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Doubling Down: President Barack Obama’s Doubled Persona after the Zimmerman Verdict

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This article analyzes President Barack Obama’s remarks following the acquittal of George Zimmerman on the charge of murdering Trayvon Martin. Speaking directly to, for, or about African Americans would lead some to accuse him of speaking primarily as a black man, while ignoring the idea of race would lead some to accuse him of failing to acknowledge its omnipresence in American life. To manage these constraints, the president employed what we have termed a doubled persona; that is, he enacted two different speaking personae and envisioned a distinct audience persona for each speaking persona: He spoke both as a black president and as a president who is black.

Keywords: African American Rhetoric; Barack Obama; Persona; Presidential Rhetoric

“Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago.”¹

On July 19, 2013, President Barack Obama surprised White House reporters by appearing, unannounced, at a daily White House press briefing to utter this line in an unscripted set of remarks. Obama spoke six days after George Zimmerman was found not guilty of second-degree murder in the death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. The president touched upon a number of racial and legal issues in his brief appearance before the media. One of his first comments acknowledged the verdict of the jury and recognized that its members had spoken and done their job to the best of their ability. Shortly after that statement, though, the president recalled his

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observation in March of 2013 that Martin “could have been my son”: “You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot, I said that this could have been my son. Another way of saying that is Trayvon Martin could have been me, 35 years ago.” Then, President Obama addressed the racial prejudice that many African Americans experience on a daily basis, while outlining some of his personal experiences with such prejudice. “It was,” wrote Chris Cillizza (2013) of the Washington Post, “the first black president of the United States speaking at a remarkably personal level about his own experiences with race in this country.”

Not surprisingly, most media coverage focused on his “could have been me, 35 years ago” statement. One study of 25 daily national newspapers, including the five with the largest circulations, found that 15 of them used a variation of that line in their front-page headlines (Daniels, 2014, p. 17). Hailed for a “bravura performance” (Cassidy, 2013), Obama was applauded for “courageously stepping forward” (Safron, 2013) to share “heartfelt views born of personal experience” (Powers, 2013). Other observers, however, offered far less charitable assessments of the president’s remarks. Jason Riley of The Wall Street Journal called the comments politically calculated, noting that “this president has not hesitated to use racial division to further his political agenda” (in “Race,” 2013), while The Washington Times (“Editorial,” 2013) called the “could have been me” meme “hyperbole”: “The only things the president had in common with Trayvon was a skin of a dark hue and a fondness for partying and smoking pot.”

This set of diverse reactions—and accompanying poll results that revealed that 86% of African Americans found the Zimmerman verdict dissatisfying, compared with only 30% of white Americans (Levinson, 2013)—vividly illustrates the racial minefield through which the president “has treaded lightly throughout his career” (Powers, 2013). As Time columnist Touré (2012) pointed out after Obama initially observed that Trayvon Martin could have been his son, “when your position in life seems to be evidence that racism can’t hold everyone back, then it becomes nearly impossible to call out the racism you encounter.” Yet, the president attempted to do just that when he entered the White House briefing room. Given his rare, and not always successful, attempts to address the issue of race through his rhetoric, President Obama’s direct discussion of his own experiences as a black man merit our attention.

To begin, we outline Obama’s previous rhetoric on race in order to illustrate the similarities and differences between those instances and his comments on July 19, 2013. Then, we offer the theoretical idea of doubled persona as a means of making sense of his July 19 remarks. Finally, we turn to an analysis of how Obama adopted a doubled persona while discussing his experiences, the Zimmerman/Martin case, and race in America.

BARACK OBAMA AND RACE

President Obama’s remarks drew surprise largely because he had been reluctant to broach the subject of race in his public comments. During his first campaign for the presidency, Obama “often began major speeches by pointing to the wonder of his mixed-race ancestry [but] it is also true that he never publicly dug much deeper about
matters of race” (Isaksen, 2011, p. 459). For some African American voters at that time, the president’s reluctance to speak directly about race—combined with his biracial family background and diverse life experiences while growing up—created “an issue of political trust” (Walters, 2007, p. 13). In short, as Obama summarized the issue in his 2008 campaign speech at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, “some commentators have deemed me either ‘too black’ or ‘not black enough’” (Obama, 2008).

