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THE PROPHETIC VOICE AND THE FACE OF THE OTHER IN BARACK OBAMA'S "A MORE PERFECT UNION" ADDRESS, MARCH 18, 2008

DAVID A. FRANK

Barack Obama's address of March 18, 2008, sought to quell the controversy sparked by YouTube clips of his pastor, Jeremiah Wright of the Trinity United Church of Christ, condemning values and actions of the United States government. In this address, Obama crosses over the color line with a rhetorical strategy designed to preserve his viability as a presidential candidate and in so doing, delivered a rhetorical masterpiece that advances the cause of racial dialogue and rapprochement. Because of his mixed racial heritage, he could bring perceptions and misperceptions in black and white "hush harbors" into the light of critical reason. The address succeeds, I argue, because Obama sounds the prophetic voice of Africentric theology that merges the Jewish and Christian faith traditions with African American experience, assumes theological consilience (that different religious traditions share a commitment to caring for others), and enacts the rhetorical counterpart to Levinas's philosophy featuring the "face of the other."

In an appeal, both radical and astonishing, Martin Luther King on December 5, 1957, urged blacks to "stand up before our white brothers in this Southland and see within them the image of God. No matter how bad they are ... no matter what they do to us, no matter what they said about us, we must still believe that in the most recalcitrant segregationist there is the image of God."¹ King called on blacks to "keep on loving" the recalcitrant segregationist, for it was "the hope that we must live by."² In the face of the segregationist, King maintained, blacks saw a reflection of God. Casting the segregationist in the image of God, King drew from Genesis 1 in the Hebrew Bible, and as Gary Selby documents in his recent book, yoked the civil rights movement to a metaphor of

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Exodus, conflating the ancient Hebrews in Egyptian captivity with American blacks under segregation.³ These touchstones are the foundation of the prophetic tradition, one allowing both for a condemnation of past and current injustice and for a vision of future redemption.⁴

King's appeal was radical. To claim segregationists were made in the image of God clashed with an empirical reality better depicted by Malcolm X, who before his hajj, declared "the white man is a Devil."⁵ Blacks had suffered 246 years of slavery and in 1957 remained under a system of American apartheid, which the white regime enforced with lynching, beating, and torture. King's theology and rhetoric were astonishing, as blacks had good reason to view whites as essentially evil and to use any means necessary, including violence, to achieve freedom.

Dismissing race as an accidental rather than an essential feature of human beings,⁶ King recognized the reality of white racism, adamantly condemned the viciousness of its structural violence, and insisted throughout his life on nonviolence, dialogue, and persuasion as the prophetic Christian method of confronting and converting segregationists made in the image of God.⁷ This theology remains poorly understood by historians, rhetoricians, and those who are not from the African American Christian faith tradition and who often treat King as a primarily secular thinker.

Some 50 years later, presidential candidate Barack Obama, a man of mixed racial heritage, addressed similar issues of race and religion, and in so doing, echoed many of the theological refrains sounded by King. His March 18, 2008, address "A More Perfect Union" stands out as a descendent of King's theology and rhetoric. The exigences for the speech were YouTube video clips, played in the major media, from the sermons of Obama's pastor Reverend Jeremiah Wright, which were framed as inflammatory, unpatriotic, anti-Christian, and racist. Obama and his campaign team recognized that a speech was needed to address this key exigence, perhaps the pivotal moment of the campaign.⁸ David Axelrod, his campaign strategist, reports Obama told his aides, "Either people will accept [my views about race and Jeremiah Wright] or I won't be president of the United States. But at least I'll have said what I think needs to be said."⁹ Obama took the occasion to interpret Wright's oratory and his own motives by displaying the prophetic impulses of their common faith tradition.

The speech received significant acclaim and criticism. Garry Wills, in a *New York Review of Books* article, juxtaposed Abraham Lincoln's address at Cooper Union with Obama's "A More Perfect Union," concluding that both "forged a moral position that rose above the occasions for their speaking."¹⁰ Editorial pages compared Obama's address to the best speeches of Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy,¹¹ Lyndon Johnson, and Martin Luther King Jr.¹² The *Los Angeles Post's*

editorial crystallized a consensus judgment:

It may have begun as an exercise in political damage control, but Barack Obama's speech in Philadelphia on "A More Perfect Union" was that rarity in American political discourse: a serious discussion of racial division, distrust and demonization. Whether or not the speech defuses the controversy about some crackpot comments by Obama's longtime pastor, it redefines our national conversation about race and politics and lays down a challenge to the cynical use of the "race card."¹³

Prominent civil rights leaders and African American scholars celebrated the speech, including Julian Bond, Jesse Jackson, John Hope Franklin, and Orlando Patterson.¹⁴ Critics on the political right praised many themes raised by Obama in the speech, with Charles Murray, Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee, Colin Powell, Newt Gingrich, and Peggy Noonan in agreement that it was a powerful address laced with important ideas.¹⁵

Other critics scored the speech for failing to deal with African American trauma, finding it an empty mimicry of Martin Luther King Jr. and a betrayal of his pastor. Houston A. Baker Jr. voiced this criticism prominently:

Sen. Obama's "race speech" at the National Constitution Center, draped in American flags, was reminiscent of the Parthenon concluding scene of Robert Altman's "Nashville": a bizarre moment of mimicry, aping Martin Luther King Jr., while even further distancing himself from the real, economic, religious and political issues so courageously articulated by King from a Birmingham jail. In brief, Obama's speech was a pandering disaster that threw, once again, his pastor under the bus.¹⁶

Charles Krauthammer concurred with Baker, although from a different ideological perspective. Obama's speech was a "brilliant fraud," Krauthammer complained, because the speech failed to explain why Obama remained a member at Trinity United Church of Christ in light of Wright's claim that America created a host of evils, including the HIV virus intentionally designed to commit genocide against people of color and imperial actions around the globe that formed the context for 9/11.¹⁷

Rhetorical critics both praised and condemned the speech. In a panel devoted to Obama's rhetoric at the 2008 Rhetoric Society of America conference, Collin Craig argued that Obama was a "new black Moses," commanding a narrative designed to rewrite the allegory of race in America.¹⁸ Vorris Nunley disagreed, echoing Baker's critique that Obama avoided the material realities of white racism.¹⁹ Mark Lawrence McPhail offers yet a third perspective.

