For example, King often used images of movement and progression like “[w]e cannot walk alone” (King, “I have a Dream”, 1963). In his 1965 “Our God is Marching on” speech, he said, “We are on the move now”, “Let us march”, “[t]he road ahead is not altogether a smooth one” (King, “Our God is Marching on”, 1965). Obama adopted this journey and progression motif. His announcement speech in 2007 is rife with references to movement: travel, journey, march, a long way, push forward (Obama, “Announcement Speech”, 2007). His primary victory speech in Iowa is another illustration:

From the very beginning, you knew that this journey wasn’t about me or any of the other candidates in this race. It’s about whether this country – at this defining moment – will continue down the same road that has failed us for so long, or whether we will seize this opportunity to take a different path – to forge a different future for the country we love. (Obama, “Primary Victory Speech Des Moines”, 2008)

Toward the end of the speech, Obama reiterated the journey metaphor:

The road here has been long [...] we have never been more energized and united in our desire to take this country in a new direction. More than anything, we need this unity and this energy in the months to come, because while our primary has been long and hard-fought, the hardest and most important part of our journey still lies ahead. (Obama, “Forging a New Future For America”, 2008)

Another rhetorical invocation of King is Obama’s frequent use of the “urgency” motif<sup>130</sup>, as in a primary speech in Iowa:

I will lead the world to combat the common threats of the 21st century and I will send once more a message to those yearning faces beyond our shores that says you matter to us, your future is our future, and our moment is now. America, our moment is now. Our moment is now! I don’t want to spend the next year or the next four years refighting the same fights that we had in the 1990s. I don’t want to pit red America against blue America. I want to be the President of the United States of America. [...] I am not in this race to fulfill some longheld ambitions or because I believe it’s somehow owed to me. I never expected to be here. I always knew this journey was improbable. I am running in this race because of what Dr. King called “the fierce urgency of now.” Because I believe that there’s such a thing as being too late, and that hour is almost upon us. (Obama, “Jefferson-Jackson-Dinner Speech”, 2008)

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128 Other examples of Obama occupying stages formerly occupied by King include his 2007 speech at the Brown AME Chapel, where King fifty years earlier had heralded the Selma-to-Montgomery-marches (Gonyea, “Obama Returns”), which became known as the “Selma Bloody Sunday March”, Obama’s visual staging as civil rights marcher (see image: Gonyea, “Obama Returns”), and Obama’s address at King’s Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta on occasion of the 2008 Martin Luther King Day (Zeleny, “At King’s Church”).

129 For other examples of the “journey” theme, see: Obama’s “Primary Speech February 12<sup>th</sup>”, 2008, “Madison Potomac Primary Speech”, 2008, “New Hampshire Primary Speech”, 2008.

130 See King: “fierce urgency of Now” (“I Have a Dream”, 1963).

Obama's "Super Tuesday" speech in February 2008 includes a close echo of the "I Have a Dream" speech's final passage, where King said,

[l]et freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania! Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado! Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California! But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia! Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee! Let freedom ring from every hill and every molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring. ("I have a Dream", 1963)

Obama used the same structure:

What began as a whisper in Springfield soon carried across the cornfields of Iowa [...]. Their voices echoed from the hills of New Hampshire to the deserts of Nevada [...]. Maybe the voices of the American people can finally be heard again. They reached the coast of South Carolina, when people said that maybe we don't have to be divided by race and region and gender [...]. And today, on this Tuesday in February, in states north and south, east and west, what began as a whisper in Springfield has swelled to a chorus of millions calling for change. It's a chorus that cannot be ignored, a chorus that cannot be deterred. This time can be different because this campaign for the presidency of the United States of America is different. (Obama, "Super Tuesday Speech", 2008)

Obama's claim to represent those calling for the change King had demanded in 1963, those whose "voices echoed from the hills of New Hampshire to the deserts of Nevada" (Obama, "Super Tuesday Speech", 2008), became the TV campaign ad "A Chorus of Millions" (First Air-Date: 06 Feb. 2008).

#### 4.4.1. "At the Same Table": Negotiating Race and Reconciliation

A major storyline about Obama's race is the claim that he can help America overcome its racial divide. His audience is offered an approach to identity politics that denies classification, stereotypes and established boundaries: "[Obama] is not stereotypically anything. He's different. He's different because he's biracial. He's a different generation. He's different, in terms of qualifications, than nine out of ten people who run for office" (Blumenthal qtd. in Schreiber, "Race Against"). In a narrative staging him in the role of racial transcender, Obama styled his Imagined Presidency as an idealized manifestation of King's dream of a "table of brotherhood" ("I have a Dream", 1963) where alliances between the races could allow all Americans "to overcome their common problems" in "a new era of progress and hope" (King, "Acceptance Nobel Prize", 1964). Obama's script broke with established expectations about racial frames:

[E]verywhere I'd go, I'd get two questions. First, they'd ask, "Where'd you get that funny name, Barack Obama?" Because people just couldn't pronounce it. They'd call me "Alabama," or they'd call me "Yo Mama." And I'd tell them that my father was from Kenya, and that's where I got my name. And my mother was from Kansas, and that's where I got my accent from. (Obama, "California Party Convention Speech", 2007)

Interpreting his biraciality in attractive terms, as an unusual, hybrid, and liberating identity, Obama offered himself as “a blank screen” (*Audacity* 11) where people could negotiate ethnic identity in positive terms.

A central element of this performative script is Obama’s upbringing as a biracial American, including the narrative of self-acceptance. Asked by *Rolling Stone* what people saw in him: “I’m comfortable in my own skin. People get a sense of authenticity from me that cuts across ideological lines” (“People of the Year 2004”). That Obama has no negative sense of his ethnic identity unburdens the issue of race. He time and again emphasized that the values and notions of self he learned from his mother gave him a healthy self-image:

Her message came to embrace black people generally. She would come home with books on the civil rights movement, the recordings of Mahalia Jackson, the speeches of Dr. King. When she told me stories of schoolchildren in the South who were forced to read books handed down from wealthier white schools but who went on to become doctors and lawyers and scientists, I felt chastened by my reluctance to wake up and study in the mornings. [...] Every black man was Thurgood Marshall or Sidney Poitier; every black woman Fannie Lou Hamer or Lena Horne. To be black was to be the beneficiary of a great inheritance, a special destiny, glorious burdens that only we were strong enough to bear. Burdens we were to carry with style. More than once, my mother would point out: “Harry Belafonte is the best-looking man on the planet”. (*Dreams* 50)

His mother made him feel special and attractive on account of being black. Obama implies that his mother’s appreciation of the “black side” of his racial identity was the source of his unburdened and non-ideological approach to race.

Obama promoted his family as the model for his assertive approach to questions about his racial identity:

In 1960, the year that my parents were married, miscegenation still described a felony in over half the states in the Union. In many parts of the South, my father could have been strung up from a tree for merely looking at my mother the wrong way; in the most sophisticated of northern cities, the hostile stares, the whispers, might have driven a woman in my mother’s predicament into a back-alley abortion-or at the very least to a distant convent that could arrange for adoption. (*Dreams* 12)

His mother and her parents are presented as role models for accepting diversity:

Gramps liked to remind me that various strands of the family contained ardent abolitionists. If asked, Toot would turn her head in profile to show off her beaked nose, which, along with a pair of jet-black eyes, was offered as proof of Cherokee blood. (*Dreams* 12)

As proposed by Obama his grandparents quietly took a progressive stand on their daughter’s marriage and emphasized to their grandchild that diversity and open-mindedness were an inherent part of the family history. Obama presents acceptance of self and others

as a family tradition and a natural part of his personality. With this narrative scripting, Obama pushed discourses on anger, cynicism and guilt into the background and broadened the acceptability of his identity offer. This was further promoted by his frequent use of humor in tackling the issue of race, as in the following exchange on John Stewart's *Daily Show*:

*Jon Stewart:* Are you concerned in some respects, you know, and I don't even know how to bring this up. Obviously your mother is from Kansas. She's a white woman. Your father, African. Are you concerned that you may go into the voting booth and...

*Barack Obama:* I won't know what to do.

*Jon Stewart:* Your white half will all of a sudden decide, "I can't do this."

*Barack Obama:* That's a problem. I've been going through therapy to make sure that I vote properly. ("Interview Daily Show", 2008)

Obama's deadpan humor demonstrates that he "feels comfortable in his skin"<sup>131</sup>. This narrative theme functions in two ways: a white audience gets the feeling that race does not always have to be a thorny issue, and a black audience sees someone with a positive feeling about his skin color.

Obama scripted his performance as a race-transcending figure using the narrative of being socialized as a child with a positive racial self-concept. On the other hand, his storyline also recounted challenges and crises he faced as a biracial individual. The narrative theme of "struggling" with race was a mainstay of Obama's performance as the fulfillment of King's "we shall overcome" ("I see the Promised Land", 1968). In both his first autobiography (1995, republished in 2004) and his second autobiography (2006), Obama said he regularly encountered the socio-political realities of his biracial ancestry. Most people, he said, could not take "my parents' brief union – a black man and white woman, an African and an American – at face value" (*Dreams xv*). He could never escape racial challenges:

When people who don't know me well, black or white, discover my background (and it is usually a discovery, for I ceased to advertise my mother's race at the age of twelve or thirteen, when I began to suspect that by doing so I was ingratiating myself to whites), I see the split-second adjustments they have to make, the searching of my eyes for some telltale sign. They no longer know who I am. Privately, they guess at my troubled heart, I suppose – the mixed blood, the divided soul, the ghostly image of the tragic mulatto trapped between two worlds. (*Dreams xv*)

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<sup>131</sup> Further example: Obama's comment on the claim that Bill Clinton was seen as America's first black President during a Democratic presidential debate in January 2008: JOHNS: Do you think Bill Clinton was our first black President? OBAMA: Well, I think Bill Clinton did have an enormous affinity with the African-American community, and still does. And I think that's well earned. Like John, one of the things that I'm always inspired by – no, I'm – this I'm serious about. I'm always inspired by young men and women who grew up in the South when segregation was still taking place, when, you know, the transformations that are still incomplete but at least had begun had not yet begun. And to see that transformation in their own lives I think that is powerful, and it is hopeful, because what it indicates is that people can change. And each successive generation can, you know, create a different vision of how, you know, we have to treat each other. And I think Bill Clinton embodies that. I think he deserves credit for that. Now, I haven't... OBAMA: I have to say that, you know, I would have to, you know, investigate more of Bill's dancing abilities. OBAMA: You know, and some of this other stuff before I accurately judge whether he was in fact a brother. But... ("First Democratic Presidential Debate January", 2008).



Obama went on to explain that he felt that “no, the tragedy is not mine, or at least not mine alone” (*Dreams* xv). It burdens all “sons and daughters of Plymouth Rock and Ellis Island, it is yours, children of Africa, it is the tragedy of both my wife’s six-year-old cousin and his white first grade classmates” (*Dreams* xv). This storyline depicts the negotiative complexity of biracial experience in the United States. Obama turned his personal experience into a narrative of a critical engagement with the question of race. With his biracial ancestry, his narrative suggests, racial belonging is not a given that can be simply consumed. It has to be earned by way of a demanding confrontation with one’s own identity and the social conventions of race.

Obama made this storyline a centerpiece of his performance script. Oprah Winfrey asked if it was confusing to be “out playing basketball and talking about ‘white folks,’ then coming home to the white folks you lived with – the people who loved and cared for you” (“Oprah talks to Obama”, 2004). Obama replied,

It was. One of the things I fell prey to during my teen years was this need to separate myself from my parents and grandparents and take on this macho African-American image of a basketball player talking trash. [...] As a teen, I had this divided identity – one inside the home, one for the outside world. It wasn’t until I got to college that I started realizing that was fundamentally dishonest. I knew there had to be a different way for me to understand myself as a black man and yet not reject the love and values given to me by my mother and her parents. I had to reconcile that I could be proud of my African-American heritage and yet not be limited by it. (“Oprah talks to Obama”, 2004)

The 2004 reprinting of his first autobiography supported his approach to his race during his presidential campaign. Obama presented his life story in his first autobiography as a successful “interior journey – a boy’s search for [...] a workable meaning for his life as black American” (*Dreams* xvi)<sup>132</sup>. This allowed him to counter accusations from both blacks and whites that he was denying one side of his identity. At the same time, he turned his greatest electoral challenge – his identification as African American – into a story of critical self-reflection that made him an expert on identity formation in America and its pitfalls. He remarked in *Dreams from my Father*: “I would not have known at the time, for I was too young [...], that I needed a race” (27).

With the account of his identity struggle in college and working in Chicago<sup>133</sup>, Obama further underscored his ability to confront the challenges of race in the United States. Those years are narratively scripted as a source of his expertise:

Away from my mother, away from my grandparents, I was engaged in a fitful interior

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<sup>132</sup> Obama setting the stage for his story of self-discovery in *Dreams from my Father*: “At some point, then, in spite of a stubborn desire to protect myself from scrutiny, in spite of the periodic impulse to abandon the entire project, what has found its way onto these pages is a record of a personal, interior journey – a boy’s search for his father, and through that search a workable meaning for his life as a black American. The result is autobiographical, although whenever someone’s asked me over the course of these last three years just what the book is about, I’ve usually avoided such a description. An autobiography promises feats worthy of record, conversations with famous people, a central role in important events. There is none of that here. At the very least, an autobiography implies a summing up, a certain closure, that hardly suits someone of my years, still busy charting his way through the world” (xvi).

<sup>133</sup> Particularly see: pages 96-112 (*Dreams*) for his time at college and pages 272-284 (*Dreams*) for his time in Chicago.



struggle. I was trying to raise myself to be a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance, no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant. (*Dreams* 76)

Prepackaged panaceas were not the solution<sup>134</sup>. As Obama suggests here, he had to work out his own opinion on racial questions, because “I didn’t have [...] the certainty of the tribe” (*Dreams* 99). He therefore was not automatically caught up in a “narrowing vision, of blood and tribe” (*Dreams* 197)<sup>135</sup>. His extended identity crisis substantiated his claim to fit the role of “overcomer”. The campaign underscored this storyline visually with a widely-distributed image of his high school basketball team (cf. [Fig. 70](#)), emphasizing his integration in a cropped version showing Obama framed by children of different ethnicities (cf. [Fig. 71](#)).

Similarly, Obama’s discussion of Affirmative Action in *The Audacity of Hope*<sup>136</sup> offers solution-oriented approaches to socio-political problems usually fought on more ideological grounds:

I remember once sitting with one of my Democratic colleagues in the Illinois state senate as we listened to another fellow senator – an African American whom I’ll call John Doe who represented a largely inner-city district – launch into a lengthy and passionate peroration on why the elimination of a certain program was a case of blatant racism.

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134 Example for Obama’s self-fashioning as critical thinker: “Reverend Wright shrugged. ‘Some of my fellow clergy don’t appreciate what we’re about. They feel like we’re too radical. Others, we ain’t radical enough. Too emotional. Not emotional enough. Our emphasis on African history, on scholarship...’ ‘Some people say,’ I interrupted, ‘that the church is too upwardly mobile.’ The reverend’s smile faded. ‘That’s a lot of bull,’ he said sharply. ‘People who talk that mess reflect their own confusion. They’ve bought into the whole business of class that keeps us from working together. Half of ‘em think that the former gang-banger or the former Muslim got no business in a Christian church. Other half think any black man with an education or a job, or any church that respects scholarship, is somehow suspect. We don’t buy into these false divisions here. It’s not about income, Barack. Cops don’t check my bank account when they pull me over and make me spread-eagle against the car. These miseducated brothers, like that sociologist at the University of Chicago, talking about ‘the declining significance of race.’ Now, what country is he living in?’ But wasn’t there a reality to the class divisions, I wondered? I mentioned the conversation I’d had with his assistant, the tendency of those with means to move out of the line of fire. He took off his glasses and rubbed what I now saw to be a pair of tired eyes. ‘I’ve given Tracy my opinion about moving out of the city,’ he said quietly. ‘That boy of hers is gonna get out there and won’t have a clue about where, or who, he is.’ ‘It’s tough to take chances with your child’s safety.’ ‘Life’s not safe for a black man in this country, Barack. Never has been. Probably never will be.’ A secretary buzzed, reminding Reverend Wright of his next appointment. We shook hands, and he agreed to have Tracy prepare a list of members for me to meet. Afterward, in the parking lot, I sat in my car and thumbed through a silver brochure that I’d picked up in the reception area. It contained a set of guiding principles – a ‘Black Value System’ – that the congregation had adopted in 1979. At the top of the list was a commitment to God, ‘who will give us the strength to give up prayerful passivism and become Black Christian activists, soldiers for Black freedom and the dignity of all humankind.’ Then a commitment to the black community and black family, education, the work ethic, discipline, and self-respect. A sensible, heartfelt list-not so different, I suspected, from the values old Reverend Philips might have learned in his whitewashed country church two generations before. There was one particular passage in Trinity’s brochure that stood out, though, a commandment more self-conscious in its tone, requiring greater elaboration. ‘A Disavowal of the Pursuit of Middleclassness,’ the heading read. ‘While it is permissible to chase ‘middleincomeness’ with all our might,’ the text stated, those blessed with the talent or good fortune to achieve success in the American mainstream must avoid the ‘psychological entrapment of Black ‘middleclassness’ that hypnotizes the successful brother or sister into believing they are better than the rest and teaches them to think in terms of ‘we’ and ‘they’ instead of ‘US!’ (*Dreams* 284).

135 In his second autobiography Obama then said, “I’ve never had the option of restricting my loyalties on the basis of, or measuring my worth on the basis of tribe” (*Audacity* 231).

136 Also see Obama: “But these same statistics should also force those of us interested in racial equality to conduct an honest accounting of the costs and benefits of our current strategies. Even as we continue to defend affirmative action as a useful, if limited, tool to expand opportunity to underrepresented minorities, we should consider spending a lot more of our political capital convincing America to make the investments needed to ensure that all children perform at grade level and graduate from high school – a goal that, if met, would do more than affirmative action to help those black and Latino children who need it the most. Similarly, we should support targeted programs to eliminate existing health disparities between minorities and whites (some evidence suggests that even when income and levels of insurance are factored out, minorities may still be receiving worse care), but a plan for universal health-care coverage would do more to eliminate health disparities between whites and minorities than any race-specific programs we might design. An emphasis on universal, as opposed to race-specific, programs isn’t just good policy; it’s also good politics” (*Audacity* 246-247).

After a few minutes, the white senator (who had one of the chamber's more liberal voting records) turned to me and said, "You know what the problem is with John? Whenever I hear him, he makes me feel more white." In defense of my black colleague, I pointed out that it's not always easy for a black politician to gauge the right tone to take – too angry? not angry enough? – when discussing the enormous hardships facing his or her constituents. Still, my white colleague's comment was instructive. Rightly or wrongly, white guilt has largely exhausted itself in America; even the most fair-minded of whites, those who would genuinely like to see racial inequality ended and poverty relieved, tend to push back against suggestions of racial victimization – or race-specific claims-based on the history of race discrimination in this country. (*Audacity* 247)

Also Obama emphasized the importance of the civil rights movement in his life, although he was actually too young to "fully grasp the nature of those changes" (*Audacity* 29). His mother brought "books on the civil rights movement, the recordings of Mahalia Jackson, the speeches of Dr. King" (*Dreams* 50), he says, and the movement played a monumental role in guiding him through his search for personal identity:

At the time, about to graduate from college, I was operating mainly on impulse, like a salmon swimming blindly upstream toward the site of his own conception. In classes and seminars, I would dress up these impulses in the slogans and theories that I'd discovered in books, thinking – falsely – that the slogans meant something, that they somehow made what I felt more amenable to proof. But at night, lying in bed, I would let the slogans drift away, to be replaced with a series of images, romantic images, of a past I had never known. They were of the civil rights movement, mostly, the grainy black-and-white footage that appears every February during Black History Month, the same images that my mother had offered me as a child. (Obama, *Dreams* 134)

He tied his journey of racial self-discovery to his political efforts as a community organizer, which was inspired, as he announced time and again early in his campaign, by the non-violent civil rights movement (Lizza, "Agitator")<sup>137</sup>:

[T]his community I imagined was still in the making, built on the promise that the larger American community, black, white, and brown, could somehow redefine itself – I believed that it might, over time, admit the uniqueness of my own life. That was my idea of organizing (Obama, *Dreams* 135).

Throughout his campaign, Obama reiterated the storyline that working as community organizer helped him develop his greatest leadership ability – the ability to bring people together<sup>138</sup>. His campaign visually reinforced this narrative script issuing private and official photos from his community organizing days (cf. [Fig. 72](#) & [73](#)).

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<sup>137</sup> For more on Martin Luther King and other members of the non-violent civil rights movement as first professional community organizers see: Minkler, Meredith. *Community Organizing and Community Building for Health and Welfare*. Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 2012. Print.; Sabl, Andrew. *Ruling Passions: Political Offices and Democratic Ethics*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002. Print.

<sup>138</sup> See for example Barack Obama on ABC's "This Week with George Stephanopoulos" on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007: "I think it comes from the set of experiences that I brought with me to this race. As somebody who worked as a community organizer in Chicago, not knowing anybody when I arrived and being able to pull people together around the issues that folks were facing after they'd gotten laid off of work; the work that I've done as a civil rights lawyer and a constitutional law professor" ("Interview This Week", 2007).

Using the narrative that his biracial ancestry forced him to formulate an individual and independent racial identity, Obama scripted his role as an expert in managing and overcoming the problems of a racially divided society. He could plausibly merge the claim that his “own upbringing hardly typifies the African American experience” (*Audacity* 233) with the claim that “if you look African American in this society, you’re treated as an African American” (“60 Minutes Interview”, 2007). His self-definition cast him in the role of racial transcender: “I am rooted in the African-American community, but I’m not defined by it. I am comfortable in my racial identity, but that’s not all I am” (“60 Minutes Interview”, 2007)<sup>139</sup>. He became a neutral, non-ideological “space” where his audience – the American electorate – could meet to negotiate and resolve deeply rooted racial divisions.

Obama’s self-promotion as a third space of identity formation is particularly clear in a 2007 interview with *ABC*’s Charlie Gibson. Making a reference to Obama’s first autobiography, where he wrote, “I learned to slip back and forth between my black and my white worlds” (*Dreams* 82), Gibson asked the “simple question”: “[I]n which world do you really belong?” (“Interview ABC World News Tonight”, 2007). Obama replied without hesitation, “I think it’s both” (“Interview ABC World News Tonight”, 2007). Staging himself as successful in both worlds, Obama fulfilled King’s prophesy “We shall overcome”. In “A More Perfect Union”, Obama’s only speech specifically devoted to the topic of race, he supported his claim in discussing Reverend Wright, the pastor of his old church, whose sermons had triggered the controversy leading to this speech. The multifacetedness of the black experience in America<sup>140</sup>, Obama said,

helps explain, perhaps, my relationship with Reverend Wright. As imperfect as he may be, he has been like family to me. He strengthened my faith, officiated my wedding, and baptized my children. Not once in my conversations with him have I heard him talk about any ethnic group in derogatory terms, or treat whites with whom he interacted with anything but courtesy and respect. He contains within him the contradictions – the good and the bad – of the community that he has served diligently for so many years. I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother – a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe. These people are a part of me. (“A More Perfect Union”, 2008)

Describing his preacher and his grandmother, Obama communicated that black and white perspectives occupy equal space in his life. His performance established that he is

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<sup>139</sup> Also see campaign manager David Axelrod comment on “his candidate” Obama: “He came to this campaign not primarily as the black candidate, but as a candidate for President who happened to be black” (qtd. in Ifill 62).

<sup>140</sup> Also see Obama: “Like other predominantly black churches across the country, Trinity embodies the black community in its entirety – the doctor and the welfare mom, the model student and the former gang-banger. Like other black churches, Trinity’s services are full of raucous laughter and sometimes bawdy humor. They are full of dancing, clapping, screaming and shouting that may seem jarring to the untrained ear. The church contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and yes, the bitterness and bias that make up the black experience in America” (“A More Perfect Union”, 2008).

no “tragic mulatto”<sup>141</sup>. His intimate familiarity with both sides of the racial divide made him the ideal authority to negotiate the rift.

The central argument of his speech on race is that that the fears, cynicism and bitterness in white and black communities are not that different<sup>142</sup>. In his second autobiography, he wrote,

[t]o think clearly about race [...] requires us to see the world on a split screen—to maintain in our sights the kind of America that we want while looking squarely at America as it is, to acknowledge the sins of our past and the challenges of the present without becoming trapped in cynicism or despair. (*Audacity* 233)

Rejecting politics “based solely on racial identity, gender identity, sexual orientation, or victimhood generally” (*Audacity* 11), Obama’s race speech offered a vision of his Imagined Presidency that almost literally promised to fulfill Martin Luther King’s vision that “that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood” (“I Have a Dream”, 1963):

[A]t this moment, in this election, we can come together and say, “Not this time.” This time we want to talk about the crumbling schools that are stealing the future of black children and white children and Asian children and Hispanic children and Native American children. This time we want to reject the cynicism that tells us that these kids can’t learn; that those kids who don’t look like us are somebody else’s problem. The children of America are not those kids, they are our kids, and we will not let them fall behind in a 21st century economy. Not this time. [...] This is where we are right now. It’s a racial stalemate we’ve been stuck in for years. Contrary to the claims of some of my critics, black and white, I have never been so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy – particularly a candidacy as imperfect as my own. [...] In the end, then, what is called for is nothing more, and nothing less, than what all the world’s great religions demand – that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Let us be our brother’s keeper, Scripture tells us. Let us be our sister’s keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well. (“A More Perfect Union”, 2008)

As a perfect touch, Obama was publicly endorsed by veteran senator Robert Byrd<sup>143</sup>. Byrd

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141 For discussion of the trope of the “tragic mulatto” see: Dalmage 103; Joseph 164; Mafe 14.

142 Also see Obama: “But for all those who scratched and clawed their way to get a piece of the American Dream, there were many who didn’t make it – those who were ultimately defeated, in one way or another, by discrimination. That legacy of defeat was passed on to future generations – those young men and increasingly young women who we see standing on street corners or languishing in our prisons, without hope or prospects for the future. Even for those blacks who did make it, questions of race, and racism, continue to define their worldview in fundamental ways. For the men and women of Reverend Wright’s generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away; nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years. That anger may not get expressed in public, in front of white co-workers or white friends. [...] That anger is not always productive; indeed, all too often it distracts attention from solving real problems; it keeps us from squarely facing our own complicity in our condition, and prevents the African-American community from forging the alliances it needs to bring about real change. But the anger is real; it is powerful; and to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races. 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’s handed them anything, they’ve built it from scratch. They’ve worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pension dumped after a lifetime of labor. They are anxious about their futures, and feel their dreams slipping away” (“A More Perfect Union”, 2008).

143 See Democratic Senator (North Carolina) Robert Byrd’s statement endorsing Barack Obama as Democratic presidential

got special attention in Obama's second autobiography. The senator "received his first taste of leadership in his early twenties, as a member of the Raleigh County Ku Klux Klan, an association that he had long disavowed, an error he attributed – no doubt correctly – to the time and place in which he'd been raised" (*Audacity* 78). Byrd "had joined other giants of the Senate, like J. William Fulbright of Arkansas and Richard Russell of Georgia, in Southern resistance to civil rights legislation" (*Audacity* 78). However, Obama explained, "Senator Byrd's life – like most of ours – has been the struggle of warring impulses, a twining of darkness and light" (*Audacity* 78). Obama's storyline suggests that even a firm racist can be swayed to switch to the good side that Obama embodied.

#### 4.4.2. "The Content of Their Character": Obama's Colorblind America

Obama's campaign also tackled the "race issue" by offering a narrative of his Imagined Presidency as the path to a colorblind political era<sup>144</sup>. Obama's imagined presidency was presented as Martin Luther King's "Mountaintop" from where "the Promised Land" (King, "I see the Promised Land", 1968) could be reached. In 2006, *Newsweek* asked Obama if America was ready for a black or female President:

I absolutely think America is ready for either. Stereotypes and prejudices still exist in American society, and for the highest office in the land a female or African-American candidate would, at the outset, confront some additional hurdles to show that they were qualified and competent. But what I've found is that the American people – once they get to know you – are going to judge you on your individual character. (qtd. Alter, "The Challenges")

In referencing King's comment about judging people based on "the content of your character", Obama set a performative frame of the potential for a colorblind America. Time and again he claimed that he did not consider his race in calculating his chances of winning the election:

You know, I don't spend a lot of time thinking about it or considering the details of this. But just to broaden the issue, are there people who would be troubled with an African-American president? Yes. Are there folks who might not vote for me because I'm African-American? No doubt. What I'm confident about, though, as I travel around the

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candidate: "After a great deal of thought, consideration and prayer over the situation in Iraq, I have decided that, as a superdelegate to the Democratic National Convention, I will cast my vote for Senator Barack Obama for President. Both Senators Clinton and Obama are extraordinary individuals, whose integrity, honor, love for this country and strong belief in our Constitution I deeply respect. I believe that Barack Obama is a shining young statesman, who possesses the personal temperament and courage necessary to extricate our country from this costly misadventure in Iraq, and to lead our nation at this challenging time in history. Barack Obama is a noble-hearted patriot and humble Christian, and he has my full faith and support" (qtd. in Horowitz, "Release Statement Byrd").

In the American media Byrd's endorsement of Obama received particular attention on account of his history as active KKK-member and ardent activist against civil rights legislations during his time in the senate during the 1960s. See: Frederick, Don. "Senator Byrd, one-time KKK-Member backs Barack Obama's Presidential Candidacy." *The Los Angeles Times*. 18 May 2008. <<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/washington/2008/05/sen-robert-byrd.html>>; Jones, Jason. "West Virginia's Byrd Supports Obama." *The New York Times*. 19 May 2008. Web. 27 Jun. 2014. <[http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/05/19/byrd-supports-obama/?\\_r=0](http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/05/19/byrd-supports-obama/?_r=0)>.

<sup>144</sup> Donna Brazile, a campaign manager for Al Gore's presidential team, noted that "Barack will tell us that we don't have to go back to being just a white America or a black America, that we can now become something else, together. That's the promise of his campaign" (qtd. in Swarns, "So Far").



country, is that people are decent at their core in America. The vast majority of folks want to do the right thing. If I don't win, it's not going to be because of my race. It's going to be because I didn't project a vision of leadership that gave people confidence. It's going to be because of something I didn't do as opposed to because I'm African-American. ("Interview This Week", 2007).

On a practical level, it was important that voters perceive him as a President who would "work for them". "I think my job is to let people know that I'm going to be fighting for you regardless of where you come from[...] I want to make sure you can live out that American Dream because that's what's been provided to me in this country" (qtd. in Price 147).