That Philadelphia speech marks one of the rare instances in which Obama had addressed racial politics prior to the Zimmerman verdict, and he was forced to do so because his pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, was revealed to have made what many perceived as anti-American remarks in some of his sermons. Much of the popular and critical reaction to that speech praised Obama for artfully speaking in what Robert Terrill (2009), borrowing from W. E. B. DuBois, called a double voice that spoke to both black and white Americans and encouraged them to “transcend the color-line” through “his own bifurcated body” (p. 365). This speech, and much of his campaign rhetoric that followed, generated a postracial discourse surrounding Obama’s candidacy and ascension to the presidency (Steele, 2008; Tesler & Sears, 2010); he became a vessel through which race was (too) neatly transcended—especially among white voters (Orbe, 2011, p. 92).

For many African Americans, however, the Philadelphia speech underscored Obama’s reluctance to address race. Utley and Heyse (2009) argued that Obama adopted a postracial stance in that speech (and in other remarks) that

- ostensibly increased identification among his non-African American audiences but potentially failed to maintain commensurate identification among his black audiences by 1) deemphasizing his African influences, 2) eliding African American rhetorical traditions, 3) sanitizing the United States’ history of racial injustice, and 4) problematically representing black and white Americans’ experiences. (p. 158)

The speech, claimed Osagie K. Obasogie (2013), simply “reasserted [Obama’s] political strategy of universalisms that transcend the particularities of racial subordination and White racial privilege” and, in fact, foretold “the consistent role of post-racialism in his approach to governing” following his election (p. 169).

In general, Obama has traversed a serpentine path through the field of race as he has risen from state senator to president—sometimes ignoring it, sometimes transcending it, sometimes embracing it. While he rejected the use of the term postracial to describe his first campaign—“it implies that somehow my campaign represents an easy short cut to racial reconciliation. It’s similar to the notion that if we’re all color blind then somehow problems are solved” (in Wolffe, 2009)—much of his early rhetoric and strategy seemed to embrace such an approach. For example, his star turn at the 2004 Democratic National Convention (DNC) was best known for this applause line: “There’s not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America” (“Transcript,” 2004). Four years later, as he accepted the nomination to be the Democratic candidate for president in 2008, “he never used the words ‘black’ or ‘African American’ during the entirety” of his acceptance speech (Cillizza, 2014). In that general
election campaign, Obama talked about race only 0.87 words for every 1,000 he uttered in his major speeches (Coe & Reitzes, 2010, p. 400). Then, during the first two years of his presidency, he talked little about race—less so than any of his Democratic predecessors in the Oval Office from John F. Kennedy onward (Gillion, 2012).

Obama’s earlier responses to the Trayvon Martin killing underscored both his reluctance to speak directly about race and the political consequences he would pay no matter which route he followed. Assailed on the right when in March of 2013 he mused that Martin could have been his son (Romano, 2012), Obama offered a tepid written statement the day after the Zimmerman verdict was announced. In the 166-word statement issued by the White House under Obama’s name (“Statement,” 2013), the president did not mention the word race or even speak of it in coded terms. Instead, he referred to “passions” without hinting at the source of those passions: “I know this case has elicited strong passions. And in the wake of the verdict, I know those passions may be running even higher.” Not surprisingly, Obama’s passive response was criticized by several African American columnists. “The most offensive reaction of them all [to the verdict],” wrote Keli Goff (2013a) in the online magazine The Root, “came from a surprising source: President Barack Obama.... For the president to not even acknowledge the existence of such a cancer is unconscionable.” Two Washington Post columnists, meanwhile, offered conflicting opinions on how the president should respond to the verdict. Janet Langhart Cohen (2013) urged him to speak up because “for the past 4 years, we [African Americans] have remained silent; some have been satisfied that Obama being the first black president was reason enough to seal our lips and muffle our voices.” Eugene Robinson (2013), on the other hand, counseled quiet. Calling Obama’s official statement the day after the verdict “anodyne and forgettable,” Robinson wearily concluded, “perhaps that’s for the best... [because] the record indicates that honest talk from Obama about race is seen by many people as threatening.”

Thus, as he entered the White House briefing room on July 19, Obama addressed two envisioned audiences—one was an African American audience eager to hear him speak out on matters of racial justice and the other was the typical generic audience of a president: the American people, some of whom would undoubtedly disagree with a president using his position to comment on a local jury verdict. In addition, Obama spoke—as he must—as the president but in two ways: as a black president dismayed by the ways in which young black men are formally and informally profiled and as a president who is black, a figure who can understand African Americans’ dismay about the Zimmerman verdict yet recognize the value in serving the president’s traditional role as unifier of the American people. We examine the notion of rhetorical personae generally and a doubled persona specifically in the next section, then we turn to an illustration of how a doubled persona manifests itself in the president’s remarks.

