The Constitutive Role of Emotions in the Discursive Construction of the "People": A Look into Obama's 2008 "Race Speech"

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the semiotic and rhetorical mechanisms by which Obama's "race speech" builds a mutual identification between Blacks and Whites; it emphasizes the importance of *locus communis* commonplace and "equivalential links" (Laclau 2005, 94). It also looks at how Obama himself constructs his identity in order to appeal to a racially and politically heterogeneous audience. In addition, it attempts to identify and explain some elements of the speech that may carry heightened emotional content and that may induce a distancing or identification reaction in an audience. From the theoretical standpoint, the article brings to bear the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics understanding of metaphor and meaning-generation mechanisms on the Laclauian post-Marxist poststructural concept of the "people," in order to explain how metaphors participate in the construction of a "people" during a presidential campaign. In terms of cognitive theory, it draws on Lakoff and Johnson's understanding of metaphorical thinking ([1980] 2003) and Castells's elaboration on emotions in relation to political cognition (2009). The sociological perspective on emotions aids in the analysis of emotions in social interaction (Turner and Stets 2009). The contribution of this article lies in the semiotic analysis of the role of emotion-evoking elements of the race speech that may indicate a constitutive role in the formation of a "people."

The address by President Barack Obama titled "A More Perfect Union" (2008b), also known as his "race speech," may be considered as a symbolic meditational means intended to bring about dialogue between two

historically conflicting racial groups.[1] It offers, in fact, an explanatory narrative of why there still exists an internalized and unexpressed anger between Whites and Blacks. Furthermore, it permits the construction of "equivalential links" (i.e., common denominators) and meanings, which contribute to the political creation the "people" (i.e., a legitimized group) by simultaneously establishing an "internal frontier" in terms of the us/them categorical relation (Laclau 2005). Stating this point another way, the speech stands at the center of an alleged latent racial division and political polarization. In order to discursively narrow the gap between disparate groups, Obama endeavors to construct himself as Black, on the one hand. On the other hand, he draws heavily on American identitarian traits (i.e., shared values, beliefs, and a projected future) that are "a key factor in determining political behavior" (Castells 2009, 155). He also uses culturally resonant symbols (e.g., the constitution, democracy, and freedom), together with metaphorical religious associations, in order to create a *locus communis* on which to build a spirit of unity (cf. Žagar 2010). The speech contains an underlying thread with which the majority of the message is intertwined (i.e., toward "a more perfect union"). As a result, an overarching set of meanings and "universal-equivalential identifications" (Laclau 2005, 206) are established in a way that indexes a not racially specific "people" with which a wide range of audiences might identify.[2]

Like any political and communication process, the discursive construction of the "people" is in immanent relation to an emotionally loaded practice. From the sociological point of view, "emotions pervade virtually every aspect of human experience and all social relations" and participate in the constitution of "social structures and systems of cultural symbols" (Turner and Stets 2009, 1). They play a prominent role in the organization and function of communities and states (Bleiker and Hutchison 2007, 18). Turner and Stets underline the work of emotions in the formation of all kinds of social structures and bonds, due to our characterizing reliance on emotions. In their view, "experience, behavior, interaction, and organization are connected to the mobilization and expression of emotions" (1).

The concept and nature of emotions can also be understood from a cognitive theory. In building an interdisciplinary perspective to understand the

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1. The race speech was delivered on March 18, 2008, in Philadelphia. Excerpts of the speech quoted in this article are taken from the *New York Times*.

2. Laclau (2005, 206) employs this term to describe leading American politician William Jennings Bryan's 1896 presidential campaign in contrast to William McKinley's campaign. According to him, "the success of Bryan's campaign depended entirely on constituting the 'people' as a historical factor—that is, on having universal-equivalential identifications prevail over sectorial ones."

formation of power relations in political communication, Castells (2009, 138) explains that "networks of associations of images, ideas, and feelings are constituted by neural patterns that structure emotions, feelings, and consciousness."[3] According to him, neural patterns in the brain are in correspondence with visual and nonvisual images that are generated by "the interaction between specific regions of the brain and . . . internal and external stimuli" (138). In this regard, the dynamic construction of neural patterns allows for the mapping and storing of our experiential and sensorial activity (past, present, and anticipated future) along with its elicited responses. Semiotically speaking, networks of associations in the brain are interrelated with the semiotic systems we come into contact during semiotic processes. It is worth of note that the term *dynamic* suggests that the correspondences between sensory data (in the form of signs) and brain patterns and networks (that constitute meaning) are not fixed—that is, interpretative semiotic processes are not rigidly determined. They can actually be consciously manipulated by establishing symbolic correspondences between sign-based received information and neural patters and networks—for example, by employing metaphorical associations (Castells 2009, 139)—for metaphors influence the way we make sense of our surrounding environment (Lakoff and Johnson [1980] 2003).