Obama's fitness to lead America into a colorblind future was also based on the line, simply put, "It's all in my genes". Throughout the 2008 campaign, he said that as a child, it "barely registered in my mind" (*Dreams* 10) – and thus seemed natural – that my father was "black as pitch, my mother white as milk" (*Dreams* 10). This storyline became part of Obama's standard response to questions about dealing with race as President<sup>145</sup>. While on *The View* in March 2008, he said that his "racial" vision of America was "engrained in me: My mother was white, my father was black, I have a sister who's half-Indonesian, who's married to a Chinese-Canadian" ("Barack Obama on the View", 2008), he told *Meet the Press*, "It's in my DNA to believe that we can bring this country together and that people are the same under the skin" ("Meet the Press Interview", 2008). In a 2004 interview with Oprah Winfrey, Obama described his aspirations in this regard:

I'm well situated to help the country understand how we can both celebrate our diversity in all its complexity and still affirm our common bonds. That will be the biggest challenge, not just for this country but for the entire planet. How do we say we're different yet the same? Of course, there will be times when we'll argue about our differences, but we have to build a society on the belief that you are more like me than different from me. That you know your fears, your hopes, your love for your child are the same as what I feel. Maybe I can help with that because I've got so many different pieces in me. ("Oprah talks to Obama", 2004),

The "many different pieces in me" construed Obama's mixed heritage as an asset. This is particularly clear in a frequently quoted line from Obama's "race speech." His family history, he said,

hasn't made me the most conventional candidate. But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts – that out of many, we are truly one. ("A More Perfect Union", 2008)

Obama tackled the challenging issue of race by claiming that his family's genetic richness, including the genetic heritage of his daughters, empowered him to function as post-racial

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<sup>145</sup> Also see the following comment made by Obama in his first autobiography: "Through organizing, through shared sacrifice, membership had been earned. And because membership was earned – because this community I imagined was still in the making, built on the promise that the larger American community, black, white, and brown, could somehow redefine itself – I believed that it might, over time, admit the uniqueness of my own life" (*Dreams* 135).



catalyst. He contextualized his performance in this role by connecting it to the quintessential Americanness of his mixed identity. In a 2007 interview, he said,

[t]here [were] all sorts of ethnicities and cultures that were swirling around my head as I was growing up. That's proven to be an enormous strength for me. [...] There were times where that was difficult. One of the things that helped me to resolve a lot of these issues is the realization that the African-American community, which I now very much feel a part of, is itself a hybrid community. It's African. It's European. It's Native American. [...] What I also realized is that the American experience is, by definition, a hybrid experience. I mean, you know one of the strengths of this country is that we have these people coming from, you know, all four corners of the globe converging, and sometimes in conflict, living side by side, and over time coming together to create this tapestry that is incredibly strong. And so, in that sense, I feel that my background ironically, because it's unusual, is quintessentially American. ("60 Minutes Interview", 2007)

The idea that a hybrid racial identity is quintessentially American broadens the appeal and accessibility of his Imagined Presidency. Staging his "genetic amalgam" as "Ur"-American makes Obama a living catalyst for a colorblind future. Colorblindness, as defined by Obama's narrative performance, requires recognizing that American identity is inherently race-transcending. The seeming otherness of his heritage made him feel particularly American:

What's interesting is how deeply American I feel, considering this exotic background. Some of it is the Midwestern roots of my grandparents, my mother, and the values that they reflect. But some of it is also a deep abiding sense that what is quintessentially American, is all these different threads coming together to make a single quilt. And I feel very much like I'm one of those threads that belong in this quilt — that I'm a product of all of these different forces — black, white, Asian, Hispanic, Native American. That, somehow, all this amalgam is part of who I am, and that's part of the reason I love this country so much. ("Interview ABC World News Tonight", 2007)

On a textual, as well as visual level, Obama's "It's in my genes" narrative was the main frame for the biographical video clip that set the stage for his acceptance speech at the National Democratic Convention. A narrator introduces the audience to the story: "It is a promise we make to our children. That each of us can make what we want of our lives. It is this promise that defined so many great Americans" ("A Mother's Promise"). The voiceover blends into Obama's voice declaring, "I stand here knowing that my story is part of a larger American story"<sup>146</sup> ("A Mother's Promise"). If all Americans share the same promise, Obama's quintessential American story made him a unique negotiative site for identity-formation: a receptacle of "the larger American story" ("A Mother's Promise"). This storyline is elaborated by the narrator: "His childhood was like any other. [...] And what he learned was that by discovering his own story, he would come to know what is remarkable about his country" ("A Mother's Promise"). Presenting Obama as an "average American" makes his narrative offer accessible to everybody. Textually, Obama's life story is "like any other" while visually,

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146 This is a line from Obama's speech at 2004 National Democratic Convention in Boston.

family photos depict his racial inheritance (cf. [Fig. 74](#), [75](#), [76](#) & [77](#)).

While Obama is “just like everybody else” he simultaneously stands for something special: the greater American promise. The words and photos combined script Obama as transcending race.

Obama’s performative staging of the race question also incorporates the narrative of America as “immigrant nation”: a universal identity that almost all Americans can share. He defined the American experience and identity through its immigrant past:

I believe that part of America’s genius has always been its ability to absorb newcomers, to forge a national identity out of the disparate lot that arrived on our shores. In this we’ve been aided by a Constitution that—despite being marred by the original sin of slavery—has at its very core the idea of equal citizenship under the law; and an economic system that, more than any other, has offered opportunity to all comers, regardless of status or title or rank. [...] But in the hands of reformers, from Tubman to Douglass to Chavez to King, these ideals of equality have gradually shaped how we understand ourselves and allowed us to form a multicultural nation the likes of which exists nowhere else on earth. (*Audacity* 274)

Obama staged his life as proof of this American exceptionalism. He emphasized his white grandmother’s Scottish and English roots (*Dreams* 12) and presented typical “immigrant” anecdotes, like his father’s adoption of an anglicized name (“Barry”) (*Dreams* 104):

My father was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya. He grew up herding goats, went to school in a tin-roof shack. His father — my grandfather — was a cook, a domestic servant to the British. But my grandfather had larger dreams for his son. Through hard work and perseverance my father got a scholarship to study in a magical place, America, that shone as a beacon of freedom and opportunity to so many who had come before.” (“Convention Speech”, 2004)

Obama used his immigrant narrative to script an Imagined Presidency where race is redefined by American universalism. His father’s deep belief in America’s exceptional status supports this narrative:

[...] I can recall only one story that dealt explicitly with the subject of race; as I got older, it would be repeated more often, as if it captured the essence of the morality tale that my father’s life had become. According to the story, after long hours of study, my father had joined my grandfather and several other friends at a local Waikiki bar. Everyone was in a festive mood, eating and drinking to the sounds of a slack-key guitar, when a white man abruptly announced to the bartender, loudly enough for everyone to hear, that he shouldn’t have to drink good liquor “next to a nigger.” The room fell quiet and people turned to my father, expecting a fight. Instead, my father stood up, walked over to the man, smiled, and proceeded to lecture him about the folly of bigotry, the promise of the American dream, and the universal rights of man. “This fella felt so bad when Barack was finished,” Gramps would say, “that he reached into his pocket and gave Barack a hundred dollars on the spot. Paid for all our drinks and puu-puus for the rest of the night--and your dad’s rent for the rest of the month.” (*Dreams* 10)

Obama’s acceptance speech began with the immigrant theme that had framed his 2004

DNC speech:

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. ("Acceptance Speech", 2008)

The true promise of the immigrant nation is that racially defining markers, such as "your name" ("Convention Speech", 2004) or your skin color, "are no barrier to success" ("Convention Speech", 2004).

Obama's self-promotion as a catalytic transcender helped him overcome skepticism among the American electorate about his race. He offered a redefinition of established identity taxonomies, decoupling discourses on the definition of Americanness from limiting essentialist notions tied to racial categories. Drawing on the promise of America as the "land of opportunity", he suggested that a universalist approach to race is required for a truly enlightened community. Appropriating King to set his performative stage, Obama was able to make a narrative offer, casting himself as a genetically predestined catalyst, "the embodiment of his own message, the-one-man rainbow coalition" (von Drehe, "The Five Faces"), and the path to the "Promised Land" where people are judged by not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character<sup>147</sup>.

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<sup>147</sup> Obama's performative staging in context of the race issue was also picked up and accordingly amplified by the American media, as the following examples illustrate: e.g. *Caricatures*: "Obama's Mountaintop." Jim Morin, *Miami Herald* 14 Mar. 2008; "I Have Been To The Mountaintop." Adam Zyglis, *The Buffalo News*, 29. Aug. 2008.; "Obama and MLK", Steve Kelley, *New Orleans Times*, 4 Nov. 2008. or magazine covers: "Black and White." *Newsweek* 16 Jul. 2008. "Why The Economy is Trumping Race" *Time Magazine* 20 Oct. 2008.

#### 4.5. Michelle Obama as Barack's Better Black Half

Obama faced a major performative challenge in the 2008 campaign: he was perceived as standing outside the moral legacy of the African American community and its struggle for freedom. Because Obama scripted himself as a post-racial catalyst in the 2008 campaign, he could not ground his performative staging in conventional African American identity narratives. Particularly in the African American community, persistent questions about his blackness challenged his campaign's overall performative narrative<sup>148</sup>. Given the history of American blacks and their fear of losing their identity through more or less subtly forced assimilation<sup>149</sup>, it is not surprising that many African Americans cast a critical eye on Obama's performance. Many African Americans, including political activists like Jesse Jackson Sen. and Al Sharpton<sup>150</sup>, felt that a challenge to the notion of the presidential office as "white" should not be left to a hybrid figure who presented his blackness in a less traditional way, that ceding the watershed moment of America's first "black President" to a candidate promoting himself as a post-racial transcender would sell out African Americans interests<sup>151</sup>.

African Americans also reacted negatively to Obama's performative celebration of America as the exceptional home of racial and ethnic diversity ("Oprah talks to Obama", 2004) and his call to leave behind "either/or arguments" about racial identity (Alter, "The Challenge We Face"). They saw him on the easy road to political success: ignore America's racist past. Especially black voters in the South, they accused Obama of being inconsistent in his narrative on race. For example, a black member of the Democratic Party wrote, "[a]fter Iowa, Obama was the biracial candidate who appealed to all of our better natures. Now he's a black politician" (Luce, "Truce has little Impact"). Haitian journalist Marjorie Valbrun said that Obama's problem is that his "life story does not parallel that of most blacks born in the United States" (Valbrun, "Black like Me"). Many white politicians and political commentators referred to Obama as the "articulate" and "clean" candidate (Younge, "Black Enough") alluding to established negative stereotypes<sup>152</sup> in this context, while at the same time implying that Obama was an exception to this "rule". Obama's

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148 Writing on the potential candidate in late 2006, for example, columnist Stanley Crouch identified "What Obama isn't: Black like Me" (Crouch 2006). Debra Dickerson noted a few months later that "Barack Obama would be the great black hope in the next presidential race – if he were actually black" (Dickerson, "Colorblind", 2006). And shortly after Obama declared his candidacy, Ta-hisi Coates asked in *Time* magazine "Is Obama Black Enough?" (Coates 2007). It is clear that many in the African American community seemed to feel that without a family history of slavery, a childhood in the African American community, and political roots in the church, Obama lacks the "real African American experience" lived by the majority of black Americans and thus could not properly represent them.

149 See Ogbu, John. "Collective Identity and the Burden of 'Acting White' in Black History, Community, and Education." *The Urban Review* 36.1 (2004): 1-35. Print.

150 Obama was time and again accused by members of the black political establishment, like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, of "acting white" (Burriss, "Acting White") in order to seem less threatening to the white public. So while he was criticized for never having lived the life of an average African American, he was also repeatedly accused of appealing to the white public by mitigating their guilt over racial inequality with his post-racial rhetoric.

151 Interestingly, Hillary Clinton, whose husband Toni Morrison called "our first black President" (Morrison, "Comment"), particularly during the early phase of the presidential election (Oct. 2007), outpaced Barack Obama by 13 percent among black voters (Pappu, "Obama Reawakening"). This clearly reflects the deep division dominating African American voters with regard to Obama's approach to the question of race in the United States.

152 For more on the aspect of black stereotypes see: Moue, Jean. *Cultural Competence: A Primer for Educators*. Santa Barbara: Cengage Learning, 2011. 54-55. Print.

attempt to “have it both ways” undermined his efforts to convince African Americans that he could be a true representative of and advocate for the black community.

Being both “too black” and “not black enough” constituted a performative dilemma for Obama. To help compensate, Michelle Obama again entered the stage. The campaign effectively complemented Obama’s narrative staging with Michelle Obama’s well-publicized engagement in the competition<sup>153</sup>. In countless interviews, stump speeches, television appearances, and mainstream print media coverage, she functioned as an independent campaign spokeswoman on race.

Michelle Obama’s public and media presence reveals a narrative script addressed directly to the African American community. She toured South Carolina’s barbershops and beauty salons, appeared with Oprah Winfrey, and spoke about how, with her husband running for President, she felt proud of her country for the first time in her adult life (Thomas, “Proud Remarks”).

Born on Chicago’s South side to working class descendents of slaves, she made herself a mirror for many African Americans with blunt statements reflecting their daily experience. While her biracial husband produced modest and integrative rhetoric emphasizing unification and overcoming, Michelle Obama offered the African American electorate a performance unambiguously grounded in black narrative contexts and demands.

On the downside, Michelle Obama quickly became a target of negative campaigns from outside the black community. She was painted as an emasculating, angry, militant black woman incapable of fairly representing the nation as a whole<sup>154</sup>. In March 2008, National Public Radio asked directly, “Is Michelle Obama an Asset or Liability?” (Bates, “Michelle Liability”). Nonetheless, it can be argued that without Michelle Obama’s performance as “Barack’s Better Black Half”, the Obama campaign would not have succeeded at winning the black vote.

The narrative scripting of Michelle Obama’s campaign performance enhanced the credibility of her husband’s Imagined Presidency among African American voters. First, she presented herself as a *de facto* “real” African American: dark skinned, descendent of slaves, raised on Chicago’s “black” South Side. In a speech at a traditionally Black college, she told her audience that a “little black girl from the south side of Chicago” now had a chance to become “the next First Lady” (qtd. in Newton-Small, “Michelle Obama Voice Too”).

Michelle Obama’s narrative script as Barack Obama’s better black half promoted her

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153 See e.g. “The Media Spotlight Shines Brighter on Michelle Obama than Cindy McCain.” *Journalism.com – Pew Researcher Center’s Project For Excellence in Journalism*. 14 May 2008. Web. 28 Nov. 2014. <[http://www.journalism.org/charts/chart\\_builder2.php?id=1756&ct=col&sort=&dir=&chartback=None&chartgrid=LightGray&labelincr=1&scalemid=Auto&scalemax=Auto&scalemid=Auto&rot=0&3d=1&depth3d=20&showtitle=0&ran=27381&legendloc=1&scalemid=Auto&scalemax=Auto&scalemid=Auto&chartsize=Large&chartpalette=Standard&r1=0&r2=1&r3=1&c1=0&c2=0&c3=0&c4=0&c5=0&c6=0&c7=0&c8=0&c9=0&c10=0](http://www.journalism.org/charts/chart_builder2.php?id=1756&ct=col&sort=&dir=&chartback=None&chartgrid=LightGray&labelincr=1&scalemid=Auto&scalemax=Auto&scalemid=Auto&rot=0&3d=1&depth3d=20&showtitle=0&ran=27381&legendloc=1&scalemid=Auto&scalemax=Auto&scalemid=Auto&chartsize=Large&chartpalette=Standard&r1=0&r2=1&r3=1&c1=0&c2=0&c3=0&c4=0&c5=0&c6=0&c7=0&c8=0&c9=0&c10=0)>

154 See, for example: Dowd, Maureen. “She’s Not Buttering Him Up.” *The New York Times*. 25 Apr. 2008. Web. 02 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/25/opinion/25dowd.html>>; Fox News. “Transcript Fox News Watch June 14th.” *Fox News Watch*. 14 Jul. 2008. Web. 15 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.foxnews.com/story/2008/06/16/transcript-fox-news-watch-june-14-2008.html>>; Malkin, Michelle. “Michelle’s America and Mine.” *MichelleMalkin.com*. 20 Feb. 2008. Web. 23 Oct. 2014. <<http://michellemalkin.com/2008/02/20/michelle-obamas-america-and-mine/>>; Nelson, Sophia. “Black. Female. Accomplished. Attacked.” *The Washington Post*. 20 Jun. 2008. Web. 21 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/07/18/AR2008071802557.html>>; Ressler, Jeffrey. “Michelle Obama Thesis was on Racial Divide.” *Politico*. 23 Feb. 2008. Web. 16 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0208/8642.html>>.

African American origins, reducing the perception of the family as “Oreo-blacks of the middle class” (Johnson 6). Jacqueline Mitchell writes that “[t]he Black community rates service to the community high” (22), but pursuing upward social mobility outside the geographical boundaries of the African American community is perceived negatively – as elitist and assimilationist (Ogbu 26). Michelle Obama countered the portrayals of the family as a “whitened” out-of-touch high-earning Ivy League couple (Abramson, “Michelle Obama Elitism”).

To achieve this, she performed the role of the “South Side Girl”, a genuine member of the community. She was a product of Chicago’s public schools: “I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for the simple neighborhood schools where I came from” (Obama, “USC Speech”, 2008). In the 2008 Democratic National Convention, she was introduced with a short film entitled “South Side Girl”, a clear identity statement. Establishing this narrative on a visual level, the introductory images of Michelle Obama as child and young woman show her “genuine” African American appearance (cf. [Fig. 78 – 82](#)).

The narrative then focuses on Michelle Obama’s community loyalty. This topic resonates strongly with black audiences. The “loss” of educated middle class people who move away to pursue their careers is often perceived as choosing a “better white” life over their own community (Ogbu 22). The video taps right into that question with a sequence that starts with Michelle Obama’s Harvard graduation portrait (cf. [Fig. 83](#)) showing her with a distinctly African American hairstyle.

Then the following dialogue follows:

*Narrator (Michelle Obama’s mother):* We raised Craig and Michelle to go to college, but we always teased them about how some went away to college and never came back to their community.

*Michelle Obama:* My mom and dad would always say that if just a few people would come back and live in the community, it would make all the difference in the world and we talked about that a lot.

*Prof. Ogletree (Harvard Professor):* She was very committed to the South Side of Chicago. She was very committed to use every bit of her skills and her talent to lift others up. (“South Side Girl”)

Visually, her loyalty to the African American community is illustrated by a photo showing Michelle Obama in a baseball cap with a group of mostly black people from Chicago’s South Side (cf. [Fig. 84](#)).

Her arm on the young man’s shoulder conveys intimacy and belonging. Displaying these images to a national audience helped establish her as a committed member of the African American community. The message is unmistakable: She is proud of being African American.

Michelle Obama’s performance also included the story of her family’s slave ancestors. Early in Obama’s campaign, a research team was hired to inquire into Michelle Obama’s family history (Glanton, “Michelle Obama’s Family”). The investigation uncovered highly beneficial information: documentation that the family descended from a slave on a South



Carolina rice plantation (Bone, “From Slave Cabin to White House”). In a campaign-related visit to her family in South Carolina, Michelle Obama said, “My people are from South Carolina. I don’t know if y’all knew that. In fact, my brother and I came down last week for a mini family reunion at my grandparents’ church” (qtd. in Collins, “The Other Obama”).

After visiting relatives, she spoke at her grandfather’s church in Bethel (cf. [Fig. 85 & 86](#)). With this visit, she evoked her personal connection to the burdensome history of the South, thus appropriating this narrative for her performance. While Shailagh Murray suggests that “Michelle Obama’s family history – from slavery to Reconstruction to the Great Migration north – connects her to the essence of the African American experience” (“Family Tree”), historian Dan Wood even goes a step further, dubbing her the “Alex Haley of her generation” (qtd. in Murray, “Family Tree”): “Black people are taken by the fact that she’s proud, not ashamed, and how she can make other people feel okay about it” (qtd. in Murray, “Family Tree”). Incorporating family history into her narrative script presented Michelle Obama’s own story as a mirror of black America’s history and benefited Barack Obama’s performative staging of the race issue<sup>155</sup>.

With her frequent appearances in settings racially coded as black, Michelle Obama countered the impression that of Barack Obama African American racial identity as “diluted”. She campaigned heavily in geographical locations and at traditionally black sites with a central role in the African American experience, especially in the Deep South (Keller 170; Favor 25). She appeared at black beauty parlors (Wolffe, “Who is Michelle”), the *Trumpet Awards* in Atlanta honoring black achievement (Waldron 35), and schools, and colleges with large African American populations like the traditionally black Benedict College, South Carolina State University and the University of South Carolina (Newton-Small, “Obama finds Voice Too”). At South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, she said,

[a] few years ago, I had the privilege of meeting Coretta Scott King. ... And I thought, this is a woman who knows what it means to overcome. ... And as I thought about this remarkable woman, I thought about all the others who had come before her in the long journey for equality in this country – women like Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. And I thought about those who had carried the torch of justice by her side – women like Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Dorothy Height, Shirley Chisholm, C. Delores Tucker, and Mary McLeod Bethune. (Obama, “Orangeburg Speech”, 2007)

Thus Michelle Obama presented herself on stages associated with the African American community and established a meaningful meta-stage by linking herself with iconic figures of the African American freedom struggle.

Michelle Obama’s storyline also scripted her as deeply embedded in the African American community’s cultural and social sphere. In many stump speeches, her lan-

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<sup>155</sup> See, for example, the following comment from Barack Obama’s so-called “Race” speech: “I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave-owners – an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters” (“More Perfect Union” 2008).

guage, lingo, speech characteristics, and non-verbal expressions were clearly intended to identify her as part of the black community.

She most clearly engaged in a performance to “sound black” in a campaign appearance in Delaware. For this presentation, she dressed like a preacher, in a simple black suit. She supported this visual impression by including the audience in call-and-response exchanges typical of black churches. At the start of her speech, a young girl entered the stage and they had a short conversation with a question-answer cycle in a call and response pattern (Obama, “Delaware Speech” 2008). Criticizing how Barack Obama’s political opponents downplayed his campaign, she elicited audience participation and verbal support with a series of questions:

*Michelle Obama:* But then, when that happened – What happened then? Then organization wasn’t important. And then it was Iowa. Iowa was everything – Do you remember that?  
*Audience:* Yeah! I do! (“Delaware Speech”, 2008).

She supported her preacher-like performance with a determined speaking voice, a highly expressive, sing-song intonation pattern, and irregular and frequently changing pitch and tone (e.g. Michelle Obama’s “Delaware Speech”). The whole speech reflects African American vernacular speech mannerisms and standard performance techniques in the black church tradition (O’Meally 108). On a grammatical and semantic level, Michelle Obama emphasized her status as a “black speaker” by switching to “Black English”<sup>156</sup>, with short forms such as “I’m proud *a* her” (Obama, “Delaware Speech” 2008) or “Well *ya* know” (Obama, “Delaware Speech” 2008). “G”-dropping also occurs frequently in her speeches, in phrases like “*Nothin’* remarkable about my *upbringin’*” (Obama, “Delaware Speech” 2008). Another example of Michelle Obama’s code-switching strategy is using the black vernacular form of negation, telling the audience that “I ain’t get to talk to anybody” (Obama, “Delaware Speech” 2008). The deliberate deployment of a speech style to prove her group membership can be found in her other speeches as well<sup>157</sup>.

Richard Ford notes, “group specific lifestyles offer an easy solidarity, a V.I.P. Pass to belonging” (39). Michelle Obama therefore also displayed her intimate familiarity with and rootedness in black daily life and culture on many occasions during the campaign. For example, her style of dress established her identification with her African American background. Anthropologist Gwendolyn O’Neal suggests, “African Americans appear to use style as resistance or refusal” (173)<sup>158</sup>. Complementary, saturated colors and irregu-

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<sup>156</sup> Also see: Labov, William. *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972. Print; Rickford, Russel John. *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*. London: John Wiley and Sons, 2002. Print.

<sup>157</sup> Obama, Michelle. “University of South Carolina Speech.” Columbia, 23 Jan. 2008 Transcript, 01 Oct. 2010. Web. 14 Sep. 2010. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ac1K6QQI08>>; Obama, Michelle. “Harlem’s Our Children’s Foundation Speech”. New York City, 26 Jun. 2007. *World News* 27. Jun. 2007 <[http://wn.com/Michelle\\_Obama\\_in\\_Harlem](http://wn.com/Michelle_Obama_in_Harlem)>.

<sup>158</sup> Also see: “Yet while slaves were heavily policed they found ways, such as by wearing bright, clashing colors or by combining the cast-off finery of their masters with daily homespun clothing, to alter their dress to demonstrate their disaffiliation from Euro-American society” (Rizzo 212). Particularly during the Harlem Renaissance dress aesthetics became an important issue. Nella Larsen’s fictional Helga Crane offers an apt description of the expressive importance of outer appearance in the African American community: “Drab colors, mostly navy blue, black, brown, unrelieved, save for a scrap of white or tan about the hands and necks. Fragments of a speech made by the dean of women floated through her thoughts

lar patterns (White 24 & 82), and mixed materials (White 23) are perceived by many African Americans as a contrast to the traditionally linear and color-coordinated European-American (Hindman 118) “white” sense of fashion. From the beginning, Michelle Obama’s style of dress deviated from the traditional First Lady’s dress code followed by other candidates’ wives<sup>159</sup>. She adopted an African American fashion tradition, frequently wearing high intensity colors (cf. [Fig. 87](#), [88](#) & [89](#)). After the campaign, headlines declared, “Purple Reign: The color is strong and regal – No stretch for new First Lady Michelle Obama” (“Stylewatch”) and “Michelle Obama’s Amazing Technicolor Closet” (Cheung, “Technicolor”)<sup>160</sup>.

Michelle Obama also mixed eye-catching patterns and materials. Her outfit on Jay Leno’s *Tonight Show* is a typical example (cf. [Fig. 90](#)). Aside from that, her wardrobe on the campaign trail frequently included a mix of bold prints and flashy colors (cf. [Fig. 91](#), [92](#) & [93](#)).

With these fashion choices, Michelle Obama broke ranks with the institutional aesthetic for the First Lady, thus demonstrating her different aesthetic socialization with “self-defining, fashion-based distinctions [to] express an implicit identification with or distancing from a relevant social group” (Haytko/Thompson 23).

Magazines aimed at an African American audience served as another stage for Michelle Obama to show her cultural roots. Over the course of the 2008 campaign, she was featured in numerous African American magazines, including *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Essence*. Most of these appearances focused on her daily life in the role of the all-African American woman (cf. [Fig. 94](#)).

In interviews she frequently emphasized her preference for African American artists. Stevie Wonder, for example, is mentioned on numerous occasions: “Stevie Wonder is my most favorite singer-songwriter of all time. I love Stevie Wonder!” she told *Jet* (*Jet*, “Michelle Obama Juggles”). Later she said that the last film she saw in a theater was “Dream Girls”, the story of the Supremes (*Jet*, “Michelle Obama Juggles”). While in *Ebony* she said that on her first date with Barack, they went to see Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (*Ebony*, “Hottest Couple”)<sup>161</sup>.

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– “Bright colors are vulgar” “Black, gray, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people.” “Dark complected people shouldn’t wear yellow, or green or red.” – The dean was a woman from one of the “first families” – a great “race” woman: she, Helga Crane, a despised mulatto, but something intuitive, some unanalyzed driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need for gorgeousness told her that bright colors were fitting and that dark-complexioned people should wear yellow, green, and red” (*Quicksand* 17-18).

**159** Also see: CBS News Crew. “Michelle Obama: A First Lady Fashionista.” *CBS*. 7 Nov. 2008. Web. 16 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/michelle-obama-a-first-lady-fashionista/>>; Kotur, Alexandra. “It-Girl of the Month April Flash It Girl Michelle Obama lights up the campaign Trail, Proving that she is a Fashion Force to be Reckoned with.” *Vogue*. April 2008 Vol. 198 Vol 4. Web. 23 May 2014. <<http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/editorials/31988114/girl>>; Vanity Fair. “Best Dresses List Women 2008: Michelle Obama.” *Vanity Fair*. 14 Jun. 2008. Web. 28 May 2014. <<http://www.vanityfair.com/style/the-international-best-dressed-list/2008/5>>.

**160** “Purple Reign” is clearly a reference to Prince’s famous R&B album and rock music film (1984) *Purple Rain*, while the “Technicolor Closet” is a reference to the stage play (1965) and Andrew Lloyd Weber musical (1972) “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.” For more on Michelle Obama’s bold fashion choices see: Brooks, Kimberly. “Michelle Obama, Master Colorist and Me.” *Huffington Post*. 7 May 2009. Web. 19 May 2014. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kimberly-brooks/michelle-obama-master-col\\_b\\_183245.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kimberly-brooks/michelle-obama-master-col_b_183245.html)>.

**161** In a 2007 *Glamour* interview she mentioned Jill Scott, India Arie and Lauryn Hill as her favorite singers (*Glamour*, “Next First Lady”). In an interview with *Marie Claire* Michelle Obama disclosed her iPod playlist exclusively naming black artists: “MC: So, what’s on your iPod? MO: I have a pretty eclectic mix of everything, from Beyoncé to Stevie Wonder. He’s my favorite artist of all time, so I probably have every song he’s ever recorded. But if I hear something I like somewhere, I’ll add it. I just heard this CD by Anthony David, who’s an R&B guy — I put him on there. That’s brand new, so I’m kind of enjoying that a lot now. I

Stories dealing with hair care were another recurring element in Michelle Obama's public performance. The ongoing discourse among black women about Michelle Obama's hair reflects Melissa Harris Lacewell's observation that for black women "[a]ny choice [of hair] carries tremendous personal and political valence" (qtd. in Desmond-Harris, "Michelle Obama's Hair"). Although she was occasionally accused of bowing to white aesthetic demands<sup>162</sup>, in general her middle to upper-class hairstyles were scrutinized for evidence of solidarity with African American women. "I'm a black woman", comments African American writer Jenee Desmond-Harris in *Time*, "[m]y focus on hair feels like a birthright. It is my membership in an exclusive, historical club, with privileges, responsibilities, infighting and bylaws that are rewritten every decade. Not once when I've seen an image of our First Lady has it been lost on me that she is also a member" (qtd. in "Michelle Obama's Hair"). In *Ebony*, Michelle Obama explained how she deals with her hair as an active sportswoman: "I found ways to pin my hair and tie down and deal with it. If it's not where it needs to be I pull it back. I just said, I am not going to let hair be the dictator of my health" (*Ebony*, "The Real Michelle"). Such comments show how she shares the common, everyday concerns of African American women.

Michelle Obama also "included" her daughters in her performative staging strategy. Sasha and Malia Obama frequently appeared in public with braids, puffs or cornrows (cf. [Fig. 95](#) & [96](#))<sup>163</sup>, signals that the girls were part of African American culture.

Michelle Obama offered similar performances to mixed audiences nationwide, emphasizing her pride in her racial origin. A clear example is the fist bump she used to greet her husband at the primary victory event in St. Paul, Minnesota (cf. [Fig. 97](#)).

The fist bump greeting ritual originated in 1960s black urban culture. It is especially popular among younger African Americans (Cefkin 185). To the broader American public, it is associated with the black militant movement or lower class African Americans<sup>164</sup>. Media reactions illustrate the negative connotation. *The New Yorker* made an ironic comment on the racist perception of the Obamas on their controversial June 2008 cover<sup>165</sup> (cf. [Fig. 98](#)), while *Fox* ran a banner on the news screen referencing Michelle as "Obama's Baby Mama"<sup>166</sup> (cf. [Fig. 99](#)).

The use of a typically black gesture on an important occasion, however, was highly popular with the African American community. The African American senior editor of

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also have some old Mariah Carey; the girls have reintroduced me to some of her older stuff. So I have a good mix: some pop, some R&B, some jazz" (*Marie Claire*, "Keeps it Real", 2008).

<sup>162</sup> Kaplan, Erin Aubry. "The Michelle Obama Hair Challenge." *Salon*. 03 Feb. 2009. Web. 04 Jun. 2014. <[http://www.salon.com/life/feature/2009/02/03/michelle\\_hair](http://www.salon.com/life/feature/2009/02/03/michelle_hair)>.

<sup>163</sup> See: Sasha and Malia Obama's hair-style during interview with *All Access Hollywood*, 09 Jul. 2008, or at campaign event at Pueblo, Colorado, 01 Nov. 2008.

<sup>164</sup> See: Koppelman, Alex. "Fox News calls Michelle Obama 'Obama's Baby Mama.'" *Salon*. 11 Jun. 2008. Web. 15 Sep. 2009. <[http://www.salon.com/news/politics/war\\_room/2008/06/11/fox\\_obama](http://www.salon.com/news/politics/war_room/2008/06/11/fox_obama)>; Sklar, Rachel. "Obama Fist-Bump Rocks The Nation!" *Huffington Post*. 14 Jun. 2008. Web. 09 Jul. 2014. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/06/06/obama-fist-bump-rocks-the\\_n\\_105490.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/06/06/obama-fist-bump-rocks-the_n_105490.html)>.