**Rhetorical Personae**

Every speaker generates a persona through their word choices and behaviors. That persona is a combination of who they perceive themselves to be and how they want
their audience to perceive them. “The rhetorical persona is not the rhetor qua person but is an attributed character created by the auditor’s symbolic construction (and implied assessment) of the rhetor” (Ware & Linkugel, 1982, p. 51). In our case, for example, the persona of the president is what Ware and Linkugel called “the mask that is there before any person turns up to fill it” (p. 50); in other words, an audience holds socially constructed assumptions about what constitutes appropriate presidential rhetoric (Greenstein, 2004). Those assumptions find their roots in the rhetoric, verbal and nonverbal, of those who have previously held the presidency, which creates “a coherent sense of the presidency” (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008, p. 7). As part of that persona, Beasley (2014) emphasized, presidents are “perpetually attempting to create an idea of ‘the people’ with collective identity and common cause” (p. 271). That collective identity, however, is often bound up in notions of whiteness (see Nakayama & Krizek, 1995), a feature that naturalizes the space of the presidency as white: “Up until 2008, when instructed to imagine a nameless, faceless American president without any race or gender prompt, most of us would have imagined a white man” (Jeffries, 2013, p. 3).

Obama’s relative silence on matters of race undoubtedly represents an effort in part to avoid being viewed primarily as a black president, or a president who views the world first and primarily as a black male; the trope of the angry, threatening black man—and this trope tends to dominate mediated representations of African American males (Anderson, 2011; Cooper, 2006; Orbe, 1998)—does not mesh well with socially constructed assumptions about presidential leadership. Such a persona would mark him as an interloper in the white space of the presidency. “Strategic silence, on the other hand,” observed Brummett (1980), “creates a passive persona.... A silent, passive persona has relinquished control over defining and shaping the world” (p. 293). “The phenomenon of self-silencing,” Cloud (1999) added, “could be referred to constitution of oneself in the role of ‘null persona’” (p. 200). The null persona most likely emerges, Cloud continued, when rhetors face “extradiscursive constraints” (p. 200) such as prejudicial perceptions about their fitness to speak on an issue because of their race. As Cloud explained, African Americans understand that their rhetoric is always preceded by a non-black audience’s recognition that a black person is speaking. Or, as urban ethnographer Elijah Anderson (2011) has pointed out, “a person with black skin is viewed as black long before he or she is viewed as a black doctor, black lawyer, or a black professor, whatever that adjective might mean” (p. 258). Thus, despite being biracial, Obama is always black before he is president. “For all his hybridity,” argued G. Reginald Daniel (2009), “Obama’s identity is situated in the black community and extends outward from that location” (p. 52).

As these observations suggest, a rhetor’s persona is developed in concert with an audience’s understanding of who the speaker is addressing. As Edwin Black (1970) asserted, “there is a second persona also implied by a discourse, and that persona is its implied auditor” (p. 111). So, when some African Americans hear Obama speak in the colorblind/white persona of the presidency, addressing—as many presidents have—the collective “American people” (McGee, 1975), they may not hear themselves as implied auditors of this typically “presidential” rhetoric. In such cases, they would be a
third persona or “audiences not present, audiences rejected or negated through the speech and/or speaking situation” (Wander, 1984, p. 209). A third persona, Wander pointed out, is not simply an unaddressed audience, but an audience that has been “negated in history” (Wander, 1984, p. 210)—as African Americans have been throughout much of the nation’s history. On the other hand, if Obama seems to speak about race from his perspective as a black man, non-black listeners may feel excluded and/or judge his rhetoric as inappropriately presidential.

As he approached the podium to speak about the Zimmerman–Martin case, President Obama thus had to be mindful of an ongoing double-bind: speak directly about race and incur the wrath of a collection of non-black voters or speak indirectly (if at all) about race and be admonished by some African American voters. Two African American columnists illustrate this double-bind:

Touré (2012): “Barack Obama is not a black leader. He’s a leader who’s black. This is not an insignificant distinction. In order to become President, he had to promise to be President for all the people and not be someone who would be a special friend to the black community.”