Within the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics tradition, this article considers metaphors as the result of translation processes between communication systems. They serve as a rhetorical device and meaning-generation mechanism (Lotman 2000). Translation between systems occurs because culture speaks to us in different languages (Ivanov et al. 1973), which constitute different ways to perceive and conceptualize the world around us (Torop 2009). One of the most prominent metaphorical associations in the race speech is Obama's use of religious language (e.g., imagery and symbols) to confront the issue of race and to construct himself as Black in such a way that he indexes a not racially specific group.

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3. Emotions are not to be mistakenly equated with feelings at all times. Contrary to what many sociologists define as feelings (a conscious emotional state), Turner and Stets (2009, 286) argue in favor of evolutionary and psychoanalytical theories (including neurological data) and demonstrate that "individuals do not consciously recognize many emotions and, hence, do not experience them as feelings. Instead, they remain below the level of conscious awareness," which is the case of people that are emotionally aroused without knowing it, but it can be evinced in their "body language and voice inflections." This statement appears to be fundamentally important as it considers not only conscious states (feelings), but it also directs attention to unconscious states, which may still lead to a certain political response because of their motivating and mobilizing force (286). Put another way, "emotions are distinctive patterns of chemical and neural responses, resulting from the brains detection" of emotionally charged stimuli. And feelings are the conscious perception of emotions as such (Castells 2009, 140).

In light of the above, the politically discursive construction of the "people" is a semiotic process that integrates the capacity for perception and interpretation (i.e., political cognition) to process sensible data and recognize and categorize objects (Eco 2009). At the same time, this semiotic process incorporates emotions, feelings, and reasoning during perception and interpretation. In other words,

> Our brain processes events (interior or exterior) on the basis of its maps (or established networks of associations). . . . By connecting these maps with events, neural binding creates emotional experiences by activating two emotional pathways defined by specific neurotransmitters: The dopamine circuit conveys positive emotions; the norepinephrine circuit conveys negative emotions.
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> By becoming known to the conscious self [i.e., emotions], feelings [conscious states] are able to manage social behavior, and ultimately influence decision-making by linking feelings from the past and the present in order to anticipate the future by activating the neural patters that associate feelings and events. (Castells 2009, 140)

In this framework, this article examines the semiotic and rhetorical mechanisms by which Obama's race speech builds a mutual identification between Blacks and Whites. It also looks at how he constructs his own identity in order to appeal to a racially and politically heterogeneous audience. Finally, it attempts to identify and explain some of elements of the speech that may carry heightened emotional content and that may induce a distancing or identification reaction in an audience. From the theoretical standpoint, the article brings to bear the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics understanding of metaphor and meaning-generation mechanisms on the Laclauian post-Marxist poststructural concept of the "people," in order to explain how metaphors participate in the construction of a "people" during a presidential campaign. In terms of cognitive theory, it draws on Lakoff and Johnson's understanding of metaphorical thinking ([1980] 2003) and Castell's elaboration on emotions in relation to political cognition (2009). The sociological perspective on emotions aids in the analysis of emotions in social interaction (Turner and Stets 2009). The contribution of this article lies in the semiotic analysis of the role of emotion-evoking and metaphorical associations in the understanding of a specific political process (i.e., the creation of a "people"), with an emphasis on Obama's race speech. This is not to say that previous semiotic approaches to the field of politics have not been conducted. The works of Ventsel (2009) and Selg

(2011) provide an outline for the study of politics under a theory of political semiotics that they examine and elaborate. They focus on developing a semiotic theoretical framework of hegemony and emphasize concepts such as discourse, power relations, communication, and identity. Perhaps, one the most important aspects of Ventsel and Selg's works is their emphasis on how discourse constitutes "people" as described and analyzed by Ernesto Laclau (2005). In Laclau's theory, discourse should not be understood as written or spoken language but as "synonym for 'system of meaning'" or as a "process of communication of meaning" (Selg 2011, 8–9).

I am aware of the existence of a vast literature concerning the evocation of emotions in other political processes such as the formation of national identity, political communication, and in world politics in general.[4] Fear, for instance, has been examined in light of its positive and negative use in national and international politics (Robin 2004, cited in Bleiker and Hutchison 2007, 5). Anger and anxiety have also been studied in relation to times of war and political campaigns (Huddy et al. 2007; Redlawsk et al. 2007; Schnur 2007). And some have pointed out methodological limitations when dealing with emotions in the political field due to the lack of "sustained discussions about how to go about studying emotions" (Bleiker and Hutchison 2007, 13). In terms of media communication and statistical data, I acknowledge the robust amount of information dealing public perception and reaction after Obama delivered the race speech, as well as the studies that have been conducted on Obama's discourse (Sharpley-Whiting 2009; Leeman 2012). The analysis of this information lies beyond the scope of this article as it centers on a specific political process and the analysis of rhetorical elements that may indicate a unifying or dividing sign-based behavior.