<sup>165</sup> See: Goldenberg, Suzanne. "US Election: 'Terrorist Fist Bump' Cartoon Misfires." *The Guardian*. 15 Jul. 2008. Web. 16 Jun. 2014. <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jul/15/barackobama.usa>>.

<sup>166</sup> For more on reactions to this headline at *Fox News* see: Bauder, David. "Fox News Refers to Michelle Obama as 'Baby Mama.'" *Associated Press*. 12 Jun. 2008. Web. 28 Jun. 2014. <<http://www.foxnews.com/wires/2008Jun12/0,4670,TVFoxObama,00.html>>.

*The Atlantic*, Ta-Nehisi Coates, said that it

thrilled a lot of black folks [...] Because it's the kind of gesture that, while commonplace in the African American community, was generally stifled by earlier generations of blacks working their way up into the corporate or political worlds for fears about looking *too black*. (qtd. Argetsinger in "The Fist Couple")

In the following Michelle Obama deliberately employed this gesture. Michelle Obama gave fist bumps to the hosts of the women's talk show *The View* (cf. [Fig. 100](#)). Commenting "Yes We Can", the Obama campaign even turned the fist-bump image into an official campaign poster and button (cf. [Fig. 101](#) & [102](#)).

Her appearance on the TV talk show *Ellen* is another example of this scripting. During the show's obligatory "dance introduction", Michelle Obama included rapper Jay-Z's well-known "Dirt-off-My-Shoulder" move in her short dance interlude ("Michelle Obama on Ellen", 2008). By associating herself with an iconic black hip hop artist known for his "Down-with-the-Street" narrative<sup>167</sup> Michelle Obama presented herself as youthful and up-to-date (James, "Jay-Z Brush Off"). Through such a mis-en-scene Michelle Obama successfully added a "black" facet to Barack Obama's Imagined Presidency.

The success of her performance becomes clear when reading an African American Studies professor's assessment that Michelle Obama "helps to reinforce the point, 'We're coming from an African American family; our perspective is your perspective'" (qtd. in Talev, "Michelle Obama Stumps"). With narratives presenting her as a natural-born member of the African American community, "[speaking] to black audiences in cadences that reflect their experience" (Collins, "The Other Obama"), Michelle Obama established a credible stage for addressing the black electorate during the presidential campaign.

Michelle Obama's stories also established her as a spokeswoman for the African American community. She, for example, demonstrated her roots and identification with the African American community by openly discussing highly relevant issues. A self-described "loudmouth" ("Good Morning America Interview", 2007), she bluntly addressed sensitive race issues, particularly during the primaries. When she said in her 2008 Milwaukee speech, "[f]or the first time in my adult life I am proud of my country" (qtd. in Tapper, "First Time"), outraged conservative voters called her alienated, bitter and unpatriotic (Thomas, "Alienated U.S.A."). But the comment appealed to many black voters who took her as their spokeswoman. "As people of color, our experience is quite different than the majority, and we've been treated as the stepchild of this nation", a program administrator at the Rhode Island Office of Human Affairs explained (qtd. in Wangness, "Obama's Candor"). Ron Walters, an African American professor of government and politics, frankly characterized the appeal of such direct comments:

Pride of country, loyalty, patriotism, etc., are all emotions that have ebbed and flowed

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<sup>167</sup> An example for this narrative of black street credibility is Jay-Z's Reebok Advertisement, March 2005, Shawn Carter: "I got my MBA from Marcy Projects" (McCarthy, "New Theme").



for African Americans with the force of damage directed against them historically, and many whites have had a problem with what they perceive to be the ungrateful black who should love their country right or wrong. (“I Understand”)

Michelle Obama also talked about racial discrimination: “[T]he life I am living is still out of reach of too many women. Too many little black girls. I don’t have to tell you this. We know the disparities that exist across this country, in our schools, in our hospitals, at our jobs and on our streets” (qtd. in Samuels, “Third Rail”). She criticized arbitrary and changing requirements for success that limit the career advancement of “regular black folks”: “[T]he bar is set and then you meet the bar and then they move the bar. Can’t keep up. The bar is movin’ and shiftin’ on all over the place” (Obama, “Delaware Speech”, 2008). Her personal stories lent verisimilitude to her criticism of racial discrimination:

I wasn’t supposed to have my own successful career. They said my achievement must have been the result of racial preferences. And I am certainly not supposed to be standing here, maybe to become the next first lady of the United States.” (qtd. in Saulny, “Michelle Obama Thrives”).

Candid remarks on discriminatory practices established Michelle Obama as a credible and trustworthy advocate for the African American community. She boosted the impact of her performative strategy by taking unambiguous positions on race issues before nationwide audiences. Her appearance on *MSNBC*’s morning show *Morning Joe* illustrates how she staged her racial advocacy.

What we’re dealing with in the black community is just the natural fear of possibility. You know, when I look at my life, the stuff we’re seeing in the polls has played out my whole life. You know... Always been told by somebody that I’m not ready, I can’t do something, my scores weren’t high enough. You know, there is always that doubt in the back of the minds of people of color, people who haven’t been given real opportunities, that you never really believe – that you believe that somehow someone is better than you. Deep down inside you doubt whether you can do it, because that’s all you’ve been told... No, wait... That’s all you hear. And you hear it from people who love you not because they don’t care about you, but they’re afraid. They’re afraid that something might happen. [...] That’s the psychology that is going on in our heads and our souls. I understand it. I know where it comes from. You know, and I think it is one of the horrible legacies of racism and discrimination, and oppression. (“Interview Morning Joe”, 2007)

Citing her experience of racial discrimination allowed Michelle Obama to script herself as a credible spokesperson for others. Speaking before a national audience about “our heads and our souls”, using a “we-rhetoric”, she created an intimate atmosphere of honest solidarity with “her” African American community.

Another example illustrating her role as advocate of “her” black community, is her stump speech at the University of California, Los Angeles:

I’m gonna tell you a story about this little girl I’ve met in Newberry, South Carolina, two days before the South Carolina primary. I was at a beauty shop. [...] And this little girl



came up to me and said: ‘Mrs. Obama, I’d like to tell you something. [...] She said ‘ Do you realize that when Barack Obama becomes the next President of the United States, it will be historical?’ And I said ‘Yeah’. But I said ‘Well, what does that mean to you?’ And she said ‘That means that I can imagine everything I can imagine anything for myself in this world.’ And then that little girl started to cry. She broke down and she started crying, because, you see, that little girl understands. She knows. Well, that little girl understands the limitations that are already set for her. She knows that she is already five steps behind. And she has heard so many people already tell her what she can’t do. She knows about that veil of impossibility, because it is suffocating her. And the truth is she knows that she is better than anybody’s limited expectations of her. (“USC Speech”, 2008)

Strong terms like “limitations” and “suffocating” left no doubt about her position on racism and discrimination. The expression “veil of impossibility”, an indirect reference to W.E.B. DuBois’ metaphor, reinforced her sincerity. The national broadcast before a mixed audience further amplified the impact of her narrative scripting.

Even when appearing together with her husband, Michelle Obama did not shy away from thorny issues like racially motivated violence. In a joint TV interview, she was asked if she was concerned for her husband’s safety. Her reply: “[a]s a black man, he could get shot at a gas station” (“60 Minutes Interview”, 2007).

Michelle Obama’s performative script as “Barack’s better black half” also included a storyline appealing to the black community’s deep longing for positive images of black women, relationships, and families. On *ABC*’s “Good Morning America” she discussed the image of black America:

As we’ve all said in the black community, we don’t see all of who we are in the media. We see snippets of our community and distortions of our community [...]. So the world has this perspective that somehow Barack and Michelle Obama are different, that we’re unique. And we’re not. You just haven’t seen us before. (“Morning Joe Interview”, 2007)

According to Verna Williams, “[b]lack females are constructed as oversexed and overly fertile; Black motherhood is abnormal and blameworthy for social problems such as juvenile delinquency and poverty”, while “black males are deemed irresponsible, undependable, and dangerous” (840).

Michelle Obama challenged such internalized constructs of black pathology. Her performance was a powerful counter-narrative to negative images. One example is a “byproduct” of her emergence as a fashion icon. Her regular appearances on the covers of magazines aimed at both African Americans and broader target audiences facilitated the visual inclusion of black women in the culturally accepted canon of beauty standards. According to Andrea Gillespie, “[t]o have a black woman in that position brings black women into the forefront as full-fledged American women and, more importantly, ladies. It affirms black women’s womanhood, their humanity, their femininity” (qtd. in Lewis, “Michelle Obama Presents Modern Image”)<sup>168</sup>. Michelle Obama said early in the cam-

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<sup>168</sup> Also see: “When I see Michelle Obama on the cover of magazines and on TV shows, I think, Wow, look at her and her brown skin [...] gee, it’s nice to see a brown girl get some attention and be called beautiful by the world. That just doesn’t

paign, “One thing I hope happens is that this country and this world see yet another image of what it means to be black” (qtd. in Parsons, “Barack’s Rock”).

Portraying herself as a female role model countered negative stereotypes of black women and substantially increased her husband’s popularity among black female voters. Voting for Barack Obama meant voting for a new image of black women in American society. Deconstructing deeply entrenched negative stereotypes of black women as sex bombs, welfare queens, and “babymommas”<sup>169</sup> was the key to Michelle Obama’s campaign success.

Staging her family life and her balanced and well-functioning relationship with Barack Obama was another powerful strategy that appealed to African Americans. Black relationships, marriage, and family life have been a constant battleground of public perceptions and deeply rooted stereotypes. The American media do not often associate the black community with intact families and functioning relationships<sup>170</sup>. Michelle Obama offered a counter-narrative. On African American magazine covers, for example, she successfully juggles family life, career, and relationships (cf. [Fig. 103](#)).

In addition, the relationship between Michelle and Barack Obama, as performed, challenges deeply rooted notions of male-female relations in the African American community. As a high-powered career woman and caring mother in an egalitarian relationship, Michelle Obama updated archaic African American gender structures. Michelle Obama presented herself as feminine, albeit determined and emancipated. At the same time, Barack Obama softened his image with a feminized identity performance<sup>171</sup>.

During the 2008 Democratic Convention, Michelle Obama told the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, “[w]hen I was growing up in the ’80s, ‘The Cosby Show’ meant so much to African American families. A lot of people looked at the Huxtables and thought, ‘There’s no way that family exists.’ [...] If we don’t see those images, then the people don’t believe they exist” (qtd. in Brown, “Image of Affirmation”).

In February 2007, the Obamas graced the cover of *Ebony* as “Black America’s Hottest Couple” (cf. [Fig. 104](#)). In the accompanying interview, they present themselves as a harmonious and mutually supportive team, happily married for over 14 years. “He’s my biggest cheerleader as a mother, as a wife and as a career person. He always tells me how great I am doing” (*Ebony*, “Hottest Couple”). Photos of the couple hugging and flirting visually underscored the message. This establishes another image that African Ameri-

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happen a lot” (qtd. in Samuels, “What Michelle”).

**169** Also see: Green, Laura. “Stereotypes: Negative Racial Stereotypes and Their Effect on Attitudes Toward African-Americans.” *Perspectives on Multiculturalism and Diversity* XI.1 (1998-99). <<http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/links/VCU.htm>>. Web.; Harris-Perry, Melissa. *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. Print.

**170** Also see: Adamo, Gregory. *African Americans on Television: Behind the Scenes*. New York: Peter Lang, 2010. Print.; Johnson, Victoria. “Television and Racism.” *African Americans and American Popular Culture*. Ed. Todd Boyd. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2008. 165-185. Print. Powell, Katrina. *Identity and Power in Narratives of Displacement*. London: Routledge, 2015. Print. Robert, Michael. “Television Drama and Racism.” *Race and Racism in the United States: An Encyclopedia of the American Mosaic*. Ed. Charles Gallagher and Camerron Lippard. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2014. 1226-1228. Print.

**171** For a detailed discussion of this image strategy see: Cooper, Frank Rudy. “Our First Unisex President?: Black Masculinity and Obama’s Feminine Side.” *Suffolk University Law School Faculty Publications Paper 52* (2009): 633-661. Print.

cans, in particular females, want to be represented in public discourse. Presenting Barack as an ideal husband and telling the story of a seemingly perfect relationship, Michelle Obama gives performative reality to a narrative that black voters find highly appealing.

An *Essence* magazine story about the Obama family's home life further exemplifies the narrative scripting of Michelle Obama's performance. Family photos show skilled visual staging of an intact and harmonious all-African American family (cf. [Fig. 105](#)). This is important because "[t]here's something that happens when you validate the existence of someone by visually representing them. What people see, they believe" (Givhan, "TV's First Lady").

Michelle Obama's public performances in gossip magazines like *People* and *US Weekly* satisfied African Americans' desire for public affirmation of functional black families, and by displaying this positive image to nationwide audience, also offered black voters a source of pride. In summary, Michelle Obama's performance made visible a healthy and realistic version of black gender equality. She breathed life into the fantasy of the Huxtable family.

Offering the black electorate a skillfully staged story of her "true" blackness, she became a credible representative of longstanding African American desires, a palpable version of the African American Dream. As "Barack's Better Black Half", Michelle Obama balanced his biracial family. "Having Michelle at his side helped reassure skeptical blacks that he was really one of them", *The Economist* observed ("Michelle Obama's America"). Her performance endowed Barack with the blackness needed to win the African American electorate. In the words of a woman from Detroit, "[w]hen I look at Michelle, Barack doesn't have to be any blacker for me" (Grigoriadis, "Black and Blacker").

#### 4.6. Obama's "Great Depression": Renewing the American Dream in Crisis

The economy always plays a central role in presidential elections. In the 2008 presidential campaign, the growing economic recession moved center stage and raised questions about America's economic ideology (Ghosh 14). The economic crisis was commonly interpreted as a failure of the American Dream, America as "the Land of Opportunity", where hard-working individuals can go "From Rags to Riches". Newspapers, radio and television featured stories entitled "Class Mobility: Is the American Dream a Myth?" (Gordon 2005), "Chasing the American Dream?" (CNN 2006), "A Dream Blown Away" (Garreau 2006), "When the American Dream Becomes A Nightmare" (Sreenivasan 2007), "The Impossible American Dream" (Samuelson 2007), "Economic Crisis Takes Toll on Pursuit of American Dream" (PBS 2008), and "Economy Squeezes the American Dream" (Lynch 2008). Books were written on *Outsourcing the American Dream: Pain and Pleasure in the Era of Downsizing* (England 2001), and *New Class Society: Goodbye American Dream?* (Perrucci/Wysong 2008).

The ur-American promise of the American Dream epitomizes America's most foundational socio-economic principle of equal opportunity and "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness". Media discourse, as exemplified above, questioned if the American Dream could still integrate and hold together American society (Ghosh 3), suggesting that America's social, political and economic systems depend on public belief in American opportunity structures. When the meritocratic route "up the ladder" is hampered, the cohesion of the American collective becomes problematic.

The prominent role of the American Dream in the 2008 campaign is nothing new, as the American Dream is "a long-standing trope in presidential rhetoric" (Demo 248). Political communication and marketing professionals accept that "the ability to convince consumers or voters that a [...] candidate will help make their American Dream come true" (Newman 78) is *sine qua non* for a successful political candidate.

During the 2008 presidential election, however, the discourse on America's socio-economic state and the American Dream gained intensity. Economist Jeremy Rifkin writes, "For most of America's first two hundred or so years, the myth and reality of American opportunity were close enough to go unquestioned" (Rifkin 38). But in George W. Bush's second presidential term, belief in the American Dream declined dramatically. In a 2004 survey, 62% said that "the American Dream is harder to achieve today compared to their parent's generation" ("New American Dream Survey", 2004). A 2006 Pew poll found 50% agreeing that "today's children will grow up to be worse off than people are now" ("Future Ain't What It Used to Be", 2006).

Obama's candidacy coincided with a massive challenge to this deeply rooted story about America. To re-empower the meaning-making structures uniting the United States and to regenerate voter belief in the "American Dream Community", Obama presented his Presidency as a space where the American Dream could be re-imagined. Obama's 2008 campaign used two main strategies to revitalize belief in America's exceptionalist

status: first, establishing that belief in the American Dream is deeply rooted and persistent, and second, offering a non-ideological, pragmatic approach to reinvigorating this fundamental principle.

The storyline of a community united by belief in the American Dream was a crucial part of how the campaign tackled America's socio-economic crisis. For example, in March 2008 at New York's Cooper Union, where Abraham Lincoln had launched his own presidential career, Obama said:

[T]he bedrock of our economic success is the American Dream. It's a dream shared in big cities and small towns, across races, regions and religions, that, if you work hard, you can support a family; that if you get sick, there will be health care that you can afford; that you can retire – that you can retire with the dignity and security and respect that you've earned; and that your children can get a good education and young people can go to college, even if they don't come from a wealthy family. That's our common hope. That's our common hope across this country. That's the essence of the American dream. But today, for far too many Americans, this dream is slipping away. (“Cooper Union Speech”, 2008)

Many other speeches offer a similar rhetoric.<sup>172</sup> A campaign pamphlet focused on the recession is entitled “Barack Obama's Plan to Reclaim the American Dream” (cf. [Fig. 106](#)). Here Obama interweaves the storyline of his strategic approach to the economic crisis with that of the American Dream while linking socio-economic questions to his family's and his own story. In a 2008 campaign speech in Ohio, he presented himself as an example of how the American Dream is supposed to work:

Some of us had grandparents or parents who said maybe I can't go to college but my child can; maybe I can't have my own business but my child can. I may have to rent, but maybe my children will have a home they can call their own. I may not have a lot of money but maybe my child will run for Senate. I might live in a small village but maybe someday my son can be president of the United States of America. (“Speech Chillincothe Ohio”, 2008)

On *Meet the Press*, references to his grandparents and father-in-law demonstrate how Obama defines the “American Dream Community”:

[These] are the values of millions of people across the country. [...] [N]ot only are these values at the core of what this country is about, not only are these values what make me patriotic, but that those are the values that need to be fought for because that American Dream is slipping away. Those same individuals who are like Michelle's Dad, who are like my grandparents, who are like your Dad, They can't make it now, doing the same things they used to do. No matter how hard they work they are falling behind. No matter how

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172 See for example, Obama's “Reclaiming the American Dream” Speech in Bettendorf 7 Nov. 2007: “[T]oday, the cost of that dream is rising faster than ever before. While some have prospered beyond imagination in this global economy, middle-class Americans – as well as those working hard to become middle class – are seeing the American dream slip further and further away” and “Victory Speech North Carolina” Raleigh 6 May 2008: “This fall, we intend to march forward as one Democratic Party, united by a common vision for this country, because we all agree that at this defining moment in our history, a moment when we are facing two wars, an economy in turmoil, a planet in peril, a dream that feels like it's slipping away for too many Americans, we can't afford to give John McCain the chance to serve out George Bush's third term” (“Reclaiming the American Dream”, 2007).

hard they work they are at risk losing their home or losing their pension. That's what this campaign is about. And that's what we've been fighting for. And that's why ultimately I am confident that, unless we create opportunities for ordinary Americans that have been slipping away over the last 7 years, with wages and incomes actually going down even during an economic expansion, then we are not going to pass on that kind of America to our children that we want to. ("Meet The Press Interview", 2008)

By connecting his fight for the American Dream to both the interviewer and his own family, Obama emphasizes its central role in America's imagination and socio-economic union. This notion is expressed in many of his comments about the economic recession:

[A]s I've traveled around Iowa and the rest of the country these last nine months, I haven't been struck by our differences – I've been impressed by the values and hopes that we share. In big cities and small towns; among men and women; young and old; black, white, and brown – Americans share a faith in simple dreams. A job with wages that can support a family. Health care that we can count on and afford. A retirement that is dignified and secure. Education and opportunity for our kids. Common hopes. American Dreams. (Obama, "Reclaiming the American Dream", 2007)

The socio-economic aspects of Obama's Imagined Presidency rely on both the conservative tradition of self-reliance and individualism, and the more liberal ethos of communal responsibility. In his Cooper Union speech on the economy, Obama took a historical perspective to show how seemingly conflicting economic ideologies could be reconciled:

For Alexander Hamilton, the young secretary of the treasury, [America's strength] was bound to the vigor of the American economy. Hamilton had a strong belief in the power of the market, but he balanced that belief with a conviction that human enterprise, and I quote, "may be beneficially stimulated by prudent aids and encouragements on the part of the government." Government, he believed, had an important role to play in advancing our common prosperity. ... Hamilton met fierce opposition from Thomas Jefferson, who worried that this brand of capitalism would favor the interests of the few over the many. Jefferson preferred an agrarian economy, because he believed that it would give individual landowners freedom and that this freedom would nurture our democratic institutions. ("Cooper Union", 2008)

In this account of the roots of American capitalism, the differences between Jefferson and Hamilton seem irreconcilable. Obama gives the story a narrative twist, so the argument between proponents of free markets and advocates for government involvement is resolved by finding a balance between meritocracy and equal opportunity:

[T]here was one thing that Jefferson and Hamilton agreed on: that economic growth depended upon the talent and ingenuity of the American people; that in order to harness that talent, opportunity had to remain open to all; and that through education in particular, every American could climb the ladder of social and economic mobility and achieve the American dream. In the more than two centuries since then, we've struggled to balance the same forces that confronted Hamilton and Jefferson: self-interest and community, markets and democracy, the concentration of wealth and power and the



necessity of transparency and opportunity for each and every citizen. (“Cooper Union”, 2008)

Obama’s reconciliation of the typical Democratic and Republican economic positions was celebrated as an innovative approach to America’s socio-economic challenges.

Obama’s approach echoes the ideas of a successful fellow Democrat: Bill Clinton. Particularly in his early presidential advances, Clinton’s political prescriptions mixed traditionally conservative positions like smaller government and more personal responsibility (Flemming/McClain 19) with generic Democratic support of government protection from a reckless and unregulated free market and amoral big business. Clinton suggested a new definition of the relationship between “the people and their government, to provide opportunity for everybody, inspire responsibility throughout our society, and restore a sense of community to this great nation” (“New Covenant Speech”, 1991). In his 1995 State of the Union address, Clinton promoted opportunity and personal responsibility as solutions to American economic problems:

I call it the New Covenant<sup>173</sup>. But it’s grounded in a very, very old idea – that all Americans have not just a right, but a solid responsibility to rise as far as their God-given talents and determination can take them; and to give something back to their communities and their country in return. Opportunity and responsibility: They go hand in hand. We can’t have one without the other. And our national community can’t hold together without both. Our New Covenant is a new set of understandings for how we can equip our people to meet the challenges of a new economy, how we can change the way our government works to fit a different time, and, above all, how we can repair the damaged bonds in our society and come together behind our common purpose. We must have dramatic change in our economy, our government and ourselves. (“State of the Union”, 1995)

Clinton’s call for a new covenant resulted in major welfare reform, dubbed the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act”. His approach, promoted by the Democratic Leadership council in the 1990s as the “Third Way” (Whittington 206)<sup>174</sup>, was perceived as unusual for a Democrat, even boldly conservative<sup>175</sup>. Many Democrats criticized it as too conservative and Republican (Lee/Click 112)<sup>176</sup>.

With Hillary Clinton as Obama’s main competitor for the Democratic nomination, Obama could not draw on Bill Clinton’s economic policies, as this would risk bolstering Hillary Clinton’s image as an experienced “old hand”. Socio-economic policy was already a difficult terrain for Obama vis-à-vis Hillary Clinton. While Obama was seen by many as a political greenhorn (Scott, “Obama Illinois”), Clinton successfully presented her first ladyship as source of presidential experience, having served with her

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173 The concept of the covenant brought forth here, clearly is a reference to Puritan covenant theology with both, its religious as well as socio-political implications (Corbett/Corbett-Hemeyer/Wilson 26).

174 Also see: Romano, Flavio. “Clinton and Blair: The Political Economy of the Third Way.” *Journal of Economics and Social Policy*. 10.2. (2006): 1-17. Print.

175 See, for example: Devroy, Ann. “Clinton Calls for a Centrist ‘Social Compact!’” *The Washington Post*. 25 Jan. 1995. Web. 03 Jan. 2015. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/states/stories/sou012595.htm>>.

176 Also see: Vobejda, Barbara. “Clinton Signs Welfare Bill Amid Division.” *The Washington Post*. 23. Aug. 1996. Web. 12 Jan. 2015. <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/welfare/stories/wf082396.htm>>.

husband as a full political partner (Healy, “Resume Factor”). Thus the open appropriation of Bill Clinton’s presidency was not an option for the Obama campaign. Instead, Obama chose to appropriate two other presidential predecessors: Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan.

In his second autobiography, Obama wrote extensively on the long-term economic influence of Roosevelt and Reagan, with scant mention of President Clinton. Compared to his extended analysis of other presidents’ achievements, Obama’s observations on Clinton’s economic impact convey modest appreciation at best:

[M]any voters continued to look to the government during economic downturns, and Bill Clinton’s call for more aggressive government action on the economy helped lift him to the White House. After the politically disastrous defeat of his health-care plan and the election of a Republican Congress in 1994, Clinton had to trim his ambitions but was able to put a progressive slant on some of Reagan’s goals. Declaring the era of big government over, Clinton signed welfare reform into law, pushed tax cuts for the middle class and working poor, and worked to reduce bureaucracy and red tape. And it was Clinton who would accomplish what Reagan never did, putting the nation’s fiscal house in order even while lessening poverty and making modest new investments in education and job training. By the time Clinton left office, it appeared as if some equilibrium had been achieved – a smaller government, but one that retained the social safety net FDR had first put into place. (*Audacity* 157)

During the campaign Obama actively distanced his own run for office from Clinton’s presidency, potentially anticipating his future opponent Hillary Clinton. In an interview with the *Reno Gazette Journal* that caused quite a controversy among Democrats, Obama said that he saw John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan as crucial watershed moments for the presidency, and considered the administrations and policies of Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton significantly less relevant (“Interview *Reno Gazette Journal*”)<sup>177</sup>.

Although Obama avoided comparisons with Bill Clinton, his approach to economic policy is similar to Clinton’s positions in the 1990s<sup>178</sup>. Obama needed to sidestep accusations of copying Bill Clinton’s socio-economic agenda and its underlying script. Thus he focused on Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan as a solution to his “Clinton prob-

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177 Another example is Obama’s refusal to comment on the position he held over the course of his political career towards Bill Clinton’s 1996 health care reform. See e.g.: Davis, Teddy. “Obama Shifts on Welfare Reform.” *ABC News*. 2 Jul. 2008. Web. 18 Jan. 2015 <<http://blogs.abcnews.com/politicalradar/2008/07/obama-shifts-on.html>>.

178 Obama’s offer of a new approach to socioeconomic challenges facing the United States is not a copy of Clinton’s “New Covenant” politics. Clinton’s approach to the interrelating key question of responsibility and the role of government in a community is much more informed by a conservative and rather Republican “debt” principle. This becomes particularly clear in his 1991 “New Covenant” speech, where he explained: “Today we need to forge a New Covenant that will repair the damaged bond between the people and their government and restore our basic values – the notion that our country has a responsibility to help people get ahead, that citizens have not only the right but a responsibility to rise as far and as high as their talents and determination can take them, and that we’re all in this together. We must make good on the words of Thomas Jefferson, who said, ‘A debt of service is due from every man to his country proportional to the bounties which nature and fortune have measured to him’” (“New Covenant”, 1991). Obama’s position, described in a later chapter, is quite different. For more on that question see: Lizza, Ryan. “The Agitator.” *New Republic*. 19 Mar. 2007. Web. 24 Jun. 2012. <<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/the-agitator-barack-obamas-unlikely-political-education>>; Kovalski, Serge. “Obama’s Organizing Years, Guiding Others and Finding Himself.” *The New York Times*. 7 Jul. 2008. Web. 17 Jan. 2015. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/07/us/politics/07community.html?pagewanted=all>>.

lem”. Setting the stage for his performance with the cultural memory of two seemingly diametrically opposed figures allowed Obama to indirectly evoke Bill Clinton’s successful “Third Way” politics without directly alluding to Clinton’s presidency.

Obama’s decision to use Roosevelt and Reagan, of all people, is particularly interesting. As William Leuchtenburg observes, Ronald Reagan’s, a former “FDRian”<sup>179</sup>, highest aim was to “dismantle the Roosevelt coalition” (225). Speaking on behalf of Barry Goldwater’s presidential candidacy, in a speech that kick-started his Republican career, Reagan used a famous line from Roosevelt’s 1936 acceptance speech: “This generation has a rendezvous with destiny” (Roosevelt, “Acceptance Speech”, 1936). Reagan turned the phrase “rendezvous with destiny” against the Democrats, the party of New Deal liberalism, proclaiming

You and I have a rendezvous with destiny. We’ll preserve for our children this, the last best hope of man on earth, or we’ll sentence them to take the last step into a thousand years of darkness. (“Time For Choosing”, 1964)

Against all odds, Obama successfully married the father of the New Deal and the fierce advocate for the free market’s “Invisible Hand” in his Imagined Presidency, praising Reagan as a “transformative leader” (“Interview Reno Gazette Journal”) and FDR’s achievement of a powerful “new social compact” (*Audacity* 176)<sup>180</sup>.

This chapter describes how Obama escaped the image of the “typical Democrat” as an “extreme liberal” (Sinclair 29), by adopting a pragmatic, non-polarized approach toward the economy. He presented the story of his climb up the ladder of opportunity, and his past as a community organizer, casting both as the source of his political know-how and effectiveness. Obama, according to his campaign, was committed to finding “American solutions” to the economic crisis (Obama, “American Stories, American Solutions”, 2008) by, as Clinton claimed during the 2008 Democratic convention, “rebuild[ing] the American Dream” (Clinton, “Convention Speech”, 2008). “That’s the promise of America”, Obama declared on the same occasion, “the idea that we are responsible for ourselves, but that we rise and fall as one nation” (“Acceptance Speech”, 2008).

#### 4.6.1. Reagan’s Road to the Land of Opportunity

Obama based part of his Imagined Presidency on the populist conservative argument

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<sup>179</sup> What has to be noted in this context is that Ronald Reagan also had a “special relationship” with FDR: He used to be a member of the Democratic Party as a young man and politician, as well as an ardent supporter of FDR’s politics during that time. As Reagan wrote in his autobiography, “I had become a Democrat by birth, I suppose, and a few months after my twenty-first birthday, I cast my first vote for Roosevelt and the full Democratic ticket. And, like Jack – and millions of other Americans – I soon idolized FDR. He’d entered the White House facing a national emergency as grim as any the country has ever faced, and acting quickly, he had implemented a plan of action to deal with the crisis” (*An American Life* 66). As Reagan scholar Joseph Hogan notes in this context, “as an ex-Democrat and old supporter of the New Deal who could recall voting as a young an for FDR, Reagan would present himself, not as a black beast of partisan revenge, but rather as a benevolent counselor” (31).

<sup>180</sup> Clinton’s call for a “new covenant” interestingly finds no mentioning here.

of the “opportunity society”<sup>181</sup> rooted in a “Franklinian” value canon<sup>182</sup>: given the promise of “equal opportunity”, every American’s success will result from self-reliance, personal responsibility, initiative, hard work, industriousness, perseverance and individual accomplishment. In the 2008 campaign, Obama presented himself as someone who had earned his success (Brooks 71) by following the laws of the American Dream – a “maker”, in conservative parlance (Brooks xxii). Conservatives had particularly monopolized the storyline of individual responsibility since the Reagan era<sup>183</sup>. By embedding his specific arguments in a Reaganite narrative, Obama protected his Imagined Presidency from being automatically identified with traditional Democratic Party positions.

