



## US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

As this issue of *AN* goes to press, two weeks remain before the US presidential election. This In Focus series includes four articles written in anticipation of the historic election. The first two commentaries examine the poetic and evocative speech of Barack Obama throughout his presidential campaign. The next two address the electoral process itself—how “voter will” and increased representation of marginalized populations can be realized.

## “Our Union Grows Stronger”

### The Poetic Persuasion of Barack Obama

ELIZABETH COVILLE  
HAMLINE C

During the 2008 presidential campaign, candidate Barack Obama’s speeches received predictable criticism from his political detractors. “Pretty words” versus “hard work” and “eloquence” versus “action” echo a dichotomy familiar in the American way of talking about political communication. Such talk is all about “style” versus “substance.” On the other hand, commentators who appreciate Obama’s oratory—such as Sam Anderson (“Raise High the Rafters,” *New York*, June 22, 2008), Gary Wills (“Two Speeches on Race,” *The New York Review of Books*, May 1, 2008) and James Fallows (“Rhetorical Questions,” *The Atlantic*, September 2008)—praise him for the ways in which his speeches reflect a moral compass and the contours of his thinking. However, they too seem to separate out stylistic from substantive dimensions of discourse. Interestingly, Obama himself, when reflecting back on his own first experience with politically engaged public speaking, does not make this opposition. He values instead both words that “could carry a message, support an idea” and “the power of... words to transform” (*Dreams from my Father* 1995/2004:105-6). Linguistic anthropologists, who have a long tradition of studying the efficacy of ritual language around the world, have paid close attention to such power to change hearts and minds. Here I will discuss the ways in which Obama marshals the poetic structure of language (in Roman Jakobson’s terms) and its “transformative effectiveness” (Silverstein, *Talking Politics: The Substance of Style from Abe to “W”* 2003).

My contention is that Obama crafts his argument about polit-

ical reconciliation and unity by means of the persuasive poetic structuring of language in performance. My focus is the speech delivered on March 18, 2008 across the street from Constitution Hall in Philadelphia. Titled “A More Perfect Union” and referred to informally as the “speech on race,” this 2500-word, 37-minute address composed by Obama himself is available online.

No one could say that it was a speech in which substance did not matter. Wills likens it to Lincoln’s Cooper Union address, because in both cases the candidates were faced with a radical associate from whom they had to dissociate themselves, in Obama’s case the Reverend Wright. But style—in every sense of the term, including paralinguistic factors that limitations of space prevent me from addressing here—was crucial as well. The speech, even as it transcends the moment of its delivery, is effective because it powerfully anchors its message in history, geography and politics.

#### The Central Image

This speech illustrates well what Silverstein (2003:10) has called “the cumulative indexical poetry of properly arranged words.” At the symbolic center of its parallel structure is “a more perfect union.” Obama uses some form of the word *perfect* ten times—after the initial opening quotation, he uses it three times as a verb and twice in the negative adjectival form. Near the end he returns to the more usual adjectival form, referring to the noun “union” three times before the final lines when he returns to the verb form, followed by the unusual (marked) abstract nominal form *perfection*.

The speech covers the Reverend Wright crisis, analyzes historic and present race relations and then proposes remedies. Since his words will be heard differently

by different audiences, Obama repeats the “perfect union” to remind and reassure the audience of their shared common principles and responsibility. Sometimes the imagery is religious (“let us be our brother’s keeper, our sister’s keeper”) and at other times it is secular (“that common stake we all have in one another”), but regardless, “perfect union” is the consistent image that is poetically repeated.

#### Reported Speech

After giving customary thanks, Obama begins by quoting the opening line from the Preamble to

that have not yet been fully realized is a powerful call to action.