In the first scholarly article on Obama's rhetoric, McPhail scored Obama's 2004 address before the Democratic National Convention for its "raceless" depictions of U.S. history.²⁰ McPhail celebrated the 2008 "A More Perfect Union" speech as "courageous" and as an advance in the rhetoric of race relations. Obama's thinking and rhetoric on this issue, according to McPhail's analysis, had evolved in four years.²¹ On the other hand, one could as well argue that Obama's thinking and rhetoric did not remain on a high plain, as he explicitly repudiated Wright for comments made at a National Press Club presentation in April 2008, comments that were deserving of contextualization and elucidation by the candidate. Obama rarely discussed racial justice in more than general and universal terms during the rest of the campaign.

It is my position, however, that "A More Perfect Union" is a response to a particular constellation of political exigences. Obama's address reflects both his progression as a thinker and rhetorician *and* the prophetic tradition as it is expressed in the American civil rights movement.²² Many of those who have critiqued Obama's speech do not trace its power to the prophetic tradition, nor have most historians of the civil rights movement or contemporary studies of African American rhetoric heard its voice. After reviewing the scholarly literature on the civil rights movement, David L. Chappell in his *A Stone of Hope* observed: "The prophetic theme came to appear as the missing link that made all the existing books on civil rights incomplete."²³ Indeed, even Chappell, who is among the few historians to feature the prophetic theme, ultimately depicts it as an "irrational" and "illiberal" tradition.²⁴

Rhetorical scholars have not been much better. Davis W. Houck and David Dixon, in the introduction to their critically important *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement*, a collection of 130 speeches delivered by civil rights activists, found the prophetic tradition was the common theme binding these speeches together. They candidly acknowledged that prior to 2004, they had "never heard" of the prophetic tradition.²⁵ Even rhetorical scholars who do hear the prophetic voice believe it is often expressed in irrational and hyperemotional terms.²⁶ Properly understood, the prophetic tradition rests on coherent and rational principles, and presumes that anger is a proper mood to adopt in the face of injustice, that hope is based on faith in God's creation, and that justice, in the words of Amos, will "roll down like waters."

Obama's embrace of the prophetic tradition is not unmediated, for he has explicitly placed his Christian faith tradition at the center of his campaign for the presidency, refusing to cede religion to the American right. He has engaged progressive politics through a reenchantment of its rhetoric. Indeed, Obama has reworked both the prophetic and his Christian faith traditions to unveil the spiritual underpinning they share: "that our relation to the world depends not on knowledge but on acknowledgement" of the other.²⁷ The other, in this tradition,

is made in the image of God. Summarizing the “message” of American prophecy, George Shulman observes: “what God requires of us is not esoteric but common, not abstract but ‘carnal,’ not a remote Archimedean point to reach, but a ‘turn’ toward what is nearby, to become present to it.”²⁸ Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” calls for blacks and whites to acknowledge the other and concludes with an illustration of carnal recognition, which flows from the prophetic foundation he establishes at the beginning of the speech.

To explain better the power of Obama’s address, I devote the first section of this article to the African American prophetic tradition. I pay careful attention to the African origins of the tradition, the books of Genesis and Exodus in the Hebrew sacred text, and the role played by the New Testament in prophetic theology. In the second section, I consider Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” speech as an expression of the prophetic tradition and conclude with reflections on Obama’s speech as a display of racial rapprochement.

THE PROPHETIC TRADITION AND BARACK OBAMA

The thematic core of “A More Perfect Union” is Obama’s explanation of the prophetic tradition as it was practiced at Trinity United Church of Christ of Chicago and preached by Pastor Wright. Obama observes in the initial sections of the speech:

In my first book, *Dreams from My Father*, I described the experience of my first service at Trinity, and it goes as follows:

People began to shout, to rise from their seats and clap and cry out, a forceful wind carrying the reverend’s voice up to 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 stories, my story. The blood that 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 generations 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 meaning 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.²⁹

The biblical stories Obama references are keystones of an Africentric expression of Christianity.

Emphasizing Christianity's African heritage, the Hebrew scriptures, particularly the book of Exodus, and the redemptive messages of Jesus, Trinity seeks to offer a theological balm for African Americans and others who continue to suffer in the wake of slavery, legal segregation, and the continuing forces of racism.³⁰ The theology practiced at Trinity affirms the African heritage of many of its congregants. Moses is depicted as an "African Prince," hailing from Egypt, who is married to a "raven-black beauty."³¹ Jesus is described as having "nappy hair" and a bronze complexion. This geographical rendering recasts the central geographical myth of American white Christianity, which features Greek thought, having "generally bypassed African-American views of the Bible. Although white churchgoers quarry the Bible for guidance about personal behavior, they tended to codify First Testament narratives into a set of ancient, iconic stories trapped in Amber that succeeding Sunday school teachers would present."³² Trinity's focus on the African origins of Christianity provided Obama with a connection to his heritage, as his father was from Kenya.

Obama writes that he "imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with" the selected biblical stories, which is the function of mythic narrative when it provokes action.³³ As Selby demonstrates, these biblical stories were the source of Martin Luther King's narrative frame for the African American civil rights movement, as he became a black Moses leading his people to the redemption of the Promised Land.³⁴ King's creative adaptation of the Exodus story to the civil rights movement drew upon an African American–Hebraic biblical hermeneutic that depicted slavery and segregation as against God's will and foretold divine redemption because, according to King, "the arch of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."³⁵

Obama read and reportedly was deeply influenced by Taylor Branch's history of the civil rights movement, which uses as titles for his trilogy the themes from the Exodus myth: *Parting the Waters*, *The Pillar of Fire*, and *At Canaan's Edge*.³⁶ Although Obama was not born into an African American family that had experienced American slavery or segregation, he would come to adopt an African American identity and the Christianity practiced at Trinity as a function of intentional choices rather than conversion or religious epiphany.³⁷ That Obama has adopted rather than been born into the African American experience has produced tension among black leaders: "He is genuinely of a different place and time than the generation of black leaders forged in the civil rights struggle. His story is, in part, an immigrant's story, devoid of the particular wounds that descendants of American slaves carry."³⁸ The wounds carried by the descendants of American slaves remain open, justifying the case for reparations.³⁹

The master narrative of the Africentric prophetic tradition as it is translated through the experience of slavery and desegregation, the Emancipation

Proclamation, and the civil rights legislation of 1964 and 1965, assumes a loving and active God, working with humans who desire justice. The distinction between worship and practice in this tradition is collapsed, with the social gospel taking priority. This desire and search for justice translates into a view of the long civil rights movement that has roots much further back than 1954 or a vision limited to the present. A prophetic view of the civil rights movement begins with Moses and looks forward to a time of justice, redemption, and reconciliation. The bending of the arch of the moral universe toward justice, King and Obama believe, arises from a loving, active, companion God involved in both the sacred and profane.