Obama used conservative icon Ronald Reagan (Critchlow 219) to set his stage. In his campaigns and presidency, Reagan presented himself as an embodiment of the American Dream, using “emotional rhetoric on the virtues of hard work, family, religion, individualism, and patriotism” (Dallek xxiv). Obama co-opted Reagan’s approach, presenting himself as the staunch, patriotic, heroic American Dreamer<sup>184</sup> that Reagan had evoked in his first inaugural address. Reagan said,

[w]e have every right to dream heroic dreams. Those who say that we’re in a time when there are not heroes, they just don’t know where to look. You can see heroes every day going in and out of factory gates. Others, a handful in number, produce enough food to feed all of us and then the world beyond. You meet heroes across the counter, and they’re on both sides of that counter. There are entrepreneurs with faith in themselves and faith in an idea who create new jobs, new wealth and opportunity. (“Inaugural Address”, 1981)

Obama rejected the typical Democratic characterization of Reagan as the one-dimensional “rugged individualist” enemy (Dunn 265). In his chapter on “Opportunity” in *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama offers a personal assessment of the Reagan years:

as disturbed as I might have been by Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980, as unconvinced as

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**181** See, for example: Newt Gingrich *To Renew America*: “The greatest moral imperative we face is replacing the welfare state with an opportunity society. For every day that we allow the current conditions to continue, we are condemning the poor – and particularly poor children – to being deprived of their basic rights as Americans” (76); or Mitt Romney’s campaign speech, on 20 Dec. 2011: “In a merit-based society, people achieve their dreams through hard work, education, risk-taking, and even a little luck. An opportunity society produces pioneers and inventors; it inspires its citizens to build and create. And these people exert effort and take risks, and when they do so, they employ and lift others and create prosperity. Their success does not make others poorer. It makes all of us better off. President Obama sees America differently. He believes in an entitlement society. Once we thought that ‘entitlement’ meant that Americans were entitled to the privilege of trying to succeed in the greatest nation in the world. Americans fought and died to earn and protect that entitlement. But today, the new entitlement battle of this president is over the size of the check you get from Washington” (“Speech Bedford”, 2011). or Spalding, Matthew. *America’s Opportunity For All*. Washington D.C.: Heritage Foundation, 2013. Web. 19 Jan. 2015. <[http://thf\\_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2013/Opportunity/AmOppfAll\\_Highlights.pdf](http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2013/Opportunity/AmOppfAll_Highlights.pdf)>.

**182** The idea of self-making through hard work and self-improvement and the corresponding concept of the self-made man most prominently promoted by Benjamin Franklin in his *Autobiography* (1791) and in his *Poor Richards Almanac* series (1733-1758, including the 1758 essay “Way to Wealth”) has always been a notion present in the American socio-economic and political discourse (Paul, *The Myths* 370-390).

**183** Ronald Reagan presented his politics as being deeply rooted in these Franklinian ideals and values, while at the same time promoting the revitalization of this Franklinian value canon as central solution to contemporary socio-economic challenges (Engel 211).

**184** In context of presidential politics Ronald Reagan stands out with regard to being closely associated with the idea of the American Dream. In the American public and media discourse Ronald Reagan has been, time and again, dubbed the “American Dreamer” or “Dreamer-in-Chief” as for example in: Gibbs, Nancy. “The All-American President: Ronald Wilson Reagan (1911-2004).” *Time Magazine*. 14 Jun. 2004. Web. 18 May 2013. <<http://time.com/2823516/ronald-reagan-obituary/>>; Meacham, Jon. “American Dreamer.” *Newsweek*. 13 Jun. 2004. Web. 18 May 2013. <<http://www.newsweek.com/american-dreamer-129135>>; Borucki, Wesley. *Ronald Reagan: Heroic Dreamer*. Hauppauge: Nova Science Publishers, 2014. Print.

I might have been by his John Wayne, Father Knows Best pose, his policy by anecdote, and his gratuitous assaults on the poor, I understood his appeal. It was the same appeal that the military bases back in Hawaii had always held for me as a young boy, with their tidy streets and well-oiled machinery, the crisp uniforms and crisper salutes. It was related to the pleasure I still get from watching a well-played baseball game, or my wife gets from watching reruns of The Dick Van Dyke Show. Reagan spoke to America's longing for order, our need to believe that we are not simply subject to blind, impersonal forces but that we can shape our individual and collective destinies, so long as we rediscover the traditional virtues of hard work, patriotism, personal responsibility, optimism, and faith. (*Audacity* 31)

Although critical of Reagan's public performance and his politics, Obama applauded Reagan's ability to regenerate Americans' belief in their personal agency. Obama's description of Reagan's political values leaves no doubt that he shares this aspect of the "Reaganite ethos". Obama argued that Reagan's success came not only from his skillful communication (*Audacity* 31), but also from the "failures of liberal government, during a period of economic stagnation, to give middle-class voters any sense that it was fighting for them" (*Audacity* 31).

In criticizing his party's failures, Obama underscored Reagan's success in the 1980s. Obama also commented critically on the liberal rhetoric during the Reagan era, indirectly aligning himself with the conservative call for more individual responsibility:

A lot of liberal rhetoric did seem to value rights and entitlements over duties and responsibilities. Reagan may have exaggerated the sins of the welfare state, and certainly liberals were right to complain that his domestic policies tilted heavily toward economic elites, with corporate raiders making tidy profits throughout the eighties while unions were busted and the income for the average working stiff flatlined. Nevertheless, by promising to side with those who worked hard, obeyed the law, cared for their families, and loved their country, Reagan offered Americans a sense of a common purpose that liberals seemed no longer able to muster. (Obama, *Audacity* 32)

Here Obama appears to admire how Reagan fostered collective meaning-making for an American public that had lost its common values, and Obama's criticism of Democrats' "liberal rhetoric" implies approval of Reagan. Obama's credibility as a heroic American Dreamer is obvious when he discusses Kennedy and Reagan in an interview. Obama commented only briefly on Kennedy<sup>185</sup>, reflecting more extensively on Reagan's presidency:

I think Ronald Reagan changed the trajectory of America in a way that Richard Nixon did not and in a way that Bill Clinton did not. He put us on a fundamentally different path because the country was ready for it. They felt like with all the excesses of the 60s and the 70s and government had grown and grown but there wasn't much sense of accountability in terms of how it was operating. I think he tapped into what people were already feeling. Which is we want clarity, we want optimism, we want a return to that sense of dynamism and entrepreneurship that had been missing. ("Interview Reno Gazette Journal")

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<sup>185</sup> In his short comment on John F. Kennedy, Obama said, "I think Kennedy, 20 years earlier, moved the country in a fundamentally different direction. So I think a lot of it has to do with the times. I think we are in one of those fundamentally different times right now where people think that things, the way they are going, just aren't working" ("Interview Reno Gazette Journal"). 26 Mar. 2008 <<http://www.rgj.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080115/VIDEO/80115026>>



Although he never lauds Reagan's political decisions, Obama uses the present tense in describing Reagan's sense of the public desire for "dynamism and entrepreneurship" as a worthwhile aim of his own campaign:

I think it's fair to say that the Republicans were the party of ideas for a pretty long chunk of time there over the last 10, 15 years, in the sense that they were challenging conventional wisdom. ("Interview Reno Gazette Journal")

This interview received heavy criticism from Democratic contenders. Jon Edwards bashed Obama for using "Ronald Reagan as an example for change"<sup>186</sup> (Bosman, "Edwards Attacks Obama"). Hillary Clinton declared that

[m]y leading opponent the other day said that he thought the Republicans had better ideas than Democrats the last 10 to 15 years. That's not how I remember the last 10 to 15 years. (qtd. In Suarez, "Clinton Hits Obama")

Instead of compromising Obama as a Democratic "traitor", however, the competitors' predictable reactions made Obama's appropriation of Reagan seem more plausible and sincere.

Obama also established Reagan as his performative site by using Reagan's signature rhetorical style of celebrating America's uniqueness. As William Steding points out, Reagan's rhetoric is decidedly different from other 20<sup>th</sup> century Presidents: "Exceptionalist rhetoric", he writes, "was Reagan's chosen alchemic elixir to affect the renewal of the American spirit" (114). After John F. Kennedy, and especially after Reagan presented himself as the ideal typical embodiment of American Exceptionalism, bold exceptionalist rhetoric became a tricky proposition for the Democratic Party (Restad 15). But very early on, Obama adopted the American exceptionalism storyline.

[...] America is an unlikely place – a country built on defiance of the odds; on a belief in the impossible. And I remind you of this because as you set out to live your own stories of success and achievement, it's now your turn to help keep it this way. It's your turn to keep this daringly radical but unfailingly simple notion of America alive – that no matter where you're born or how much your parents have; no matter what you look like or what you believe in, you can still rise to become whatever you want; still go on to achieve great things; still pursue the happiness you hope for. Today, this dream sounds common – perhaps even cliché – yet for most of human history it's been anything but. As a servant of Rome, a peasant in China, or a subject of King George, there were very few unlikely futures. No matter how hard you worked or struggled for something better, you knew you'd spend your life forced to build somebody else's empire; to sacrifice for someone

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<sup>186</sup> John Edwards explained why he has never seen anything good in the politics of Ronald Reagan: "He was openly – openly – intolerant of unions and the right to organize. He openly fought against the union and the organized labor movement in this country", Edwards said during a campaign event in Henderson, Nevada. "He openly did extraordinary damage to the middle class and working people, created a tax structure that favored the very wealthiest Americans and caused the middle class and working people to struggle every single day. The destruction of the environment, you know, eliminating regulation of companies that were polluting and doing extraordinary damage to the environment" (Bosman, "Edward Attacks"). Hillary Clinton further elaborated her criticism in her assessment of the Reagan era: "I don't think it's a better idea to privatize Social Security. I don't think it's a better idea to try to eliminate the minimum wage. I don't think it's a better idea to undercut health benefits and to give drug companies the right to make billions of dollars by giving prescription drugs to Medicare recipients. I don't think it's a better idea to shut down the government and drive us into debt" (Suarez, "Clinton Hits Obama").



else's cause. (Obama, "Commencement Speech UMass", 2006)

In drawing attention to American exceptionalism, Obama expropriated the myth of American uniqueness that had been the hallmark of the Republican Party since the late 1970s.

Obama tapped into the cultural memory of the Reagan presidency with rhetoric similar to, and sometimes directly referencing, Reagan's own. Time and again Obama referred to John Winthrop's "shining city upon a hill" mentioned so frequently by Reagan:

I've spoken of the shining city all my political life [...] [I]n my mind it was a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace, a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity, and if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it and see it still. (Reagan, "Farewell Speech", 1989)

On the one hand, Obama used Reagan's trope to display his patriotic belief in America's exceptionalism:

[A]s the centuries passed, the people of the world grew restless. They were tired of tyranny and weary of their lot in life. And as they saw merchants start to sail across oceans and explorers set off in search of new worlds, they followed. It was right here, in the waters around us, where the American experiment began. As the earliest settlers arrived on the shores of Boston and Salem and Plymouth, they dreamed of building a City upon a Hill. And the world watched, waiting to see if this improbable idea called America would succeed. ("Commencement Speech UMass", 2006)

On the other hand, Obama also harnessed the trope to criticize the status quo, thus styling himself as protector and restorer of America's exceptionalist status. A statement from his September 2008 presidential debate with John McCain nicely illustrates this strategy, along with Obama's appropriation of Reagan's rhetorical trope of America as a "beacon of hope for the world":

[T]his is the greatest country on Earth. But because of some of the mistakes that have been made ... we, I think, are going to have a lot of work to do in the next administration to restore that sense that America is that shining beacon on a hill. ("Presidential Debate September", 2008)

Reagan had predicted in his 1981 inaugural address that

as we renew ourselves here in our own land, we will be seen as having greater strength throughout the world. We will again be the exemplar of freedom and a beacon of hope for those who do not now have freedom. ("Inaugural Address", 1981)

Obama, in a campaign speech, similarly promised that

at this defining moment, we will do what previous generations of Americans have done, and unleash the promise of our people, unlock the promise of our country, and make sure

that America remains a beacon of opportunity and prosperity for all the world. (“Ohio Speech Education”, 2008)

Obama also used a third Reagan trope for America’s exceptional status: “the last, best hope of man”, which Reagan took from Abraham Lincoln’s 1862 address to the Congress. Reagan had emphasized a narrative of America’s “manifest destiny” as a “redeemer nation”:

We cannot escape our destiny, nor should we try to do so. The leadership of the free world was thrust upon us two centuries ago in that little hall of Philadelphia. In the days following World War II, when the economic strength and power of America was all that stood between the world and the return to the dark ages, Pope Pius XII said, “The American people have a great genius for splendid and unselfish actions. Into the hands of America God has placed the destinies of an afflicted mankind.” We are indeed, and we are today, the last best hope of man on earth. (“We Will be a Shining City upon a Hill”, 1974)

Obama used the “last best hope” line to communicate a message like Reagan’s about America’s predetermined role and unique mission as a model for the world:

I [have] limitless faith in the capacity of the American people. Because if we are willing to work for it, and fight for it, and believe in it, then I am absolutely certain that generations from now, we will be able to look back and tell our children that this was the moment when we began to provide care for the sick and good jobs to the jobless; this was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal; this was the moment when we ended a war and secured our nation and restored our image as the last, best hope on Earth. (Obama, “Victory Night Speech St. Paul”, 2008)

In his 2008 acceptance speech Obama used the trope to claim his role as restorer of American exceptionalism:

And I will restore our moral standing so that America is once again that last, best hope for all who are called to the cause of freedom, who long for lives of peace, and who yearn for a better future. (“Acceptance Speech”, 2008)

To reinforce this storyline, Obama chose a patriotic country song for his finale in Denver, the “unofficial Bush theme song” (Willman 87) in Bush’s 2000 and 2004 election campaign, Brooks and Dunn’s “Only in America”<sup>187</sup>. The song’s refrain is “Only in America/ Dreaming in red, white and blue/ Only in America/ Where we dream as big as we want to/ We all get a chance/ Everybody gets to dance/Only in America”<sup>188</sup>.

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<sup>187</sup> Brooks and Dunn played at George W. Bush’s 2000 Inauguration. For more see: Willman, Chris. “‘Only in America’ could Obama Borrow the GOP’s Favorite Brooks & Dunn Song.” *Entertainment Weekly*. 29 Aug. 2008. Web. 23 Feb. 2015. <<http://www.ew.com/article/2008/08/29/only-in-america>>.

<sup>188</sup> Complete lyrics Garth & Brooks “Only In America”: Sun coming up over New York City, School bus driver in a traffic jam, Starin’ at the faces in her rearview mirror, Looking at the promise of the Promised Land, One kid dreams of fame and fortune, One kid helps pay the rent, One could end up going to prison, One just might be president. [Chorus] Only in America, Dreaming in red, white and blue, Only in America, Where we dream as big as we want to. We all get a chance, Everybody gets to dance, Only in America. Sun going down on an L.A.. Freeway, Newlyweds in the back of a limousine, A welder’s son and a banker’s daughter, All they want is everything, She came out here to be an actress, He was the singer in a band, They

Obama's Imagined Presidency promised economic recovery with a storyline of renewing public faith in the American Dream. Obama used his own story, and his family's, to support his offer with regard to socio-economic progress:

[M]y story is a quintessentially American story. It's the same story that has made this country a beacon for the world – a story of struggle and sacrifice on the part of my forebearers and a story overcoming great odds. I carry that story with me each and every day, it's why I wake up every day and do this, and it's why I continue to hold such hope for the future of a country where the dreams of its people have always been possible. (“Associated Press Speech”, 2008)

Obama's main narrative theme is the story of his grandparents. His grandfather, in Obama's first autobiography, is described as an ideal-typical American Dreamer intent on escaping “the empty, dust-ridden plains” (*Dreams* 15) of the Depression era Midwest, where “fear and lack of imagination choke your dreams” (*Dreams* 15):

He won't end up like that, my grandfather insists; he has dreams, he has plans; he will infect my grandmother with the great peripatetic itch that had brought both their forebears across the Atlantic and half of a continent so many years before. They eloped just in time for the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and my grandfather enlisted. [M]y mother is born at the army base where Gramps is stationed; my grandmother is Rosie the Riveter, working on a bomber assembly line; my grandfather sloshes around in the mud of France, part of Patton's army. (*Dreams* 15)

The message: Obama's family is deeply invested in America's promise of progression and upward mobility. His grandfather's commitment to the spirit of progress is likened to the pioneers' westward migration. The university class his grandfather attended after the war, Obama continues,

couldn't contain his ambitions, his restlessness, and so the family moved again, first back to Kansas, then through a series of small Texas towns, then finally to Seattle[...] Gramps worked as a furniture salesman; they bought a house and found themselves bridge partners. They were pleased that my mother proved bright in school [...]. And that's where the story might have stopped: a home, a family, a respectable life. Except something must have still been gnawing at my grandfather's heart. I can imagine him standing at the edge of the Pacific, his hair prematurely gray, his tall, lanky frame bulkier now, looking out at the horizon until he could see it curve and still smelling, deep in his nostrils, the oil rigs and corn husks and hard-bitten lives that he thought he had left far behind. So that when the manager of the furniture company where he worked happened to mention that a new store was about to open in Honolulu, that business prospects seemed limitless there, what with statehood right around the corner, he would rush home that same day and talk my grandmother into selling their house and packing up yet again, to embark on the final leg of their journey, west, toward the setting sun [...]. (*Dreams* 15)

The clear message: Obama's family was headed by a true “American character” (*Dreams* 16) who “embraced the notion of freedom and individualism and the open road without

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just might go back to Oklahoma, And talk about the stars they could have been. [*Chorus*] × 2 Yeah only in America, Where we dream in red, white and blue, Yeah we dream as big as we want to.

always knowing its price” (*Dreams* 16). Praising his grandfather as a rugged individualist, self-made man, and adventurous striver, is supposed to substantiate Obama’s own claim to be an American Dreamer. His grandfather’s influence on Obama was promoted visually in photos released by his campaign (cf. [Fig. 107](#), [108](#) & [109](#)).

His grandmother’s biography was used in a similar fashion. “A trailblazer of sorts” (*Dreams* 56) from a mid-western town full of “decency and endurance and the pioneer spirit” (*Dreams* 13), his grandmother became the first woman vice-president at a bank in Hawaii (*Dreams* 56):

Not that Toot had anticipated her success. Without a college education, she had started out as a secretary to help defray the costs of my unexpected birth. But she had a quick mind and sound judgment, and the capacity for sustained work. Slowly she had risen, playing by the rules, until she reached the threshold where competence didn’t suffice. There she would stay for twenty years, with scarcely a vacation, watching as her male counterparts kept moving up the corporate ladder, playing a bit loose with information passed on between the ninth hole and the ride to the clubhouse, becoming wealthy men. (*Dreams* 56)

Obama characterizes his grandmother as epitomizing Reagan’s meritocratic hero, emphasizing her perseverance, hard work, discipline, endurance and sacrifice. It is this, Obama suggests, that made possible her whole family’s move up the social ladder:

More than once, my mother would tell Toot that the bank shouldn’t get away with such blatant sexism. But Toot would just pooh-pooh my mother’s remarks, saying that everybody could find a reason to complain about something. Toot didn’t complain. Every morning, she woke up at five A.M. and changed from the frowsy muu-muus she wore around the apartment into a tailored suit and high-heeled pumps. Her face powdered, her hips girdled, her thinning hair bolstered, she would board the six-thirty bus to arrive at her downtown office before anyone else. From time to time, she would admit a grudging pride in her work and took pleasure in telling us the inside story behind the local financial news. [...] What Toot believed kept her going were the needs of her grandchildren and the stoicism of her ancestors. (*Dreams* 57)

At important events, Obama described his grandmother as a role model:

[W]hen I hear a woman talk about the difficulties of starting her own business or making her way in the world, I think about my grandmother, who worked her way up from the secretarial pool to middle management, despite years of being passed over for promotions because she was a woman. She’s the one who taught me about hard work. She’s the one who put off buying a new car or a new dress for herself so that I could have a better life. She poured everything she had into me. And although she can no longer travel, I know that she’s watching tonight and that tonight is her night, as well. (“Acceptance Speech”, 2008)

Obama also, time and again, emphasized that his grandmother was the main source of his character<sup>189</sup>. He told *Vanity Fair* that his grandmother instilled in him “a lot of that

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<sup>189</sup> Other examples include an interview with his sister, Maya Soetoro-Ng, where she explained that “[f]rom our grandmother, he gets his pragmatism, his levelheadedness, his ability to stay centered in the eye of the storm. His sensible, no-nonsense (side) is inherited from her” (qtd. in “Toot Obama Grandmother”)

very mid-western, sort of traditional sense of prudence and hard work” (Purdum, “Raising Obama”). On other occasions Obama said that his grandmother “has really been the rock of the family, the foundation of the family. Whatever strength and discipline that I have, it comes from her” (“The Early Show Interview”, 2008).

Obama used his family’s Kansas roots to cast himself as the hero of a Reaganite version of the American Dream. The so-called heartland is the “land of endless opportunity”. Obama’s first autobiography includes extensive description of his grandparents’ life in Kansas, the “dab-smack, landlocked center of the country” (*Dreams* 13).

[They] had grown up less than twenty miles away from each other – my grandmother in Augusta, my grandfather in El Dorado, towns too small to warrant boldface on a road map – and the childhoods they liked to recall for my benefit portrayed small-town, Depression-era America in all its innocent glory: Fourth of July parades and the picture shows on the side of a barn; fireflies in a jar and the taste of vine-ripe tomatoes, sweet as apples; dust storms and hailstorms and classrooms filled with farm boys who got sewn into their woolen underwear at the beginning of winter and stank like pigs as the months wore on. Even the trauma of bank failures and farm foreclosures seemed romantic when spun through the loom of my grandparents’ memories, a time when hardship, the great leveler that had brought people closer together, was shared by all. [...] It had to do with something called respectability – there were respectable people and not-so-respectable people – and although you didn’t have to be rich to be respectable, you sure had to work harder at it if you weren’t. (*Dreams* 13)

The image of the heartland as “home to national values of self-reliance, independence, kindness, pragmatism, industry, and humility” (Johnson 16)<sup>190</sup> was a major theme in Obama’s performative scripts on socio-economic questions. In January 2008, Obama made a highly publicized visit to his grandfather’s home town, El Dorado. Obama’s narrative scripting was enhanced by the interviewer’s introduction:

We’re here in Kansas City, Missouri, following Barack Obama’s campaign. The news today, as we said, was in neighboring Kansas. That’s a state where Barack Obama has some deep roots. His mother was born in the state of Kansas. His grandfather was born and raised in the town of El Dorado, Kansas. And that’s where we went. He had never been there before [...]. It’s a cold winter afternoon on main street in El Dorado, Kansas. Main street, a little sleepy, a little slow, but placid and tidy and safe, an iconic American place and that’s precisely why Barack Obama came here today. This trip is more than just another stop on the trail for Obama. It is, in a way, a homecoming. (“Obama on Nightline”, 2008)

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In an *ABC News* feature on Obama, he said that his grandmother, who “never got a college education”, is “where I get my practical streak. That part of me that’s hardheaded, I get from her. She’s tough as nails” (qtd. in Whitcraft, “Childhood”).

**190** For more on the myth of the American “Heartland” see: “The heartland myth provides a short-hand cultural common sense framework for “All-American” identification, redeeming goodness, face-to-face community, sanctity, and emplaced ideals to which a desirous and nostalgic public discourse repeatedly returns. Positively embraced as the locus of solid dependability, cultural populism, and producerist, “plain folks” independence, the Midwest as Heartland, in this iteration, symbolizes the ideal nation (in other words, “we the People” are, ideally, Midwesterners)” (Johnson 5); or “Popular representations of the frontier tell us that the U.S. West is the nation’s heartland, a place where purported national values of independence, self-reliance, and hard work are thought to cultivate through a unique and special relationship with the rural land” (Barraclough 12); or Comment by Paul Krugman that, “the denizens of the heartland, we’re told, are rugged, self-reliant” (“True Blue Americans”).

Although Obama was a newcomer to El Dorado, at the local diner he declared, “I’m home. This chili tastes like grandpa’s” (“Obama on Nightline”, 2008). Ironically Obama is presenting this storyline at a place called “El Dorado”, a mythical reference to a place of great wealth in the promised land.

Obama infused his grandparents’ story with the heartland myth, telling the press corps that small-town virtues like hard work helped his grandparents “to ride that upward mobility and help me get an education”, and that these virtues are the “ones that we need to rediscover” (qtd. in La Ganga, “Obama Family Roots”).

Obama’s El Dorado speech also used his family’s story to legitimize his candidacy, demonstrating that he was not running on “blind optimism” but rather “because of a story I’ve lived” (“Speech El Dorado”, 2008). Before detailing his proposals to improve the economy, Obama presented his grandparents as exemplars of the American heartland, their story the source of his own:

It’s a story that began here, in El Dorado, when a young man fell in love with a young woman who grew up down the road in Augusta. They came of age in the midst of the Depression, where he found odd jobs on small farms and oil rigs, always dodging the bank failures and foreclosures that were sweeping the nation. They married just after war broke out in Europe, and he enlisted in Patton’s army after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. She gave birth to their daughter on the base at Fort Leavenworth, and worked on a bomber assembly line when he left for war. In a time of great uncertainty and anxiety, my grandparents held on to a simple dream – that they could raise my mother in a land of boundless opportunity; that their generation’s struggle and sacrifice could give her the freedom to be what she wanted to be; to live how she wanted to live. (“Speech El Dorado”, 2008)

The grandparents are depicted as embodying America’s meritocratic spirit: hard working, patriotic citizens who gave everything to protect freedom and opportunity so the next generation could live in this exceptional place and move up the social ladder as well. With a “story [that] could only happen in the United States” (“Speech El Dorado”, 2008), Obama adapted conservative rhetoric celebrating America’s unique status as “land of endless opportunity”. Obama closed his El Dorado speech with this storyline, equating his grandparents’ experience with the problems of contemporary Americans. His grandparents’ investment in the American Dream legitimizes his own appropriation of this principle in his campaign<sup>191</sup>:

In the face of war and depression; through great struggle and tremendous sacrifice, that is the future that my grandparents’ generation forged for their children. It is why that

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191 Another example for the employment of this narrative script is Obama’s speech “Reclaiming the American Dream”, held in Bettendorf, Iowa on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2007: “It’s change that I’ve been fighting for since I moved out to Chicago over two decades ago. Because those dreams – American dreams – are worth fighting for. And because I wouldn’t be standing on this stage today if it weren’t for the dreams of those who came before me. The dreams of my grandfather – who marched in Patton’s Army and moved his family west in search of opportunity. The dreams of my grandmother – who was up at dawn and worked twice as hard at her job because a woman had to work harder to get ahead. The dreams of my father who crossed an ocean because America offered that light to the world. The dreams of my mother - a single mom who understood that a life rich in family and experience was more important than a life of riches. The dreams of those men and women on the South Side of Chicago, who fought with me to create a future for their community after the steel plant was shuttered” (“Reclaiming the American Dream”, 2007).



little girl who was born at Fort Leavenworth could dream as big as the Kansas sky. And it is why I stand before you today – because there are two little girls I tuck in at night who deserve a world in which they can dream those same big dreams; in which they can have the same chances as any other child living any other place. It is a dream I share for your children and all of our children, and that is why it’s American – always hoping, always reaching, always striving for that better day ahead. I hope you’ll join me on that journey, and I thank you for welcoming me back to the place my family called home. (“Speech El Dorado”, 2008)

Identifying his grandparents’ life story with the American heartland and claiming it as the origin of his own identity, Obama infused his Imagined Presidency with a conservative myth of the American Dream<sup>192</sup>.

The Obama campaign promoted this American Dream narrative in a variety of expensive television advertisements<sup>193</sup>. Two that appeared in all fifty states exemplify the narrative connections among Obama’s story, his grandparents, and the American heartland values they supposedly embodied: “The Country I Love” (First Air Date: 20 Jun. 2008) and “The Country I Believe in”/“Grandfather” (First Air Date: 7 Oct. 2008). “The Country I Love” centers on Obama’s claim to his grandparents’ “Kansas values”.

I’m Barack Obama. America is a country of strong families and strong values. My life’s been blessed by both. I was raised by a single mom and my grandparents. We didn’t have much money, but they taught me values straight from the Kansas heartland where they grew up. Accountability and self-reliance. Love of country. Working hard without making excuses. [...] I’ll never forget those values, and if I have the honor of taking the oath of office as president, it will be with a deep and abiding faith in the country I love. (“The Country I Love”)

Obama celebrates those values usually evoked by conservative politicians in their arguments for the capitalist free market as the ultimate source of a level playing field and equal opportunity. The “Grandfather” ad focuses on his grandparents as representatives of the “up-by-your-own-bootstraps” storyline, while at the same time associating them with a conservative meritocratic value canon. Beginning with old films of the return of astronauts from a space mission (cf. [Fig. 110 – 112](#)), the narrative context alludes to America as the land with unlimited opportunities for those willing to achieve and succeed: not even the sky constitutes a limit.

A narrative voiceover by Obama accompanies the visuals.

One of my earliest memories: going with my grandfather to see some of the astronauts

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<sup>192</sup> It of course has to be noted that the use of the myth of the American Dream has always been a theme central to presidential election campaigns in general. It however can be argued that Obama’s specific use of the American Dream – the extremely close interweaving of his and his family’s story with the latter – stands out among recent presidential election campaigns. For more on the American Dream rhetoric in contemporary American political culture, see: Ghosh, Cyril. *The Politics of the American Dream: Democratic Inclusion in Contemporary American Political Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Print.

<sup>193</sup> The total cost of the “The Country I Love” ad summed up to a total cost of \$12,747,062, the “Grandfather” ad to a total cost of \$7,820,665. See “Obama Campaign Ad Grandfather”, *The New York Times* <<http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/president/advertising/ads/6761842--barack-obama-grandfather-60>>; “Obama Campaign Ad The Country I Love”, *The New York Times*, <<http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/president/advertising/ads/6477960--barack-obama-the-country-i-love-60>>.

being brought back after a splashdown. Sitting on his shoulders and waving a little American flag. And my grandfather, you know, would say... boy, Americans we can do anything when we put our minds to it. ("Grandfather")

The "everything is possible in America" storyline is reinforced with a photo of the young Obama and his grandfather (cf. [Fig. 113](#)).

The audience, guided by a male narrator's comment that "his life was shaped by the values he learned as a boy" ("Grandfather"), is finally introduced to Obama's value canon by his own voiceover: "Hard work, honesty, self-reliance, respect for other people, kindness, faith" ("Grandfather"). The two ads perfectly exemplify Obama's narrative use of his grandparents to promote himself in the role of a Reaganite American Dreamer.

Obama appropriated his parents' life stories as well. His father's story is offered as the immigrant version of the American Dream, and his mother's as the source of his humble economic background.

Obama harnessed his father's immigrant past as an independent witness for America's greatness and the wide reach of America's meritocratic promise as "land of endless opportunities". In his first autobiography, Obama presents his father's story as the source of his own belief in the American Dream. Obama first describes his father as "a Kenyan of the of the Luo tribe" (*Dreams* 9), from a poor village<sup>194</sup>, who recognizes the American socio-economic promise from afar:

My father grew up herding his father's goats and attending the local school, set up by the British colonial administration, where he had shown great promise. He eventually won a scholarship to study in Nairobi; and then, on the eve of Kenyan independence, he had been selected by Kenyan leaders and American sponsors to attend a university in the United States, joining the first large wave of Africans to be sent forth to master Western technology and bring it back to forge a new, modern Africa. (*Dreams* 9)

To reinforce his belief in American exceptionalism, Obama offered this storyline on his visit to Berlin. Speaking before an international audience, but with comments directed to American viewers, Obama explained that America was the only country where his father could follow his dreams and fulfill his wish of a better life:

At the height of the Cold War, my father decided, like so many others in the forgotten corners of the world, that his yearning – his dream – required the freedom and opportunity promised by the West. And so he wrote letter after letter to universities all across America until somebody, somewhere answered his prayer for a better life. ("Berlin Speech", 2008)

In this telling, even Obama's African father was an "American Dreamer", his story proof of the reality and efficacy of the American promise.