#### Spatial and Temporal Deictics

If quoted speech ties this text to the founding texts, spatial deictics, or indexicals, map a geography of the United States. Obama opens with “in a hall that still stands across the street” (ie, from where I am speaking) and ends with “right here in Philadelphia,” in the actual spoken version. Other speeches in his repertoire during the primary election were located in places where significant historical events took place (eg, Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta; Springfield, Illinois). Sometimes it is the name of the place that signals the message of the speech (eg, a speech about patriotism during the week of the 4<sup>th</sup> of July in

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the Constitution: “We the people, in order to form a more perfect union.” He does not simply borrow its authority; he also summons to mind the very act of communication that produced it in the first place (“the document... was eventually signed”) and he questions its effectiveness as a text (“words on a parchment would not be enough...”). Thus he evokes the Constitution as both a sacred text of United States’ civil religion and as an event of communication in real time. By using this reported speech, he invokes history and at the same time emphasizes that it is an *unfinished* history.

Reported speech here is crucial for both his critics and his supporters. For his critics, the repeated invocation of “a more perfect union” is meant to be reassuring, because it encompasses the novelty (“improbability”) of his candidacy as well as his assertions about contemporary racial tensions in a familiar and potent refrain. For supporters drawn to his pragmatic idealism, the idea of “narrowing the gap” between US political ideals and US political reality is key. For this audience “words on a parchment”

Independence, Missouri). Name *and* event converged in a single place for Obama’s reconciliation with Hillary Clinton in tiny Unity, New Hampshire where the two candidates tied in the primary vote with 107 votes each!

Obama repeatedly anchors his message in history, using dates and temporal phrases with reference to the present. Even more frequent are the many instances of condensed forms such as “this time,” “at this moment” and “in this election,” which contextually tie the speech to the here and now of the speaking event. Because they are found in his stump speeches and formal speeches alike, these temporal deictics have memorability and intertextuality; they link speeches to each other and to other pieces of political discourse. We have heard them before, and we remember; they are tiny condensations of longer pieces of speeches; they are the stuff of mixes and YouTube mashups.

#### Personal Pronouns

Another classic feature of anchoring speech in the context of its performance is the use of

personal pronouns to address participants. During the primary season, Obama seems to have deliberately used the first person plural pronoun *we*, playing on its potential to include the people he is speaking to (speaker plus third party plus addressee). Consider the difference between the following passages. In his 2004 keynote address at the Democratic National Convention Obama said, "If there's a child on the south side of Chicago who can't read, that matters to

me, even if it's not my child." Four years later, in Philadelphia, he said, "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...Not this time." His 2007-08 speeches prior to receiving the nomination are full of these inclusive *we* forms. In the second example, he has also shifted subtly from

an unmarked "these" (ie, these kids that I just mentioned) to the socially-marked term "those kids" as an expression of negative evaluation (as in "those people"). So, "our kids" in this speech is not just grammatically inclusive but politically inclusive as well.

In conclusion, Obama's poetic speech is not just a matter of stylistic flourishes added on to a substantive message. Like many of his other speeches, "A More Perfect Union," is densely connected to its human context

in a myriad of ways: to the time and space of its performance, to other texts (past, present and future) and to participants (whether supporters, opponents or undecideds). Anchored in this way, such speaking has the potential to transform.



*Elizabeth Coville, a longtime adjunct assistant professor of anthropology at Hamline University, is teaching this fall at Carleton College.*

## Barack Obama's Campaign of Hope

### Unifying the General and the Personal

HIROKAZU MIYAZAKI  
CORNELL U

At the Democratic National Convention in Denver, Barack Obama concluded his acceptance speech, "The American Promise," with the following line from the Bible: "[H]old firmly, without wavering, to the hope that we confess" (Hebrews 10:23). From his campaign speeches to his campaign website "powered by hope" ([www.barackobama.com](http://www.barackobama.com)), hope has persistently been a distinctive marker of Obama's campaign.