Keli Goff (2013a): “Here’s hoping that before his final term in office concludes, the first black president will rightly conclude that he is a black president, and not just an American president who happens to be black, and subsequently has a responsibility to speak for those black Americans who cannot speak for themselves.”

The question we address, then, is the following: How did President Obama craft a presidential persona while addressing the racial issues that emerged in the wake of the verdict finding George Zimmerman not guilty of second-degree murder or manslaughter in the death of Trayvon Martin?

One possible strategy Obama could have employed in this scenario was to address race but transcend it; he could acknowledge racial concerns but rhetorically encase them within a multicultural (re)definition of “the American people”—much as he did in his 2004 DNC keynote and some of his 2008 campaign speeches (Dilliplane, 2012; Patterson, 2011; Rowland & Jones, 2007, 2011). In these addresses, Obama crafted a transcendent persona (Doss & Jensen, 2013; Jensen, Doss, Janssen, & Bower, 2010) in which he used (often implicitly) his unique biography as proof of his ability to help the nation transcend its history of racial division. The Martin–Zimmerman case, however, had already been framed in (somewhat misleadingly) black–white terms, and—as noted earlier—poll results affirmed distinct black and white perspectives on the case.

A second strategy open to Obama was to speak to “the American people” generally while addressing African Americans as an eavesdropping audience. An eavesdropping audience is not the primary or target audience of the speaker, yet the speaker recognizes that members of that audience will nonetheless hear the message (see Leff & Utley, 2004; Rieke & Golden, 1971; Scott, 1968; Scott & Brockriede, 1969). An eavesdropping audience is similar to what Morris (2002) called a fourth persona: “a collusive audience constituted by the textual wink” (p. 230). A fourth persona is not directly addressed in a rhetorical performance but nonetheless recognizes that elements of the performance silently and cleverly speak to it. Obama could have
constituted African Americans as an eavesdropping fourth persona in his remarks following the Zimmerman verdict, but—as noted earlier—many black Americans had grown weary of his reluctance to speak directly about race and would likely not have appreciated a rhetorical performance in which their concerns, especially in the context of the Zimmerman–Martin case, were not overtly addressed.

A third strategy, speaking in a doubled political style (Stillion-Southard, 2012; Terrill, 2009; Wells, 2002), represented the most feasible option. In this approach, which Terrill argued that Obama artfully used in his Philadelphia campaign speech to transcend the racial divide, Obama would speak in two voices, one to a black audience and one to a more general audience. The roots of this approach lie in W. E. B. Du Bois’s (1903) observation that African Americans possess a double consciousness or the necessary ability to see the world from both black and white perspectives. When this double consciousness is enacted rhetorically, a speaker adroitly moves between two personae, or simultaneously inhabits both, in order to meet the expectations of two audiences. A doubled political style can be enacted by African American politicians such as candidate Obama (Terrill), black social movement leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. (Leff & Utley, 2004), or by rhetors who enact two rhetorical personae from different doubled experiences, such as Dolores Huerta, cofounder of the United Farm Workers Union (Doss & Jensen, 2013).

In this case, Obama rhetorically crafted two personae, both of which reflected a presidential persona and Obama’s experience as a black man in America. Unlike some of his campaign speeches, in which he espoused and/or performed postracial rhetoric, Obama clearly positioned himself both as a black man and as a president with the power to act and lead. In labeling these personae a black president and a president who is black, we emphasize that the president’s doubled persona did not elide race but instead allowed audience members to impose their own understandings of the degree to which Obama featured race in his comments.

PRESIDENT OBAMA’S DOUBLED PERSONA

A Black President

In the first half of his doubled persona, President Obama foregrounded his persona as a black male who has encountered routine and recurring racism during his lifetime, and he shared those personal experiences with listeners who have experienced the same. In addition, he moved beyond the personal to critique the enduring presence of institutional racism in the United States, especially within the criminal-justice system. “On this day,” Linda Feldmann (2014) of The Christian Science Monitor observed, “he was the president of black America.”