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<sup>194</sup> On other occasions Obama summoned his paternal grandfather, who also worked hard and made his way up from being a farmer: "my father grew up herding goats in Kenya. His father – my grandfather – was a cook, a domestic servant to the British" ("Berlin Speech", 2008).

On countless occasions, Obama used the immigrant narrative, the “story of ambition and adaptation, hard work and education, assimilation and upward mobility” (*Audacity* 260) to script his Imagined Presidency in conservative terms. Obama frequently described his father as a hard-working, persistent and individualist “achiever”. In a 2006 speech he elaborated on his father’s ambition to be more than merely a poorly educated goatherd<sup>195</sup>:

[H]e wanted more. He dreamed of coming to America so he could further his education, improve his skills, and then return to help lead the next generation of newly independent Kenyans. (“Commencement Speech UMass”, 2006)<sup>196</sup>

In an anecdote about his first visit to his father’s hometown in Africa, Obama drew an analogy between his father’s and his own life story to appropriate his father’s “achiever” spirit as his own:

She [Obama’s African grandmother] opened a trunk and took out a stack of letters, which she handed to me. There were more than thirty of them, all handwritten by my father, all addressed to colleges and universities all across America. They were letters not so different than those I would write twenty-five years later, trying to find a job that would give meaning to my life. And I read these letters, which were in the simple, sometimes awkward, voice of somebody desperate for a chance to come and live his unlikely dream. It is because someone answered that dream that I stand before you today, hopeful for our collective future, excited for your individual prospects, and eager for you to keep the legacy of this country alive in the years to come. (“Commencement Speech UMass”, 2006)

Other examples include Obama’s recounting his father’s success at the University of Hawaii, where he quickly established himself as a leader, and his acceptance in a PhD program at Harvard University (*Dreams* 9-10).

Obama included his mother’s story in his narrative script with the same aim. To present his own exemplary meritocratic struggle up the social ladder, he emphasized that he was raised by a single mom (Newton-Small, “Regular Guy Dilemma”).

In the 2008 convention’s biographical video, an interesting interplay between the visual and textual levels emphasizes that a single-parent family meant both mother and son had to work much harder to make their way up. Early in the video the narrator explains in a highly Franklinian manner: “[I]t was his mother who’d see in him a promise. And understood what she needed to do” (“A Mother’s Promise”). Obama then “replies”: “She’d wake

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<sup>195</sup> Also see Obama’s remarks on his perception of the immigrant spirit: “This is America. A place where millions of restless adventurers from all over the world, still weary of their lot in life – still hoping for something better – have longed to travel great distances and take great risks for a chance to arrive on our shores. My father was one of them. Born and raised in Kenya before that nation was freed from the shackles of colonialism, he grew up herding his father’s goats and, from time to time, attending local schools” (“Commencement Speech UMass”, 2006).

<sup>196</sup> Another example is an account in Obama’s *Dreams from my Father* about how his father was invited to speak in front of his high school class: “He was leaning against Miss Hefty’s thick oak desk and describing the deep gash in the earth where mankind had first appeared. He spoke of the wild animals that still roamed the plains, the tribes that still required a young boy to kill a lion to prove his manhood. He spoke of the customs of the Luo, how elders received the utmost respect and made laws for all to follow under great-trunked trees. And he told us of Kenya’s struggle to be free, how the British had wanted to stay and unjustly rule the people, just as they had in America; how many had been enslaved only because of the color of their skin, just as they had in America, but that Kenyans, like all of us in the room, longed to be free and develop themselves through hard work and sacrifice” (69).

me up at 4:30 in the morning and we'd sit there and go through my lessons. And I used to complain and grumble. You can imagine an eight-year old kid that woke up at 4:30 in the morning and if I grumbled she said to me: "Well this is no picnic for me either Buster" ("A Mother's Promise"). The narrative is accompanied by photos of Obama alone with his mother (cf. [Fig. 114 & 115](#)).

In the second half of the video, Obama says, "I know what it's like to have no father in the house. To have a mother who is trying to raise kids, work and get her college education at the same time" ("A Mother's Promise"). On a visual level, the message is again underscored with a photo of Obama, his mom and his half-sister Maya (cf. [Fig. 116](#)).

Obama frequently described his mother's determined effort to insure a better future for Barack. For example, Obama attended the local school in Indonesia because they could not afford tuition at the English-speaking international school. To insure that he got his English lessons, she practiced with him every morning before she went to work (Malveaux, "Obama Revealed").

A campaign ad with his half-sister Maya as speaker reinforces the narrative interrelation of their mother's status as single mother, her strong values and work ethic, and Obama's humble roots, while at the same time framing his family's story as characteristically American:

I think our story is a quintessentially American story. What I mean by that is, that this is a story of people who start off with not very much in the sense of material resources. I think my mother reflects the burden of so many women in America who are working hard to offer strong examples for their children and who are having to do so without the support of a life partner [...]. But in spite of her struggles she never complained and never gave up. ("Maya on Her and Barack's Mother")

Obama's story of his immigrant father and his single mother reinforced his status as an American Dreamer who succeeded thanks to his family's roots in the conservative meritocratic and individualist approach to the American Dream<sup>197</sup>. He further substantiated this narrative script by referencing iconic individualist heroes of the American Dream, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Benjamin Franklin<sup>198</sup>.

Linking his life story to the American Dream lent verisimilitude to Obama's Imagined

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<sup>197</sup> Another example for the display of this narrative script is Obama's May 2008 *Meet the Press* interview with Tim Russert. On this occasion Obama, asked about his patriotism, once more supported his claim to embody the ideal-typical American Dream by referencing his family and the values they stand for: "The fact that I'm running for president right now is an indication of how much I love this country, because it has given everything to me. This country has been a great source of good. I've lived overseas and seen the difference between America and what it stands for and what other countries oftentimes stand for and where they fall short. I've said before, my story's not possible in any other country on earth. You know, when I think about this country, I think about my grandfather fighting in World War II in Patton's army; I think about my grandmother staying home – staying back and, and working on a bomber assembly line while she was raising a kid in – as, as they're coming out of a depression. And, and so this country is the – it defines, for me, what's possible for not just me, but for so many people who see this as a beacon of good, including my father, who originally came here seeking an education in this country. So I love this country. It is what I have been fighting for, a ... that America lives up to its values and its ideals" ("Meet the Press Interview", 2008).

<sup>198</sup> Obama listed Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" among his favorite reads on his *Facebook* profile during the 2008 election (Benson, "Candidates' Reading Lists") and wrote extensively about "all those homespun virtues that Benjamin Franklin first popularized in Poor Richard's Almanack and that have continued to inspire our allegiance through successive generations" (*Audacity* 54).

Presidency. The opportunity principle demands personal responsibility, hard work and perseverance. Individualism and self-reliance are celebrated. Obama presented himself as an upwardly mobile and industrious achiever, thereby celebrating the values inherent to Ronald Reagan's American Dreamer, the "All-American individualist" (Cannon, "Ronald Reagan") and claiming these values as his own.

The 2008 convention biographical video presents Obama working his way through college and his career in politics, a successful and energetic "achiever" and "leader". A group portrait shows Obama with fellow Harvard students, the text identifying him as the 1990 president of the renowned Harvard Law Review<sup>199</sup> (cf. [Fig. 117](#)). In another image, he runs up the capitol steps, a singular dynamic man of action (cf. [Fig. 118](#)).

In his first presidential campaign, Obama frequently claimed economic positions that did not align with the liberal, core Democrat party line. He was highly critical of his party's liberal anti-free market and pro-government rhetoric.

There are those who still champion the old-time religion, defending every New Deal and Great Society program from Republican encroachment, achieving ratings of 100 percent from the liberal interest groups. But these efforts seem exhausted, a constant game of defense, bereft of the energy and new ideas needed to address the changing circumstances of globalization or a stubbornly isolated inner city. (*Audacity* 38)

Interestingly, Obama again brought up Ronald Reagan in this context:

[T]he conservative revolution that Reagan helped usher in gained traction because Reagan's central insight – that the liberal welfare state had grown complacent and overly bureaucratic, with Democratic policy makers more obsessed with slicing the economic pie than with growing the pie – contained a good deal of truth. (*Audacity* 156)

He distanced himself from generically liberal approaches to economic questions.

Not every government program worked the way it was advertised. Some functions could be better carried out by the private sector, just as in some cases market-based incentives could achieve the same results as command-and-control-style regulations, at a lower cost and with greater flexibility. [...] And while welfare certainly provided relief for many impoverished Americans, it did create some perverse incentives when it came to the work ethic and family stability. (*Audacity* 157)

In his 2008 acceptance speech, he also demanded that Democrats rethink the government's economic role.

I will [...] go through the federal budget line by line, eliminating programs that no longer work and making the ones we do need work better and cost less, because we cannot meet 21st-century challenges with a 20th-century bureaucracy. And, Democrats, Democrats, we must also admit that fulfilling America's promise will require more than just money. It will require a renewed sense of responsibility from each of us to recover what John F. Kennedy called our intellectual and moral strength. Yes, government must lead on

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<sup>199</sup> That Obama is holding the journals insignial wand also visually stylizes him in the role of a leader.

energy independence, but each of us must do our part to make our homes and businesses more efficient. Yes, we must provide more ladders to success for young men who fall into lives of crime and despair. But we must also admit that programs alone can't replace parents, that government can't turn off the television and make a child do her homework, that fathers must take more responsibility to provide love and guidance to their children. ("Acceptance Speech", 2008)

Obama often paired his criticism of typical liberal positions on the role of government in the market with the promotion of a free-market philosophy reminiscent of Ronald Reagan, defining himself as a non-dogmatic pragmatist on socio-economic issues. This position aligned quite well with his presentation of himself as a "hands-on" American Dreamer: "I'm not a dogmatist. I know that some, you know, my opponents to the right would like to paint me as this woolly-eyed, you know, liberal or wild-eyed" ("Obama Interview Closing Bell", 2008), he told a stock market expert. Asked whether he would call himself "not a liberal", Obama replied, "I believe in the market, I believe in entrepreneurship, I believe in opportunity, I believe in capitalism and I want to do what works" ("Obama Interview Closing Bell", 2008).

Obama's economic speeches also frequently opened with his faith in the free market as the key to America's success:

It's a market that's created a prosperity that is the envy of the world, and opportunity for generations of Americans; a market that has provided great rewards to innovators and risk-takers who've made America a beacon for science and technology and discovery. ("Cooper Union Speech", 2008)

Obama also emphasized the connection between education policy and upward mobility. In an early speech he had asked,

[C]an we honestly say our kids are working twice as hard as the kids in India and China who are graduating ahead of us, with better test scores and the tools they need to kick our butts on the job market? Can we honestly say our teachers are working twice as hard, or our parents? ("Fight for Freedom Fund Dinner Speech", 2005)

Political discourse that combines education, hard work, and economic success comes close to Reagan's demands for more personal responsibility. American culture has always considered education the key to the American Dream, the "primary pathway to success in the social system" (Johnson, "American Dream and Power of Wealth" 34). Republicans and Democrats differ on the role of government and individual responsibility in this context. A number of political positions Obama took in his 2008 campaign were not fully aligned with the traditional Democratic take on the question of education and achievement<sup>200</sup>.

For example, on his 2008 Father's Day speech, instead of merely calling for an exten-

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<sup>200</sup> Law professor Joan Williams provocatively asked in an *Huffington Post* guest editorial on occasion of Obama's 2008 father's day speech: "Do Liberals Believe in Personal Responsibility?" ("Father's Day Speech", 2008).



sion of government programs, Obama described the meritocratic principle as necessary for successful government policy:

It's up to us – as fathers and parents – to instill this ethic of excellence in our children. [A]chievement, self respect, and hard work. It's up to us to set these high expectations. And that means meeting those expectations ourselves. That means setting examples of excellence in our own lives. [...] [I]f they're taking our responsibilities seriously to be there for their children, and set high expectations for them, and instill in them a sense of excellence and empathy, then our government should meet them halfway. (“Father’s Day Speech”, 2008)

Unless parents take responsibility for their children’s education and upbringing, government education policy will make no difference<sup>201</sup>.

[I]f your child is misbehaving at school, don't curse out the teacher. You know who you are. It's not the teacher's fault that your child is misbehaving. [...] Don't blame the teachers, and the government and the schools if you're not doing your job. (qtd. in Kuhnenn, “Obama Urges Parental Responsibility”)

Campaign ads present his position in a similar manner. Interestingly, all nation-wide ads centered on Obama’s own educational experience. An early television ad, “Chances I Had” (First Air Date: 15 Nov. 2007), begins with an Obama saying, “My parents weren’t rich. My father left me when I was very young” (“Chances I Had”). Interestingly Obama emphasizes here that his father left “him” not “him and his mother” or the like. This further emphasizes the storyline of him having had to learn to be self-reliant from very early on. On a visual level this storyline is accompanied by images from the family photo album, showing his parents in one photo, and him with his “absent father” in the other (cf. [Fig. 119](#)). Obama goes on to say that government education programs help only if parents accept personal responsibility to “[i]nstill in our children a sense of excellence. We have to ask more of ourselves if we want (the children) to get the world class education they need” (“Chances I Had”).

The “Turn it Off” ad (First Air Date: 21 Apr. 2007) also presents Obama taking positions reminiscent of Reagan’s. It begins with Obama standing in a classroom (cf. [Fig. 120](#)). The blackboard behind him says “Homework”, implying efforts that belong to the private realm. In the ad, Obama says, “For me, the American Dream began in a room like this. My family didn’t have much money, but education made everything possible” (“Turn it Off”). As President, he will invest in education, but “government can’t do it all” and “[a]s parents we need to turn off the TV, read to our kids, give them that thirst to learn” (“Turn it Off”). Achieving the American Dream, Obama suggests in his educational proposals, depends on individual hard work and discipline – conservative rhetoric prioritizing pri-

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201 Also see: Timiraos, Nick. “Obama Strikes Chord Urging Parents to Be More Responsible.” *Wall Street Journal*. 1 May 2008. Web. 18 Feb. 2015. <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB120960254267657915>> ; Okun, Will. “Obama: Parents Who don't Parent.” *The New York Times*. 23 Jun. 2008. Web. 16 Feb. 2015. <[http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/06/23/parents-who-dont-parent/?\\_r=0](http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/06/23/parents-who-dont-parent/?_r=0)>.

vate responsibility over government or communal responsibility.

To summarize, the narrative scripting of Obama as the Reaganite American Dreamer who firmly believed in a Franklinian value canon helped the American public regain a feeling of agency in the midst of a severe economic crisis. Under Obama's Imagined Presidency, the American electorate could re-imagine America as the land of endless opportunity. This gave Democratic candidate Obama credible expertise in economic policy, which for thirty years had been dominated by the Republicans as inheritors of Reagan's legacy.

#### 4.6.2. FDR's Community and Obama's Communitarian American Dream

Each of the three centuries since the founding of the American republic has produced a president whom the public reveres as an irreproachable paragon of leadership. [...] The twentieth century has seen the elevation of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Doctor New Deal and Doctor Win-the-War, his country's leader in the best and worst of times. (Maney xi)

Obama's narrative for his Imagined Presidency included a dimension at odds with his use of Ronald Reagan: a communitarian principle. In the Great Depression, Roosevelt became the "president of all the people" (Beck-Young 11), based on his populist conviction that

conditions that come with individual freedom are inevitably bound to bring up many questions that mere individual liberty cannot solve. I have always called this the struggle for liberty of the community rather than liberty of the individual. (*My own Story* 17)

Obama's Imagined Presidency is rooted in Roosevelt's idea that "we now realize as we have never before our interdependence on each other; that we cannot merely take, but we must give as well" (Roosevelt, "Inaugural Address", 1933). Obama counterbalanced his call for meritocratic individualism by appropriating Roosevelt, the "liberal icon" (Beck-Young 20).

To distance himself from "reckless individualism", Obama presented himself as a community organizer and grassroots activist safeguarding the American Dream through communitarian political action. He rejected blind Social Darwinist hyper-individualism and emphasized Americans' inevitable interconnection as a community *e pluribus unum*. Obama brought together and appropriated two ideologically contradictory presidential figures by staging his Imagined Presidency, not as a 21<sup>st</sup> century Rooseveltian "New Deal", but by advocating a transformative communitarian redefinition of the New Deal's fundamental idea – an actual "new" New Deal.

The general public and media generally interpreted the 2008 economic crisis as "the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression" (*Washington Post* Faiola, "End Capitalism", *Wall Street Journal*, Hilsenrath "Worst") with "American style capitalism" as its casualty (Faiola, "End Capitalism"). The American media also picked up the analogy between candidate Obama and Roosevelt's Great Depression presidency, facilitating

Obama's efforts to establish Roosevelt as his stage (cf. [Fig. 121](#) & [122](#))<sup>202</sup>.

Obama's appropriation of Roosevelt was the foundation for his public performances and his narrative scripting of his future presidency as site for a communitarian renewal of the socio-economic promise of the American Dream. The script for his Imagined Presidency allowed Obama to promote a coherent merger of individual and community-driven solutions to the economic crisis.

Obama used several strategies to constitute Franklin D. Roosevelt as stage for the presentation of his Imagined Presidency. The most obvious is by direct references to FDR as performative frame. In Obama's second autobiography, FDR plays a prominent role his discussion of economic issues. For example, he writes that FDR "understood that capitalism in a democracy required the consent of the people" (*Audacity* 154). What a "new economic consensus" might look like, Obama says, includes modernizing and rebuilding the "social contract" created by FDR (*Audacity* 159), a new social compact that recasts FDR's crumbling social compact (*Audacity* 178) "to meet the needs of a new century" (*Audacity* 180). Similarly, in early economic speeches, Obama talks about FDR in order to embed his comments on socio-economic matters in a Rooseveltian context (Obama "National Press Club Speech", 2005; "Nasdaq Speech", 2007).

Later in the campaign, Obama's strategy shifted, influenced by economic developments. Instead of mentioning FDR as the source of his socio-economic positions, Obama alluded to how both he and FDR were confronted with similar conditions. His description of America's situation in his nomination acceptance speech could also apply to the 1930s:

We meet at one of those defining moments, a moment when our nation is at war, our economy is in turmoil, and the American promise has been threatened once more. Tonight, more Americans are out of work and more are working harder for less. More of you have lost your homes and even more are watching your home values plummet. More of you have cars you can't afford to drive, credit cards, bills you can't afford to pay, and tuition that's beyond your reach. ("Acceptance Speech", 2008)<sup>203</sup>

The ambiguity of Obama's description allows him to associate his candidacy with Roosevelt's Depression-era leadership. Obama repeatedly equated the 2008 economic crisis with the Great Depression:

We meet at a moment of great uncertainty for America. The economic crisis we face is

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<sup>202</sup> See comment by Clive Crook: "Is Mr. Obama an FDR for the new century? A president has many ways of ruining his reputation, and this is a different world, yet the idea looks plausible. Like Roosevelt, Mr. Obama inherits a crisis not of his making. Like Roosevelt, he is brimming with energy to get things done. Like Roosevelt – happy days are here again – he has given the country a jolt of optimism just by turning up" ("Teach").

<sup>203</sup> Also see his speech on the economy remarks in Toledo, Ohio 13 Oct. 2008: "I know these are difficult times. I know folks are worried. But I also know this – we can steer ourselves out of this crisis. Because we are the United States of America. We are the country that has faced down war and depression, great challenges and great threats. And at each and every moment, we have risen to meet these challenges – not as Democrats, not as Republicans, but as Americans" ("Speech Toledo", 2008); or speech at Chillicothe, Ohio on October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008: "We meet at a moment of great uncertainty for America. In recent weeks, we've seen a growing financial crisis that's threatening not only banks and businesses, but your economic security, as well. It's getting harder and harder to get a loan for that new car or that startup-business or that college you've dreamed of attending. And yesterday, millions of America" ("Speech Chillicothe", 2008).

the worst since the Great Depression. Markets across the globe have become increasingly unstable, and millions of Americans will open up their 401(k) statements this week and see that so much of their hard-earned savings have disappeared. (“Speech Toledo/Ohio”, 2008)<sup>204</sup>

In drawing parallels with the Depression era, Obama turned the economic crisis from a problematic and potentially limiting storyline to his advantage.

Obama already modeled his rhetorical style on Roosevelt’s long before officially declaring his presidential ambitions. For example, in his 2004 convention speech, he identified America’s exceptional status as rooted in “the true genius of America” (“Convention Speech”, 2004), and presented a modified version of the most famous lines from FDR’S “Four Freedoms” speech<sup>205</sup>.

[A] faith in simple dreams, an insistence on small miracles; that we can tuck in our children at night and know that they are fed and clothed and safe from harm; that we can say what we think, write what we think, without hearing a sudden knock on the door; that we can have an idea and start our own business without paying a bribe; that we can participate in the political process without fear of retribution; and that our votes will be counted – or at least, most of the time. (“Convention Speech”, 2004)

The main theme Obama used to establish FDR as his performative site is that the economic crisis demonstrates that the American people are inevitably connected and bound together, not only by the economic crisis, but more importantly by their common destiny as Americans. Obama said,

[w]e believe that there is a larger responsibility we have to one another as Americans. We believe that we rise or fall as one nation – as one people. That we are our brother’s keeper. That we are our sister’s keeper. (“March 4<sup>th</sup> Speech”, 2008)<sup>206</sup>

He repeated this message in campaign speeches focused on socio-economic matters<sup>207</sup>. The line “We rise or fall as one nation – as one people” is a clear reference to FDR’s second inaugural address:

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**204** Also see: Speech at Des Moines, Iowa on October, 31<sup>st</sup>: “We are in the middle of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. 760,000 workers have lost their jobs this year. Businesses and families can’t get credit. Home values are falling. Pensions are disappearing. It’s gotten harder and harder to make the mortgage, or fill up your gas tank, or even keep the electricity on at the end of the month” (“Speech Des Moines”, 2008).

**205** Also see Roosevelt: “In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms. The first is freedom of speech and expression – everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way – everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want – which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants- everywhere in the world. The fourth is freedom from fear – which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor – anywhere in the world” (“Four Freedoms”, 1941).

**206** This theme was also central to Obama’s 2008 convention speech, where he claimed that it was inherent to the “promise of America [...] that we are responsible for ourselves, but that we also rise or fall as one nation, the fundamental belief that I am my brother’s keeper, I am my sister’s keeper” (“Acceptance Speech”, 2008).

**207** See for example Obama’s speech in Chillicothe, Ohio, in October 2008: “It is time to turn the page on eight years of economic policies that put Wall Street before Main Street but ended up hurting both. We need policies that grow our economy from the bottom-up, so that every American, everywhere has the chance to get ahead. Not just corporate CEOs, but their secretaries too. Not just the person who owns the factory, but the men and women who work on its floor. Because if we’ve learned anything from this economic crisis, it’s that we’re all connected; we’re all in this together; and we will rise or fall as one nation – as one people” (“Speech Chillicothe”, 2008).

Today we reconsecrate our country to long-cherished ideals in a suddenly changed civilization. In every land there are always at work forces that drive men apart and forces that draw men together. In our personal ambitions we are individualists. But in our seeking for economic and political progress as a nation, we all go up, or else we all go down, as one people. ("Second Inaugural Address", 1937)

A central tenet of FDR's political message was the American people's recognition of

their interrelationship and their interdependence. They sense a common destiny and a common need of each other. Differences of occupation, geography, race and religion no longer obscure the nation's fundamental unity in thought and in action. ("State of the Union", 1939)

Obama's solutions to the economic crisis were directly and indirectly rooted in FDR's rhetoric: "In our 21<sup>st</sup> century economy", Obama declared, "there is no dividing line between Main Street and Wall Street" ("Cooper Union Speech", 2008). He presents the American Dream as a positive expression of the interdependence that makes a nation *E Pluribus Unum*:

[T]he bedrock of our economic success is the American dream. It's a dream shared in big cities and small towns, across races, regions and religions, that, if you work hard, you can support a family; that if you get sick, there will be health care that you can afford; that you can retire. That you can retire with the dignity and security and respect that you've earned; and that your children can get a good education and young people can go to college, even if they don't come from a wealthy family. That's our common hope. That's our common hope across this country. ("Cooper Union Speech", 2008)<sup>208</sup>

Roosevelt had defined the Great Depression as America's "rendezvous with destiny" ("State of the Union", 1939). Similarly Obama said that the current crisis showed how "our destiny as Americans is tied up with one another" ("New Era of Service Speech", 2008), and urged his audience to recognize that "our individual salvation depends on collective salvation"<sup>209</sup> ("Commencement Address Wesleyan College", 2008). Obama's "We're all in this together" storyline this clearly established FDR as the performative ground for his Imagined Presidency.

Obama also invoked FDR's "common effort" rhetoric. From the beginning, FDR demanded that Americans recognize their common destiny and take "action, and action now" ("First Inaugural Address", 1933). In his first fireside chat, he said that America required "action both by the government and by the people" ("First Fireside Chat", 1933). Similarly, Obama warned that socio-economic challenges might destroy the American

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**208** For a similar definition of the American Dream see Obama's 2007 "Reclaiming the American Dream" speech held in Bettendorf: "What is unique about America is that we want these dreams for more than ourselves – we want them for each other. That's why we call it the American dream. We want it for the kid who doesn't go to college because she cannot afford it; for the worker whose wondering if his wages will pay this winter's heating bill; for 47 million Americans living without health care; for the millions more who worry if they have enough to retire with the dignity they have earned. When our fellow Americans are denied the American dream, our own dreams are diminished" ("Reclaiming the American Dream", 2007).

**209** This argument also seems to be taken from FDR, who said in his famous 1932 "Commonwealth Address": "The final term of the high contract was for liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We have learnt a great deal of both in the past century. We know that individual liberty and individual happiness mean nothing unless both are ordered in the sense that one man's meat is not another man's poison" ("Commonwealth Address", 1932).

way of life if “our generation does not act now and act boldly” (“Economic Club Detroit”, 2007). When the economic crisis intensified in the campaign’s last months, he insisted in numerous speeches, “We need action now” (“Speech Chillicothe”, 2008).

FDR’s rhetoric also emphasized collaboration:

[W]e now realize as we have never realized before our interdependence on each other; that we can not merely take but we must give as well; that if we are to go forward, we must move as a trained and loyal army willing to sacrifice for the good of a common discipline, because without such discipline no progress is made, no leadership becomes effective. (“First Inaugural Address”, 1933)

In his first fireside chat, he said that

[the government has] provided the machinery to restore our financial system; it is up to you to support and make it work. It is your problem no less than it is mine. Together we cannot fail. (“First Fireside Chat”, 1933)<sup>210</sup>

Obama adopted similar rhetoric on both a literal and an ideational level. On the ideational level, this rhetoric appears early in his presidential campaign:

You are not on your own. We are in this together. We rise and fall together. We can pull together, and work together, and organize together to create a better America. That’s the reason that we’re here. That’s why you turned up. It’s not for me. It’s for each and every one of you who deciding that we can work together to rebuild America. (“Speech Seattle”, 2007)

Obama’s literal appropriation of FDR’s call for collective effort is especially evident toward the end of the campaign, when he adopted a line from FDR’s third fireside chat. “Now it falls to us”, Obama said, “[t]ogether, we cannot fail. Together, we can overcome the broken policies and divided politics of the last eight years. Together, we can renew an economy” (“Speech Chillicothe”, 2008)<sup>211</sup>. In many of these late campaign speeches, Obama also echoed FDR’s line, “The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself” (“First Inaugural Address”, 1933). On some occasions he alluded to the famous quote:

I know these are difficult times for America. But I also know that we have faced difficult times before. The American story has never been about things coming easy – it’s been about rising to the moment when the moment was hard. It’s about seeing the highest mountaintop from the deepest of valleys. It’s about rejecting fear and division for unity of purpose. That’s how we’ve overcome war and depression. (“Speech Canton”, 2008).

On other occasions he referenced FDR explicitly:

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<sup>210</sup> A similar message is promoted in FDR’s third fireside chat where he remarked: “I am now asking the cooperation that comes from opinion and from conscience. These are the only instruments we shall use in this great summer offensive against unemployment I do have faith, and retain faith, in the strength of common purpose, and in the strength of unified action taken by the American people” (“Third Fireside Chat”, 1933).

<sup>211</sup> Three days later Obama repeated, “Together, we cannot fail. Not now. Not when we have a crisis to solve and an economy to save” (“Speech Toledo/Ohio”, 2008).



Now is not the time for fear. Now is not the time for panic. Now is the time for resolve and steady leadership. We can meet this moment. We can come together to restore confidence in the American economy. (“Speech Chillicothe”, 2008)<sup>212</sup>

Finally, Obama co-opted the most obvious and the most double-edged of Roosevelt’s ideas: the moral critique of “reckless” capitalism. In a major economic speech, for example, Obama said,

[T]he American experiment has worked in large part because we guided the market’s invisible hand with a higher principle. A free market was never meant to be a free license to take whatever you can get, however you can get it. That’s why we’ve put in place rules of the road: to make competition fair and open, and honest. We’ve done this not to stifle but rather to advance prosperity and liberty. [...] the core of our economic success is the fundamental truth that each American does better when all Americans do better; that the well-being of American business, its capital markets and its American people are aligned. I think that all of us here today would acknowledge that we’ve lost some of that sense of shared prosperity. (“Cooper Union Speech”, 2008)

Characterizing the free market’s “invisible hand” as dysfunctional is not only akin to Roosevelt’s demand for a new order guiding American society towards “a morally better world” (“Second Inaugural Address”, 1937), but also constitutes a direct criticism of Reagan’s socio-economic politics. According to FDR, this required a “changes in ethics” to those based “on honesty, on honor, on the sacredness of obligations, on faithful protection, on unselfish performance” (“First Inaugural Address”, 1933). “[I]n the long run”, FDR claimed, “economic morality pays” (“Second Inaugural Address”, 1937). Similarly, Obama envisioned a moral restoration of capitalism based on a “new ethic of responsibility” to bring the urgently needed “new era of responsibility and accountability to Wall Street and to Washington” (“Speech Toledo/Ohio”, 2008).

