

# THE COMPLICATED MEMORY OF OBAMA'S 'MIDDLE GROUND' RHETORIC:

## The Silent Return of 'Race' in the aftermath of Treyvon Martin's Shooting in the USA\*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper charts the complications arising out of the rhetorical markers of 'Middle Ground' colorblindedness in the unitary fervour attending Barack Obama's 2004 Democratic National Convention Speech, wherein the *E pluribus unum* dictum was planted into both memory and public consciousness through rhetorical features such as Parallelism and Anaphora, both of which resonate with the vision of one diverse American family. Yet, this paper argues, his cautionary response in the aftermath of the Treyvon Martin shooting, attests to a shift to a rhetorical flourish hinged on the Aristotelian *antilogiai* principle that puts race 'under erasure' through the rhetorical device of variation, whereby he allows public memory to reimagine Treyvon Martin as not only a younger version of Barack Obama but also Treyvon as his son. The paper concludes that between the orotund anaphora of hope and the cautionary diction of despair carried by variation lies hidden the partition of America's cosmetic color-blindedness that paradoxically plays out in profiled, if fatal, racial spectacle of the clash between the 'middle ground' rhetoric and gruesome 'stand your ground' policing. The said clash, in styled rhetoric and

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historical content, renders America as both the country of dreams for all and a zone of exception and non-being for young, black males.

## INTRODUCTION

In its insistence on complications and variations in the Presidential rhetoric of President Barack Obama at a moment of crisis, this paper makes bold to go beyond the vectors of collision and conflict in the aftermath of the shooting of Trayvon Martin. A new set of questions and defences have arisen: '[the] protectiveness the president felt for Trayvon Martin is what most black Americans feel for him as he battles with the racist elements in the Tea Party and 'birthers' who question his allegiance to his country.'<sup>1</sup> According to Henry A. Giroux, it is not so much the political culture of 'hyper punitiveness' against what Herbert and Brown identify as 'children who refuse to be invisible' (2006: 757). That is cause for concern. It is more that the space of circulation of race in American society is regulated by spectacular forms of violence in a 'society that has intensified its racism behind the cloak of colorblindness and other post-racial myths while at the same time exercising with more diligence its policing and punishing functions.'<sup>2</sup> This paper then draws attention to the paradoxes and challenges of 'articulating rhetorical contours of this highly effective *ethos* of moral persuasion.'<sup>3</sup>

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1 Brooks 2012: 43.

2 Giroux 2012: 3.

3 Campbell 2012: 49.

## THE LIMITS OF ALTRUISTIC PRESIDENTIAL RHETORIC: THE DARK SIDE OF AMERICA

It frames that moral persuasion in President Obama's rhetorical contours to the Trayvon Martin shooting as being characteristic—at least in terms of Kermit Campbell (2012) and Barbara Hinckley (1990)—of what American presidents do, that is, cultivate the impression of 'altruism and benevolence' typical of 'high priests of society.'<sup>4</sup> Rhetorical devices that underscore benevolence have an emphatic history of unity: from the famous 2004 Democratic Convention Speech replete with anaphora and analogia to the 2nd Presidential Inaugural Speech's polysyndeton and parallelism, Presidential benevolence has become manifest in a unity that has, by default, become synonymous with American colourblindness. If anything, a recent analysis of President Obama's rhetorical devices has gone further to show how 'race' has come under erasure in the best interests of the country:

Each time we gather to inaugurate a President **we** bear witness to the enduring strength of our Constitution. **We** affirm the promise of our democracy. **We** (TRICOLON & ANAPHORA) recall that what binds this nation together is **not the colors of our skin or the tenets of our faith or the origins of our names** (POLYSYNDETON & PARALLELISM). What makes us exceptional — **what makes us American** (AMPLIFICATION) — is our allegiance to an idea articulated in a

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<sup>4</sup> Campbell 2012: 54; Hinckley 1990: 73.

declaration made more than two centuries ago: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. (SENTENTIA)<sup>5</sup>

Given that the shooting of Treyvon Martin was not consistent with neither the pursuit of happiness nor the 'self-evident truth that men are created equal, Presidential benevolence have to be referenced as correcting the discontinuities and fissures in the fabric of American national life. Indeed, the colour of Treyvon Martin's skin placed him in the darker side of President Obama's 2012 American modernity that represents what Frantz Fanon calls the 'zone of non-being': 'The dividing line, the frontiers are shown by barracks and police stations' (1961: 29). That dividing line renders certain zones of the American public life sites of specific violence against a specific race. In one sense, this black 'race' is democratic America's 'Other.' In another, Treyvon Martin's violent death attests to his perceived lack of what Ramon Grosfoguel sums up as the basic fundamental qualities of being fully human.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Skellon 2013. <http://wholebrainpresentingblog.wordpress.com/2013/01/23/rhetorical-devices-used-in-president-obamas-2nd-inaugural-speech/> (accessed 4 May 2014).

