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Coming Home to Roost: Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama, and the (Re)Signing of (Post) Racial Rhetoric

Joshua Gunn and Mark Lawrence McPhail

In the spirit of apologia, this essay illustrates how the rhetoric of Reverend Jeremiah Wright can be better understood when set in relation to the black vernacular tradition of Signification or signifyin(g), the Racial Contract, and Whiteness. A sustained contextualization of Wright's "controversial statements" reveals a complex performative rhetoric that is highly dependent on elements of delivery, especially tone. We argue that reporters in the mainstream media as well as Barack Obama deliberately maligned the performative dimension of Wright's rhetoric, thereby misrepresenting it in the service of generating controversy and political expediency, respectively.

In December of 1963, following the death of President John Kennedy, Malcolm X made his (in)famous “chickens coming home to roost” remark to signify what he believed was the ultimate consequence of America’s long history of subordination and exploitation of people of color around the world. In an interview with Louis Lomax shortly afterward, Malcolm stated that Kennedy’s assassination “was the result of a long line of violent acts, the culmination of hate and suspicion and doubt in this country,” a country that “has allowed white people to kill and brutalize those they don’t like.” Malcolm followed his explanation with a summary characteristic of the spiritually inspired militancy that had always underscored his rhetoric: “The chickens are coming home to roost; that’s all there is to it. America, at the death of the president, just reaped what it had been sowing.”

Malcolm’s remarks were reported the following day in the *New York Times* and were subsequently invoked by the Nation of Islam to justify silencing and

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eventually expelling him from that organization, as well as his continued demonization by white Americans (quoted in Pipes, para 4.) Malcolm's explanation for his remarks following Kennedy's assassination "closely anticipated" the mediated plight of another spiritually inspired African-American rhetor: Reverend Jeremiah Wright (Pipes, para 3.). Known for his lively, intellectually provocative sermons, the now retired senior pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago came to national prominence because of his personal relationship to Barack Obama, who attended Trinity for some twenty years. As the citizenry moved toward the widespread awareness of Obama's presidential possibility, an ensuing controversy about Wright's rhetorical style and persona set the stage for one of Obama's most significant rhetorical acts as a presidential candidate: his much celebrated "More Perfect Union" address.

Although many scholars have explored Obama's race speech,¹ few have examined (or remembered) its almost contradictory follow-up or counterpart, the "Press Conference on Jeremiah Wright" held on April 29, 2008, in which Obama announces a very public divorce from his former pastor.² At least in print, even fewer scholars have considered the rhetorical exigencies that called both speeches forth: respectively, Reverend Wright's decontextualized "chickens" sermon and his remarks at the National Press Club (NPC) on April 28, 2008. Rather than examine Obama's oratory, we believe that a consideration of Wright's rhetoric and reactions to it is needed to illuminate better the implications of the rhetorical study of race and racism at a complex historical moment. By attending to Wright's rhetoric and its reception in the national imaginary, beginning with an alarming ABC morning news segment that ignited the controversy and ending with reactions to Wright's 2008 NPC speech, we argue that ours is a moment in which "'postracial' and 'color blind' rhetoric serves only to silence substantive historical discussions of race and racism in American history, society, and contemporary politics" (Walker and Smithers, "Introduction"). In our own and other words, we argue that an analysis of the dialectic between Wright's rhetoric and the postracial *reactions* to it help us to see better how a conceit of Whiteness works to obscure or confuse the deeper rhetorical, institutional, and historical contexts that make Wright's rhetoric legible at all. We will endeavor to show how and why voices like Wright's are perverted in a public sphere, space, or modality increasingly constrained by the cones of speakers and the frames of screens.

To this end, in this essay we work between two critical dimensions: First, we pursue an approach to criticism that engages in the practice of repetition and variation, signifyin' on an early analysis of Obama's rhetoric that similarly addressed and critiqued its post-racial registers, repeating the gesture of "writing together separately," and juxtaposing Obama's rhetoric with that of a speaker traditionally associated

¹See, for example, David Frank's essay "The Prophetic Voice and the Face of the Other in Barack Obama's 'A More Perfect Union' Address, March 18, 2008," or Robert Terrill's "Unity and Duality in Barack Obama's 'A More Perfect Union.'"