I selected Obama's race speech for the present analysis because of its significance in American politics during the 2008 presidential campaign (cf. Sharply-Whiting 2009). First, the speech posits Obama as a figure of hope and change for an audience that may identify with him, as he himself appears to signify an embodiment of the vision and ideals of the founding fathers and other historical figures to whom people may be emotionally attached. Second, Obama's speech may represent, to a certain extent, the current interests and needs of a not racially specific "people." Third, the speech conveys the idea of the realization of the "American promise" in the future by fixing the present and maintaining continuity and stability in the future (cf. Wodak et al. [1999] 2009, 73).

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4. See Kemper 1984; Wodak et al. (1999) 2009; Guibernau 2007; Huddy et al. 2007; Neuman et al. 2007; Mitchell 2009; Staiger et al. 2010; Stonecash 2010a; Van de Steeg 2010; Lempert and Silverstein 2012.

And fourth, the speech provides evidence of Obama's effort to construct his cultural and political identity so as to appeal to nonspecific racial groups (cf. Cross 2007; Walters 2007, 8–15). My intention is not to discuss any specific audience reaction to Obama's speech, because that depends on a subject's position and disposition (as will be explained later). Neither is it my intention to assert that the emotions in question are actually triggered or evoked. Instead, my purpose is to discuss the potentiality of some elements of the speech to evoke certain emotions. I intend to provide an empirical and theoretical discussion of the potentiality of certain elements of the speech to effect a possible emotional response. The purpose of any campaign message is intended to lead voters toward a political action: to vote for the candidate who represents hope and change and to disparage the "other" (Stonecash 2010a).

After a close reading of the speech, a textual structure was identified: (1) introductory and unfinished quote from the preamble of the Constitution; (2) historical overview of the writing of the Constitution in connection to the issue of slavery; (3) description of Obama's campaign; (4) Obama's self-identification; (5) the campaign and the issue of race; (6) condemnation and justification of Reverend Jeremiah Wright's racial comments; (7) explanatory narrative of Black and White anger; (8) analogical relation between White and Black anger; (9) description of racial stalemate in the past and present; (10) connection between the issue of race, the campaign and the idea of perfecting the union; (11) a call for Blacks and Whites to overcome racial resentment; (12) a call for all to come together; and (13) Ashley's story. These sections will not be entirely examined. However, they serve as a textual reference and methodological tool to identify a common thread underlying the speech, to examine possible equivalential links, and to identify potentially emotion-evoking symbols.

Loci Communes: A Source of Political Rhetoric

From the start, it is evident that Obama's discussion would develop around an overarching theme with which the issue of race and a set of unsatisfied demands are extraordinarily associated. This theme corresponds to an overarching idea of moving toward a more perfect union, which entails a collective task. The same underlying thread functions as a historical *locus communis* commonplace that evokes a collectively shared knowledge and feelings associated with particular historical events. Put differently, it places both audience and speaker within a common ground or frame of mind (Žagar 2010, 9–13). Interestingly enough, Obama begins with an introductory but unfinished quote taken from the preamble of the Constitution of the United States: "We the

people, in order to form a more perfect union." The textual cues of this quote are enough to index the constitution of the United States, a symbol with which most Americans may emotionally identify. In the same sentence, the use of "we" conjures up a feeling of togetherness and invites individuals to take part in the discursive event. As a matter of fact, the aforementioned quotation serves as a powerful rhetorical strategy to circumscribe the whole speech within one universal theme: toward a more perfect union. Notably important, Obama ends the speech with a reference to the same theme:

Excerpt 1

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.

In one way or another, Obama is reinforcing an identitarian attribute. This strategy is very similar to how nation-states pursue the creation of a single identity among their citizens: by forming a group feeling of closeness (psychological dimension); by internalizing cultural identifying symbols, values, and beliefs (cultural dimension); by selecting historically transcendental events (historical dimension); and by trying to build a homogenous culture (political dimension) (Guibernau 2007, 12–21).[5] These dimensions may be observed in politically discursive communication in different degrees. Therefore, they may have a powerful effect on unity construction during presidential campaigns. Excerpt 2 is a distinct example of how Obama resorts to a historical reference in order to construct what has been already referred to as a historical *locus communis*.

Excerpt 2

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.

5. Guibernau (2007, 21) also considers a territorial dimension that deals with space and territorial limits and helps "people to 'imagine' their nations as territorially bounded, distinct and sovereign."

The document they produced was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least twenty more years, and to leave any final resolution to future generations.

Besides positioning the audience within a spatiotemporally historical context from the start, Obama makes use of a narrative that indirectly offers subject positions. In other words, excerpt 2 implies a narrative discourse that "seeks[s] to construct unified subjects out of fragmented events" (Bruner 2005, 312).[6] Borrowing Bruner's words, the construction of unified subjects occurs when they are constrained by "the kinds of narrative characterizations with which they identify and by the institutional subject positions [roles] they find themselves obligated to fulfill" (314). The effect of narratives stems from their definition of "social roles within social contexts" and practices (Castells 2009, 143).