<sup>6</sup> (cf. Grosfoguel 2013). This key position is gleaned from Ramon Grosfoguel (2013) 'The Structure of Knowledge in Westernised Universities: Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century' in *Human Architecture: Journal of Sociology of Self-Knowledge* [Vol 11.1: 73-90] where it is noted that the tendency to equate difference with

Treyvon Martin was therefore not only wrongly criminalized but also grossly dehumanized in the zone of non-being in general and a zone of exception in particular. It is not the gun of the white shooter but the historical connection between the white culture of dehumanization encoded in the 'Stand your Ground' policies that define the dividing line between the frontiers of two humanities in America. 'Stand your ground policy' thus becomes an inscribing *socius* in a territorial machine that is geared towards not only processing entries and exits of African-Americans migrants into American spaces: it recolonizes the United States of America into a zone of exception and reterritorializes the American assemblage into a space definable by the particularities of race and gender that typify the continuities of colonial violence as a primum mobile of slavery. The predominantly white, gated community in particular turns into a veritable zone of exception: no recognition of movement rights for young African-American males despite proclamations of 'what makes us American' in the amplification rhetorical device of President Obama's second Presidential Inaugural Speech identified by Nick Skellon.<sup>7</sup>

Embodied in the fatally shot Treyvon Martin, this violent disjuncture between rhetoric and American reality better explains why Hon. Farouk Adamu Aliyu,<sup>8</sup> following on Sonja Foss's (1982: 1) observation of the cost of shifts from idealistic vote-garnering

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degeneration in Western culture has allowed it to dehumanize its 'Others' as soulless. In the context of this paper, to be young and black in a white neighbourhood renders Treyvon Martin a vulnerable target of genocidal attacks against blacks in the advent of American colourblindness.

<sup>7</sup> Skellon 2013: *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Aliyu 2013: 185

rhetoric to problem-reactive rhetoric, has noted: 'A short time into his Presidency, Obama lost grip of his popularity as his rhetoric changed.'<sup>9</sup> Presidential altruism fails, especially given that:

[America now lives] in a bifurcated country of gated communities organized to protect at all costs their isolated privileges and desperately poor no-go zones, also isolated and armed to the teeth. Living in these paranoid life worlds we have become a nation that emulates the fictional Dexter, the much-celebrated serial killer in the cable TV series of the same name. Crime now drives social policy, and vigilante culture increasingly plays a prominent role in shaping American life. This is a bunker culture where guns rule, corporations have learned to capitalize on the growing culture of cruelty and punishment, Hollywood thrives on the spectacle of racial violence and the American government devolves into a torture state. But it is also a society that has intensified its racism behind the cloak of colorblindness and other post-racial myths while at the same time exercising with more diligence its policing and punishing functions (Giroux 2012: 3-4).

For the altruistic and benevolent President, this shooting is a tragedy, and his response is not standard but more personalised

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<sup>9</sup> Aliyu 2013: 185.

than the more identifiable affinity of synecdoche it invokes when he mentions that if he had a son, he would look like Trayvon. Rather, he no sooner points out the likely similarity than he remarks that:

I can only imagine what these parents are going through, and when I think about this boy, I think about my own kids, and I think every parent in America should be able to understand why it is absolutely imperative that we investigate every aspect of this and that everybody pulls together, federal, state and local, to figure out how this tragedy happened.<sup>10</sup>

To pull together, as it were, under the tedium of tragedy is to question by obverse logic the rhetorical contours that rendered of *E pluribus unum* that attenuates the force of President Obama's hitherto 'highly effective ethos'<sup>11</sup> to a point where observers like Farouk Adamu Aliyu conclude that 'Obama typifies leaders who have all the right words before they get into office but fail to live up to expectations' (2013: 184). However, it is worth noting here that at his second Presidential Inauguration in 2012—the year of Trayvon Martin's fatal shooting—Barack Obama recalled the tragic spectre of racial slavery indexed by the Declaration of Independence and, especially, Thomas Jefferson's Notes on

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<sup>10</sup> Condon 2012 for CBS News writes Obama: 'If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon' (CBS News/ March 23, 2012, 10:21 AM, accessed 4 May, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Campbell 2012: 49.