²Notable exceptions include essays by Obery Hendricks, Jr., Laura Jones, and Tim Wise.

with the black vernacular tradition of religious discourse.³ Second, we interrogate the psychodynamics of race and racism via a reading of Reverend Wright's address and remarks at the NPC through the lenses of Henry Louis Gates' discussion of the African-American vernacular practice of "Signifyin(g)," Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks' psychoanalytic explication of Whiteness, and Charles Mills' notion of the "Racial Contract." Our analysis illuminates the ways in which Wright's speech, the immediate response to it, and the subsequent silences that followed offer a sobering antidote to the belief that we are any closer to transcending race than we were more than five decades ago.

Dissin' the Black Vernacular: Gates—with Lacan—on Signifyin(g) and Racial Identity

One year after his "chickens coming home to roost" sally, Malcolm X offered another (in)famous observation that has continued to circumscribe and constrain our American understanding of black identity: the distinction between "house" slaves and "field" slaves. In his "Message to the Grass Roots," Malcolm used the phrase to differentiate himself, and his audience, from the "mainstream" civil rights orthodoxy. "I'm a field Negro. The masses are the field Negroes. When they see this man's house on fire, you don't hear these little Negroes talking about 'our government is in trouble.' They say, 'The government is in trouble'" (Malcolm X 11). Malcolm implicitly characterized Martin Luther King as a "house" Negro, further implicating the mainstream civil rights movement in the suppression and oppression of Black Americans.

Just as the slavemaster of that day used Tom, the house Negro, to keep the field Negroes in check, the same old slavemaster today has Negroes who are nothing but modern Uncle Toms, 20th century Uncle Toms, to keep you and me in check, keep us under control, keep us passive and peaceful and nonviolent. That's Tom making you nonviolent. (Malcolm X 12)

The house/field slave distinction, although never explicitly invoked by Reverend Wright, nonetheless emerged in the Obama/Wright controversy, most notably in the characterization of Obama as a "good" black, literally seeking to enter the White House, and Wright as the "angry black man," critical of the government, and trafficking in the vernacular language of the slave.

Indeed, Senator Harry Reid's "unequivocal" support of Obama's candidacy clearly reflected this sentiment. As John Heilemann and Mark Halperin explain, Reid "was wowed by Obama's oratorical gifts and believed that the country was ready to embrace a black presidential candidate, especially one such as Obama—a

³In other words, this essay is in conversation and argument with an earlier essay that deliberately foregrounds the racial and raced positionality of the authors, replacing a focus on Obama's discourse with a focus on his "Other" in Wright (see Frank and McPhail, "Trauma"). Here, we offer an alternative, and less sanguine, reading of the psychodynamics of race and rhetoric.

‘light skinned’ African American ‘with no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one’” (57). Reid’s comments rested on a distinction that relates to the reduction of a variety of African-American rhetorical styles to a singular “Negro dialect,” a reduction that linguist Geoff Nunberg argues is hardly “controversial.” “You couldn’t fault the actual content of [Reid’s] remark: that an African American presidential candidate has a better chance of being elected if he doesn’t look or sound ‘too black.’” Contrary to Nunberg’s observation, the idea that black identity or authenticity can be reduced to a singular “Negro” linguistic style is a highly contested claim, often resting on simplistic and essentialized notions of race and language. One of the more nuanced considerations of African-American rhetorical style that effectively “slips the yoke” of essentialism is Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s discussion of “signifyin(g).”

Gates’ rhetorical theory focuses on the intersection of the linear and associative, the literal and the figurative, and the metaphoric and metonymic at the heart of all rhetorical traditions. He argues that African-American rhetorical traditions supplant the centrality of semantics with tropic play or, simply, “rhetoric” (47). Although he is careful to draw a distinction between specific, ritualized speech practices on the one hand and figurative, vernacular language on the other, Gates advances “Signifyin(g)” as a governing term, a “unifying metaphor” (239) and master trope for African-American rhetorical traditions. Of particular relevance and import is Gates’ careful analysis of speech traditions in relationship to performance, affect, and the unconscious—characteristically “psychoanalytic” concerns—as well as the closely, intertwined dynamics of white and black vernaculars.

In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates begins with a discussion of Yoruba-derived folk tales about a trickster figure, the monkey (or “signifying monkey”), and the figure’s verbal play with a lion and elephant. Using the tales of the signifying monkey as an allegory for, and illustration of, a certain black vernacular tradition in the United States, Gates draws on Du Bois to suggest U.S. black vernacular participates in a double-consciousness as a precondition of the production of a double-voice: “Signifyin[g] . . . is the Other of discourse; but it also constitutes the black Other’s discourse as its rhetoric.” He continues: “Ironically, rather than a proclamation of emancipation from the white person’s standard English, the symbiotic relationship between the black and white, between the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes . . . is underscored here” (50). Signifyin[g] represents the historical emergence of a collection of linguistic practices set in relation to material manifestations of power, most especially the institution of slavery. Gates’ theory also recognizes explicitly that African-American rhetoric is *inextricably* entangled with white vernaculars and cannot be “purified” of them.