Obama's allusion to farmers, scholars, statesmen, patriots, tyranny, and persecution unavoidably simultaneously describes the "people" (us) and the enemy (them) of the time (which appears unspecified). These concepts may have the potential to activate particular feelings related to a sense of identity, community, and personal experiences (e.g., enthusiasm and solidarity). They can also stimulate negative feelings depending on the subject's position in society (e.g., fear, anxiety, or anger).[7] Citing Ahmed's work *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2003), Bleiker and Hutchison (2007, 11–12) explain that "the emotional nature of identity and communal belonging is implicit, because our sense of identity and belonging are constituted by the way we attach and situate ourselves within the social world." In this sense, "emotions help us make sense of ourselves, and situate us in relation to others and the world that surrounds us." In the end, the audience of Obama's speech may either identify with or distance themselves from him.

Another important *locus communis* in the race speech concerns the description of Obama's campaign. For it positions voters within current context, but also within a decision-making framework:

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6. This is a process that Charland (1987) defines as "constitutive rhetoric" and that is further elaborated by Bruner (2005).

7. Turner and Stets (2009, 288) explain that "context also involves outcomes produced by emotions, and sometimes negative emotions can produce positive outcomes, as when fear and fleeing from danger protects the self from attack"; examples of other cases are restoring social order by imposing sanctions on emotions fueled by anger, and guilt and shame generating positive results for the group and the person involved.

Excerpt 3

> This was one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this campaign—to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America. I chose to run for the presidency at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together—unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction—towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren.

At this point, the speech may have developed a capacity to lead various audiences toward a political behavior: either to accept or reject the message. As stated before, this behavior derives from the activation (by sign-based stimuli) of two emotional systems: the *disposition* and *surveillance* systems. Based on affective intelligence theory, Castells (2009, 146–47) sheds light on how these systems operate during political campaign: "The *disposition system* induces enthusiasm and organizes behavior to achieve the goals of the enthusiastic subject in a given environment . . . the *surveillance system*, when experiencing fear or anxiety . . . calls upon the reasoning mechanism to carefully evaluate the adequate response to a perceived threat. . . . Enthusiastic citizens follow the party line, while anxious citizens take a closer look at their options." According to Castells (147–50), the former system is responsible for feelings of enthusiasm, which bring about a closer attachment of an audience to a candidate "when the circumstances are familiar" or in tune with their values and beliefs (and usually they tend to look for information that validates and supports their views). The latter concerns emotions of fear (which is responsible for self-preservation), anger (which leads to "risk taking behavior" and imprudent decisions), and anxiety (which induces "risk-aversive behavior"); that is, this system triggers "a critical examination of parties, candidates, or opinion leaders" when their values and beliefs are confronted and contradicted.

Another important aspect of excerpt 3 is the explicit reference to common hopes as to create another common ground. Although this concept is left unclear, it works a powerful effect. Based on Lakoff's work on the concept of freedom in America, an undefined term leaves blank spaces for an audience to "fill in" (2006), which functions as a rhetorical strategy that reinforces individ-

ual meanings or ideas. Excerpt 3 also indicates the possibility of triggering a feeling of hope, arising from the way Obama defines his campaign—as the continuation of "a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America"—and from his assigning a universal-equivalential identification characteristic: "we all want to move in the same direction." It is important to note that the feeling of hope appears together with a feeling of fear during a political process, because a campaign message is usually "directed to stimulate hope and to still fear of the opponent" (Castells 2009, 150).

Metaphorical Associations as Meaning-Generating Mechanism

Loci communes are not the only source of political rhetoric and meaning during the construction of a "people." The use of metaphors is also a mechanism that activates and generates meaning and helps to create equivalential links. This mechanism implies the substitution of literal terms by figural ones (Laclau 2005, 71). Lakoff and Johnson ([1980] 2003 5, 9) point out the reason why metaphorical constructions stems from our metaphorical thinking behavior. For them, this type of thinking originates largely from the need to conceptualize "less clearly delineated (and usually less concrete) concepts" in terms of more concrete concepts, "which are directly grounded in our experience. Therefore, metaphors are essential to "understanding and experiencing one kind of things in terms of another." One of the strongest metaphorical associations in the race speech is the conceptualization of slavery as the nation's original sin (excerpt 2). In Christian tradition, this original sin is a human innate tendency to commit sin. It is a condition inherited from the Fall of Man in the Garden of Eden. This type of sin can be washed away through baptism (see Fitzgerald et al. [1999] for further elaboration of the concept of "original sin" in the writings of St. Augustine). In this sense, Obama defines slavery as inherited ancestral and collective guilt from which we can free ourselves. In fact, Obama presents the issues of slavery and the issue of race in general as an assigned task to be resolved by future generations (excerpt 2). In the next passage, Obama implies that the original sin of slavery has led to a racial stalemate that can be resolved by working together, which implicitly carries the religious idea of forgiveness.

Excerpt 4

This is where we are right now. It's a racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years. . . . But I have asserted a firm conviction—a conviction

rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people—that working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.