Obama’s most memorable line — “Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago”— accomplished two rhetorical objectives that his earlier version of the line did not. First, the line positioned Obama primarily as a black man speaking. While the “could have been my son” phrasing is still personal, it did not position Obama outside of his postracial presidential persona; the president, father of two teen daughters,
could have had a son about the same age as Trayvon Martin. Obama’s reminder that he, too, was once a young black man who was racially profiled, however, likely brought to mind an image that threatened his presidential persona during his first campaign for the White House: Barry from the Choom Gang. While this Barry persona might fuel the fury of Obama’s detractors, its veiled (and risky) reappearance presents Obama not as the chief executive or even as a Harvard Law School graduate but as an aimless young black man who grew up without a father. Such a persona might reaffirm for his African American audience the tragedy that too many young black males, stereotyped in a similar manner, have not had the opportunity to find a different direction in life. As Time’s Touré (2013) pointed out, “no one would’ve thought Barry from the Choom Gang would become President.” Yet, here he was, with the power to interrupt a media briefing in the White House and to command attention across the country with one powerful sentence; Obama was a black man speaking—one who now possessed the power of the presidency.

Second, Obama’s suggestion that his experiences were no different than Trayvon’s—or of countless other young black men, for that matter—affirmed that little has changed in 35 years, and that African Americans experience life in the United States from this perspective. “I think it’s important to recognize,” he asserted in the sentence following his “could have been me” line, “that the African American community is looking at this issue through a set of experiences and a history that doesn’t go away.” This history, he continued in the next lines of his remarks, does not just linger in the consciousness of African Americans, it is continuously experienced in daily living; the same instances of racial profiling that afflict black males like Trayvon Martin today were also part of the president’s formative years:

There are very few African American men in this country who haven’t had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me. There are very few African American men who haven’t had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That happens to me—at least before I was a senator. There are very few African Americans who haven’t had the experience of getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off. That happens often.

Obama’s choice of verb tense in this passage worked to link past and present as well. Although he was clearly speaking about his past experiences, while knowingly asserting that most African American males have shared those experiences, Obama’s use of present tense verbs (“includes” and “happens”) reaffirmed the nagging presence of everyday racism in the United States. In addition, Obama’s accounting of everyday injustices offers a truncated version of the African American vernacular form of testifyin’ “in which the speaker gives verbal witness” to communal experiences (Smitherman, 1977, p. 58). As a black man, he knows racism; as president, he has the power to call it out from the White House.

Obama emphasized that the pernicious presence of ongoing racism is more than a collection of personal acts; instead, he argued, it is embedded within the social fabric of the country. In particular, Obama pointed out that racism within the criminal-justice
system has led to African Americans being arrested more frequently and punished more severely than white Americans. “The African American community,” he explained, “is also knowledgeable that there is a history of racial disparities in the application of our criminal laws—everything from the death penalty to enforcement of our drug laws.” Obama acknowledged that young black men are “disproportionately both victims and perpetrators of violence,” but he also noted that African Americans “understand that some of the violence that takes place in poor black neighborhoods around the country is born out of a very violent past in this country, and that the poverty and dysfunctions that we see in those communities can be traced to a very difficult history.”

Moreover, Obama continued, the presence of high numbers of incarcerated black males in the United States can also be traced to institutionalized racism in the criminal-justice system—although he was careful not to employ such direct phrasing. To begin to change this situation, Obama argued from his position as president, states and localities need to enact more training “on how to think about potential racial bias and ways to further professionalize what they were doing” in law enforcement. Obama also suggested revisiting “stand your ground” laws to see “if they are designed in such a way that they may encourage the kinds of altercations and confrontations and tragedies that we saw in the Florida case.” More pointedly, Obama wondered: “I’d just ask people to consider, if Trayvon Martin was of age and armed, could he have stood his ground on that sidewalk?” In fact, Obama answered that question earlier in his remarks when he explained that African Americans had “a sense that if a white male teen was involved in the same kind of scenario, that, from top to bottom, both the outcome and the aftermath might have been different.”

Much of Obama’s critique of personal and institutionalized racism occurred after his introductory comments and before he reached the midway point of his remarks. Yet before and after he issued his critique, he also used more oblique, and uplifting, rhetoric to speak of African Americans’ lengthy shared history of perseverance in the midst of prejudice. In his opening remarks, for example, he praised the Martin family’s “incredible grace and dignity,” a characterization that brings to mind the steadfast suffering of civil rights marchers who endured violent reprisals for their nonviolent resistance to injustice. Similarly, as he concluded his time at the podium, Obama echoed Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, when he encouraged his listeners to ask themselves, “Am I judging people as much as I can, based on not the color of their skin, but the content of their character?” And, in the final paragraph of his comments, Obama embraced the mantel of Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, when he resurrected the last line of Lincoln’s first inaugural: “And those of us in authority should be doing everything we can to encourage the better angels of our nature, as opposed to using these episodes to heighten divisions.”