The stories of Ezekiel's field of dry bones and Hannah in the book of Samuel help to place Wright, Trinity, Obama, and "A More Perfect Union" in their respective contexts. Ezekiel's prophet preaches to the dry bones of the dead, which are embedded in a killing field hosted in a valley. "The vision" of Ezekiel's prophet "focuses exclusively on the enormity of exile. . . . The valley of dry bones is the quintessential vision of human disaster that does not find fault or point fingers."⁴⁰ In preaching to the dry bones and speaking for God, the prophet persuades them to rejoin the living, suggesting hope remains a profound possibility even in contexts beyond hope. Although the vision of dry bones does not, in itself, cast blame, the prophet Ezekiel is angry and condemns Israel.

Israel, the nation, Ezekiel thunders, is depraved, corrupt, unfaithful, violent, and immoral. Indeed, one can imagine Ezekiel yelling "God Damn Israel," justifying his condemnation with evidence drawn from the nation's betrayal of God's expectations. The prophet saw God punishing Israel by destroying the temple and Jerusalem. Similarly, the anger of Jeremiah Wright is prophetic. Like Ezekiel, Wright judges his country and finds it wanting. His anger, traced to his experience as a black man under the harsh conditions of segregation and the foreign and domestic policies of the Bush administration, is expressed in prophetic terms as Wright declared God would seek justice and punish the nation. The snippets of Wright's angry sermons viewed by many on the major media were divorced from their theological moorings.

The prophetic tradition pairs anger with hope, refusing to adopt either a resigned psychological affect or a theology of fatalism. Obama reports that he was deeply moved by Wright's sermon, delivered to the Trinity congregation in 1990, on the theme of "The Audacity of Hope," which became the title of Obama's second book.⁴¹ The sermon featured the contradictions and contraries involved in the interpretation of George Frederic Watts's painting titled "Hope." Watts's painting features a woman sitting on top of the world, holding a harp. At a distance, the painting leads the viewer to believe the woman is in a state of sublimity, if not contentment.

When the viewer moves closer and the details of the painting are unveiled, the woman appears to be in pain; there is a cloth tied around her head, obstructing her eyes; the harp has but one chord. According to Wright's reading of the painting:

You and I think of being on top of the world as being in heaven. When you look at the woman in Watts's painting, you discover this woman is in hell. She is wearing rags. Her tattered clothes look as if the woman herself has come through Hiroshima or Nagasaki. Her head is bandaged, and blood seeps through the bandages. Scars and cuts are visible on her face, her arms, and her legs.

The woman, Wright continues, also seeks the divine for she strains to hear the notes of the one-string harp, suggesting the possibilities of a better world. And a closer look at the painting, according to one of Wright's colleagues, reveals "small notes of music moving joyfully and playfully toward heaven." The woman in the painting, although in a material condition of suffering, "had the audacity to make music and praise God."

Wright developed the relationship between despair and hope in this sermon by following his exegesis of the Watts painting with the story of Hannah in the Hebrew testament. Hannah, the heroine of 1 Samuel 1:1–18, is the wife of Elkanah, who is also married to Peninnah. Hannah and Peninnah are in competition to bear children and win the primary affection of their husband. Peninnah wins the procreation contest, a critically important achievement in their culture, yet Hannah remains Elkanah's favorite wife. Hannah's life is painful and bitter, as she is childless and is the target of Peninnah's scorn. "Just like the woman in Watts's painting," Wright observes, "what looks like being in heaven is actually existence in a quiet hell." The lesson Wright derives from Hannah is her audacity, given her circumstance, to hope.

Hannah neither mimicked nor returned Peninnah's hatred; she maintained her hope. She continued to pray, assuming a God able to hear, even though there was no empirical evidence that her petitions were heard or answered. According to Wright, Hannah's hope was not rooted in visible signs or material verification; it derived from a "vertical" relationship of the spirit between a God of love and the individual human being. In juxtaposing the spiritual vertical plane with the horizontal plane of material being, Wright reminded his congregation of the slave song:

Over my head I hear music in the air.
 Over my head I hear music in the air.
 Over my head I hear music in the air.
 There must be a God somewhere.

The story of Hannah, Wright concludes, teaches the lesson that

the most important word God would have us hear—is how to hope when the love of God is not plainly evident. It's easy to hope when there are evidences all around of how good God is. But to have the audacity to hope when that love is not evident—you don't know where that somewhere is that my grandmother sang about, or if there will ever be that brighter day—that is a true test of a Hannah-type faith. To take the one string you have left and to have the audacity to hope—make music and praise God on and with whatever it is you've got left, even though you can't see what God is going to do—that's the real word God will have us hear from this passage and from Watts's painting.

According to Obama, Wright's sermon of hope, which turned on Watts's painting and Hannah, provoked shouting, with the congregants rising "from their seats" to "clap and cry out, a forceful wind carrying the reverend's voice up into the rafters."⁴²

At this point, Obama reported he was watching and listening from his seat. His religious background, which was complex and variegated, was significantly influenced by his anthropologist mother, who he believed was a spiritual person but did not embrace organized religion or the church.⁴³ Obama, in his introspection, acknowledged he remained detached, adopting the position of an observer of, rather than a participant in, the life of the spirit. Wright's sermon and the response to it by a congregation that affirmed the African connection to Christianity and the American civil rights movement spoke to his soul: "I ... felt for the first time how" the spirit of the prophetic tradition "carried within it, nascent, incomplete, the possibility of moving beyond our narrow dreams."⁴⁴ Indeed, there is a hermeneutic universalism at Trinity and in Obama's version of a Christianity at direct odds with American Christian fundamentalism.