This excerpt hints at an underlying equivalential link to which a historically racial issue and other problems have been attached: "if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union." At the same time, the expression "my faith in God" evokes a religious belief to overcome a collectively shared set of problems.

Obama's metaphorical description of slavery as the nation's original (excerpt 2) functions as a meaning-generating mechanism. For it translates slavery from a political system into a religious system, which gives new meanings to the words described. The Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics, considers metaphorical connections as being elaborated in intersemiotic translation between semiotic systems. This translation presupposes a lack of exact translations, which creates "approximate equivalences determined by the cultural-psychological and semiotic context common to both systems" (Lotman 2000, 36–37). This perspective supports the argument put forth by Lakoff and Johnson ([1980] 2003) that reality cannot be conceptualized and represented in just one way. Instead, we need various hierarchically organized semiotic systems that enjoy a dynamic interaction in a given culture (Ivanov et al. 1973; Lotman 2000, 2009). For this reason, the construction of the "people" cannot be attained by one semiotic or communication system. It demands at least two. Looking at the race speech more closely, we can observe that Obama draws heavily on the religious system of ideas to describe and conceptualize not only slavery and race but also the values of the American people and politics:

Excerpt 5

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.

Specific as they may seem, the meaning of the terms *world's great religions, common stake, our politics*, and *spirit* is left unspecific or undefined. Such unfixity of meaning is a common characteristic of all signifying systems and, in this

case, affords political discourse the capacity to create equivalential links or common denominators that index a legitimized "people" (Laclau 2005). The blank spaces left by undefined terms (i.e., signifiers) constitute the locus where new meanings are formed. For example, we may understand *world's great religions* in terms of our own beliefs, thus changing the term's meaning.

Metaphors then provide the means for meaning generation in discourse because they help establish new connections between concepts pertaining to different systems of communication. In cognitive terms, "metaphors are critical to connect language (thus communication) and brain circuitry" (Castells 2009, 142) describes, and to structure narratives. What is more, they activate the disposition and surveillance systems as previously described. In the race speech metaphorical associations help Obama conceptualize a political issue in terms of a system of religious meanings.

Construction of Obama's Identity

Considering that political cognition and behavior are immensely conditioned by two emotional systems (i.e., disposition and surveillance), the impact of the constructed message depends on "the capacity of a given set of stimuli to activate a given frame" (Castells 2009, 152). Semiotically speaking, the effectiveness of a text depends on the set of signs (e.g., cultural symbols) capable of activating semiotic process within a spatiotemporal context. In this manner, how Obama builds his identity in the race speech is crucially important to appeal to a racially and politically heterogeneous audience. Excerpt 6 exemplifies Obama's effort to achieve a more general appeal and to bring people together at the same time:

Excerpt 6

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 slaveowners—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.

One debated question among various scholars was whether Obama was Black enough as to legitimately appeal to Black voters (Walters 2007, 7). The importance of this question is related to Hillary Clinton's earned support and positive image in the Black community. In a similar way, Bill Clinton had established an affective and loyal relationship with African American groups (Cross 2007, 68). Another significant point is that Obama's campaign was very untraditional. On the one hand, he does not come from within the Black community. On the other hand, his campaign did not arise at the periphery of the American electorate (Walters 2007).[8] Obama himself recognizes he is not a direct descendant of American slavery (see excerpt 6). Nevertheless, his political background and his family connection to a Kenyan politician father and White American anthropologist mother provide him with the means to compete against structural forces and obtain the support of voters and financial contributors (cf. Jowett and O'Donnell 2006, 273; Walters 2007, 17).

Yet defining Obama's Blackness is essential in his campaign, as race has played a decisive role in American politics. In this framework, an emotionally and symbolically loaded speech is seemingly necessary "to reach citizens' hearts and minds, and thus lead to political actions" (Van den Steeg 2010, 9). By way of reminder, information processing draws on individual dispositions, cultural experience, level of involvement and commitment to a party/candidate, and identification with a social group (11). In order to construct a meaningful Black identity, Obama first recognizes his identity problem:

Excerpt 7

This is not to say that race has not been an issue in the campaign. At various stages in the campaign, some commentators have deemed me either "too black" or "not black enough."

Obama's Blackness had been debated by some critics prior to the race speech. Debra Dickerson (2007), for example, a Black writer for the online magazine *Salon*, asserted that in order for persons to be regarded as Black, in the American context, they must be "descended from West African slaves." In her view,

8. According to Walters (2007, 15–17), every candidate that comes from within the Black community is considered to have arisen at the periphery of the American electorate. As an example, he brings up the cases of Jesse L. Jackson (a civil rights activist who was a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1984 and 1988) and Alfred Charles Sharpton Jr. (another civil rights activist, for the same nomination in 2004), who had been well known in the Black community for their leadership service but failed to compete and gain the White support.