These references to heroic figures, including the Reverend King, who claimed the moral high ground on race, work well with Obama’s speaking style, which Alim and Smitherman (2012) have called “the black preacher style” (p. 14). Obama’s cadence, pauses, and repetition—vividly on display, in particular, in his references to being profiled in his younger days—all reflect a speaking style used by pastors of churches with predominantly African American congregations. “While not attempting to
duplicate [this style] to the letter in the political sphere, [Obama has] readily engaged in a ‘stylistic sampling’ of the Black Church’s Oral Tradition” (Alim & Smitherman, 2012, p. 16). By stylistically donning the cloak of the clergy in his remarks in the briefing room, Obama’s language was endowed with moral authority as well as the political authority of the presidency and reminded African Americans of their shared historical and moral commitments to social justice.

Obama, undoubtedly, was aware that his comments could be interpreted as coming from a black presidential persona, so he was also careful to avoid addressing his remarks solely to an African American audience and he softened his stance by phrasing his critiques in ways that distanced himself from the persona of a black president. In so doing, he also spoke to the American people as a president who is black.

A President Who Is Black

In his second term of office, Obama has been “gradually speaking out more on race” (Feldmann, 2014), but he remains cognizant of the fact that the more general audience of “the American people” expects him to adopt a generic presidential persona. In this case, Obama’s partial enactment of a black president persona limited the degree to which he could project a generic persona, so instead he contextualized his remarks through the persona of a generic president who happens to be black. In other words, he demonstrated an understanding of issues pertinent to black America but spoke as a tentative translator of those issues. So, even though his black president persona spoke to issues of prejudice and institutionalized racism, Obama’s other speaking persona mitigated his critique of those issues for his other imagined audience: The American people.

To begin, the president appeared unannounced in the briefing room to offer unscripted comments. Obama’s choice of venue (the press briefing room), timing (a Friday, ensuring his remarks would be presented during a weekend news cycle), and format (unannounced and unscripted) could be interpreted to mean that he wanted to downplay the critiques he was about to unleash. More directly, Obama relied on language that softened the arguments he offered from his black president persona. At the same time that he spoke as a representative of the African American community, Obama separated himself from that community by often speaking of the African American community as an entity to which he does not belong—unlike his approach in Philadelphia in 2008, when he used collective pronouns to refer both to African Americans and to Americans in general (see Terrill, 2009). Rather than using “we” or “us,” he referred to “the African American community” six times during the first half of his remarks—the part of the speech where he shared his personal narrative and critiqued personal and institutional practices of racism. The effect is to call attention to those practices but to remove him from their experienced effects. Moreover, after referring to collective entities such as “the African American community,” “black folks,” “African American men,” and “African American boys,” Obama used the pronoun “they” rather than “we” to describe them. Over a year later, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, director of the African American Policy Forum, noted that the
president continued this pattern of speaking. “Obama has ‘begun to speak about race in the third person....’” she observed. “It’s ‘people may perceive’ or ‘people may think’ or ‘people have lost confidence’” (as quoted in Nakamura & Williams, 2014).

In addition, Obama tended to soften his critiques of personal and institutional racism either by qualifying his claims or by using indirect language. Obama frequently qualified his claims by using the phrase “I think” within the claim; in fact, the phrase appears 17 times in the transcript of his remarks (roughly once per minute), typically when he offered claims that could be deemed controversial or outside the purview of the presidency. For example, when he suggested that black Americans see race in the killing of Trayvon Martin, Obama used “I think” twice to modify his argument about black perspectives on the case: “But they [African Americans] get frustrated, I think, if they feel that there’s no context for it and that context is being denied. And that all contributes I think to a sense that if a white male teen was involved in the same kind of scenario, that, from top to bottom, both the outcome and the aftermath might have been different” (emphasis added).

Similarly, when he waded into policy to urge that state and local governments take racial profiling more seriously, he resisted being accused of presidential interference in nonfederal matters by using “I think” to qualify his claims in three of the four sentences in this excerpt:

> So that’s one area where I think there are a lot of resources and best practices that could be brought to bear if state and local governments are receptive. And I think a lot of them would be. And let’s figure out are there ways for us to push out that kind of training. Along the same lines, I think it would be useful for us to examine some state and local laws to see if it—if they are designed in such a way that they may encourage the kinds of altercations and confrontations and tragedies that we saw in the Florida case, rather than diffuse potential altercations. (emphasis added)

Critical discourse analysts argue that “I think” functions as a dialogic expansion because it suggests the opportunity for other voices to enter into the conversation (Martin & White, 2005). Obama’s repeated use of the phrase, then, modifies his experiential authority as a black man while also emphasizing that he is not invoking his presidential authority to propose or implement new policies unilaterally—but that he possesses the authority to encourage such action.