In other allusions to FDR’s critique of capitalism, Obama criticized the dysfunctions in America’s free market system. Roosevelt once famously proclaimed that “[t]he money-changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization” (“First Inaugural Address”, 1933). They left behind an economic system based on blind belief in “material wealth as standard of success” (“First Inaugural Address”, 1933), “personal profit” (“First Inaugural Address”, 1933) and in “heedless self-interest” (“Second Inaugural Address”, 1937). As a consequence, FDR said, “tens of millions [...] are denied the greater part of what the very lowest standards of today call the necessities of life” (“Second Inaugural Address”, 1937). In a similar vein, Obama claimed that the failure “to guard against prac-

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212 Also, for example, see Obama’s campaign speech in Philadelphia on October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2008: “I know these are difficult times. I know folks are worried. But I also know that now is not the time for fear or panic. Now is the time for resolve and steady leadership. Because I know we can steer ourselves out of this crisis. This is a nation that has faced down war and depression; great challenges and great threats. We have always seen that mountaintop from the deepest valley. We have always risen to the moment when the moment was hard – and we can do it again. We can restore confidence in our economy and renew that fundamental belief – that here in America, our destiny is not written for us, but by us” (“Speech Philadelphia”, 2008). or his remarks in Columbia, Missouri on October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008: “Missouri, that’s what hope is. That thing inside us that insists that, despite all evidence to the contrary, there are better days ahead, if we’re willing to work for it, if we’re willing to shed our fears, if we’re willing to reach deep deep down inside ourselves when we’re tired, when we’re discouraged and come back fighting hard” (“Speech Missouri”, 2008).

tices that all too often rewarded financial manipulation instead of productivity and sound business practice” had led to “a distorted market” and “a winner take all, anything goes environment” (“Cooper Union Speech”, 2008). He drew a direct comparison to the FDR era:

The concentrations of economic power and the failures of our political system to protect the American economy and American consumers from its worst excesses have been a staple of our past: most famously in the 1920s, when such excesses ultimately plunged the country into the Great Depression. (“Cooper Union Speech”, 2008)

Later in the campaign, Obama more explicitly critiqued the philosophy that, in his perception, had caused the economic crisis and endangered the American Dream (“Reclaiming the American Dream”, 2007). For example, he condemned the former administration for propagating a hyper-individualist economic “Social Darwinism” (“Emily’s List Speech”, 2008) and denounced the “greed and irresponsibility of Wall Street” (“Speech Raleigh”, 2008)<sup>213</sup>. His critique was also carried on television ads. For example, Obama criticized compensatory pay to fired CEOs as “million dollar golden parachutes” (“Parachute Ad”, First Air Date: 29 Sep. 2008) while American workers are left “High and Dry” (First Air Date: 08 Nov. 2007). Expressing the conviction that “Wall Street” and “Main Street” cannot be separated (“Speech Raleigh”, 2008)<sup>214</sup>, Obama presented the economic crisis as evidence against the conservative call for a deregulated market based exclusively on self-interest and the idea of the “trickle-down-effect” so frequently conjured by Reagan. Like FDR, Obama demanded that economic prosperity be restored

from the bottom up so that everyone has a chance to succeed; from the CEO, to the secretary and the janitor. From the factory owner to the men and women who work on its floor. (“Speech Raleigh”, 2008)

Here Obama also echoed the famous “Forgotten Man” speech (1932), in which FDR called the working man the backbone of the American system:

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213 A similar message is made by Obama in an television interview with *ABC*’s Robert Gibson in October 2008. “I do think that the [Bush] administration is hampered by the fact that people don’t have a lot the confidence in the president. I mean, if you think about previous crises – you know, FDR. There were a whole bunch of programs that he tried that didn’t work. But what he was able to provide to people was a sense that somebody’s in charge and we’re going to get through this. And – and that is as important as anything. And the fact that, if you’ve seen President Bush come out of the Rose Garden for two minutes at a time and, you know, not give a clear sense of what is taking place, describing this – describing this rescue package as –seeing it described as a bailout where the average person still thinks that what’s happening is \$700 billion is going out the door, and we’re never going to see it again, and it’s going to a bunch of Wall Street types. You know[...].” (“ABC Interview Obama Gibson”, 2008).

214 Also see Obama’s comments in both major 2007/2008 economic campaign speeches: “It’s the idea that we are all in this together. From CEOs to shareholders, from financiers to factory workers, we all have a stake in each other’s success because the more Americans prosper, the more America prospers. That’s why we’ve had titans of industry who’ve made it their mission to pay well enough that their employees could afford the products they made. That’s why employees at companies like Google don’t mind the vast success of their CEOs – because they share in that success just the same. And that’s why our economy hasn’t just been the world’s greatest wealth creator – it’s been the world’s greatest job generator. It’s been the tide that has lifted the boats of the largest middle-class in history. We have not come this far because we practice survival of the fittest” (“Nasdaq Speech”, 2007). or “[T]he core of our economic success is the fundamental truth that each American does better when all Americans do better; that the well-being of American business, its capital markets and its American people are aligned. I think that all of us here today would acknowledge that we’ve lost some of that sense of shared prosperity” (“Cooper Union Speech”, 2008).

It is said that Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo because he forgot his infantry – he staked too much upon the more spectacular but less substantial cavalry. The present administration in Washington provides a close parallel. It has either forgotten or it does not want to remember the infantry of our economic army. These unhappy times call for the building of plans that rest upon the forgotten, the unorganized but the indispensable units of economic power for plans like those of 1917 that build from the bottom up and not from the top down, that put their faith once more in the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid. (“Forgotten Man Speech”, 1932)

Obama also presented himself as political actor fighting for the “folks on Main Street” (“Raleigh Speech”, 2008), saying that America should measure its economic strength

not by the number of billionaires we have or the profits of the Fortune 500, but by whether someone with a good idea can take a risk and start a new business, or whether the waitress who lives on tips can take a day off and look after a sick kid without losing her job, an economy that honors the dignity of work. (“Acceptance Speech”, 2008)

A similar message is communicated in a 2008 convention presentation by former President Jimmy Carter. Carter said that after Hurricane Katrina, ordinary Americans were left alone by their government, but “Barack Obama has been down here to reach out to people and he has a deep awareness what’s going on in the Gulf region” (“Carter Tribute Video DNC”, 2008). The message was supported with images of Obama engaging with the people in New Orleans and helping them rebuild after the hurricane (cf. [Fig. 123 & 124](#)).

Carter then goes on to say that an Obama administration would place “a high priority on the basic rights of the working people in our country and not just the super-rich” (“Jimmy Carter Tribute Video DNC”, 2008).

The television ad “Need” (First Air Date: 03 Nov. 2007) offers a similar message. It shows Obama giving a speech in an intimate exchange with voters and saying “You got C.E.O.’s who are making more in 10 minutes than ordinary workers are making in a year” (“Need”). In an interview scene, Obama proclaims, “[t]he bedrock, the foundation of our economy, is our workers. And the middle class have been treading water or worse” (“Need”). The textual message is complemented by showing Obama in close touch with the ordinary workers representing America’s middle class (cf. [Fig. 125 – 128](#)).

The ad implies that Obama, like FDR, fights for the “forgotten man” and will make sure that “whatever we do is working for the ordinary people” (“ABC Interview Obama Gibson”, 2008)<sup>215</sup>.

Throughout his campaign, Obama actively reinforced an association already made by the American public and media itself: between him as a Democratic presidential candidate in a major economic crisis and the iconic Depression era Democratic President and

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215 A further example in this context is the television ad “High and Dry”, where Obama is presented as champion of the American worker: *Dave Hartgrave*: I worked here for 33 years. Did everything that they asked me to do. The executives decided to take \$19 million out of our pension fund. Didn’t return it. Thought I was going to be getting \$1500 a month. I only got \$379. *Barack Obama*: I’m telling the CEOs it hurts America when they cash out and leave workers high and dry. It’s an outrage. And you’ve got to have someone in the White House who believes it’s an outrage. *Dave Hartgrave*: Barack Obama’s gonna look out for me (“High and Dry”).

father of the “New Deal”, Franklin D. Roosevelt. He used Roosevelt’s rhetorical style and positive assessments of Roosevelt’s socio-economic politics to link himself to the cultural memory of FDR. This allowed him to convincingly present himself as a moral leader with a communitarian redefinition of the “New Deal”.

Like Roosevelt, Obama called for re-imagining American society, with his Imagined Presidency facilitating a communitarian vision of America. In this way, he successfully merged his Reaganite call for personal responsibility with his Rooseveltian demand for mutual responsibility.

Obama offered to transform liberal politics in the tradition of FDR’s New Deal, the conception of good government as federal intervention to take care of and protect citizens and the commonwealth (Kornhauser 631). He proposed a “new economic consensus” (Obama, *Audacity* 149 & 159) based on the communitarian notion that government is a site of active and responsible citizenship, as well as community-oriented and community-driven action (Bell, “Communitarianism”). Obama’s Imagined Presidency integrated the liberal tradition of social responsibility and emphasis on communal life with the conservative “ethic of self-reliance” (Sears/Funk 73) and the “self-interest-hypothesis, that the individual and the collectivity both prosper most if each individual pursues his or her own interest” (Sears/Funk 77). In *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama writes, given the equality of opportunity, which is no longer there

[o]ur individualism has always been bound by a set of communal values, the glue upon which every healthy society depends. [...] In every society (and in every individual), these twin strands – the individualistic and the communal, autonomy and solidarity – are in tension, and it has been one of the blessings of America that the circumstances of our nation’s birth allowed us to negotiate these tensions better than most. (55)

He promised a quintessentially American solution to the economic crisis, community disintegration, the lack of mutual responsibility and Americans’ alienation from the political process. He rejected the conservative libertarian principle of self-interest, as well as the New Deal liberalism’s rights and entitlement logic. Instead, like FDR, he proposed an “ethic of community” storyline on the premise “that as citizens we’re all in this together and that one of the purposes of politics is to locate, and build upon, moral sentiments that we can freely share” (Galston 19) – in short, the shared belief in the American Dream. His view of the American Dream revolves around community:

What is unique about America is that we want these dreams for more than ourselves – we want them for each other. That’s why we call it the American dream. [...] When our fellow Americans are denied the American dream, our own dreams are diminished. (“Reclaiming the American Dream Speech”, 2007)

Over the course of the campaign Obama reiterated that the American Dream had a col-

lectivizing, rather than individualizing momentum<sup>216</sup>.

This story was central to the thirty minutes infomercial “American Stories, American Solutions” (Air Date: 29 Oct. 2008) launched by the Obama campaign a week before election day. In the longest and most expensive campaign ad since a series sponsored by Ross Perot in 1992 (Schiffers, “Obama Rules”), Obama presents the stories of four American families<sup>217</sup> who, although adhering to the Franklinian values of hard work, self-reliance and sacrifice, invoked so frequently by conservatives such as Reagan, could barely make ends meet:

For the past 20 months, I’ve traveled the length of this country, and Michelle and I have met so many Americans who are looking for real and lasting change that makes a difference in their lives. Their stories are American stories, stories that reflect the state of our union. (“American Stories, American Solutions”)

Obama uses these stories to present his explanation of the economic crisis, what he calls “the state of our union” (“American Stories, American Solutions”). The stories make clear that lack of personal responsibility did not cause the economic downturn<sup>218</sup>. “Families are tightening their belts” (“American Stories, American Solutions”). Instead of calling for more self-reliance, one of the ad’s protagonists remarks, Americans must realize that “we’re all in the same boat. We all got to pull together, and if we don’t, we’re going to lose America as we once known it” (“American Stories, American Solutions”). At the end of the ad, Obama presents his solution. “We know government can’t do it all”, he says (“American Stories, American Solutions”). He calls upon citizens to take responsibility and participate in the American community: “I will open the doors of government and ask you to be involved in your own democracy again” (“American Stories, American

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<sup>216</sup> See, for example, remarks in El Dorado, Kansas, January 29, 2008; Remarks at an Economic Discussion in Beaverton, Oregon, May 9, 2008.

<sup>217</sup> See: Obama as narrator in “American Stories, American Solutions” television ad: *Story 1*: Rebecca Johnston of North Kansas City, MO, who can hardly make ends meet for her family (**Obama**: “Ten years ago, she bought a house outside the city so she could send her children to good schools. Now, with rising costs, it’s getting tight. Her husband Brian works at a tire retread plant and needs to stand all day.”); *Story 2*: Larry and Juanita Stewart of Sardinia, OH, who cannot pay for their healthcare after retirement (**Obama**: “After 30 years working on the B&O Railroad, Larry Stewart and his wife Juanita hoped to reap the rewards from their working years. Six grown children, seven grandchildren, two great-grandchildren, and a home that they own themselves.”); *Story 3*: Juliana Sanchez, Albuquerque, NM, a single-mother who has two jobs to make ends meet and make sure her children receive a decent education (**Obama**: “Juliana Sanchez is a widow with two children and a mortgage. Her parents, Richard and Francis, were both educators. Like her family, Juliana’s devoted her life to giving her daughter Jessica and son Adam a good education. Every morning, she’s up before the sun.”); *Story 4*: Mark and Melinda Dowell of Louisville, KY, who have worked hard for their company all their life and are now cut back in hours so much they cannot live of their income. (**Obama**: “Mark Dowell and his wife Melinda have worked at the local plant for most of their adult lives. Recently the plant cut back Mark’s work to every other week. Now they’re struggling to make ends meet. His grandfather Harold and father Carl each worked over 30 years and received full retirement benefits.”) (“American Stories, American Solutions”).

<sup>218</sup> Another example in this context are Obama’s remarks during a 2007 speech in Seattle, where he explained that the root of the current economic crisis was the constant and blind “rugged individualist” call of conservatives “to pull yourself up by your own bootstrap”. As Obama claims here this was not possible anymore under the current conditions, no matter how hard an individual worked: “[A] government that says you are on your own, a government that sees a guy who’s been laid off of work or his plant closed up and moved overseas after working for 20 years has the rug pulled out from under him and suddenly he’s not just lost his job but a pension and he’s lost his health care and he’s having to compete with his teenage kid for a job at the local Walmart paying 7 bucks an hour. And what does the government say? The government says tough luck, you’re on your own.’ And if you’re a single mom like my mom was a single mom, trying to figure out do I have health insurance for my children, the government says, ‘I’m sorry, that’s the breaks, you’re on your own’. And if you’re a child who’s not ‘wise enough’ to choose his or her own parent and is born into a community that doesn’t have high property values and so the schools are underfunded and have dilapidated buildings and outdated textbooks say “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps – you’re on your own” (“Seattle Speech”, 2007).



Solutions”).

In 1994, at the start of his political career, Obama took a similar position<sup>219</sup>:

In America we have this strong bias toward individual action. You know, we idolize the John Wayne hero who comes in to correct things with both guns blazing. But individual actions, individual dreams, are not sufficient. We must unite in collective action [...]. The right wing talks about this but they keep appealing to that old individualistic bootstrap myth: get a job, get rich, and get out. Instead of investing in our neighborhoods, that's what has always happened. Our goal must be to help people get a sense of building something larger. (qtd. in De Zutter, “What Makes”)

Fourteen years later, he centered his economic policy on the notion that government's role is to provide a community's infrastructure and security – “that which we cannot do for ourselves” (“Acceptance Speech”, 2008) – and to ensure a “level playing field”. This conception of government incorporates the best ideas from both sides of the political aisle:

[I]f we want get through this crisis, we need to get beyond the old ideological debates and divides between left and right. We don't need bigger government or smaller government. We need a better government – a more competent government – a government that upholds the values we hold in common as Americans. (“Speech Canton”, 2008)

Obama's idea of “competent” government is based on a political community whose members share common values and recognize that they have both rights and responsibilities. His half-sister Maye Soetero explained that

[f]or Barack, it's a matter of finding a balance between nurturing government programs and personal responsibility. This is due to our upbringing, which involved a real need for support and assistance but also left room for a lot of personal industry and perseverance. (qtd. in Gibson, “Childhood Experiences”)

Already at the beginning of his political career, Obama argued that to reverse the increasingly negative public attitude toward government, people have to stop seeing

voters or communities as consumers, as mere recipients or beneficiaries of this change. It's time for politicians and other leaders to take the next step and to see voters, residents, or citizens as producers of this change. The thrust of our organizing must be on how to make them productive, how to make them employable, how to build our human capital, how to create businesses, institutions, banks, safe public spaces – the whole agenda of creating productive communities. That is where our future lies. (qtd. in De Zutter, “What Makes”)

The call for an “activist” and participating citizenry featured prominently in Obama's 2008 victory night speech, which ended with, “I will ask you to join in the work of remaking this nation – block by block, brick by brick, callused hand by callused hand” (“Victory

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<sup>219</sup> De Zutter's 1995 interview with Barack Obama was republished by the *Chicago Reader* on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2006, when it became clear that Obama was going to run for the presidential office and also referenced in articles dealing with Obama, the presidential candidate, as for example: Lizza, Ryan. “The Agitator.” *The New Republic*. 19 Mar. 1997. Web. 16 Feb. 2013. <<https://newrepublic.com/article/64660/the-agitator>>.



Night Speech”, 2008). He merged his call for service with a call for participation: “I won’t just ask for your vote as a candidate, I will ask for your service and your active citizenship when I am President of the United States” (“Remarks on Service”, 2007) and saying it was time “to enlist the American people in the process of self-government” (“New Hampshire Democratic Debate”, 2006). The terms “service” and “enlist” convey that these expectations are not optional. The American Dream works on the principle of mutual responsibility, best understood here as a mutual “return on investment”. “You invest in America, America will invest in you, and together we will move this country forward” (“Acceptance Speech”, 2008).

Obama’s socio-economic agenda especially reflected this demand with regard to education policy. Obama promoted an active government role in education reciprocated by service and mutual responsibility. To make it easier for young people to attend college, he said,

What I want to do is provide a \$4,000 tuition credit for every student, every year, in exchange for national service. If they participate in Peace Corps, working in their community in some fashion, obviously joining the military. We are going to make sure that they can afford their college tuition. (“MTV Interview Barack Obama Answers Your Questions”)

He also indirectly referenced the conservative argument that education is a private and personal responsibility. He used the idea of service and mutual responsibility to refute the Republican argument that people must choose between big government and an extremely limited one:

When it comes to giving every child a world-class education so they can compete in this global economy for the jobs of the 21st century, the choice is not between more money and more reform – because our schools need both. As President, I will invest in early childhood education, recruit an army of new teachers, pay them more, and give them more support. But I will also demand higher standards and more accountability from our teachers and our schools. And I will make a deal with every American who has the drive and the will but not the money to go to college: if you commit to serving your community or your country, we will make sure you can afford your tuition. (“Speech Canton”, 2008)

Linking government intervention in education with the obligation to serve the community allowed Obama to dodge the charge that he favors entitlements<sup>220</sup>. “Loving your country”, Obama claimed, “must mean accepting your responsibility to do your part” (“Remarks on Service”, 2007)<sup>221</sup>. He fended off the accusation of “big government” with

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220 This line of argumentation and rhetoric was time and again brought fourth over the courses of the campaign. See for example: “I’ll recruit an army of new teachers, pay them higher salaries and give them more support. In exchange, I’ll ask for higher standards and more accountability. We’ll keep our promise to every young American – if you commit to serving your community and your country, we will make sure you can afford a college education” (“Speech Raleigh”, 2008).

221 Also see the following remark from one of Obama’s first official political interviews in 1994: “Now we have to take this same language – these same values that are encouraged within our families – of looking out for one another, of sharing, of sacrificing for each other – and apply them to a larger society. Let’s talk about creating a society, not just individual families, based on these values. Right now we have a society that talks about the irresponsibility of teens getting pregnant, not the irresponsibility of a society that fails to educate them to aspire for more” (qtd. in De Zutter, “What Makes”).

his call for responsible citizen engagement.

Obama's Imagined Presidency gained credibility because his performance in the role of the community organizer backed up his call for service, responsibility and active citizenship as solutions to the economic crisis. With a narrative of his family's dedication to community service, Obama became a model of how to live these values and a credible spokesman for "his" community. Obama often relied on his own life story for his performance's narrative script. For example, in calling for "A New Era of Service", he said,

[t]hrough service, I found a community that embraced me – citizenship that was meaningful, the direction that I'd been seeking. Through service I discovered how my own improbable story fit into the larger American story. ("A New Era of Service Speech", 2008)

He then elaborated on the role of service in tackling socio-economic challenges:

There is a lesson to be learned from generations who have served. [...] It's the lesson that in America, each of us is free to seek our own dreams, but we must also serve a common purpose, a higher purpose. When you choose to serve – whether it's your nation, your community, or simply your neighbor – you are connected to that fundamental American ideal that we want Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness not just for ourselves, but for all Americans. That is why this is a great nation. Because time and again, Americans have been willing to serve on stages both great and small; to draw on the same spirit that launched America's improbable journey to meet the challenges of each defining moment in our history. ("A New Era of Service Speech", 2008)<sup>222</sup>

Obama's performance here centers on one central storyline: the "lessons of service" instilled in him by his grandparents and his mother led him to become a community organizer. In Obama's Imagined Presidency, a "new social consensus" could be negotiated.

Obama also repeatedly emphasized the fact that his grandparents belonged to the so-called "Greatest Generation" (Rose 2). Evoking the community spirit so closely associated with World War II (Rose 234), Obama presented his grandparents' military service as exemplifying the community-oriented and sacrificial spirit. This established them as selfless and devoted community servants.

My grandfather – Stanley Dunham – enlisted after Pearl Harbor and went on to march in Patton's Army. My grandmother worked on a bomber assembly line while he was gone, and my mother was born at Fort Leavenworth. ("Speech West Virginia", 2008)

The term "enlisted" reminds the audience that Obama's grandfather volunteered for service<sup>223</sup>. Obama's grandmother, with an infant to care for, sacrificed by working in a munitions factory. In his first autobiography Obama portrays his grandmother as "Rosie

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222 With his call to to revive citizen engagement Obama is also clearly making a reference to Benjamin Franklin's call for community involvement (Pangle 215).

223 That as a matter of fact not enlisting was not really an option for young men during the years of World War II is not mentioned here for logical performative reasons. For more on the draft see: Bailey, Beth. *America's Army: Making the All-Volunteer Force*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009. Print. or Flynn, George, Q. *The Draft: 1940-1973*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993. Print.

the Riveter”, his grandfather wading through mud in France with Patton’s army (*Dreams* 15). To the American public, World War II’s citizen soldier is an “emblem of national unity, sacrifice, and heroism” (Ramsay 44), while Rosie the Riveter symbolizes “women’s selfless contribution to the war effort and their resolve to stay true to their country” (Jackson 96). Identifying his grandparents with these icons of World War II, Obama infused his own history with the war’s communal heroes. Obama exploited this narrative link visually in his biographical convention video with images of his grandparents during the “Good War” (cf. [Fig. 129 – 132](#)).

Obama, time and again, linked his grandparents’ story to the larger American tradition of service to support the narrative of his family’s commitment to community service:

When our troops go into battle, they serve no faction or party; they represent no race or region. They are simply Americans. They serve and fight and bleed together out of loyalty not just to a place on a map or a certain kind of people, but to a set of ideals that we have been striving for since the first shots rang out at Lexington and Concord – the idea that America could be governed not by men, but by laws; that we could be equal in the eyes of those laws; that we could be free to say what we want and write what want and worship as we please; that we could have the right to pursue our individual dreams but the obligation to help our fellow citizens pursue theirs. (“Speech West Virginia”, 2008)

Obama also used his grandfather’s story to illustrate how the community rewards selfless service. In many speeches<sup>224</sup>, Obama recalled that when his grandfather left the Army, the principle of mutual responsibility, embraced by the Roosevelt government, still reigned:

After my grandfather served in World War II, the GI Bill gave him a chance to go to college, and the government gave them a chance to buy a home. They moved West, worked hard at different jobs, and were able to provide my mother with a decent education, to help raise me, and to save enough to retire. (“Reclaiming the American Dream Speech”, 2007)

Government and community rewarded Stanley Dunham’s service with student financial aid to veterans and a government-backed home loan. In a pre-Independence Day speech, Obama shared memories of his grandfather’s funeral at the Punchbowl military cemetery in Hawaii (“Speech Fargo”, 2008):

In a cemetery lined with the graves of Americans who have sacrificed for our country, we heard the solemn notes of Taps and the crack of guns fired in salute; we watched as a folded flag was handed to my grandmother and my grandfather was laid to rest. It was a nation’s final act of service and gratitude to Stanley Dunham – an America that stood by my grandfather when he took off the uniform, and never left his side. (“Speech Fargo”, 2008)

The mutual relationship between his grandfather and “America” emphasizes the storyline

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<sup>224</sup> Also see Obama’s 2008 “Acceptance Speech”: “Because, in the faces of those young veterans who come back from Iraq and Afghanistan, I see my grandfather, who signed up after Pearl Harbor, marched in Patton’s army, and was rewarded by a grateful nation with the chance to go to college on the G.I. Bill.” or his speech in Dayton Ohio in 2008: “You know, when I dropped my daughters off at school yesterday, I couldn’t help but think about all America had done over the years to give me and my family a good education. This is a country that put my grandfather through college on the GI Bill after he left Patton’s army in World War II.” (“Acceptance Speech”, 2008).

of a community characterized by mutual responsibility and service to the benefit of all involved<sup>225</sup>.

The exploitation of his grandparents' story supported Obama's call for rewarding the communitarian spirit while establishing that the family tradition of service goes back two generations, thus reinforcing Obama's fitness for the role of America's chief community organizer.

Obama also supported his fitness for serving as the national community organizer by presenting his mother as "a soldier for New Deal, Peace Corps, position-paper liberalism" (*Dreams* 50). Linking his mother to the iconic institution of the American Peace Corps, to which she de facto never belonged, presents her as embodying a Kennedyesk call for service: "Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country" (Bridgeland 54). Kennedy's call to service is often identified with the Peace Corps<sup>226</sup>, which John Kerry calls "the most powerful and respected symbol of non-military service in our history" (198).

Obama presented his mother as a second family role model, repeatedly emphasizing how she had dedicated her life to serving the greater good:

She gave us a very broad understanding of the world. [...] She was very determined to be remembered for a life of service and thought that service was really the true measure of a life. (Scott, "Obama's Mother")

The storyline of his mother's voluntary service to the greater good of the (world) community helped Obama promote his idea of citizenship and community responsibility. To address the connection between service to the community and the community's responsibility to take care of its citizens in return, Obama told his audience that his mother had turned to food stamps to make ends meet (Obama, "Acceptance Speech", 2008). "Even while relying on food stamps as she finished her education", he added, "she followed her passion for helping others" ("Reclaiming the American Dream Speech", 2007). Back then, Obama suggests, service to the community and the principle of mutual responsibility were hand in glove.

Obama's half-sister helped establish this narrative script. In various campaign events, Soetoro recounted memories of growing up with Obama and their mother. She said that their mother

was incredibly brave. [S]he wanted to remedy the world's poverty and injustice; but she was an idealist who took action. She believed that with enough perseverance and enough industry change happens. (qtd. in Boylan, "Obama's Sister")

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225 Interestingly, Obama never comments on the fact that the GI Bill and home loan programs are federal government programs. Instead, Obama presents them as examples of the positive results of a communitarian approach to citizenship and government.

226 Kennedy characterized the Peace Corps mission as "bringing to man that decent way of life which is the foundation of freedom and a condition of peace" ("Remarks Establishment of the Peace Corps", 1961).

Her storyline reinforces Obama's presentation of his mother as a development aid community activist, hopping "on the backs of motorcycles with women in rural credit programs all over the world" (qtd. in Lawrence, "Growing up with Obama"). It was Ann Dunham "who insisted that we engage in a life of service" (qtd. in Lawrence, "Growing up with Obama"). Her grassroots action in the spirit of the New Deal and the Peace Corps<sup>227</sup> – his mother was active in the field of micro-finance – reinforced Obama's fitness for the role of national community organizer<sup>228</sup>. Obama also used his mother's story to illustrate the failure of mutual responsibility. When his mother's health problems developed in the early 1990s, and she needed support, her government and community let her down:

She was 53 years old when she died of ovarian cancer, and you know what she was thinking about in the last months of her life? She wasn't thinking about getting well. She wasn't thinking about coming to terms with her own mortality. She had been diagnosed just as she was transitioning between jobs. And she wasn't sure whether insurance was going to cover the medical expenses because they might consider this a preexisting condition. I remember just being heartbroken, seeing her struggle through the paperwork and the medical bills and the insurance forms. So, I have seen what it's like when somebody you love is suffering because of a broken health care system. And it's wrong. It's not who we are as a people. (qtd. in McCormick, "Obama's Mother")<sup>229</sup>

The juxtaposition of his mother's health care needs with her altruism corroborated Obama's call for mutual responsibility. His principle of subsidiarity included a health care system based on the principle of community. In the campaign ad "Mother" (First Air-Date: 30 Sep. 2008) Obama noted that the health care issue remained a serious problem in this context as unfortunately, "I hear stories like hers everyday" ("Mother Ad").

Obama's mother's service supported the narrative script establishing Obama as community organizer in chief. Through his mother the mission to serve was instilled in him as well. The story of his mother's illness and early death, tied to the failing community in America, support the solutions Obama offered in his Imagined Presidency.

Obama's larger picture is a call for a new social contract. Under his Presidency, he suggested, the United States could tackle the economic crisis and be restored as a community in which everyone has a fair shot at the American Dream. Obama as "common man", community organizer, renewer and rethinker of the Rooseveltian socio-economic

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227 The establishment of this storyline becomes particularly clear in Obama's half-sister's narrative involvement in the campaign's scripting of Obama's Imagined Presidency. Soetero was particularly involved in undergirding their mother's image as deeply rooted in a mentality of investing your personal skills for the improvement of the community: "She did micro-financing and rural credit projects, mostly in Southeast Asia. She worked with women in basketry and weaving. She went to Ghana, India, Thailand, Indonesia, Nepal, Bangladesh." (qtd. in Boylan, "Obama's Sister"). Presenting her mother as dedicated volunteer, Soetero seems to suggest her to be a citizen who had earned her right to be supported by her government ("my mother had to turn to food stamps") when she herself was confronted with an "economic struggle" having to manage taking care of two children "with very modest material resources" (qtd. in Gibson, "Childhood Experiences").

228 In a television ad dealing with Obama's mother and her influence on him, Soetero said "[h]er work offered a very fine example to us of service" ("Maya on Her and Barack's Mother").

229 Also see, for example: "When it comes to health care, we don't have to choose between a government-run health care system and the unaffordable one we have now. [...] We'll invest in preventative care and new technology to finally lower the cost of health care for families, businesses, and the entire economy. And as someone who watched his own mother spend the final months of her life arguing with insurance companies because they claimed her cancer was a pre-existing condition and didn't want to pay for treatment, I will stop insurance companies from discriminating against those who are sick and need care most" (Obama, "Changing the Odds Speech", 2007).

contract, was the culmination of his performative staging.

Particularly interesting in this context is the narrative script emphasizing his membership in the “we” of the community. Jimmy Carter described Obama as an average American, and exactly what America needed:

[H]is deep religious faith as a Christian and his background as someone who has come from nowhere, you might want to say, to a high position in the political world, all those things bode well for America. (“Jimmy Carter Tribute Video DNC”, 2008)<sup>230</sup>

Obama often presented himself as a Franklinitan common man who worked his way up “from nothing”. In television ads Obama appears familiar with the daily struggle to make a living and pay for education.

For example, a mid-2008 ad emphasized that America should “never forget the dignity that comes from work” (“Dignity”, First Air Date: 30 Jun. 2008). The narrative frame is set by the narrator, who says “He worked his way through college and Harvard Law. Turned down big money offers, and helped lift neighborhoods stung by job loss” (“Dignity Ad”). This storyline was emphasized throughout the campaign:

I wasn’t born into a lot of money. I was raised by a single mother with the help my grandparents, who grew up in small-town Kansas, went to school on the GI Bill, and bought their home through an FHA loan. My mother had to use food stamps at one point, but she still made sure that through scholarships, I got a chance to go to some of the best schools around, which helped me get into some of the best colleges around, which gave me loans that Michelle and I just finished paying not all that many years ago. (“Speech Associated Press Meeting”, 2008)

As an “average American”, Obama presented himself as “in touch” with other average Americans, a full member of the “we” that he emphasized so frequently. This theme is evident in his DNC biographical video, where he is depicted as an intimate member of the community (cf. [Fig. 133 – 136](#)).

Such presentations erase the line between citizen/voter and politician/candidate. To boost this storyline, the campaign presented Republican candidate John McCain as the exact opposite – not “one of us”. The “Seven” ad (First Air-Date: 22 Aug. 2008) shows a typical one-family suburban house (cf. [Fig. 137](#)). The narrator says, “Maybe you’re struggling to just pay the mortgage on your home...” – a clear reference to the American Dream:

Recently John McCain said ‘The fundamentals of our economy are strong’. Hmmmm...then again, the same day, when asked how many houses he owns, McCain lost track, he couldn’t remember. Well, it’s seven. Seven houses worth thirteen million dollars. (“Seven Ad”)

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<sup>230</sup> Jimmy Carter is almost literally quoting from Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography in his characterization of Barack Obama: “Having emerged from the poverty and obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a state of affluence and some degree of reputation in the world, and having gone so far through life with a considerable share of felicity, the conducting means I made use of, which, with the blessing of God, so well succeeded, my posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own situations, and therefore fit to be imitated” (10).



In contrast, Obama, with heavy loans that he and Michelle had paid off after college, seems a true member of the American “we” (“MTV Interview Barack Obama Answers Your Questions”)<sup>231</sup>.