people who do not fall into this category are just "voluntary immigrants." Following this perspective, Dickerson states that embracing Obama as Black means to replace "the black man with an immigrant of recent African descent of whom you can approve without feeling either guilty or frightened" (Dickerson 2007). In reference to Dickerson's comments, Walters (2007, 10) points out that such criticism reflects an evolved perception of Blackness in the United States: "such criticisms amount, in my view, to an unsophisticated conception of the political meaning of 'Blackness' as an essential concept of Black identity, bounded by skin color, biology, history, and culture. In fact, there are different kinds of Black people in America, a Black diaspora, if you will, a fact . . . that increasingly complicates the use of categories in America that were originally meant for the majority of Blacks with a history that stretches back to ancient Africa and includes the legacy of slavery and oppression." The assertions above suggest that accepting a narrowly constructed definition of Blackness may leave out those who arrived after the abolition of slavery. It can also accentuate ethnic discrimination in American society. In this context, Obama's race speech points to other determinants of Black identity without focusing on merely historical bases. We should, however, bear in mind that there still exist some parameters (i.e., experiences, social practices, and the process of acculturation and assimilation) that determine Black identity at large (Walters 2007, 12). One of these practices concerns Christian religious practices among a large group of African Americans (Stonecash 2010a). It is here that Obama finds powerful rhetorical material (religious symbols and imagery) to forge his Black identity, due to his experience and association with a Black church:

Excerpt 8

In my first book, *Dreams from My Father*, I described the experience of my first service at Trinity: "People began to shout, to rise from their seats and clap and cry out, a forceful wind carrying the reverend's voice up into the rafters. . . . And in that single note—hope!—I heard something else; at the foot of that cross, inside the thousands of churches across the city, I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians in the lion's den, Ezekiel's field of dry bones. Those stories—of survival, and freedom, and hope—became our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears our tears; until this black church, on this bright day, seemed once more a vessel carrying the story of a people into future gen-

erations and into a larger world. Our trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal, black and more than black; in chronicling our journey, the stories and songs gave us a means to reclaim memories that we didn't need to feel shame about . . . memories that all people might study and cherish—and with which we could start to rebuild."[9]

By resorting to a shared religious communication system, a number of metaphorical associations are interjected into the speech. First, they create a *locus communis*, that is, a place of common understanding by activating religious imagery and symbols in the audience's mind (e.g., the stories of David and Goliath and Moses and the Pharaoh, and Ezekiel's field of dry bones). Second, they build an equivalence link by connecting these biblical stories to those of "ordinary black people," even though they are not specifically defined. For the very concepts of survival, freedom, and hope are left to individual interpretation. And third, borrowing from Walters (2007, 13), these associations (including the comparison of the church to a vessel) help Obama omit "many of the cultural markers with which Blacks are more familiar to the extend it has promoted a curiosity of 'cultural fit' that in turn has become an issue of political trust." The expression "Our trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal, black and more than black" suggests that the identitarian elements of "people" transcend racial issues.

The point previously mentioned ascribes Blackness a representation shaped by the influence of emotions. This "representation is the process by which individual [or group] emotions acquire a [more] collective dimension and, in turn, shape social and political processes" (Bleiker and Hutchison 2007, 20). In this way, a varied audience, including ethnic minorities, may emotionally identify with Obama as he implicitly conveys a more general idea—namely, universal-equivalential identifications (Laclau 2005, 206)—that defines what an American is.

Apart from building his cultural identity, Obama strives as well to shape his political identity. It means that being Black involves a capacity to represent Black interests in the political field, which demands a sense of trustworthiness. Simply put, candidates can be deemed Black if they can give the Black community the feeling of "hope for a strong and explicit executive program to defend and advance the life chances of African Americans" (Cross 2007, 69). Cross suggests that political Black identity is dependent on emotionally established

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9. See Obama 2008a.

connections with voters in terms of historical and cultural involvement in the Black community. In this view, a feeling of enthusiasm or anxiety may arise based on whether the candidate runs a campaign with populist purposes, that is, to mobilize "an *already* constituted group" (Laclau 2005, 72–73). The following excerpts demonstrate Obama's effort to construct not only a Black political identity but a more general political one that encompasses other societal groups, while simultaneously creating an internal frontier within society:

Excerpt 9

For we have a choice in this country. We can accept a politics that breeds division, and conflict, and cynicism.

But if we do, I can tell you that in the next election, we'll be talking about some other distraction. And then another one. And then another one. And nothing will change.

By offering opposed subject positions, Obama constructs what Laclau (2005, 74) terms as an "internal frontier" within society: "a dichotomization of the local political spectrum through the emergence of an equivalential chain of unsatisfied demands." That is to say, Obama's words serve to fulfill the two preconditions of populism in the positive sense of the word, that is, in a way that constitutes "the very unity of the group" (Laclau 2005, 72–73). More specifically, Laclau underlines that these preconditions refer to "the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the 'people' from power; and . . . an equivalential articulation of demands making the emergence of the 'people' possible." By implication, the expression "a politics that breeds division, and conflict, and cynicism" describes an antagonistic force, on the one hand, and an expected attitude in the "people", on the other hand. Excerpt 10, therefore, reinforces Obama's political identity, while establishing equivalential links (a set of unmet demands) that characterize the "people" he is constructing:

Excerpt 10

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 talk about how the lines in the Emergency Room are filled with whites and blacks and Hispanics who do not have health care.