Obama also chose to use indirect language when he discussed potentially polarizing issues. Rather than accusing some Americans of stereotyping younger black males as violent, for example, he used passive voice to assert that “a lot of African American boys are painted with a broad brush.” Rather than arguing that the criminal justice system is racist, he pointed to “a history of racial disparities in the application of our criminal laws” and “the fact that African American young men are disproportionately involved in the criminal justice system.” These latter two examples function as nominalization, which—in this case—points to a process “but avoids agents, times and specificity through simplification” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 144). Thus, no person or institution is deemed responsible for the “racial disparities” or “disproportionate involvement” nor is any historical cause identified—yet their existence is nonetheless undeniable.
Finally, Obama embraced a more overt presidential persona in the closing part of his remarks through his frequent use of “we” and “us.” Following Kenneth Burke’s (1972) observation that much identification between speaker and audience occurs through the use of “assumed we’s,” this style is a clear contrast from his use of “they” to refer to the African American community in his earlier comments. Indeed, Obama’s final few minutes at the podium featured remarks that seem directed, from the president, to all Americans. He asserted that “I think it’s going to be important for all of us to do some soul-searching” and “we have to be vigilant and we have to work on these issues.” This strategy reflected not just a generic presidential persona but Barack Obama’s personal style of being a unifier. Obama’s most memorable and critically acclaimed speeches, especially his 2008 presentation in Philadelphia, have featured this kind of rhetoric. Not surprisingly, then, Obama returned to the theme of that speech as a means of closing his extemporaneous remarks in the briefing room: “We’re becoming a more perfect union—not a perfect union, but a more perfect union.” In another move toward consubstantiality, the president embraced a parental persona in the final minutes of his remarks by pointing out that, like other parents around the country, he talks to his wife and kids about the issues of the day (“And this is something that Michelle and I talk a lot about”; “when I talk to Malia and Sasha”).

To recognize the difficulty of performing this doubled persona, consider how the president closed and opened his remarks. He began by calling out personal and institutional racism, recognizing its historical and contemporary presence in the lives of African Americans, and critiquing its devastating effects on the African American community. He closed his commentary by acknowledging the progress that Americans have made in dealing with its presence, pointing to signs of hope that progress will continue, and speaking as a family man who happened to be president. These distinct rhetorical appeals seem, on the one hand, to reflect the primary personae we have identified; Obama spoke as a black president in the opening and as a president who is black in the closing. Yet, such a simple bifurcation is inaccurate, for he used distancing tactics in the opening portion of his remarks and echoed moral heroes on race in his closing comments. Clearly, these unscripted remarks represented a remarkable rhetorical balancing act.

CONCLUSION

As one might expect, given the challenges of speaking to and with a doubled persona, President Obama’s remarks in the White House press briefing earned mixed reactions—even within audiences that might share perspectives on the president. Conservative commentator Ben Ferguson of CNN argued that the president essentially told the American people: “I’m going to be the president for just the African American community, and everyone else better listen up” (as quoted in Monroe, 2013). On the other hand, Fox News’s Chris Wallace bluntly stated, “Boy, I sure don’t see how you can read this as in any way stoking racial tensions” (quoted in Logiurato, 2013). Meanwhile, Cornel West (“Cornel,” 2013) scolded Obama for what he described as a long overdue
indictment of racism in the U.S. criminal-justice system in general: “He hasn’t said a mumbling word until now. Five years in office and can’t say a word about the new Jim Crow.” Yet, Keli Goff (2013b), who had chastised Obama for his evasion of race in the earlier statement issued from the White House, heaped praise on the president: “The most powerful black man in the world validated the fear that has haunted most black Americans in the wake of the Zimmerman verdict…. If you are black in America you may be feared and targeted, even in the age of the first black president.”