Indeed, the subject of hope seems to have wide and powerful appeal at this moment. In his recent encyclical, *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI offers a meditation on the significance of Christian hope, which he describes as fundamentally social, for today's world. From Richard Rorty's pragmatist proposal to replace knowledge with hope (*Philosophy and Social Hope* 1999) to David Harvey's urge for progressive social theorists to learn to hope again (*Spaces of Hope* 2000) and Jonathan Lear's meditation on the "radical hope" entailed in a decision to adopt an entirely new modality of life (*Radical Hope* 2006), hope has become an important subject of inquiry in a broad range of disciplines. It can be found today in philosophy and theology (eg, Volf and Katerberg, eds, *The Future of Hope*, 2004), human geography (eg, Anderson and Fenton, eds, "Spaces of Hope," *Space and Culture* 11[2]), science studies (eg, Franklin, *Embodied Progress*, 1997) and anthropology (eg,

Crapanzano, *Imaginative Horizons*, 2004; Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism*, 2003; Miyazaki, *The Method of Hope*, 2004). In Japan, a group of social scientists at the University of Tokyo have deployed hope as a category for understanding the problems Japanese society has faced as a consequence of neoliberal reform (see Genda, ed, *Kibogaku* [Hope Studies], 2006). Although these various thinkers and public figures conceptualize the subject of hope differently, the general appeal of hope seems to reside in its embrace of the radical uncertainty and indeterminacy of the present moment. More importantly, in many of these reflections hope has emerged as a way to redefine the ethical contours of the social and the relational.

Obama's conception of hope makes a significant contribution to this emerging global debate. "Hope is not blind optimism," Barack Obama has repeatedly noted in his campaign, "It's not ignoring the enormity of the task ahead or the roadblocks that stand in our path. It's not sitting on the sidelines or shirking from a fight. Hope is that thing inside us that insists, despite all evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us if we have the courage to reach for it, and to work for it, and to fight for it" (Iowa Caucus victory speech, January 3, 2008). As Obama proclaimed in his celebrated keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, it is this "audacity of hope"—a phrase taken from his infamous former pastor Jeremiah Wright's sermon—that he has sought to

invoke in his campaign. In his view, this is "God's greatest gift to us, the bedrock of the nation; the belief in things not seen; the belief that there are better days ahead" (Keynote Address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, July 27, 2004).

What makes Obama's hope distinctive, however, is not the explicit definition of hope he has offered. Rather, it is the way he has deliberately kept his notion of hope general. Recall that in the early phase of the campaign, Obama's opponents criticized his notion of hope for its lack of specificity and substance. For example, Hilary Clinton repeatedly called it "false hope." To that criticism, Obama responded by asserting the authenticity of his hope in a particular way: "We've been asked to pause for a reality check. We've been warned against offering the people of this nation false hope. But in the unlikely story that is America, there has never been anything false about hope" (New Hampshire Primary speech, January 8, 2008).

This response is indicative of Obama's broader strategic appeal to the generality of his own personal hope. The hip-hop artist will.i.am remarked, following the Internet release of his "Yes We Can Song," that it was this speech that inspired him: "It was that speech / like many great speeches / that one moved me / because words and ideas are powerful ... it inspired me to look inside myself and outwards

towards the world / it inspired me to want to change myself to better the world / and take a 'leap' towards change / and hope that others become inspired to do the same / change themselves / change their greed / change their fears / and if we 'change that' ... we got something right???" ([www.dipdive.com/dip-politics/ywc](http://www.dipdive.com/dip-politics/ywc)). In apprehending Obama's call for change as a call for personal change in himself, will.i.am captured what I consider the most distinctive component of Obama's conceptualization of hope. That is, it is the profoundly personal and yet general character of Obama's hope and of the associated slogan, "Yes, we can," that gave the campaign its initial momentum.

In my view, it is precisely its lack of specificity that enabled Obama's hope to be replicated as others' personal hope (see also Hirokazu Miyazaki, "Sen. Obama's Policy of Hope," *Ithaca Journal*, February 29, 2008). In this light, the heavily criticized portion of his Super Tuesday speech in Chicago captures the simultaneously personal and general quality of his concept of hope: "Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We

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are the change that we seek. ... We are the hope of the future; the answer to the cynics who tell us our house must stand divided; that we cannot come together; that we cannot remake this world as it should be" (Super Tuesday speech, Chicago, February 5, 2008).

"We" here refers neither to the Obama campaign nor to Obama

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