Gates helpfully suggests that we can envision the entwined or “vertiginous” character of black and white vernaculars visually (see [figure 1](#) for a composite diagram). White discourse is located on the x-axis, which represents the linearity of meaning and syntagmatic relations, and which is thus code-bound (e.g., grammar). Black vernacular, however, is located on the paradigmatic y-axis, representing “the chaos of what Saussure calls ‘associative relations,’ which we can represent as the playful

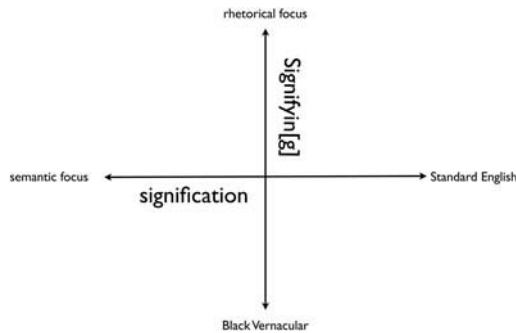


Figure 1 Gates' visual illustration of signifyin[g].

puns on a word . . .” (49). Gates' grounding of the black vernacular traditions in the materiality of the signifier and, by extension, the vocalic qualities of speech intersects clearly with Freud's theory of jokes and dream interpretation. He explains:

I do not cite Freud idly here. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* and *The Interpretation of Dreams* have informed my reading of Signifyin[g], just as have Lacan's reading of Freud and Saussure, and Derrida's emphasis on the “graphe-matic” aspect of even oral discourse. Just as jokes often draw upon the sounds of words rather than their meanings, so do the poetry of the Signifying Monkey and his language of Signifyin[g]. Directing, or redirecting, attention from the semantic to the rhetorical level defines the relationship . . . between signification and Signification.

It is this redirection that allows us to bring the repressed meanings of a word, the meanings that lie on the paradigmatic axis of discourse, to bear upon the syntagmatic axis. This redirection toward sound, without *total* regard for the scrambling of sense it entails, defines what is meant by the materiality of the signifier, its thingness (58).

Although Jacques Lacan's influence on Gates' understanding of the “thingness” of the signifier is mostly implied, the association of black vernacular with embodied performance relies on the Lacanian understanding of speech as the material meeting place of two subjects or “selves”: the self of *jouissance* or affect, which is plotted along the paradigmatic axis and to which we have access through jokes, slips of the tongue, and the “dream work,” and the self of the signifier, which is strung-out metonymically on the horizontal axis (see Fink 144–147; Gates 58–60; Lacan 197–268). Although each of us bodies forth both subjects in speaking—we simultaneously feel and say in speech—some Lacanians argue that affect and the signifier do not coincide neatly and that there is a kind of ontological dualism at the heart of human expressivity.⁴

⁴We note a technical point here: strictly speaking, *jouissance* or “enjoyment” is *not* reducible to affect as such, but a particular kind of affect keyed specifically to repetitions that are “beyond the pleasure principle.”

Echoing a certain reading of Lacan, Gates' theory suggests that in the United States "Signifyin[g] is the Other of discourse"—that in the push of Whiteness to stabilize meaning in a kind of metonymic march of reason and control, black rhetors creatively explored the maligned affective dimension of discourse, making art and an idiom that, however tethered to Standard English, comprises a unique tradition that cannot be adjudicated by Standard English (50–51).⁵ This tradition is born out of the lived experiences of African Americans, the embodied manifestations of double-consciousness resultant from the contradictions between an idealized social contract and the realities of what Mills describes as the "Racial Contract," not a pact "between everybody" ('we the people'), but between just the people who count, people who really are people ('we the white people')" (3). It is this rupture between the ideal and reality that has prompted rhetorical scholars James Golden and Richard Rieke to speculate that racism might best be understood as a problem of "psychiatry"—by which they mean the psyche—one that inhibits the ability of whites to interrogate or engage their "most basic beliefs" when the speaker is African American. This line of inquiry, coupled with Gates' argument regarding the uniqueness of African-American discourse, can be read across psychoanalytic theories that engage what Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks identifies as the "conceit of Whiteness."