These varied reactions reveal the abundance of discourses circulating around Barack Obama (see Oliha, 2011), which serves as a valuable reminder that a public figure’s rhetorical persona is not entirely under one’s control. Indeed, Waisanen and Baker (2015) argue that the notion of circulating personae should hold the interest of rhetorical scholars in this hypermediated age. They point to “the many roles created by and attributed to [public] figures across media spaces” (Waisanen & Baker, 2015, p. 257), while emphasizing that these roles continue to circulate in digital form long after their temporal enactment. For example, some of the negative online responses to Obama’s remarks could likely be traced to a lingering persona that his opponents developed to depict him as unworthy of the presidency: a person who has supposedly lied about his birthplace and religion (see Bailey, 2015; Cohen & Shear, 2010). Moreover, as Obama admitted in early 2014: “There’s no doubt that there’s some folks who just really dislike me because they don’t like the idea of a black president” (quoted in Remnick, 2014).

On the other hand, Obama’s “burden of representation” (Gates, 1997, p. xvii) as the first African American president generates outsized expectations among his black supporters. Jennifer Senior’s (2015) profile in New York details Obama’s burden. As the first black occupant of the presidency, she reports, “Obama is being asked repeatedly whether he’s done enough for black America.”

The intersection of circulating personae and rhetor-crafted personae might thus help rhetorical scholars unpack the reasons underlying polysemic interpretations of public figures’ rhetoric. Different interpretations of a speaker’s remarks, Leah Ceccarelli (1998) pointed out in her explication of polysemy, may originate in the rhetor’s language, the audience’s predispositions, or a combination of both. For example, she demonstrated that following Lincoln’s second inaugural address:

[O]ne interpretation was encoded in dominance by the author of the speech, and shared by Northerners and by most rhetorical critics who read the text from the Northern perspective; the other interpretation resisted the author’s meaning, taking possession of the text and using it to indicate intentions hostile to the South. (Ceccarelli, 1998, p. 402)

Ceccarelli’s assessment illustrated what she called resistive reading as one type of polysemy. Yet, as the reactions to President Obama’s remarks reveal, a dominant/resistant dichotomy oversimplifies the complexity of the responses to his enactment of bifurcated personae. Not only did African American audience members respond differently to the president’s talk so did conservative commentators. Such responses allow us both to reaffirm and extend Ceccarelli’s argument that “by engaging a close analysis of both the primary text and the texts that are produced in response to it, the
critic can recognize both polysemic potential and the actualization of that potential by audiences” (1998, p. 407) because we have both engaged in such an analysis and demonstrated how polysemic interpretations may be grounded in the interplay among circulating personae and President Obama’s doubled persona.

Finally, our analysis illustrates the value of extending the concept of doubled persona beyond Du Bois’s (1903) idea of double consciousness. Although our insights are grounded in Du Bois’s prescient thinking, Obama’s crafting of the doubled personae of black president and president who is black prompt us to consider other ways in which a rhetor’s persona could be doubled. A judge pronouncing sentence, for example, could speak at once as a dispassionate jurist and compassionate community member, or a school-district superintendent could explain a challenging situation as both a parent and fiscally prudent administrator. Indeed, as Kenneth Gergen (1991) noted some years ago, our everyday identities are enacted increasingly in both/and terms; no doubt, our rhetorical identities are crafted in a similarly complex manner—and scholars who study the performance of such complex identities in public and private life would benefit from teasing out the complexities of such personae.

Undoubtedly, much remains to be explored regarding the rhetoric of the nation’s first African American president. Since he spoke to the nation following the Zimmerman verdict, for example, Obama has spoken at the fiftieth anniversary of the Selma march, offered fairly quiet responses to the deaths of two African Americans (Michael Brown and Eric Garner) at the hands of police and delivered a moving eulogy to the victims of racial violence in a South Carolina church. In each case, the president embraced a different rhetorical strategy, ranging from the transcendent to the generic to the uplifting. Obama’s continuing comments on matters of race, including after he leaves the presidency, highlight the importance of analyzing his rhetoric. So doing will tell us much about how he maneuvers through dangerous symbolic terrain as well as how we in the United States work our way toward that elusive more perfect union.

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Notes

1. This quotation, and all the excerpts from President Obama’s remarks that follow are taken verbatim from the official White House transcript of his comments: http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/19/remarks-president-trayvon-martin.

2. As Obama noted in a news conference the month after his 2008 speech in Philadelphia, “I have spent my entire adult life trying to bridge the gap between different kinds of people. That’s in my DNA, trying to promote mutual understanding to insist that we all share common hopes and common dreams as Americans and as human beings. That’s who I am” (‘Obama’s,” 2008).
References