The emergence of Obama's feeling of spirit did begin with his understanding of the justified despair of blacks caught in the grips of a racist society and social structure. Wright's theme of hope, woven into and around the biblical stories, was not meant to be, nor did Obama interpret it to be, the property of American blacks. Echoing King, who declared that the civil rights movement aspired to liberate all races, not just blacks, Obama saw in the prophetic tradition themes "of survival, and freedom, and hope," cast in stories told in the black church. But these stories are not the exclusive property of the black church, Obama maintains, and he does not follow the trajectory of one expression of liberation theology, which condemns all white people for the existence and perpetuation of structural racism.⁴⁵

Obama's Christianity is universalist.⁴⁶ "Our trials and triumphs," Obama writes, "become at once unique and universal, black and more than black."⁴⁷

This pairing of apparent antimonies is a dissociation, according to Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, and yields a theology allowing for religious and racial reconciliation.⁴⁸ The Africentric Christianity practiced by Obama, affected by the traumas of slavery and segregation, provides a specific spiritual avenue for African Americans that leads to a universal vision, one enveloping the suffering and well-being of others, irrespective of religion and race. In the constellation of values set forth by Obama, it is possible to be both “unique and universal, black and more than black.”

In both political and theological matters, Obama articulates a universalism of consilience; namely, that different political and theological perspectives can “jump together” toward shared principles, while retaining their particular and specific values.⁴⁹ Obama argues that the theological principle shared by a host of religious traditions is the emphasis on our obligation to others. In Obama’s faith tradition, this obligation is found in the Hebrew and Christian emphasis on the face of the other, a theological perspective best developed by Emmanuel Levinas.⁵⁰

Drawing on Jewish sources, Levinas established a philosophy placing ethics before ontology. The consensus of those who have studied the difficult texts of Levinas is that God is found in the face of the other.⁵¹ Because others are made in the image of God, that image is sacred, and humans are responsible for seeing in others the spirit of God. Accordingly, when humans recognize an obligation for others, they are doing justice.

The emphasis on the obligation to the other complements the biblical story of exodus and redemption, and provides the keystone of the prophetic tradition. Because all humans are made in the image of God, no one religious tradition is viewed as the only way. Christianity extends and complements the prophetic tradition introduced in the Hebrew texts, emphasizing the values of liberation, forgiveness, and reconciliation.⁵² According to Branch, Martin Luther King’s exegesis of Luke 16, the story of Lazarus and Dives, unveiled the universal message in Christianity.⁵³ Why, King asked, was Dives in Hell? The answer was that Dives had failed to acknowledge Lazarus as a human being, cast in the image of God. Branch concludes: “Dr. King said this parable from Jesus burns up differences between Judaism and Christianity. The lesson beneath any theology is that we must act toward all creation in the spirit of equal souls and equal votes.”⁵⁴ Obama, in his “Call to Renewal” speech of June 28, 2006, extends King’s theological insight.⁵⁵

Some 16 years after his choice to adopt the expression of Christianity practiced at Trinity, Obama spoke directly to the role of religion in progressive politics. Alan Keyes, Obama observed, had made the argument during the 2004 senatorial election that “Jesus Christ would not vote for Barack Obama” because of the policies Obama advocated. Obama said he was counseled to rehearse the

secular progressive response to such a charge. First, Obama should not directly confront Keyes's religious argumentation and feature, instead, the pluralistic religious traditions of the United States. Second, he should argue that religious views should not be imposed and that his aspiration was to become the senator, not the minister, from the state of Illinois. However, Keyes's "implicit accusation" that Obama was not a true Christian "nagged" at him. Democrats and progressives, Obama maintained, had ceded matters of the spirit, religion, and religious language to the conservative right.

Religion and Christianity were understood by at least some in the progressive left as reflecting "inherently irrational" views, intolerance, fanaticism, and ideology beyond the pale of rationality. Obama then made the case for a reenchantment of progressive thinking. In so doing, he acknowledged the powerful role played by religion in the United States. "Americans are a religious people," he stated, supporting the claim with statistics on religious affiliation, belief in God, and the number calling themselves Christians. The source of American religiosity, Obama maintained, is a spiritual need, fulfilling "a sense of purpose" and providing "a narrative arc in their lives." His own sense of purpose and narrative arc, he explained, could be traced to the "African American religious tradition" which provides the power to "spur social change." The link between religious tradition and social change established for Obama what McPhail calls coherence, a matching of symbolic narrative with action in the world.⁵⁶

Religion and doubt, Obama maintained, coexist; reason and religion are not enemies. Embracing a philosophy well developed by rhetorical scholars, Obama observed: "Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument and amenable to reason." These proposals, Obama continued, cannot assume literalism or adopt for purposes of persuasion an assumption that the language in the Bible is inerrant. Rather, religious texts are to be read in "accordance with those things that we all see, and that we all hear, be it common laws or basic reason," and a sense of proportion. Religious understanding, Obama continues, continually unfolds, and he illustrated this notion with an exchange he had with a medical doctor over the issue of abortion. Obama conceded that the pro-choice language on his campaign website betrayed his commitment to remain open to the views of those who disagreed with him, that it was imperative to "listen and learn from those who are willing to speak in fair-minded words."

The universal theme of religion, Obama argued, should tell "us about our obligations toward one another." His own faith tradition, he observed, is rooted in a biblical imperative to "feed the hungry and clothe the naked and challenge powers and principalities." Obama's conscience and rational choice to join Trinity fit his heritage, gave him a religious grounding, and provided him with

the myths and language he used in his presidential campaign to yoke progressive policies to Christian principles. His “A More Perfect Union” should be understood as an extension of the prophetic tradition, King’s theology, and “A Call to Renewal.” The primary problem he faced in “A More Perfect Union” was to explain the theology at work at Trinity, the words of Pastor Wright, and to reframe how voters viewed the controversy.