> This time we want to talk about the shuttered mills that once provided a decent life for men and women of every race, and the homes for sale that once belonged to Americans from every religion, every region, every walk of life. . . . This time we want to talk about the men and women of every color and creed who serve together, and fight together, and bleed together under the same proud flag. . . . I would not be running for President if I didn't believe with all my heart that this is what the vast majority of Americans want for this country. This union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected.

Once again, the allusion to the "union" helps to maintain a certain sense of historical identity, which connects a common past to a present shared reality and to a collectively desired future (Wodak et al. [1999] 2009). In sum, Obama appears to assure the audience that problems, interests, and concerns of all sides matter (cf. Borgström 1982, 317).

Identity-Constituting Elements of the "People"

The underlying theme of the speech (i.e., toward a more perfect union) permits the creation of a universal-equivalence link to which a number of shared meanings can be attached. As described above, equivalential links are important in that they help form the "people." They are common denominators that, "for a set of circumstantial reasons, [acquire] a certain centrality" (Laclau 2005, 95). It can be a concept, a figure, or a symbol whose meaning influences and organizes our actions and the way we perceive our surrounding environment, whatever it may be (cf. Hall 1996, 613).

On the bases of the above, an equivalence link becomes an all-encompassing identifying symbol to which other symbols are attached. The idea of the imperfect aspect of the union in the race speech appears to be the theme within which even the issue of race and the problems that confront the people can be understood. Of course, other common markers of identity are at play, but they all work as a unifying system. In what follows, Obama references some situations that affect a vast majority of Americans, which can work as a rhetorical means to produce a sense of unity.

Excerpt 11

As such, Reverend Wright's comments were not only wrong but divisive, divisive at a time when we need unity; racially charged at a time when

we need to come together to solve a set of monumental problems—two wars, a terrorist threat, a falling economy, a chronic health care crisis and potentially devastating climate change; problems that are neither black or white or Latino or Asian, but rather problems that confront us all.[10]

The above set of unsatisfied demands (i.e., two wars, a terrorist threat, a falling economy, a chronic health care crisis, and potentially devastating climate change) unquestionably describes the condition of the "people" and unavoidably hints at the presence of an antagonistic force responsible for this condition. It is here where Obama fulfills a representational and responsive role in the face of ongoing social changes (cf. Stonecash 2010b, 13), which may eventually create a feeling of hope. Just and colleagues (2007, 251–52) underscore the fact that emotions of fear and hope are undoubtedly generated during campaigns (by the candidates themselves and by their messages) so as to distinguish between a preferred and opposing candidate; they also highlight the fact that hope "is the emotion embedded in campaign promises, which are the staple of the candidate interactions with voters" (252). It should be noted, however, that hope and fear are not the only emotions generated by a speech during a campaign. It is context that determines the type of positive or negative emotional outcome in a given political event (Turner and Stets 2009, 288) But whatever they may be, it is important to bear in mind that emotions do participate in the creation of a "people" or the formation of the us/them dichotomization.

In this view, it is difficult to determine the kind of emotional responses to Obama's speech–an issue that lies beyond the scope of this article. If we refer to political discourse, we may safely assume that negative and positive emotions are likely to appear when unmet demands are cued (as in excerpt 11) or when identity attributes are evoked.[11] In any case, the feelings experienced by an audience are conditioned by the sociocultural context and the subject's dispositions and experiences.

10. These assertions are part of a preliminary discussion intended to confront and reconcile the controversial comments made by Obama's pastor, Jeremiah Wright, with regard to racial issues oriented to "white rich people," and Obama's opponents. His statements raised an emotional discomfort among the White electorate and engaged Obama in a racial situation in which he had to confront the issue, owing to his close relationship with Wright.

11. In discussing how different types of emotions may appear, Turner and Stets (2009, 289) affirm that "when the source of positive outcomes is attributed to the self, emotions such as *pride* and *happiness* are felt, and when the source of positive outcomes is attributed to others, gratitude *emerges*. Alternatively, when negative outcomes are attributed to the self, *sadness, guilt,* or *shame* is felt, whereas negative outcomes that are attributed to another result in *anger*."

The construction of the "people" is symbolic. This political process resorts to commonly shared needs, which in turn become a signifying system of relations. The concepts of injustice, inequality, discrimination (which are interjected in Obama's race speech) are interrelated, to a certain degree, to the issue of race, which in turn is understood under the historical development of the union. At the same time, these concepts become identitarian symbols of a "people" as they share an immanent relationship with emotions, owing to our experiences, knowledge, and memories associated with them. In addition, the race speech includes cultural symbols such as freedom, democracy, and the constitution that allow Obama to reinforce the political process in question. In the sociological tradition, such symbols "activate the emotion systems of the brain," which is how culture exerts power over individuals; which is why "cultural symbols affect the body systems responsible for the emotions that generate commitments to symbols" (Turner and Stets 2009, 293). In sum, "Emotions are what give cultural symbols the very meanings and power to regulate, direct and channel human behavior and to integrate patterns of social organization. . . . Cultural symbols become even more meaningful to the extent that they can be represented by other symbols (whether by physical objects, signs, or words), with these representation symbols calling forth the emotions and meanings of the culture that they signify" (292).