Slavery.<sup>12</sup> Where Jefferson's programme of emancipation from slavery was founded on a fear, etched in the words 'Deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections by the blacks of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions nature has made,' President Obama reinscribes them in a vision of hope, using interesting rhetorical devices of antithesis, sententia, anastrophe and anaphora:

The patriots of 1776 did not fight to replace **the tyranny of a king with the privileges of a few** (ANTITHESIS) or the rule of a mob. They gave to us a republic, a government **of, and by, and for the people** (SENTENTIA), entrusting each generation to **keep safe our founding creed** (ANASTROPHE).

And for more than two hundred years, we have. Through **blood drawn by** lash and **blood drawn by** (ANAPHORA) sword, we learned that no union founded on the principles of liberty and equality could survive half-slave and half-free. We made ourselves anew, and vowed to move forward together.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Jefferson's Notes on Slavery, first published in 1782, are here culled from the series of 'American History: From Revolution to Reconstruction and Beyond' courtesy of the University of Groningen's site (<http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/documents/1776-1785/jeffersons-notes-on-slavery.php>, accessed on 28 July 2014)

<sup>13</sup> Skellon 2013: *ibid.*



The mere anaphoric mention of 'blood drawn by lash and blood drawn by sword' gives occasion to remark that it is neither the slave-owners nor the soldiers of the war of independence that have made it necessary for yet another order of 'manumission' from this form of colonial violence that is racist in both character and execution. It behoves the sitting President to release black males from what Maldonado-Torres has aptly described as 'long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjectivity relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations' (2007: 243) from the deathly clutches of 'The New Jim Crow'<sup>14</sup> that President Obama in the speech above indexes as 'the rule of a mob.'<sup>15</sup> Here we find the President having to confront that racist rule of a mob that, as per the rhetorical device of antithesis above, is no better than 'the tyranny of a king.'

## **FROM THE TYRANNY OF A KING TO THE TRAGEDY OF COLOURBLINDEDNESS**

Considering the length of time President Barack Obama took to respond from the White House, as if through a prompting by two of his most prominent left critics, philosopher Cornel West and journalist Tavis Smiley, the statement that 'I can only imagine what these parents are going through' by President Barack Obama is

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<sup>14</sup> Michelle Alexander 2010 *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* outlines how the criminal justice system in the US today operates on the basis of a racial caste system. Colourblindness, as Trayvon Martin's death attests, is a fatal fallacy.

<sup>15</sup> Skellon: *ibid.*

curiously not unlike that of Sophocles's Oedipus the King who, in the face of a plague, hastens to declare:

OEDIPUS

My poor children, I know why you have come—  
I am not ignorant of what you yearn for.  
For I well know that you are ill, and yet, 60]  
sick as you are, there is not one of you 70  
whose illness equals mine. Your agony  
comes to each one of you as his alone,  
a special pain for him and no one else.  
But the soul inside me sorrows for myself,  
and for the city, and for you—all together. (line 67-75)

And yet such a declaration is hinged on empathy and the Aristotaian formulation of ethical appeal. President Obama, in stating to the nation that 'when I think about this boy, I think about my own kids'<sup>16</sup> would partly repeat the scripts of the 2004 National Democratic Convention in Boston, where he made bold to state:

People don't expect government to solve all their problems. But they sense, deep in their bones, that with just a slight change in priorities, we can make sure that every child in America has a decent shot at

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16 Condon 2012 for CBS News, *ibid.*

life and that the doors of opportunity remain open to all.<sup>17</sup>

Contrary, too, to the rhetorical persuasion of the Second Presidential Inauguration,<sup>18</sup> Treyvon Martin, shot dead, cannot be described as a child in America 'that has a decent shot at life.'<sup>19</sup> He is late, and so is the response to the crisis of murderous colourblindness as pressure groups dared the President in a fashion akin to that of the Priest in Sophocles's tragedy of King Oedipus:<sup>20</sup>

So now, you best of men, raise up our state.  
Act to consolidate your fame, for now,  
thanks to your eagerness in earlier days,  
the city celebrates you as its saviour.  
Don't let our memory of your ruling here [50]  
declare that we were first set right again,  
and later fell. No. Restore our city,  
so that it stands secure. In those times past 60

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17 FDCH E-Media 2004 'Transcript: Illinois Senate Candidate Barack Obama' Keynote Address by Candidate for U.S. Senate in Illinois, Barack Obama, at the Democratic National Convention in Boston, Tuesday, posted July 27; 11:09 P M.