THE PROPHETIC TRADITION IN “A MORE PERFECT UNION”

The primary exigence for Obama’s speech could be traced to this passage in Wright’s April 13, 2003, sermon “Confusing God and Government”:

Not “God Bless America”; God Damn America! That’s in the Bible, for killing innocent people. God Damn America for treating her citizens as less than human. God Damn America as long as she keeps trying to act like she is God and she is supreme!⁵⁷

Placed in the context of the entire speech and the prophetic tradition, Wright’s language is quite consistent with the language of condemnation used by the Hebrew prophets Amos, Hosea, Habakkuk, Micah, and Jeremiah. Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his reflection on prophetic language, writes that the prophets “speak and act as if the sky were about to collapse because Israel has become unfaithful to God.”⁵⁸ The prophets’ “words are outbursts of violent emotions. His rebuke is harsh and relentless.”⁵⁹ Wright and the prophets are angry because their nations have ignored God’s command to care for others; and Wright’s vision of America’s moral failure is recounted in the speech, including its history of slavery, the consequences of colonization, the racist treatment of the country’s black citizens, and the Tuskegee experiment, in which 399 African American men were intentionally infected with syphilis. Obama’s challenge was to place both American history and Wright’s comments in their context.

Obama and others interpreted Wright’s critique as a claim that America was beyond redemption. In contrast, in “A More Perfect Union,” delivered in Philadelphia, the birthplace of the American experiment, Obama set forth a view of the country that assumed its plasticity, open to addressing the injustices of the past and achieving coherence between the word of its founding documents and its policies.⁶⁰ The disagreement between Obama and Wright turns on Obama’s deployment of hope for America’s promise, the value Obama gained from Wright’s sermon, “The Audacity to Hope,” against Wright’s apparent fatalism. In stark terms, Obama’s task was to deal with the profound legacies of racism and segregation, lynching and redlining—compelling evidence that black inequality and racism are permanent features in American life. Obama’s

burden was to place America's sins and promise into relationship, to put black anger and white anxiety into perspective, to offer himself as an embodiment of the country's contradictions, and to narrate a story of hope his audience could adopt better to fulfill a prophetic commitment to others.

Obama, in the introduction, elegantly juxtaposes the horror of the past with the promise of the present and future, doing so by referring to himself and his family history as striking evidence of hope, while placing the present and future moments in a historical context of suffering and oppression. Obama suggests the Constitution was signed but unfinished, that the meaning of the document's words would require interpretation and reinterpretation. The "stain" of slavery was embedded in the Constitution at its birth and is being removed through the actions of the Civil War, protest, and civil disobedience. The Constitution and its interpretation, Obama argues, remain open to new meanings and interpretations.

He then centers on the racial issues raised in the campaign:

On one end of the spectrum, we've heard the implication that my candidacy is somehow an exercise in affirmative action; that it's based solely on the desire of wide-eyed liberals to purchase racial reconciliation on the cheap. On the other end, we've heard my former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, use incendiary language to express views that have the potential not only to widen the racial divide, but views that denigrate both the greatness and the goodness of our nation, that rightly offend white and black alike.

Obama, outlining these responses to his racial background, addresses the issues raised by Wright. Obama reminds his audience that he had condemned Wright's incendiary remarks. He did not simply leave his disagreement with Wright as a matter of free speech; he critiqued Wright's fatalism about America:

But the remarks that have caused this recent firestorm weren't simply controversial. They weren't simply a religious leader's effort to speak out against perceived injustice. Instead, they expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country—a view that sees white racism as endemic and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America; a view that sees the conflicts in the Middle East as rooted primarily in the actions of stalwart allies like Israel, instead of emanating from the perverse and hateful ideologies of radical Islam.

The notion that white racism is endemic is a view supported by prominent scholars, and it is not a distortion of history to see racism as deeply rooted in the structures of American society.⁶¹ Attempts to elevate what is right about America

over what is wrong can be strongly contested as a value hierarchy and is certainly inconsistent with the prophetic tradition shared by Wright and Obama, which stresses condemnation of nations failing to pursue the cause of justice. Finally, to ignore the role of Israel in the dispersion of 800,000 Palestinians, the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, and to ignore the responsibility the government of Israel shares with the Palestinians and the larger Arab world for failing to reach a peace agreement leads to a profoundly truncated understanding of the conflicts in the region, reducing their cause to radical Islam.⁶²

Obama then poses the question on the minds of many, including Hillary Clinton: Why did he not leave Trinity if he disagreed with Wright and judged his view of America to be distorted? He confesses

that if all that I knew of Reverend Wright were the snippets of those sermons that have run in an endless loop on the television and YouTube, or if Trinity United Church of Christ conformed to the caricatures being peddled by some commentators, there is no doubt that I would react in much the same way.

He then pivots and provides a sympathetic explanation of Wright and Trinity, giving both texture:

The man I met more than twenty years ago is a man who helped introduce me to my Christian faith, a man who spoke to me about our obligations to love one another, to care for the sick and lift up the poor. He is a man who served his country as a U.S. Marine, who has studied and lectured at some of the finest universities and seminaries in the country, and who for over thirty years led a church that serves the community by doing God's work here on Earth—by housing the homeless, ministering to the needy, providing day care services and scholarships and prison ministries, and reaching out to those suffering from HIV/AIDS.

Wright, Obama documents, is a Christian in the prophetic tradition, calling Obama and his church to the service of others. The central Christian obligation, according to Wright, is to love one another and to care for the children, sick, and poor, those who are homeless and in prison and suffering from diseases often seen as taboo.

Obama transitions from his character sketch of Wright to his church, Trinity, and provides those unfamiliar with the black church an explanation of why Wright's congregants celebrated remarks perceived by many to be unpatriotic:

Like other predominantly black churches across the country, Trinity embodies the black community in its entirety—the doctor and the welfare mom, the model student and the former gang-banger. Like other black churches, Trinity's

services are full of raucous laughter and sometimes bawdy humor. They are full of dancing, clapping, screaming, and shouting that may seem jarring to the untrained ear. The church contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and, yes, the bitterness and bias that make up the black experience in America.