Throughout his campaign, Obama positioned himself as an equal to his audience, dissolving the difference by including himself in the “we”. In his announcement speech, for example, he used the words “our”, “us”, and “we” 133 times, hardly ever differentiating himself from the audience.

[T]he cynics, and the lobbyists, and the special interests who’ve turned *our* government into a game only they can afford to play. But Washington has a long way to go. And it won’t be easy. That’s why *we’ll* have to set priorities. *We’ll* have to make hard choices. And although government will play a crucial role in bringing about the changes *we* need, more money and programs alone will not get *us* where *we* need to go. Each of *us*, in *our* own lives, will have to accept responsibility – for instilling an ethic of achievement in *our* children, for adapting to a more competitive economy, for strengthening *our* communities, and sharing some measure of sacrifice. So let *us* begin. Let *us* begin this hard work together. Let *us* transform this nation. (my emphasis) (“Announcement Speech”, 2007)

In El Dorado, he used similarly inclusive “we” rhetoric.

It’s a dream that *we* can find a job with wages that support a family. That *we* can have health care that’s affordable for when *we* get sick. That *we* can retire with dignity and security. And that *we* can provide our children with education and opportunity. [...] It’s about whether *we* settle for the same divisions and distractions and drama that passes for politics today, or whether *we* reach for a politics of common sense and innovation; of shared sacrifice and shared prosperity. (my emphasis) (“Speech El Dorado”, 2008)<sup>232</sup>

As a “community organizer”, Obama presents himself as part of the community. The community organizer narrative serves two performative aims. First, it establishes his expertise on socio-economic issues during a severe economic crisis. This was particularly important because Obama was frequently questioned about his political experience and ability to get things done (Krauthammer, “McCain for President”; Sidoti “Readiness Claim”). Second, his community organizer narrative illustrates how his “new social compact” would improve America.

In a campaign pamphlet, his experience as community organizer is presented as evidence of his competence:

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<sup>231</sup> Obama repeatedly explained that he could relate to those who have to pay on high loans every month. Talking to *MTV* about making it easier for young people to attend college, he said, “[l]ook, this I can relate to. I went to college having to take out student loans, went to law school having to take out student loans. Michelle took out student loans. When we got married, I think together our total loan payments every month was more than our mortgage when we bought a house, and that lasted for about 10 years” (“MTV Interview Barack Obama Answers Your Questions”). In his DNC biographical video Obama reiterated that he and Michelle struggled to pay of their student loans. “I had a pile of student loans at the time, I just married Michelle, and she had a pile of student loans” (“A Mother’s Promise”).

<sup>232</sup> Further example: Barack Obama’s “Reclaiming the American Dream” Speech: “What is unique about America is that we want these dreams for more than ourselves – we want them for each other. That’s why we call it the American dream. *We* want it for the kid who doesn’t go to college because she cannot afford it; for the worker whose wondering if his wages will pay this winter’s heating bill; for 47 million Americans living without health care; for the millions more who worry if they have enough to retire with the dignity they have earned” (“Reclaiming the American Dream”, 2007).

[P]ublic service has not been just the slogan of a campaign; it has been the cause of his life. Obama began his career by moving to the South Side of Chicago to direct the Developing Communities Project. Together with a coalition of ministers, Obama set out to improve living conditions in poor neighborhoods plagued by crime and high unemployment. After graduating from law school, Obama passed up lucrative law firm jobs to head Project Vote, which helped register 150,000 new African American voters in Chicago, the highest number ever registered in a single local effort. (“Helping all Americans”)

Obama time and again claimed that, “as somebody who has been a community organizer (Wenner, “Obama Interview Rolling Stone”), familiar with the cumbersome work of actual politics, he was particularly qualified to be America’s highest political leader. And he sacrificed his personal advantage, refusing a “lucrative law firm job”, to serve his community:

[B]y the time I graduated from college, I was possessed with a crazy idea – that I would work at a grassroots level to bring about change. I wrote letters to every organization in the country I could think of. And one day, a small group of churches on the South Side of Chicago offered me a job working to help neighborhoods that had been devastated by steel plant closings. My mother and grandparents wanted me to go to law school. My friends were applying to jobs on Wall Street. Meanwhile, this organization offered me \$12,000 a year plus \$2,000 for an old, beat-up car. And I said yes. I didn’t know a soul in Chicago, and I wasn’t sure what was waiting for me there. I had always been inspired by stories of the Civil Rights movement and JFK’s call to service [...]. (“A New Era of Service Speech”, 2008)

Action for the greater good, he said repeatedly, motivated him more than a well-paying job. The narrative strand of Obama’s “selflessness” in this regard was further amplified by stories told on him by people who know him from “before” his time as politician. One example is the following comment by a former Harvard fellow at the *Law Review*:

He made an extraordinary decision. He turned his back on what would normally be the standard route for any president of the Harvard Law Review, which is to take very prestigious judicial clerkships, probably including a clerkship at the Supreme Court of the United States. And he returned to Chicago instead to begin political work and community work. From the perspective of people on the Review in 1991, that was an unfathomable, unheard-of decision. The clerkships only take – even if you do get a Supreme Court clerkship – two years. And they’re an extraordinary experience, an extraordinary credential, an extraordinary opportunity to serve the country and serve the judiciary. [...] Barack was more than capable of getting any clerkship in the country he wanted. [...] He turned his back on that and did something entirely different. It was clear he had a different plan and a different vision for his own life and saw himself, in some ways, as a breed apart and running separate from the pack, even back then. (Berenson qtd. in *Frontline*, “The Choice” 2008)

And his narrative script even went a step further, presenting his political engagement as a life calling, a “higher mission”<sup>233</sup>. His seeming disinterest in gaining power for its

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<sup>233</sup> On other occasions Obama emphasized how his involvement in politics was a major source of meaning in his life: “I also began to realize that I wasn’t just helping other people. Through service, I found a community that embraced me; citizenship that was meaningful; the direction that I’d been seeking. Through service, I discovered how my own improbable story fit into

own sake elevated Obama's candidacy as a selfless mission dedicated the greater good. Obama is styled as a Cincinnatus figure here. This narrative script was promoted on a visual level (cf. [Fig. 138](#)). It is striking how effectively the photo of Obama in a Rodinian thinker pose interacts with the title, "Answering the Call". The flyer's text has a religious quality, with questions like health care and education declared "moral issues" that need to be solved or "our conscience cannot rest" ("Answering the Call", 2008).

Large parts of the Obama's convention biography clip were dedicated to the storyline "compelled to serve" ("A Mother's Promise"). In the presentation, his ideal-driven investment in community service was interwoven with socio-economic issues:

*Narrator:* In Chicago he would find a calling.

*Barack Obama:* I loaded up all my belongings in this raggedy old car, drove out to Chicago.

*Narrator:* There were factory closings. Lost jobs. Failing schools. And in the people he met, he would find answers. ("A Mother's Promise")

This section is illustrated with photos of Obama in action as community organizer (cf. [Fig. 139 & 140](#)).

Further underlining this storyline, Obama, in different campaign speeches, emphasized his personal experience in serving "the community":

Day by day, block by block, we brought the community together, and we registered new voters, and we set up after school programs, and fought for new jobs, and helped people live lives with some measure of dignity ("Speech Wesleyan University", 2008).

In his acceptance speech, he then suggested that community organizing prepared him to find solutions to the economic crisis:

When I – 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. ("Acceptance Speech", 2008)

His demand for economic opportunity for "all of us" ("A Mother's Promise") is supported by images with those most challenged by the current economic crisis: the blue collar working class (cf. [Fig. 141 – 143](#)).

Obama used his community organizing experience to verify his strategic expertise in social and economic policy, a storyline in his public narrative since the early 1990s. In his first major political interview as member of the Illinois State Legislature, Obama said that serving as a community organizer was an ideal model and stepping stone for crafting and implementing economic policies:

What if a politician were to see his job as that of an organizer, as part teacher and part advocate, one who does not sell voters short but who educates them about the real

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the larger story of America" ("Speech Wesleyan University", 2008).

choices before them? As an elected public official, for instance, I could bring church and community leaders together easier than I could as a community organizer or lawyer. We would come together to form concrete economic development strategies, take advantage of existing laws and structures, and create bridges and bonds within all sectors of the community. (qtd. in De Zutter, “What Makes”)

Adding to this storyline, early in the 2008 election cycle, the campaign released a photo of Obama at the University of Chicago (cf. [Fig. 144](#)), where he taught courses on the relation between legal and socio-economic issues (Kantor, “Teaching Law, Testing Ideas”). Obama is apparently outlining the relationships among economic actors on the blackboard, suggesting his expertise in the field. Showing Obama in the role of professor complemented his performance as a “hands-on” community organizer. And the image of him explaining power relations emphasizes his call for an empowered American community<sup>234</sup>.

Obama’s Republican adversaries targeted his focus on community organizing, criticizing it as socialist politics (Washington Times Staff, “Obama’s Socialism”). During the 2008 Republican convention, prominent politicians mocked and denigrated Obama’s experience as community organizer as a poor substitute for experience with “real” economic matters. Former Republican governor George Pataki declared, “What in God’s name is a community organizer? I don’t even know if that’s a job” (qtd. in Dreier, “Qualifications”), and vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin said in her convention speech,

I was mayor of my hometown. And since our opponents in this presidential election seem to look down on that experience, let me explain to them what the job involved. I guess – I guess a small-town mayor is sort of like a community organizer, except that you have actual responsibilities. (“Convention Speech”, 2008)

Overall, however, Obama’s narrative scripting as community organizer helped him overcome the traditional “either-or” socio-economic rhetoric from both sides of the political aisle. As Obama said, “[o]ur history should give us confidence that we don’t have to choose between an oppressive government-run economy and a chaotic, unforgiving capitalism” (“Cooper Union Speech”, 2008)<sup>235</sup>.

In summary, Obama’s campaign integrated seemingly irreconcilable political posi-

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<sup>234</sup> A “bottom-up” conception of government, rooted in his organizing experience, was central to Obama’s proposals: “It goes back to what I learned as a community organizer all those years ago – that change in this country comes not from the top-down, but from the bottom up. It starts by being good neighbors and good citizens who are willing to volunteer in our communities – to keep them clean, to keep them safe, and to serve as mentors and teachers to all of our children” (“Conference Speech Miami”, 2008).

<sup>235</sup> Also see, for example: “We don’t have to choose between allowing our financial system to collapse and spending billions of taxpayer dollars to bail out Wall Street banks. [...] The choice in this election isn’t between tax cuts and no tax cuts. It’s about whether you believe we should only reward wealth, or whether we should also reward the work and workers who create it. [...] When it comes to jobs, the choice in this election is not between putting up a wall around America or allowing every job to disappear overseas. The truth is, we won’t be able to bring back every job that we’ve lost, but that doesn’t mean we should follow John McCain’s plan to keep giving tax breaks to corporations that send American jobs overseas. [...] When it comes to health care, we don’t have to choose between a government-run health care system and the unaffordable one we have now. If you already have health insurance, the only thing that will change under my plan is that we will lower premiums. If you don’t have health insurance, you’ll be able to get the same kind of health insurance that Members of Congress get for themselves. [...] When it comes to giving every child a world-class education so they can compete in this global economy for the jobs of the 21st century, the choice is not between more money and more reform – because our schools need both” (Obama, “Speech Raleigh”, 2008).

tions by promising policies that would combine personal with communal responsibility. A skillful narrative incorporated the ideas of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, making it credible that America could create a new social consensus under Obama's presidency.

In promising to save the American Dream, Obama used both the empowerment of citizens to "take back the political process" and the integration of citizens into "the actual business of government" (Obama, "Empowering All Americans"). *New York Times'* columnist David Brooks' comment on Obama's innovative approach quite fittingly summarizes his new communitarian vision of America's socio-economic compact. Obama, he wrote, seems like

a cross between a social activist and a flannel-shirted software C.E.O. – [...] a nonhierarchical, collaborative leader who can inspire autonomous individuals to cooperate for the sake of common concerns. ("Defining Moment")

#### 4.7. Michelle Obama: The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Working Class Woman

The Obama campaign's public staging on socio-economic issues was also reinforced by Michelle Obama. She supported the campaign's position on the economic crisis and added a working class Horatio Alger storyline that Obama himself, with his unusual life story, could not offer.

Michelle Obama's performative staging on socio-economic questions was extremely important because of two contextual factors. First, as discussed above, the economic crisis was a major issue during the election. Second, with two serious female contenders in the race (Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primaries, and, later, Sarah Palin in the Republican vice-presidential slot), women were heavily targeted as a voting group. Obama's presidential campaign repeatedly emphasized his economic initiatives to support women in general, and working women in particular (Caroll 120), and Michelle Obama often spoke to women's interests. Justin Vaughn calls the 2008 contest "an election that paid more attention to gender than had any previous presidential election" (Vaughn 287)<sup>236</sup>.

According to a 2008 *Zogby* poll, "65 percent of women included jobs and the economy as their top issues, compared with 47 percent of men" (Baird, "Women Voters"). In this context, Michelle Obama's involvement in the campaign was indispensable. Her independent staging gave Obama's Imagined Presidency a working-class narrative, supporting his advocacy for the average blue-collar worker. Michelle Obama's construction of her story as a "working class heroine" made her a credible advocate for all those who identified with the working class and complemented Obama's role as the "community organizer-in-chief" who could bring about economic renewal for the entire American community.

The central script underlying Michelle Obama's public performance is the story of her family's working class background. Her speech at the 2008 Democratic National Convention began "I come here as a daughter – raised on the South Side of Chicago by a father who was a blue-collar city worker" ("Convention Speech", 2008). Throughout the campaign she talked about "being raised in a working class family" and seeing herself as "a working class girl" (qtd. in Newton-Small "Michelle Obama Voice too"). To define her "blue collariness", she told stories about her father, Fraser Robinson. For example, in her 2008 convention speech, she said,

[m]y dad was our rock. Although he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in his early 30s, he was our provider, our champion, our hero. As he got sicker, it got harder for him to walk, it took him longer to get dressed in the morning. But if he was in pain, he never let on. He never stopped smiling and laughing – even while struggling to button his shirt, even while using two canes to get himself across the room to give my mom a kiss. He just woke up a little earlier and worked a little harder. ("Convention Speech", 2008)

Her father's persistence and lack of self-pity exemplify working class norms and exemplify

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<sup>236</sup> For more on this question see: Caroll, Susan and Richard Logan Fox. *Gender and Elections*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Print.



the meritocratic values underlying the American Dream. Even a physical challenge, like chronic illness, is not an obstacle to upward mobility if you work hard and never give up. “I saw hard work and sacrifice every day”, Michelle Obama said (qtd. in Brophy 4). This storyline was presented in her biographical convention video both narratively and visually. While her mother narrates, “her father worked at the city water plant” (“South Side Girl”), the audience sees two images of her humble blue-collar background (cf. [Fig. 145 & 146](#)).

Her working-class childhood home<sup>237</sup> and her father’s workplace illustrate her modest roots. In an interview she told *CNN* that her father was a shift worker throughout his life (qtd. in MacAskill, “Family’s Tale”). She grew up with “[n]o silver spoons, no magic. Just parents who tried their best to leave the next generation just a little bit better off” (qtd. in MacAskill, “Family’s Tale”). A 2008 campaign interview reinforced this: “When you see your parents who don’t have much getting out of bed and sucking it up every day, you learn a lot about values” (qtd. in Schultz, “Plaindealer Interview”). Like the average voter, Michelle Obama was “a product of public education” and “the product of hard-working people” (qtd. in Davisson, “Visits Villanova”). She thus presented her life story as one of many “quintessential American stories” (qtd. in Davisson, “Visits Villanova”) defining the American community in its entirety.

Her father’s influence on Michelle Obama was cited over and over. Stories of how the grown-up Michelle would sit on her father’s lap (“South Side Girl”, 2008) and how she took after him in intellect and temperament (“South Side Girl”, 2008), suggest that she also shares his working-class values. Family members time and again recounted the family joke. In her brother’s words,

[m]y father was not college-educated, a hard-working man who raised two kids when he had M.S., [multiple sclerosis] so the example we had was a father full of integrity, and that was the kind of guy my sister was looking for. We used to joke as a family, ‘She’ll never find a guy like that, because they don’t exist any more.’ (qtd. in Henneberger, “Obama Marriage”)

Since by then Michelle Obama had been happily married for sixteen years, she did find somebody as admirable as her father, someone who, she said in a campaign speech, “shared the same Midwestern values: Keep your word, work hard, treat others with respect” (*Vogue*, “The Natural”).

Her working class script was further augmented by the recounting of her personal experience when she left home for Princeton University, a seemingly new and alien world: “I remember being shocked by college students who drove BMWs”, she told *Vogue* in an early 2007 campaign interview. “I didn’t even know parents who drove BMWs” (*Vogue*, “The Natural”). The story aligns with her brother Craig’s account of the Robinsons as “home folks” (qtd. in Collins, “The Other Obama”) who lacked the money to travel. Michelle Obama’s staging as a working-class woman who felt out of place in elite Ivy

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<sup>237</sup> For more on the architecture of Chicago “working class” neighborhoods see: Page/Randall 224.

League social circles was reinforced throughout the whole 2008 campaign.

With deep roots in her working class community, Michelle Obama created a narrative strand, much like her husband's, of "being called to serve". The second day of the 2008 Democratic convention presented the future First Lady as a dedicated public servant. Introducing his sister Michelle as headline speaker, Craig Robinson shared this story with the audience:

Many nights we would talk when we were supposed to be sleeping. My sister always talked about who was being picked on at school and who was having a tough time at home. I didn't realize it then, but I realize it now. Those were the people she would dedicate her life to: The people who were struggling with life's challenges. She's continued to follow that passion. She gave up a big job at a law firm to work in her community with a group called Public Allies. She trained a new generation of community leaders. She developed the University of Chicago's community service center, connecting the university to the neighborhood that was blocks away, but often worlds away from its gates. ("Convention Speech", 2008)

The anecdote situates Michelle Obama's later career in public service as a deeply rooted vocation, her "passion" since girlhood. The biographical video shown before she came on stage emphasized this storyline. Textually and visually, the "South Side Girl" video accentuated her decision to follow the call to community service. Her mother explains,

At first she worked at a big law firm [...] but the law firm wasn't right for her. All those years ago we taught her to serve her community. And that's what she ended up doing. ("South Side Girl", 2008)

This passage is illustrated with contrasting images, one symbolizing the corporate world she'd left behind, the other the world of public service where she found her calling (cf. [Fig. 147 & 148](#)).

The clip then recounts Michelle Obama's public sector career. Former colleague Yvonne Davila said,

Michelle came to work with us in the mayor's office, and after a couple of years went to work in Public Allies, which is an organization helping young people and giving them an opportunity to learn public service work. She did this because it was important to her. It didn't matter to her that it didn't pay any money. This was important to her. This was her mission. This was something she wanted to do. ("South Side Girl", 2008)

Michelle Obama's biographical video also shows her in the role of a dedicated public servant with a photograph (cf. [Fig. 149](#)) highly reminiscent of the many images of her husband working as a community organizer.

Like her husband, Michelle Obama is presented as a dedicated community activist. Unlike her husband, she came from the working class she later served. Her history compensates for her husband's unusual biography and lack of "blue collariness".

Michelle Obama thus appeared on the public stage in two roles. First, she was the working class girl steeped in meritocratic values, a firm believer in the promise of upward

mobility. Second, she was deeply loyal to her community and thoroughly dedicated to its well-being, an average American, an undaunted believer in the American Dream:

I say this not to be modest, but there are so many young people who could be me. There's nothing magical about my background. I am not a super-genius. I had good parents and some good teachers and some decent breaks, and I work hard. Every other kid I knew could have been me. (*Vogue*, "The Natural")

In her 2008 convention speech, she said that Obama was running for President because they both want to protect the American Dream. Both her husband and herself, she said,

set out to build lives guided by these values, and pass them on to the next generation. Because we want our children – and all children in this nation – to know that the only limit to the height of your achievements is the reach of your dreams and your willingness to work for them.<sup>238</sup> ("Convention Speech", 2008)

Over the course of the campaign, Michelle Obama's performative staging as a working class girl committed to the blue collar value canon moved center stage, and particularly after the nomination of Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin. Palin's conservative image as the self-declared "Wal-Mart Mom from Wasilla" (Garofoli, "Pricey New Duds"), an "average hockey mom" (*CNN*, "Palin Vice President Pick"), along with heightened Republican criticism of Obama as "elitist" and nothing like the "average American"<sup>239</sup> (Keck, "Elitist Label", Thomas "Bubba Gap") intensified the need for Michelle Obama's balancing storyline.

With Barack Obama under increased attack, his wife's public performance as a working class girl was given greater substance to assure the audience that the storyline of her upbringing still held true for her life today. In response to public and media discourses on socioeconomic matters revolving around Wal-Mart shopping soccer moms (Martin, "Time for Palin") versus "arugula elitism" (Achenbach, "Salad Spinning"), narratives about the Obamas' present-day life were added to Michelle Obama's performance script.

In late 2007, Michelle Obama began discussing the financial challenges the Obamas faced repaying their college loans. In an interview with *MSNBC*, for example, she said that if it was not for the unexpected success of her husband's second book, "we would still be paying off our loans, and that is not a unique situation" ("Interview Morning Joe", 2007). She added,

We are just now at a point where we're not worried about our financial future, and that's not a guarantee. You know, we don't know what life holds. Our financial futures aren't

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<sup>238</sup> Michelle Obama reiterated her belief in the meritocratic principle of hard work and personal responsibility in addressing the controversial issue of a right to health care. She called for responsibility from both sides – the individual and the collective – as promoted by her husband's socio-economic agenda: "It's mutual responsibility [...] Whatever health-care solution we bring to the table, people have to use it. People have to put good food in their bodies. People have to take their medication as directed. People can't sit and completely blame outside forces" (qtd. in Parsons, "Barack's Rock").

<sup>239</sup> Also see the following comment made by Sarah Palin in her convention speech: "I might add that in small towns, we don't quite know what to make of a candidate who lavishes praise on working people when they are listening and then talks about how bitterly they cling to their religion and guns when those people aren't listening" ("Convention Speech", 2008).

secure – we still have to make sure that our girls can go to college. (“Interview Morning Joe”, 2007)<sup>240</sup>

On other occasions, including an interview with the women’s magazine *Marie Claire*, Michelle Obama said she understood the daily realities confronting “moms who can’t pay their mortgage” (*Marie Claire*, “Keeps it Real”). The Obamas’ student loan debt was used to prove that the family had an average, even humble, lifestyle:

Barack and I were paying off our student loans until a very short time ago. We’re lucky that he’s had a couple of best-selling books ... but we didn’t come from privileged backgrounds. We both know what it’s like to struggle and work hard, and we’re not very far removed from families who are doing everything they can to keep up with rising costs. (*Marie Claire*, “Keeps it Real”)

Her account emphasized that their financial situation had changed only recently:

I remember those days clearly, sweating to get that mail. [...] That collection agency, the loan debt, people calling you telling you that you’ve got a few more days before you’re in trouble. (qtd. in Parsons, “Showing Humble Roots”)

On other occasions she presented the “solution” to the Obamas’ financial problems as simple luck: “It was like, ‘Let’s put all our money on red!’[...] It wasn’t a financial plan! We were lucky! And it shouldn’t have been based on luck, because we worked hard” (qtd. in Abcarian, “In Spotlight’s Glare”).

Michelle Obama supported her public performance as an average woman with stories about the Obama family’s private life, and in particular, their shopping habits and fashion preferences. She referenced American brands that stand for affordability and the average American consumer to establish her averageness while distancing herself from Republican “Walmart Mom” rhetoric. Although both *Walmart* and *Target* are both set roughly in the same price range, both are widely recognized symbols of a conservative vs. liberal attitude or Republicans vs. Democrats (Zogby 8; Keane “On Target”).

One specific storyline stands out: her affinity to the *Target* big box discount stores. Over the course of the campaign, she repeatedly mentioned *Target* as part of the Obamas’ private life. “I am still going to Target, buying Halloween costumes” (Brezinski, “Interview Morning Joe”, 2007), she said once. On another occasion she described rushing into *Target* in her workout clothes to buy a few things on her way home (Langley, “Solidifies Role”). In other stories Michelle Obama used *Target* shopping to demonstrate the Obama’s normality.

Our lives are so close to normal, if there is such a thing when you’re running for President.

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<sup>240</sup> Michelle Obama referenced an allegation that Barack Obama and vice-president Dick Cheney’s were eighth cousins (*MSNBC*, “VP Obama Eighth Cousins”) in contrasting the Obamas’ financial background with that of a well-off Republican elite: “You’re looking at a young couple that’s just a few years out of debt. [...] See, because, we went to those good schools, and we didn’t have trust funds. I’m still waiting for Barack’s trust fund. Especially after I heard that Dick Cheney was supposed to be a relative or something. Give us something here!” (qtd. in Collins, “The Other Obama”).

[...]When I'm off the road, I'm going to Target to get the toilet paper, I'm standing on soccer fields [...]. (qtd. in Collins, "The Other Obama")

Michelle Obama's "average" Americans are *Target* shoppers. She includes *Target* in accounts of her private life in order to infuse her role as "working class heroine" with narrative verisimilitude. In this way, she successfully countered Republican efforts to monopolize the "sports mom" rhetoric.

A similar narrative strategy was applied to Michelle Obama's fashion choices. On the campaign trail, her wardrobe and her comments on fashion and style demonstrated her working class background.

In a July 4<sup>th</sup> interview with *All Access Hollywood* the Obamas for example applied this strategy to appear as "down-to-earth" family. Dressed in simple, casual outfits, the whole family sits on a quilt-draped picnic bench in the all-American setting of an open-air coal-mining museum (cf. [Fig. 150](#)). In this Independence Interview the Obamas made the storyline of being an "average American family" clearly visible. Michelle Obama took the lead, and much of the discussion concerned her husband's status as fashion icon and her own display of affordable fashion. Michelle (MO) and her oldest daughter Malia commented on Barack's wardrobe (cf. [Fig. 151 & 152](#)):

MO: I think it's funny that he is involved in this fashion icon stuff, because these pants he's had for probably ten years.

Malia: And that belt...

MO: And don't pan [the camera] down to the shoes. Because ... we talked about getting new shoes. ("Interview All-Access Hollywood", 2008)

The mentioned "worn old clothing" label Barack Obama as modest and frugal. Michelle Obama, on the other hand, presents herself as liking to shop and dress nice, but with an eye to affordability. Her husband, she said, "[will] be happy to know that this is a \$30 dress" ("Interview All-Access Hollywood", 2008). Sasha, the youngest daughter, interjected, "Mommy buys everything at The Gap" ("Interview All-Access Hollywood", 2008). Thereby further underlining her mother's storyline.

Michelle Obama's identity as an average American woman is a stark contrast to the Republican candidate's spouse. Cindy McCain, with her penchant for luxury fashion, told *Vogue* magazine that she favored the high-end German brand *Escada*, but was willing to switch to an American designer like Carolina Herrera when she became First Lady (Reed, "Cindy McCain takes a Moment")<sup>241</sup>.

Michelle Obama extended her discussion of wardrobe and style, with an implied swipe at the Republicans, on Jay Leno's *Late Night Show*. Jay Leno hinted at the uproar over Sarah Palin's \$150,000 pre-convention fashion makeover (Cummings, "RNC shells

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<sup>241</sup> For more also see: Conroy, Scott. "Cindy's Fortune: An Asset And A Liability." *CBS News*. 02 Jul. 2008. Web. 19 Aug. 2014. <<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/cindys-fortune-an-asset-and-a-liability/>>.



out \$150K”)<sup>242</sup> and Cindy McCain’s \$300,000 Republican National Convention outfit (Dowd, “Makeover with an Ugly Gloss”)<sup>243</sup>. “I want to ask you about your wardrobe”, he said. “I’m guessing about 60 grand? Sixty, 70 thousand for that outfit?” (“Michelle Obama Tonight Show”, 2008). Her casual answer met with thunderous applause: “Actually, this is a *J. Crew* ensemble” (“Michelle Obama Tonight Show”, 2008) (cf. [Fig. 153](#)). “Ladies, we know *J. Crew*”, she said, “You can get some good stuff online!” (“Michelle Obama Tonight Show”, 2008). Note how Michelle’s “we” aligns her with the women in the audience. She went on to offer information about her shopping habits (she shops online to save time, and the Obama family always pays for their own clothes). These comments established that she enjoyed wearing affordable American fashion, unlike political opponents who hypocritically accused the Obamas of elitism while spending a fortune on high end fashion. And by explaining that the Obamas bought and paid for all their clothes<sup>244</sup>, Michelle Obama made clear that the presidential campaign had not changed her personal habits. Unlike Sarah Palin, with her professional personal shoppers<sup>245</sup>, this potential First Lady did her own shopping, like other average Americans.

Michelle Obama also conveyed modesty and contentment on a visual level. Her campaign trail wardrobe included affordable outfits from popular retailers, to widespread public surprise. For example, she appeared at one 2008 rally in a \$34.99 dress from *He&M* (cf. [Fig. 154](#)) (Tomer, “Mrs. O’s Style”)<sup>246</sup>.

She underscored her “everywomanness” by wearing clothing more than once during the campaign. Two days after her *Tonight Show* appearance, for example, she wore her yellow *J. Crew* cardigan (cf. [Fig. 155](#))<sup>247</sup>. Mix-and-match clothing communicates to female voters: Like every normal woman, I have a limited wardrobe and of course I wear things more than once. As first lady, Michelle Obama made it her signature style to “recycle” her outfits like regular folks (“Michelle Obama Repeat Fashion”)<sup>248</sup>.

**242** Also see: Givham, Robin. “Sarah Palin’s Wardrobe Disconnect.” *The Washington Post*. 23 Oct. 2008. Web. 27 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/22/AR2008102202187.html>>; “Palin’s Pricey Clothes may Clash with Image: GOP Spends \$150,000 on New Wardrobe for the Vice Presidential Pick.” *NBC News*. 22 Oct. 2008. Web. 28 Jan. 2015. <[http://www.nbcnews.com/id/27330137/ns/politics-decision\\_08/t/palins-pricey-clothes-may-clash-image/#.Vj0dxYRK78g](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/27330137/ns/politics-decision_08/t/palins-pricey-clothes-may-clash-image/#.Vj0dxYRK78g)>.

**243** Also see: “Cindy McCain’s Party Clothes: Candidate’s Wife Sported Costly Designer Duds at RNC.” *Daily News*. 05 Sep. 2008. Web. 19 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/cindy-mccain-party-clothes-candidate-wife-sported-costly-designer-duds-rnc-article-1.322561>>.

**244** Another occasion on which Michelle Obama promoted this storyline was during a magazine cover shoot where she refused to wear designer clothes bought for the shoot and instead insisted on wearing her own clothes she had brought. See: Seymour, Lesley Jane. “Behind *The More* Magazine Shoot: Who Dictates Michelle Obama’s Personal Style?.” *Huffington Post*. 29 Oct. 2008. Web. 03 Apr. 2014. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lesley-jane-seymour/dressgate-who-is-dictatin\\_b\\_128067.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lesley-jane-seymour/dressgate-who-is-dictatin_b_128067.html)>.

**245** Michelle Obama claimed not to have employed a stylist for the campaign, but to decide on her wardrobe herself. As her spokeswoman Katie McCormick announced in June 2008: “To the best of my knowledge, she does not use a stylist” (Trebay, “She Dresses to Win”).

**246** Further example in this context: Michelle Obama’s *J. Crew* skirt worn on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008 at a campaign rally in Jacksonville North Carolina. For image see: Tomer, Mary. “Coming Up Roses in J.Crew.” *Mrs-O.com*. 07. Oct. 2008. Web. 13 Mar. 2008. <<http://mrs-o.com/newdata/2008/10/7/coming-up-roses-in-j-crew.html>>.