18 President Obama inspires confidence when he says: 'Our journey is not complete until all our children, from the streets of Detroit to the hills of Appalachia, to the quiet lanes of Newtown, know that they are cared for and cherished and always safe from harm. Skellon, *ibid.*

19 *ibid.*

20 Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, (e-text) trans. Ian Johnston. (<https://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/sophocles/oedipustheking.htm>, accessed on 24/05/2014).

you brought us joy—and with good omens, too.  
Be that same man today.

To be sure, the crisis is the plague of racist violence within a state that should stand secure as a champion of liberty throughout the world, and yet the greater crisis lay not only in the fatally shot body of Treyvon Martin but also in the post-racial myths of colourblindedness. The latter myths were readily embraced in the wake of his ‘Middle Ground’<sup>21</sup> travails, as it were, of his Campaign Trail that peaked at the 2004 Democratic National Convention Speech, wherein the *E pluribus unum* rhetoric reigned supreme. Charlton McIlwain<sup>22</sup> and Michael A. Cohen<sup>23</sup> have in two Campaign Coverage contexts referred to the spirit of ‘E pluribus unum’ as epitomizing the Middle Ground: ‘there is no white America, no black, America, no red America,’ and so forth. From this moment, it seemed, the son of an immigrant from Africa or Asia or Latin America could make it in America. This son who makes it, this paper reckons, is not Treyvon Martin in the no-go zone regulated by ‘Stand Your Ground’ policies. This son, being black in America, is in what Fanon calls the ‘zone of non-being’; where ontological density is lost on account of race and blackness in particular. It is here that an unarmed black 17-year old Treyvon Martin is shot and killed. In his revelatory paper ‘Jim Crow Riding High: Trayvon Martin, Voting Rights, and Equal Justice Under the

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21 Alcahal 2011: 54.

22 McIlwain, Charlton D. (2009). ‘Leadership, Legitimacy and Public Perceptions of Barack Obama.’ In Andra Gillespie (Ed.) *African American Politics in the 21st Century*. New York: Routledge, 155-172.

23 Cohen 2008.

Law,' Richard Scher<sup>24</sup> takes time to pose germane questions associated with the rhetoric of freedom:

Is there a link between the Curious Case of Trayvon Martin and contemporary African-American voting rights? Mr. Martin was killed as a result of an atavistic Florida statute, commonly known as the Stand Your Ground law. It allows anyone who feels threatened by actions of another to defend him or herself (e. g., shoot the supposed provocateur), essentially with impunity. It is nothing more than a permit or license for vigilante justice. And so Mr. Martin, wearing a hoodie and eating candy, was gunned down, allegedly by an individual who found him threatening.<sup>25</sup>

The first black President of the United States, suffice to remind us all, had on the occasion of celebrating his inauguration aimed to put an end to doubts about possibilities for all Americans irrespective of colour. Proudly referring to himself as the first President of the United States of America, he said: 'This, is your answer!' President Obama had referred to not only himself, however. He used contradistinction to describe the space of those

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24 Scher 2013 'Jim Crow Riding High: Trayvon Martin, Voting Rights, and Equal Justice Under the Law' in University of Florida Law's Centre for the Study of Race and Race Relations, Spring Lecture., available on [http://scholarship.law.ufl.edu/csrrr\\_events/10thspringlecture/](http://scholarship.law.ufl.edu/csrrr_events/10thspringlecture/), accessed on 28 May 2014.