Placing the black church in its historical context, Obama explains how it serves as a “hush harbor” for blacks to speak outside the presence of the white majority.⁶³ Hush harbors emerged out of African American experience with slavery. The black church engaged in interpretations of Hebrew and Christian texts that effectively reversed those of the white church to stress liberation, transformation, and reconciliation. Scriptural texts were used as weapons in revolts.⁶⁴ Here, Obama explains for those unfamiliar with the black church the function it plays in providing a safe haven for blacks both to act out and to work through the trauma. He pairs both the more positive qualities found in hush harbors with those reflecting the residues of trauma.

Obama provides a nuanced explanation of Wright and Trinity, observing:

Not once in my conversations with [Wright] have I heard him talk about any ethnic group in derogatory terms or treat whites with whom he interacted with anything but courtesy and respect. He contains within him the contradictions—the good and the bad—of the community that he has served diligently for so many years.

The containment of contradictions, not a judgment of Wright or others based on a criterion of purity, marks the thinking expressed here. The human being and the human community, Obama appreciates, are bound up in contradictions, paradoxes, profound flaws, which Obama is ready to acknowledge.

Wright and Trinity, and Obama’s white grandmother, contribute to the contradictions within his own being. In the most moving passage of the speech, Obama declares:

I can no more disown [Wright] than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother—a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe. These people are a part of me. And they are a part of America, this country that I love.

By acknowledging and then embracing his black and white heritage, with their contradictions, Obama embeds this heritage in the character of America.

Because of his mixed racial background, Obama could move between the hush harbors of white and black worlds while retaining an identity in both.

Racism and its history, issues Obama had subordinated in his campaign, could not be ignored, and in the next section of the speech, he chronicles the legacy of American racial injustice. Using the language of trauma theory, Obama observes: “The fact is that the comments that have been made and the issues that have surfaced over the last few weeks reflect the complexities of race in this country that we’ve never really worked through—a part of our union that we have yet to perfect.” The notions of “acting out” and “working through” historical and transhistorical trauma provide the psychoanalytic scaffolding of this speech.⁶⁵ Historical trauma can be traced to specific events and characters bracketed in time. Transhistorical trauma resists temporal or chronological brackets, cannot be transcended, and is seen as permanent. “Acting out” trauma occurs when there is a repetitive and compulsive response to trauma. Obama, in this speech, challenges what he believes to be Wright’s transformation of America’s racist past into a transhistorical trauma, suggesting racism is an enduring characteristic of the nation. To “work through” historical trauma, one must put it in its context and use critical reason to determine how the suffering caused by trauma can be at least partially mitigated and better policies enacted.⁶⁶

Without the historical context, Obama continues, there will be no collective understanding of why there is great anger, poverty, and despair in the black community. Explicitly recognizing the historical trauma suffered by American blacks, Obama quotes from William Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun*: “The past isn’t dead and buried. In fact, it isn’t even past.” Although Obama claims he did not “need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country,” he did rehearse, in some detail, the sins committed by America against African Americans. He began this rehearsal by tracing the current state of racial injustice to this past: “many of the disparities that exist in the African American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.” Without question, this unequivocal claim placed the historical trauma suffered by African Americans in its context.

Obama does not identify particular individuals as the responsible agents for the legacy of racial injustice he recounts; rather, he argues that the American republic and its laws are the source of racism. He begins with schools, “Segregated schools were, and are, inferior schools; we still haven’t fixed them, fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today’s black and white students.” He then details the consequences of economic discrimination:

Legalized discrimination—where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African American business

owners, or black homeowners could not access FHA mortgages, or blacks were excluded from unions, or the police force, or fire departments—meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations. That history helps explain the wealth and income gap between black and white, and the concentrated pockets of poverty that persists in so many of today's urban and rural communities.

Economic discrimination, Obama argues, profoundly disrupted the black family:

A lack of economic opportunity among black men, and the shame and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one's family, contributed to the erosion of black families—a problem that welfare policies for many years may have worsened. And the lack of basic services in so many urban black neighborhoods—parks for kids to play in, police walking the beat, regular garbage pick-up and building code enforcement—all helped create a cycle of violence, blight and neglect that continue to haunt us.

Obama places the blame for African American trauma, and the current disparities, on the government and legal structure.

After explaining to his audience the rhetorical situation faced by blacks, he returns to the topic of Reverend Wright's anger, which represents that of the larger African American community. Wright, Obama observes, is deeply scarred by his experience with segregation, which has produced a deep anger expressed most completely in the African American hush harbors of the black church, barbershops, and family:

For the men and women of Reverend Wright's generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away; nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years. That anger may not get expressed in public, in front of white co-workers or white friends. But it does find voice in the barbershop or around the kitchen table. At times, that anger is exploited by politicians, to gin up votes along racial lines, or to make up for a politician's own failings.

Obama places the events of segregation in the past, distinguishing segregation as an episode with a specific history, characters, and a chronological limit. In placing Wright in his context and establishing chronological limits to the episode of segregation, Obama counters transhistorical claims that American racism has and always will be endemic and a permanent fixture in American life.

That many were surprised by the anger of Wright's condemnations and the vigorous and positive response by his congregation, Obama argues, is a

function of religious segregation. Echoing a refrain from Martin Luther King Jr., Obama observes:

The fact that so many people are surprised to hear that anger in some of Reverend Wright's sermons simply reminds us of the old truism that the most segregated hour in American life occurs on Sunday morning. That anger is not always productive; indeed, all too often it distracts attention from solving real problems; it keeps us from squarely facing our own complicity in our condition and prevents the African American community from forging the alliances it needs to bring about real change.

His critique of Wright's mood of anger is twofold. First, the anger does have a historical context—slavery and segregation—toxins that continue to infect the African American community, and that those who do not understand their historical trauma and who are not privy to African American hush harbors should better appreciate. Second, the anger is a form of “acting out” rather than “working through” the problems faced by the African American community. In his analysis of Wright's anger, Obama shifts his frame from the prophetic to the psychoanalytic, and then returns to the prophetic voice in the concluding section.