**247** Further example in this context: Michelle Obama’s *J. Crew* skirt re-worn on October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2008 at a campaign rally in Las Vegas, Nevada and Santa Fe, New Mexico. For image see: Tomer, Mary. “J.Crew X-Two.” *Mrs-O.com*. 07. Oct. 2008. Web. 15 Mar. 2015. <<http://mrs-o.com/newdata/2008/10/30/j-crew-x-two.html>>.

**248** Also see: Lindley, Willow. “Twice As Nice: Michelle Obama’s Repeat Wardrobe.” *Huffington Post*. 15 May 2009. Web. 14 Apr. 2015. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/04/14/twice-as-nice-michelle-ob\\_n\\_186582.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/04/14/twice-as-nice-michelle-ob_n_186582.html)>; Cardellino, Carly. “Michelle Obama Recycles a Dress.” *Cosmopolitan*. 07 Nov. 2012. Web. 17 Apr. 2015. <<http://www.cosmopolitan.com/health-fitness/>>



Michelle Obama also demonstrated her “normality” by wearing her more expensive items, like a luxury brand Maria Cornejo belt costing around \$200, with inexpensive items (cf. [Fig. 156](#), [157](#) & [158](#)).

Revealing the success of this performative strategy, Michelle Obama’s fashion choices were widely praised as “keeping with the current economic spirit” (Odell, “Fast Fashion”) and dubbed “recession chic” (Keilar, “Urban Chic”). *People Magazine* even celebrated her “democratic fashion” (“Michelle Obama Classic and Confident”). Michelle Obama made a socio-economic necessity – affordable fashion on a limited budget – into something fun and fancy. Michelle Obama, said her friend, is “you and I, she’s the woman next door, she’s the woman down the street” (qtd. in Associated Press, “Kids and Campaign”).

The last narrative strand underlying Michelle Obama’s performance in the role of working class girl is the working mom storyline. This was particularly important for the Obama campaign’s engagement with socio-economic issues: it transcended class lines, thereby creating a sense of unity, and presented the Obamas as credible advocates for working families. “I’m a working mother” (*Good Housekeeping*, “Conversation with Michelle Obama”) she declared in an interview with *Good Housekeeping* magazine<sup>249</sup>. In 2008 she wrote an essay for *U.S. NEWS* and announced that working women and families would be her top priority as First Lady, as this issue was “closest to my heart” (“As Barack’s First Lady”).

Michelle Obama used her life experience as a working mother to show her understanding of working families’ daily challenges and especially working women with children. Personal anecdotes lent credibility to her performative staging. She told *ABC*’s “Morning Joe” interviewer Mika Brezsinski,

[Y]ou know how work is for mothers. It’s all very flexible. I carry a Blackberry from work, so I’m constantly on that, in communication with my assistants, my staff, and with today’s technology you can do a lot over Blackberry. [...] I don’t think that’s very different from what a lot of women do. We are always juggling. I don’t want to pretend like this isn’t any different, but I have spent my entire adult life, as a professional, as a mother, juggling. (“Interview Morning Joe”, 2007)

For *People Magazine* she recounted a story about a job interview while on maternity leave and breast-feeding her newborn. “I didn’t have a babysitter, so I went in there with the stroller and did the interview. And Sasha slept through it, thank goodness” (*People Magazine*, “This is Who I Am”). Like “regular folks”, the Obamas couldn’t always find (or afford) a babysitter. The interviewer chimed in, “[w]hat working mother couldn’t identify with that babysitter dilemma?” (*People Magazine*, “This is Who I Am”). The “working mother” storyline is supported with images of Michelle Obama as loving mother and resolute working

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news/a10741/michelle-obama-recycles-a-dress/; Lee, Ester. “Michelle Obama Stuns at State of the Union Address in Recycled Azzedine Alaia Dress.” *US Weekly*. 29 Jan. 2014. Web. 23 Jun. 2015. <<http://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-style/news/michelle-obama-state-of-the-union-recycled-azzedine-alaia-dress-first-lady-sotu-2014291>>.

<sup>249</sup> What she had in common with Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, Michelle Obama said, is, “She’s a working mom, so we have that in common” (*Marie Claire*, “Keeps it Real”).

woman – here shown supporting her husband’s campaign (cf. [Fig. 159](#), [160](#) & [161](#)).

Michelle Obama also, time and again, emphasized that she was well aware of the fact that working women have a double burden. “[I]f a toilet overflows”, Michelle Obama said, “we women are the ones rescheduling our meetings to be there when the plumber arrives” (*Vogue*, “The Natural”). The inclusive “we” makes clear to her audience that Michelle Obama, without a doubt, is one of those “burdened” working women.

In an interview on *Larry King Live* she further noted:

[...] I think it’s hard being a mother, a working mother, in this society, period. [...] [W]hat I’m struggling with in terms of the balancing that I have to do to get through the day is no different than what any woman that I know is struggling with. In fact, I think that I can’t complain because I have resources that most mothers don’t have. I’ve got my mother, who is staying behind, helping with – me with my kids. She’s with my girls right now. And that gives me a level of peace. But so many women out here, they don’t have the resources. They don’t have that informal support structure. They don’t have health care. They don’t have living wages. That’s who I worry about. (“Michelle Obama on Larry King”, 2008)

Comments like these made Michelle Obama a credible advocate for working women and families.

The outreach is about acknowledging that we are all women. You know what it’s like on the campaign trail. I can be a lot more effective talking about issues that are relevant to me: I feel guilty working and juggling my responsibilities as a parent. If I’m still struggling with this, there have to be other women who do, too. (qtd. in Schultz, “Plaindealer Interview”)

In addition to that, by admitting that she, too, finds it challenging to manage both work and parental responsibilities, Michelle Obama offers a shared identity to her female audience. And her husband knows how working women feel first hand:

[He] has seen me worry that when I am at work I’m not spending enough time with the kids. And when I’m with the kids, I’m not spending enough time at work. Never feeling like I’m doing anything right – always feeling just a little guilty. Barack understands this. (qtd. in Baird, “Women Voters”)

With these narrative scripts, Michelle Obama staged herself as a “working class heroine” fighting alongside her husband for women who do not have the resources she has (“Interview Michelle Obama Larry King”, 2008):

I have a backup system. And that’s what we need to make sure – that’s one of the things Barack wants to do, is to make sure that women and families have the kind of backup system that we have to sustain ourselves. (“Interview Michelle Obama Larry King”, 2008)

To promote her husband’s socio-economic agenda, Michelle Obama held countless “Working Women’s Round Tables” (Crone, “Michelle Obama 1<sup>st</sup> Michigan Campaign

Stop”) with the motto, “Economic Security for American Families” (cf. [Fig. 162](#)).

In these meetings, she used her family history to illustrate the decline of the American Dream<sup>250</sup>:

[F]or me, policies that support working women and working families aren’t just political issues. They’re personal. They’re the causes I carry in my heart every single day. When I was a kid, my father, a blue-collar city worker, could earn enough from his job to support our whole family, while my mother stayed at home to take care of my brother and me. But today, one income—especially a shift worker’s income like my dad’s—doesn’t go as far as it used to. In most families, both parents have to work. And it’s even harder for single parents. (“Remarks Women’s Economic Round Table Fishers”, 2008)

This storyline was repeated on many occasions. She told Jay Leno that her father’s salary “sent me and my brother to the best schools in the country”, adding, this promise of the American Dream – “[t]hat’s what we’re fighting for” (“Michelle Obama Interview Late Night Show”, 2008)<sup>251</sup>.

In conclusion, the staging of a gender-specific storyline on socio-economic issues played a crucial role during the 2008 election. The Obama campaign’s senior advisor on women voters, Dana Singister, said the election focused heavily on “kitchen-table, pocket-book issues” (qtd. in Baird, “Women Voters”), that is, the daily issues of American voters: “economic security, retirement security, concerns that their health care will be there when they need it” (qtd. in Baird, “Women Voters”).

In that regard Michelle Obama complemented Obama’s Imagined Presidency with a gender-specific narrative script. The down-to-earth “working class heroine” narrative – the “working class girl” turned “working mom” – extended the range and impact of Barack Obama’s performance as “American Dreamer” and “Community Organizer in Chief” by infusing it with a down-to-earth and prototypical Horatio Algerite “working-class-version” (Silverblatt 205) of the American Dream’s meritocratic promise.

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<sup>250</sup> She told a “Working Women’s Round Table” in New York, “My father went to work every day, and you know why? [...] Because he could raise a family of four on a city worker’s salary. There was no magic to my life” (qtd. in Parsons, “Humble Roots”).

<sup>251</sup> Also see Michelle Obama’s appearance on *The View*, where she explained: “Let me tell you, of course I am proud of my country. Nowhere but in America my story is even possible. I am girl that grew up on the South Side of Chicago. My father was a working class guy. Worked the shift all his life. Because of his hard work he was able to send me and my brother to Princeton. But you know, I tell people, just imagine thre pride my parents who didn’t go to college felt that they could through their own hard work and sacrifice have us achieve things they could never have imagined” (“Michelle Obama The View”, 2008).

## 5. Conclusion: The “Imagined Presidency” and Political Communication in Contemporary Election Campaigns

When you read a really good story, you sometimes reach the point where you almost forget that you’re reading at all. When that happens, you experience the story in a fundamentally different way, as though you have entered it, and instead of taking place outside you, it proceeds around you, and you feel everything the story evokes more deeply and profoundly. (Waldman, “Triumph of Narrative”)

Many political communication scholars agree that political communication in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is made problematic and permanently changed by the “fragmentation of symbolic experience through new means of signification and technological reproduction within a landscape defined by mass media and mass consumption” (Dunn, *Identity* 11). James Stanyer claims that because of the post-modern world’s contingency, complexity and chaos, political communication has “undergone a fundamental change, a ‘paradigmatic shift’” (1).

Confronted by rapidly increasing social differentiation, fragmentation and individualization (Stanyer 8), political actors have to apply new communicative strategies in order to fulfill their functional role in the public sphere and meet their audiences’ expectations. Jay Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh describe three phases of post-World-War II political culture and communication in the Western hemisphere in (211-213): The “‘golden age’ of parties” (Janda/Colman 612) defined by group-loyal consumption of politics, was followed by the loosening of party loyalty triggered by televised mass communication (Blumler/Kavanagh 212). Today, political culture and communication are characterized by a highly individualized and consumption-oriented electorate conditioned by the hypermedialization of the public sphere (Blumler/Kavanagh 213).

During this same period, the presidency became more important in advanced democracies (Körösényi 2005; Poguntke/Webb 2005), political culture saw “the rise of the narrative paradigm” (Fisher 2), and theatrical fictionalization is increasingly central to negotiating “collective political decisions and claims to power” (Gadinger et al. 9).

The perception of Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign as epitomizing these communicative shifts in collective meaning-making processes inspired this research project. The dissertation begins with the assumption that post-war developments had a significant impact on the communicative mechanisms underlying the American presidency, which is *the* socio-ontologically center of collective meaning-making and national collective belonging in the United States. Storytelling and performative staging have always been crucial for the American presidential office (Cornog 2004; Woodward 2007, Weiss 2008). My research aimed to show how “telling a story” and staging it properly have become the *sine qua non* for American presidential political communication.

The narrative (Kreiswirth 1992/2005; Czarniawska 2004) and performative turn (Fischer-Lichte 2004/2005; Kershaw 1994/1999) in cultural studies and the social sciences

is the foundation of my approach. I first show that storytelling and performative staging play an indispensable role in 21<sup>st</sup> century political communication in general, and in the American socio-political sphere in particular. I focused on the American Presidential office as central and most powerful institution in the American political and cultural sphere. With a focus on political communication and collective meaning-making, I reconceptualized the American Presidency, proposing my concept of the Imagined Presidency as a refinement of established theoretical communication studies approaches to the Presidential office (Rhetorical Presidency, Symbolic Presidency).

As I have argued, in an age when symbols, rituals, and other established means of collective meaning-making have lost their integrative power, the American Presidency can no longer be seen and acted upon simply as a site of symbolic representation. Instead, as I have suggested, it must be understood as site where the symbolic systems underlying modern western socio-political entities can be regenerated and resignified with meaningfulness through imaginative and performative processes.

My concept of the Imagined Presidency recognizes that collective meaning-making in the political sphere depends on communication processes that go beyond appropriating and representing established symbolic systems. Rather, these communication processes generate an avatarian space of collective engagement by actively engaging imaginative processes (storytelling), and their staging (public performance). These mechanisms allow political communication in the fragmented and hyper-individualized socio-political sphere of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to re-fuse the symbolic meaning-making systems that secure the existence of large collectives, and to enable and empower individuals to gain access, participate in and identify with a collective socio-political entity.

I have argued that imaginative processes and their performative realization, unlike processes of mere representation, offer an extended realm of experience for individual actors. My concept of the “Imagined Presidency” acknowledges the key role of storytelling and performance, and offers a corresponding and necessary refinement to existing concepts of the American Presidency as the central site for political communication and collective meaning-making in American political culture.<sup>252</sup>

My case study of Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential election campaign provides an analytical implementation of my concept of the American Presidency. I selected the 2008 Obama campaign as my case study because, I believe, this campaign most clearly demonstrates the “paradigmatic shift” in political communication structures. However, I am not suggesting that Barack Obama himself initiated this communicative shift. Instead my case study examines Obama’s 2008 campaign as the first presidential campaign to fully acknowledge the changing socio-political communicative environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

My focus on the 2008 campaign was initially prompted by the conspicuous and frequent characterization of Obama as an extraordinary actor and storyteller<sup>253</sup>. For example,

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252 According to the *Sage 21<sup>st</sup> Century Communication Reference Handbook* (2009), in contemporary communication “[p]erformance and storytelling are key processes” (1).

253 The topic of storytelling and politics has been a much discussed issue in the media since the 2004 presidential election



Larissa MacFarquhar called Obama “a master storyteller” (MacFarquhar, “The Conciliator”), and Kelley Candaele claimed in an article that Obama so successfully inspired people to participate in his potential presidency because he translated “values into action by telling his own story in public” (“Year of the Organizer”). Time and again, Obama himself said that political action required “building up stories and getting people to reflect on what their lives mean” (qtd. in Schneiderhan 148). After his first term as President, Obama declared his “biggest mistake” was his failure “to tell a story to the American people that gives them a sense of unity and purpose” (“Interview CBS This Morning”, 2012).

In May 2008, David Axelrod, Barack Obama’s campaign manager, linked Obama to the realm of narrative, fictionalization and performative staging in a particularly interesting way. Writing to Elie Attie, former Al Gore speechwriter and writer and producer of the popular HBO television series on the American Presidency, *The West Wing*, Axelrod said, “We’re living your scripts” (qtd. in Funt, “A Race”)<sup>254</sup>. This comment further confirmed my perception that the Obama campaign understood that in this changed communicative environment, the American Presidency must be understood as imaginative space in which stories had to be scripted, told and staged.

In my research I therefore examined Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign as epitomizing this shift in political communication. It is an exemplary case of the understanding that a successful presidential contender must present himself as a viable “Narrator-in-Chief” who can offer a verisimilar performative implementation of his own script on stage. In this context I considered two main questions. First, I examined how Barack Obama offered his Imagined Presidency to the American electorate with regard to the central issues of time. Second, the case study analyzed the underlying structure and performative aim of his imaginative offer: its narrative script, how it was formulated and implemented during the 2008 campaign, and to what end candidate Obama made this imaginative offer.

Because Obama could not credibly cover all relevant political issues through the enactment of his own narrative script, his wife Michelle Obama played a crucial role as independent campaigner in certain contexts. My examination of both Barack and Michelle Obama’s imaginative offers in the campaign reveals how their performative staging succeeded at fusing their own narrative scripts with stories deeply rooted in the America’s cultural memory and self-concept, and with the issues confronting their audiences in their daily lives. By successfully staging his narrative script and thus achieving in

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and got increasingly more attention after the 2008 presidential election. See e.g.: Bai, Matt. “The Framing Wars.” *The New York Times Magazine* 17 Jul. 2005. Web. 24 Aug. 2009. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/17/magazine/the-framing-wars.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/17/magazine/the-framing-wars.html?_r=0)>; “Still Waiting for the Narrator-in-Chief.” *The New York Times Magazine*. 30 Oct. 2012. Web. 04 Nov. 2012. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/magazine/still-waiting-for-the-narrator-in-chief.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/magazine/still-waiting-for-the-narrator-in-chief.html?_r=0)>; Black, Eric. “It’s not the News, It’s the Narrative.” *MinnPost*. 05 Apr. 2010. Web. 03 Feb. 2011. <<https://www.minnpost.com/eric-black-ink/2010/04/its-not-news-its-narrative>>; Boyle, David. “In Search of a Political Narrative.” *David-Boyle.co.uk*. Aug. 2005. Web. 01 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.david-boyle.co.uk/politics/narrative.html>>; Safire, William. “Narrative.” *The New York Times*. 05 Dec. 2004. Web. 01. Aug. 2011. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/05/magazine/narrative.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/05/magazine/narrative.html?_r=0)>; Westen, Drew. “What Happened to Obama?” *The New York Times*. 06 Aug. 2011. Web. 17 Aug. 2011. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/07/opinion/sunday/what-happened-to-obamas-passion.html?\\_r=4&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/07/opinion/sunday/what-happened-to-obamas-passion.html?_r=4&pagewanted=all)>

<sup>254</sup> Also see Brian Stelter’s 2008 commentary on the parallel between Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign and the fictional candidate Matt Santos’ run for office: Stelter, Brian. “Following the Script: Obama, McCain and ‘The West Wing’.” *The New York Times*. 29 Oct. 2008. Web. 14 Jul. 2009. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/30/arts/television/30wing.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/30/arts/television/30wing.html?_r=0)>.



the site of their offered Imagined Presidency this “fusion” of single performative elements determining a collective’s identity formation (“Pragmatics” 529/549), Obama facilitated the inseparable and seamless merging of the realm of their imaginative offer with their audiences’ “real world”.

My case study focused on what I consider the four most prominent issues of the 2008 election campaign: renewal/change, (political) reconciliation/overcoming, race, and the economy/economic crisis. I relied on a wide variety of sources to reveal the overall communicative strategy that Obama followed throughout his campaign. The analysis included sources directed at the public and especially the electorate: textual sources, such as Obama’s two autobiographies, speeches and campaign remarks, texts, articles, and interviews published by and about the candidate; audio-visual sources, such as television and web interviews, television appearances, and campaign commercials; and other forms of visual communication, such as campaign posters, personal, official, and media photographs, and campaign logos. I hope that both my compilation of public communication sources, and my extensive and thorough examination of these sources make a substantial contribution to understanding Obama’s 2008 presidential election.

My examination of Barack Obama’s public performance and its underlying communication strategy during the 2008 presidential campaign shows that Obama’s public staging was unambiguously determined by an imaginative principle. In this, I see confirmation of my communications-related re-conceptualization of the American presidential office – the Imagined Presidency.

In addressing the issue of renewal and change, Obama offered a performance in the role of the reformer and prophet of new political age. He merged his appropriation of the cultural memory of John F. Kennedy with the narrative scripting of his rather unusual ethnic background, young age and short political career into an “Adamic” storyline of progress, innovation and rebirth. Through the imaginative and performative establishment of an Adamic narrative of unburdened renewal, Obama evoked a second “Camelot”. He turned his inexperience and his ethnic background into assets, staging his future presidency as a credible threshold to a new era of hope and progress for the American nation and a renewal of Washington D.C. as symbolic center of the American political sphere.

Michelle Obama’s narrative script and its performative staging in this context added both a balancing and an affirming storyline to Obama’s Imagined Presidency. Offering herself as a hip and dynamic version of the first lady’s traditional roles as mother and spouse, Michelle Obama refreshed established performative frames without breaking completely with traditional cultural boundaries. Her performative summoning of a “Jackie O.” image further amplified the narrative scripting of her own story as modern and up-to-date mother and spouse by summoning the cultural memory of the revered Jacqueline Kennedy, who epitomized both renewal and tradition. Having established this “balanced” storyline through her public staging, Michelle Obama successfully complemented her husband’s call for change and renewal, and at the same time injecting into it

an appreciation for the traditional.

Summoning a special relationship with Abraham Lincoln, Barack Obama publicly staged himself as a pragmatic, non-ideological political reconciler. Casting himself as the nation's healer and unifier after years of political strife under George W. Bush's presidency, Obama presented himself as trustee of the Founding Fathers' and Lincoln's legacy, saving the American union by guiding it to true political unity and social equality. He established the narrative script for his public performance by offering the story of his life, a story that portrayed his natural, undogmatic drive and mission to bring people together with a sense of commonality and equality. Obama successfully presented his Imagined Presidency as resolving the nation's political rupture and polarization, the start of a truly bipartisan solution-oriented style of politics, with his Imagined Presidency as the site where the long-standing socio-political flaws of the American union could finally be healed.

Race, always a challenging issue in the United States, was the most visible topic in the 2008 election. Obama summoned a highly integrative storyline, styling his campaign as a space where America's difficult racial past could be rewritten as a narrative of American progress in overcoming its greatest failures, opening a path to a post-racial American future. Using Obama's life story to illustrate overcoming race as a limiting category and realizing a humanist understanding of belonging, the campaign presented the potential of his Imagined Presidency for racial reconciliation and overcoming. Tapping into the cultural memory of Martin Luther King, Obama amplified his imaginative offer significantly. Using King to style the performative site, Obama presented himself as enacting King's prophecy, opening the door to King's "beloved community" and a colorblind America. With Obama cast as a genetically predestined racial catalyst whose life was driven by a nonideological approach to overcoming the challenges of racial and ethnic belonging, his narrative scripting clearly broke with established expectations about racial frames.

Barack Obama's integrative storyline entailed a performative dilemma: He was both "too black" (for white America) and "not black enough" (for Black America). Michelle Obama played a central role in resolving this problem for the campaign. My examination of her public performance reveals an underlying narrative script addressed directly to the African American community. Whether addressing audiences that were exclusively African American, mixed, or majority white, Michelle Obama, invariably offered an open and highly visual performative presence unambiguously grounded in black narrative contexts and demands. Scripting her life story as a mirror of black America's history compensated for her husband's "atypical" ethnic experience, and also facilitated the staging of the Obama family as the African American Dream. Acting in public as an honest and plainspoken advocate for the Black electorate, Michelle Obama also generated a credible atmosphere of honest solidarity with "her" African American community, something that her husband could not do with his imaginative offer.

The crisis state of the American economy was the issue perceived as most pressing by the American electorate. Obama's 2008 campaign, in calling for a new social consensus,

integrated two seemingly politically contradictory storylines: the Reaganite self-reliant American Dreamer, and the Rooseveltian communal citizen. Obama's public performance in this context relied on a narrative scripting of his life story as exemplar of both the conservative tradition of self-reliance and individualism (his family's and his own "American storybook" climb up the social ladder), and the more liberal ethos of community-orientation and communal responsibility (his family's altruistic service and his "selfless" career as community organizer). Credibly offering himself as exemplifying a balanced mix of conservative and liberal socioeconomic values, Obama was able to verisimilarly present himself as an expert who could overcome the economic crisis by providing a transformative redefinition of the America's social compact, while at the same time celebrating the American Dream's promise of America as opportunity society. Obama thus offered his Imagined Presidency as a space where the American public could both regenerate its socioeconomic belief system and regain a feeling of agency in the midst of a severe and overwhelming economic crisis.

The Obama campaign's public staging on socioeconomic issues also relied heavily on Michelle Obama's public performance. She backed up her husband's campaign's positions on the economic crisis and added a Horatio Algerite working class narrative that Obama himself was not able to offer. The central narrative script underlying Michelle Obama's public performance in this context was the story of her family's working class background. In addition, Michelle Obama presented her life experience as a working mother as proof of her true and knowledgeable advocacy for working families, and especially the issues facing working mothers. Her down-to-earth "working class heroine" narrative thus complemented Obama's Imagined Presidency with a gender-specific narrative script supporting Barack Obama's performance as "American Dreamer" and "Community Organizer-in-Chief" by infusing it with a working-class celebration of America's meritocratic promise.

The case study demonstrates that the narrative scripting of Obama's public performances was key to the success of the 2008 election campaign. America's established, but weakened systems of collective identity formation were reinfused with meaning by Obama's telling and enacting stories and connecting them with national cultural icons and collective stories of self. The narrative, the process of storytelling and the performative act opened up the participatory dimension and made Obama's public staging particularly effective by enhancing the merger of the actor on stage, the audience, and the larger cultural meaning-making systems on which the socio-political collective rests.

That this notion was central to Obama's 2008 communicative strategy is supported by one of Obama's 2008 "inside the campaign" videos, "The Meaning of Community Organizing". After Barack Obama's brief introduction about the importance of community organizing for his campaign, the viewer follows a team of campaign volunteers. A team leader explains that their success fully depends on "us building relationships" by "sharing our stories" ("Meaning Community Organizing", 2008). Having shared this principle

with the new team members, the volunteers have to “tell their story” to their fellow campaigners. After the audience hears the extended story of why one woman joined the Obama campaign – her mother’s chronic illness and the financial difficulties it created (“Meaning Community Organizing”, 2008) – the team leader again “goes center stage”. She explains with gravitas that what matters most for their success as campaigners is telling a story: “When we tell our stories, it tells people who we are and why we are here” (“Meaning Community Organizing”, 2008). The video thus nicely reflects the 2008 official Obama campaign’s overall communicative strategy.

Sticking to his 2008 campaign’s communication strategy, Obama, throughout his first term in office and his second campaign, repeatedly took the role of America’s “story-teller-in-Chief”. In 2010, for example, Obama spoke in the introduction to the *History Channel*’s 12-part docudrama series *America: The Story of Us* (Goodale, “The Story of Us”)<sup>255</sup>. The immensely popular docudrama included a segment on Barack Obama, presenting him as a one-man incarnation of the American story.

Obama used “The story of us” slogan as the title of a 2012 campaign ad launching his second run for presidency: “The Story of Us” (Air-Date: 09 Feb. 2012). The ad invites viewers to go online and “click ourselves” through “the story of us” that began in Springfield in February 2007 with Obama’s presidential campaign announcement. Highlighting the most notable moments of “our” 2008 campaign and of “our” first term in office with Obama (“The Story of Us”), we are then invited to see what we “can do” if we decide in 2012, “I’m in” (“The Story of Us”). Interestingly, Obama’s Republican opponent in the second campaign, Mitt Romney, completely distanced himself from this notion on which Obama rested his communication strategy in a 2012 Tweet, where he claimed that “[b]eing president is not about telling stories. Being president is about leading, and President Obama has failed to lead” (Romney, “Being” 2012).

Mitt Romney’s comment can be a starting point for thinking about extending my concept of the Imagined Presidency. More research on the narrative and performative shift in political communication is necessary in order to evaluate the full dimensions and impact of this development on the 21<sup>st</sup> century political culture in general, and American political culture in specific. In this particular context there are a number of possibilities for further research.

First, it would be interesting to examine the communication strategy used by Barack Obama once in office. Occupying the office of the Presidency naturally constitutes a limiting frame with regard to imaginative and performative processes. The Presidential office and its underlying structures dominate anyone who occupies the office. Realpolitik and the pragmatic necessities of the political process always come into play for political officeholders, and inevitably influence political communication. Therefore, it would be helpful to examine how, and to what extent, imaginative and performative processes that are extremely effective for “newcomer” presidential candidates remain viable once the politi-

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255 The series was known outside the United States as “America: The Story of the U.S.”.

cian is in office. Comparing the possibilities and limits of the communicative strategy in campaigns with the strategies used by an incumbent would contribute significantly to the elaboration of my concept of the Imagined Presidency and our understanding of the communicative processes at play. For similar reasons, Presidential second-term re-election campaigns are also relevant research projects. Barack Obama's second presidential campaign in 2012 would of course be of particular interest in this regard.

Research on the communication strategies of Obama's Democratic and Republican political competition in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections also has great potential. Comparing Obama's communication strategies with his political opponents' could contribute to the elaboration of my concept of the Imagined Presidency. Such a study might investigate structural differences in the two parties' 2008/2012 communication strategies and performative staging, and specifically whether the Democrats' and Republicans' communicative styles and strategies show signs of convergence or divergence. Research on other types of election campaigns, as for example governor's races, might also reveal if there has been a narrative and performative shift in the political communication structures on the state level.

Another worthwhile field of inquiry is the ongoing pre-election phase of the 2016 presidential election, as well as the 2016 presidential election itself. Currently an interesting development can be observed: a significant increase in the publication of so-called "campaign books" (Garvin, "Judging") by presidential candidates.<sup>256</sup> A recent article on *Bloomberg.com* claims, "This year's batch of literary offerings – with publications [or re-publications] from at least 10 candidates in both parties – stands out as one of the largest of any election cycle in recent memory" (Tartat/Elkin/ Tiourririne, "The Literary Primary")<sup>257</sup>. I interpret this trend as corroboration of my concept of the Imagined Presidency: that political communication and its performative enactment rely increasingly on imaginative forms and strategies for scripting meaning-making, such as narratives and storytelling. Examining the successful and unsuccessful communicative strategies used by both parties' presidential hopefuls leading up to the 2016 election would constitute another intriguing extension of my dissertation research.

Finally, it is worth noting the growth in cross-disciplinary research on the communicative role of the imaginative.<sup>258</sup> The increased interest in narrative processes and their

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256 John F. Kennedy's 1957 *Profiles of Courage* can be seen as the first publication of a modern-form "campaign book", which usually appear in form of a memoir or autobiography.

257 This has also been claimed by historian Anne Applebaum, who remarked that, "nowadays nobody runs for high office without having written, or having arranged for the ghostwriting of, a very large book" ("Hillary's Crystal Ball"). She continues, it "has become de rigeur for presidential candidates to publish a work between hard covers" (Applebaum, "Hillary's Crystal Ball").

258 Aside from political communication a broad range of other disciplines has discovered imaginative processes such as storytelling and its performative staging as viable source of interest. See for example: Alexander, Bryan. *The New Digital Storytelling: Creating Narratives with New Media*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011. Print; Ettl-Huber, Silvia. *Storytelling in der Organisationskommunikation: Theoretische und empirische Befunde*. Wiesbaden: Springer Verlag, 2014. Print.; Fog, Klaus et al. *Storytelling: Branding in Practice*. Berlin: Springer Science & Business Media, 2011. Print; Funken, Christiane and Alexander Stoll, Sinje Hörlin. *Die Projektdarsteller: Karriere als Inszenierung: Paradoxien und Geschlechterfallen in der Wissensökonomie*. Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag, 2011. Print.; Hovious, Amanda. *Transmedia Storytelling: The Librarian's Guide*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2015. Print.; Lanier, Clinton David. *Experiential Marketing: Exploring the Dimensions, Characteristics, and Logic of Firm-driven Experiences*. Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2008. Web.; Lewis, Jacon and Rachel Seuell. "Educational Trends Past, Present, and Future: The Significance of Storytelling." *Educational Trends: A Symposium in Belize, Central America*. Ed. Pamela Cook. Newcastle:



performative staging as powerful sources of meaning-making can be seen as a general trend. As Ruth Levitas says, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century globalized world, “the reconstitution of society in imagination and in reality is a pressing need” (xi).

With my elaboration and refinement of the concept of the Imagined Presidency, and my case study of Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential election campaign, I hope to have contributed to both a better conceptual and practical understanding of political communication and its underlying structure in the America’s 21<sup>st</sup> century political and public sphere.

Barack Obama’s performative staging during the 2008 presidential campaign clearly suggests that he recognized and relied on the importance of imagination in reconstituting and reforming society. With thorough and skillful narrative scripting of his public performance, Obama secured his electoral success by making an imaginative offer on the site of “his” Imagined Presidency that invited his audience to participate in collective meaning-making and the regeneration of the American collective’s weakened symbolic meaning-making structures. As my research demonstrates, the secret of Obama’s success can be found in his ability to fuse his own story, the story of his electorate, and the story of America.

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