25 Op cit, [http://scholarship.law.ufl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=csrrr\\_events](http://scholarship.law.ufl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=csrrr_events), accessed on 28 May 2014.

who do not believe in the American dream. In his words, 'the ground has shifted beneath them.' I would like to return to this shifting ground and link it to 'Stand Your Ground' policies that target black males, despite the American dream, despite the much-vaunted *E pluribus unum*. Henry Giroux<sup>26</sup> explains the geopolitical coordinates of the ground thus:

Trayvon Martin's death should not be trivialized by the distracting discourse of hoodies; nor is reducible to the actions of a potentially mentally unbalanced shooter. It is not (yet) about a clear-cut act of racial violence, nor, for that matter, simply about the isolated and yet shocking death of a young man. It is about the death of the idea of justice, not merely its practice. It is symptomatic of the way in which an entire generation of young, poor, minority youth are being punished, excluded, starved and thrown up in the elimination system of a new and violent, self-mutilating social order. It is about the stench and reality of death being promulgated by a society that has become cruel, corporate-owned, politically corrupt and morally bankrupt (2012: 4).

It is worth considering a less sceptical view from Karim Brooks (2012) in his famous essay 'A Linked Fate: Barack Obama and Black America.' In one place he observes:

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<sup>26</sup> Giroux 2012: 4.

Barack Obama's election marked a significant step in what black Americans call the long road to freedom. A survey conducted after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 revealed that 82 percent of blacks believed they were 'unlikely to soon achieve racial equality.' After Obama's election, only 45 percent held that belief. Many black people regarded his victory as a personal triumph, a vindication or renewal of their faith in the American Dream. And so it was. . . But approval is not the same as satisfaction.<sup>27</sup>

This disjuncture between approval and satisfaction means that the President's rhetoric of the 'ground has shifted beneath them' has violently collided, it seems, with dissatisfaction AND 'Stand Your Ground' policing, resulting in uncertainty about both the American Dream and colourblindedness:

The ambivalence many African Americans feel when they reflect both on their current problems and on the monumental victory of 2008 points to the irony of the Obama presidency. The first black president makes it more difficult for black activists to speak out and organize and thus helps to slow continuing improvements in the lives of black Americans.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Brooks 2012: 42.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

If, indeed, the Obama Presidency is difficult to criticize, it is because of his colour—indeed the logical upshot of post racial myths that are amenable to abuse—and not colourblindedness indexed in President Obama’s rhetoric of stars and stripes since the famous 2004 Democratic Convention speech, viz, ‘We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America’. This rhetoric has become untenable, with the US Attorney-General Eric Holder characterizing visceral criticism from vehement white conservative opponents thus: ‘There is a certain racial component to this for some people. I don’t think this is the thing that is the main driver, but for some there’s a racial *animus*.’<sup>29</sup>

### **CONCLUSION: THE ANIMUS COMES HOME TO ROOST**

Reconfiguring the memory of ‘the pursuit of happiness’ in one united American nation through President Obama’s rhetorical markers of his ‘Middle Ground’ stance such as *analogia*, *amplificatio* and *anaphora*—from the 2004 Democratic Convention Speech to the Inauguration speeches—the death of Treyvon Martin becomes a limit to colourblindedness. For President Obama’s response to construct that enduring momentary impact in the fashion of Cicero’s *regere*,<sup>30</sup> he needed to face truths about the racial animus against Treyvon Martin. Instead of this, as if pursuing the *in*

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<sup>29</sup> In *The Guardian* 2014 of July 13, 2014 Attorney general says US is largely 'too afraid to confront racial issues' during candid interview in which he suggests clearly that there is a racial animus against Barack Obama and himself (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/13/eric-holder-racism-obama-administration-sarah-palin>, accessed 13/07/2014).

<sup>30</sup> *cf.* Ige 2009: 254.



*umtrumque partes* principle, he puts race 'under erasure' through the rhetorical device of variation, whereby he public memory to reimagine Treyvon Martin both a younger version of himself and also as his son. The Oedipus-like empathy is at this point devoid of Presidential altruism but replete with tragic harmatia. To deny the racial animus that sounded the death knell for Treyvon Martin was to pave way for racist gaffes against Obama, at best, and calls for his impeachment, at worst.

Like Oedipus, Barack Obama denied that racism amid the fervour of colourblindedness was the cause of Treyvon Martin's death. Lest we forget, the rhetoric of unified America, with no black or white, no red or yellow, came from him; in like manner, the tragedy of Oedipus was as much a matter of denialism and his blindness to the truth as it was of harmatia and hubris. In the case of President Obama, by rhetorically rendering Treyvon as his son, he domesticates a tragedy of the zone of non-being. This is a denialism of the scandalous failure of colourblindedness encoded in his 'Middle Ground' rhetoric.

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