Giving voice to African American anger, in the confines of the Trinity church, may allow Wright and his congregation to engage in a self-reflexive cathartic act, giving expression to suffering, pain, and fury not intended for audiences outside their hush harbor. Once Wright's words were endlessly looped in the major media, however, they became part of the public sphere, which is unfortunate because those words were spoken in a place and before an audience engaged in prophetic worship, not legislative policy making. Regardless, Obama had to deal with the very real political consequences of Wright's anger, which in the public realm, he believed, undermined the attempt to work through the problems of racism. Even though Wright's anger created a distraction, Obama observes, the mood is

real; it is powerful; and to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races.

The roots of the anger, Obama contends, have historical, not transhistorical origins, with the causes of racism open to identification and at least partial rectification. Obama's speech included the roots of white anger as well.

White anger, Obama observes, isn't “always expressed in polite company,” suggesting that whites have their own hush harbors. Black anger is matched by

a similar anger ... within segments of the white community. Most working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly

privileged by their race. Their experience is the immigrant experience—as far as they're concerned, no one's handed them anything, they've built it from scratch.... So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town, when they hear that an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed, when they're told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time.... Talk show hosts and conservative commentators built entire careers unmasking bogus claims of racism while dismissing legitimate discussions of racial injustice and inequality as mere political correctness or reverse racism.

In this section of his speech, Obama does not equate the brutal legacies of slavery and segregation with the economic anxieties faced by the white community, but he does recognize the existence of white anger and the role played by conservatives in undermining attempts to engage in productive discussions about America's racial legacy. Blaming blacks, busing, and affirmative action becomes a way of acting out, not working through, the economic anxieties experienced by whites. Obama observes:

Just as black anger often proved counterproductive, so have these white resentments distracted attention from the real culprits of the middle class squeeze—a corporate culture rife with inside dealing, questionable accounting practices, and short-term greed; a Washington dominated by lobbyists and special interests; economic policies that favor the few over the many.

To properly deal with white anxiety, Obama argues, the focus should be on corporate and governmental economic policies, not racial strife. Obama's aspiration is to offer a vision of working through the "racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years," one in which both whites and blacks act out, in a compulsive and repetitive fashion, their condemnations rather than affirmations of the other.

Obama would urge African Americans to treat the trauma of slavery and segregation as historical, not transhistorical, and to recognize that whites share many of their grievances. To work through shared grievances, he holds, there is a need for multiracial alliances involving governmental and nongovernmental agencies, including families and parents:

For the African American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances—for better health care, and better schools, and better

jobs—to the larger aspirations of all Americans—the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man who's been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family.

African Americans, Obama maintains, must recognize the possibility of change. In a deft move, he returns to Reverend Wright's sermon, deploying the theme of hope—the subject of Wright's sermon that had led Obama to join Trinity—to crystallize what was profoundly wrong with Wright's message.

Obama does not fault Wright for decrying, in angry terms, racism in America. Wright erred, Obama reasons, when he treated America as stagnant, beyond the pale of hope:

The profound mistake of Reverend Wright's sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It's that he spoke as if our society was static, as if no progress has been made, as if this country—a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition of white and black, Latino and Asian, rich and poor, young and old—is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past. But what we know—what we have seen—is that America can change. That is the true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope—the audacity to hope—for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.

Obama quotes the title of Wright's sermon, “The Audacity to Hope,” as the closing argument against Wright's static view of America, enlisting his former pastor as a witness in favor of hope.

To achieve this aspiration of hope, Obama is clear that whites need to acknowledge

that what ails the African American community does not just exist in the minds of black people, that the legacy of discrimination—and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past—are real and must be addressed.

The legacy of discrimination must be addressed, Obama continues,

Not just with words, but with deeds—by investing in our schools and our communities, by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system, by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations. It requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams, that investing in the health, welfare, and education of black and brown and white children will ultimately help all of America prosper.

The matching of words and deeds—coherence—would produce social policy affecting the welfare of all, not just whites or just blacks. Obama casts coherence in universalist terms, but it is a universalism that understands it is dependent on particular actions, laws, and policies.

After his analysis of the psychodynamics of race relations, he concludes the speech by returning to the prophetic tradition and provides a graphic illustration of Levinas's face of the other. "In the end, then," Obama declares, "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." The foundation for working through the problems of race and the host of societal ills is the prophetic tradition's insistence on caring for the other. Obama then juxtaposes the temptations of "distraction" elicited by the racial stalemate with the "crumbling schools," "lines in the emergency rooms," "shuttered mills," and corporate greed, arguing that the latter should be at the top of the country's agenda.

In his conclusion, Obama enacts the prophetic tradition, folding his relationship to Martin Luther King Jr. and the universal impulses at work in his vision of racial reconciliation into a story about an African American's statement of commitment and obligation to a white woman. Obama first told the story during a celebration of King's birthday at Ebenezer Baptist, King's home church in Atlanta. Ashley Baia, a white woman, who helped with the Obama campaign, had visited a number of African American homes. During a group meeting of Obama volunteers in Franklin, South Carolina, Baia and others shared their reasons for supporting the campaign. Baia reported that when she was a small girl, her mother suffered from cancer, lost her health insurance, and as a result, her family went into bankruptcy and had little food. Obama recounts, "She told everyone at the roundtable that the reason she joined our campaign was so that she could help the millions of other children in the country who want and need to help their parents too." He continues the story:

And finally they come to this elderly black man who's been sitting there quietly the entire time. And Ashley asks him why he's there. And he does not bring up a specific issue. He does not say health care or the economy. He does not say education or the war. He does not say that he was there because of Barack Obama. He simply says to everyone in the room, "I am here because of Ashley."

That moment of recognition, an elderly black man's acknowledgment of the suffering of a white woman, is the prophetic turn toward the face of another.

Obama summarizes: "I'm here because of Ashley." By itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is not enough. It is not enough to give health care to the sick, or jobs to the jobless,

or education to our children. But it is where we start.” And that start is with the prophetic injunction that we must care for each other, that in the face of the other we find the trace of God. The story also places an African American man, one who we assume suffered as well from the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, in the role of working through trauma by seeing the humanity in Baia. Similarly, Obama’s infomercial, televised on October 29, 2008, featured Obama embracing younger and older whites, with a particularly effective still of Obama hugging and giving solace to a white male.