In terms of cultural values, Obama employs the concept of generosity and decency as describing elements of the "American people." These attributes, which form part of the bedrock of American culture, are rhetorically used in the race speech in a way that helps an audience make sense of the present reality, on the one hand. On the other hand, they index a "people" to which they are attributed. The term *American people* is introduced as a neutral, unbiased, and unprejudiced signifier, which may help build Obama's positive image if the audience attributes positive meanings to it.

After narrating his blood connection to Black and White races, Obama describes his affiliation with every race and constructs an image of himself in a way that indexes a "people" that does not have a racially specific attribute:

Excerpt 12

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 willnever forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.

> It's a story that 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.

The statements above, afford Obama symbolic representation of the "people" he intends to create. One way or another, they allow him to explicitly address and merge with a racially heterogeneous audience.

Besides allowing him to index a not racially specific audience, these statements may have also helped Obama build a sense of unity, especially when proclaiming that "out of many, we are truly one." This feeling seems to be dexterously reinforced at the end of the speech, by the narration of the story of a young White woman named Ashley Baia, who reportedly worked mostly with an African-American community to organize for his campaign in Florence, South Carolina. The story, told by Ashley at a roundtable, describes her difficult experience as a nine-year-old girl, when her mother, after being diagnosed with cancer, eventually lost her job and health insurance. So Ashley joined the campaign to help children with similar experiences. The whole story ends when Ashley finishes her own story and then goes around asking others why they are supporting the campaign. Interestingly, an elderly Black man responded that he was there because of Ashley. According to Obama, the Black man's answer successfully exemplifies a mutual recognition between Blacks and Whites that is essential to moving toward a more perfect union. By implication, this recognition serves to characterize the "people" while implicitly suggesting the existence of an enemy.

Conclusion

Although the present empirical analysis does not provide a systemic method to analyze certain types of feelings and emotions, it does demonstrate that the political process of forming the "people" is shaped by the activation of emotions, consciously perceived as feelings. The discussion above recognizes emotions as a constitutive component of communication and political processes, which may help illuminate and critique new directions of sociocultural phenomena. For emotions, feelings and reasoning are all interacting elements in all human behavior, "from political speeches and constitutional declarations to protest marches and televised depictions of famine, terrorism or any other intensely emotional political event" (Bleiker and Hutchison 2007, 17), or any communication phenomena.

The process of creating a "people" during a political campaign does not escape the influence of positive or negative emotions. From a cognitive and political perspective, this follows the neural activation of a disposition and surveillance emotional systems in political cognition and communication in general. The former concerns enthusiastic and positive attitudes toward the party/candidate, whereas the latter calls on emotions of fear, anger, and anxiety. The surveillance system, indeed, generates a more critical and reflective evaluation of information as to assesses adequate responses to the perceived stimuli (Castells 2009).

The race speech is particularly important in that it deals with a racial issue that not only concerns African Americans (and other minorities) but also points to the construction of Obama's own identity as Black in a way that indexes a not racially specific "people." In this regard, the speech forces Obama to creatively build a message in which various rhetorical elements converge. One important rhetorical strategy is the creation of a historical *locus communis* commonplace that allows Obama to place the audience within a specific frame of mind (Žagar 2010). Besides that, Obama artfully resorts to a religious system of meanings (symbols and images such as the story of David and Goliath, Moses and the Pharaoh, and Ezekiel's field of dry bones) to conceptualize the needs of people and to indirectly build himself as Black. The use of metaphors is another significant semiotic and rhetorical resource to deal with the issue of race and, more specifically, to conceptualize slavery as the "nation's original sin." We found that the metaphor of "slavery as the nation's original sin" injects a new meaning into the concept of slavery, a meaning is dependent on a wide number of sociocultural factors, including the emotions. In the tradition of the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics, metaphorical associations result in the process of translation between semiotic systems, thus establishing new connections between signs and meaning across semiotic systems.

In this analysis, we found the race speech connecting a racial and political issue to an underlying equivalence link: the idea of forming a more perfect union. From the start, the union is presented as an imperfect condition that is yet to be perfected by those fighting against an enemy responsible for that condition. In this sense, Obama appears to create an internal frontier between the people who share a set of unmet demands (e.g., inequality in education and employment) and the enemy (implied) that has promoted, inter alia, racial division, inequality, discrimination, and injustice. All things considered, equivalence links are important in political campaigns because they help create a universal characterizing aspect of a "people," while implying the existence of an antagonist force—that is, an enemy.

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