A number of polls taken after the speech suggested that the vast majority of Americans found the speech persuasive, allowing Obama to keep his campaign on track. John McCain was not subjected to a similar scrutiny of his religious affiliations, but the controversy over Wright’s words did not end. On April 28, 2008, Wright addressed the National Press Club.⁶⁷

In his prepared remarks, Wright reviewed the history of the black church, including an explanation of hush harbors, and equated the attacks on him with attacks on the black church. He endorsed Obama’s call for an authentic dialogue on race, one that would move “people of faith in this country from various stages of alienation and marginalization to the exciting possibility of reconciliation.” He observed that he was a pastor and professor “who comes from a long tradition of what I call the prophetic theology of the black church.” He then detailed a historical narrative of this theology and argued:

Black preaching is different from European and European American preaching. It is not deficient; it is just different. It is not bombastic; it is not controversial; it’s different.

The difference, Wright continued, is a function of the diversity of learning styles and that the prophetic theology of the black church emphasizes liberation, transformation, and reconciliation. He reviewed the service provided to America by Trinity and sounded the same theme Obama did in his “A More Perfect Union” address:

The prophetic theology of the black church has always seen and still sees all of God’s children as sisters and brothers, equals who need reconciliation, who need to be reconciled as equals in order for us to walk together into the future which God has prepared for us.

The question-and-answer period, which followed his address, was the cause of Obama’s complete break from Wright. In response to questions, Wright remained open to the possibility that the U.S. government is capable of doing anything, including “inventing the HIV virus as a means of genocide against

people of color,” that Louis Farrakhan is “one of the most important voices in the twentieth and twenty-first century,” that Obama is a politician and “Politicians say what they say and do what they do based on electability, based on sound bites, based on polls.” The next day, April 29, Obama held a press conference in which he stated that the Wright he

saw yesterday was not the person that I met 20 years ago. His comments were not only divisive and destructive, but I believe that they end up giving comfort to those who prey on hate and I believe that they do not portray accurately the perspective of the black church.⁶⁸

Obama returned to the theme he had advanced in “A More Perfect Union,” noting that when those, like Wright, focus

so much on the plight of the historically oppressed that you lose sight of what we have in common, that it overrides everything else, that we’re not concerned about the struggles of others because we’re looking at things only through a particular lens. Then it doesn’t describe properly what I believe, in the power of faith to overcome but also to bring people together.

Obama continued to frame Wright’s understanding of history as frozen, static, and America as a dystopia.

In “A More Perfect Union,” Obama gave Wright the benefit of the doubt, explained the prophetic tradition of the black church, detailed the traumatic influence of slavery and segregation on Wright and those of his generation, and challenged whites to acknowledge the stain and legacy of America’s racist history. In his National Press Club statements, Wright did not return Obama’s gesture of historicizing the civil rights movement or placing Obama in context. Indeed, Wright dismissed Obama as a person who says what he says for political gain. Wright did not acknowledge Obama’s effort to build a campaign on the spiritual value of hope, which Obama learned from Wright, nor did he, even remotely, seem aware of the potential an Obama presidency might have for blacks and others, or the damage his comments at the National Press Club would have on Obama’s efforts to win the nomination of the Democratic Party.

Wright conflated his persona with that of the black church, suggesting criticism of him should be seen as an attack on the black church. This conflation smacked of narcissism, a condition revealed in Wright’s failure to consider what was at stake for Obama and the progressive causes at the heart of the prophetic tradition.⁶⁹ Perhaps Wright felt Obama had abandoned him, or was threatened by Obama’s success, or that the theological value of hope he had preached in

1990 had yielded to pessimism in 2008, which sponsored defiance and anger. Regardless, Obama was compelled to repudiate Wright fully.

Obama claimed Wright was no longer the same man he had known. With super delegates as an important audience, Obama chose to dissociate himself completely from his former pastor, and between April and the November 2008 election, the issue of race and Wright gave way to other topics. Obama, the politician, effectively distanced himself from Wright and the anger expressed at Trinity. Obama's "A More Perfect Union" address did prompt dialogue about race in America, but it is not clear how open and authentic the dialogue has been.⁷⁰ In the wake of the election, race will remain an issue for Obama and the United States, requiring him to cross over the color line.

CONCLUSION

Obama's "A More Perfect Union" is a masterpiece with small flaws and sequels that do not fully match its excellence. Because of Obama's mixed racial heritage, he understands the hush harbor talk of both blacks and whites. In "A More Perfect Union," he places black and white hush harbor talk in dialogue, seeking to promote mutual understanding and to chart a path beyond the racial stalemate. Both blacks and whites, according to Obama, need to work through this stalemate by understanding how their repetitive discourse rehearses grievances that have a history and often identify the wrong causes of trauma and suffering. Obama's complaint about Wright, and the anger he reflects and refracts, is not that he condemns racism, but that there is a melancholic and fatalistic dimension to his thinking about America, which is inconsistent with his theology of hope. Whites, Obama holds, see black perceptions of racism as illusions, and they need to acknowledge how the legacies of slavery and segregation continue to deprive African Americans of equal treatment. Obama's answer is to see the American republic as imperfect but perfectible, the trauma of history as open to rectification, and multiethnic alliances as the political means of solving problems.

Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech, however, subordinated its sociological and psychological insights to principles of prophetic theology. At the core of the speech is the prophetic tradition, with its fundamental assumptions that all human beings are made in the image of God, that the traces of God are found in the face of the other, and that humans have an obligation to recognize and care for their brothers and sisters. As Reverend Wright observed, the prophetic tradition, as it is practiced in the black church, seeks liberation, transformation, and reconciliation. Indeed, the aspiration of reconciliation is based on hope, a value that requires faith despite a reality of oppression and great suffering. If reconciliation is to occur, the hush harbors surrounding both Obama and Wright,

and blacks and whites in the United States, will have to give way to the hope that deep listening, respectful disagreement, and genuine argument can lead to the acknowledgment of the other, which Obama elegantly displayed in the story of the elderly black man declaring he was there because of and for Ashley Baia, a young white woman.

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