Like Gates, Seshadri-Crooks draws on Freud's theories of jokes and the unconscious as a starting point for her critique. "Without being facetious, I suggest that dominant racial identification—or whiteness—is implicated in Freud's theory of jokes, and that when threatened, such identification is susceptible to uncanny effects" ("Comedy" 353). In her analysis of race in the colonial context, Seshadri-Crooks suggests that psychoanalytic theory offers a powerful heuristic for unmasking the "conceit" of whiteness: "Whiteness is a structuring principle of racial meaning; as a linguistic construct, it also subjects individuals to a phantasmatic identification that the body's surface seems to literalize. In this respect, we must consider whiteness per se and whiteness in principle as elaborate conceits" ("Comedy" 355). In a manner compatible with Gates' notion of signifyin(g), Seshadri-Crooks' reading of whiteness as a conceit reveals the simultaneity of seeing and feeling in speech as it is expressed in the uncanny interplay between the double-consciousness of blackness and the double-unconsciousness of whiteness. The play of signifyin(g) unmasks whiteness' attempt to disguise itself as unraced and unmarked, and thus exposes through its own figurative disguises "the unspeakable joke."

The unspeakable joke threatens to expose whiteness as a "ruse," to adopt [Judith] Butler's term. The ruse is that whiteness is only a performance—not the

The description of *jouissance* as affect here is a pragmatic decision, following Fink, that denotes feeling sans the signifier. For a nuanced elaboration of the relation between affect and *jouissance*, see Christian Lundberg (107–114).

⁵We say "certain reading of Lacan" here only to underscore Gates' theory does not necessarily implicate all the meanings of Other in Lacan's work (e.g., as the Symbolic, as the unconscious, and so on). Gates here means to refer to the identitarian function of Other as "not me" in a grander sense (as opposed to the "other" as simply another person or group of people).

essence—of authority; that as a color whiteness is but one element in a series of differences, and not the inaugural signifier of differences as such; and that whiteness is reducible to a metaphor that is produced in its citation of radical discontinuity—it does not constitute a stable presence. (“Comedy” 371)

Signifyin(g) constitutes a discursive practice that disrupts both the underlying racial and epistemic assumptions of whites and implicitly assumes that racism is not a problem of rational argument, or moral suasion, but the product of deeply held beliefs and values sustained as much by unconscious desire as by rational choice.

As such, signifyin(g) offers a nodal point for intersecting psychoanalytic and racial theories of rhetoric, both of which challenge traditional notions of the efficacy of persuasion. Like rhetorical scholars, many psychoanalytic theorists have viewed racism as primarily a problem of ignorance, once susceptible to correction through persuasion, either as a rational intervention or as *pietho*, the talking cure. “Much of this work assumes that racism derives largely from ignorance and false consciousness,” explains Christopher Lane, whose insights on behavioral psychology apply equally to rhetorical theories of change. “If teachers and social scientists could influence a person’s views, the argument goes, that person would realize that his or her assumptions about different racial and ethnic groups are shallow and false” (4). More recent psychoanalytic theories of rhetoric similarly acknowledge, and question, such an investment: “Both Aristotelian and critical and cultural rhetorics can describe what happens in a given context on the basis of a reference to historically sedimented discursive practices,” Lundberg observes, “but neither seeks to describe how or why a given situation came into being, or perhaps most crucially, why the agents in a given circumstance are affectively invested in undertaking and relating to the contexts as they do” (23). Sheshadri-Crooks recognizes this rupture between theory and practice and argues that “we must begin to recognize the double-edged aspect of the rhetoric of race, where so-called theory and practice do not always coincide to produce the effect of causality” (*Desiring* 16).

Importantly, we note that Sheshadri-Crooks’ analysis draws on “the Lacanian view that sexual difference is in the Real,” and as such is “that which escapes or confounds language,” that which is “marked by the impasse of signification,” and is “missing a signifier that can organize male and female in a binary relation” (*Desiring* 6). Race, she argues, “attempts to compensate for sex’s failure in language; . . . we must not, therefore analogize race and sex on the sexual model of linguistic excess or contradiction” (*Desiring* 7). Unlike sexual difference, the fundamental investment of race is in the illusion of perfection, symbolized as *completeness* and signified by Whiteness. “The signifier Whiteness tries to fill the constitutive lack of the sexed subject. It promises a totality, an overcoming of difference itself” (*Desiring* 7). In other words, sexual difference is fundamentally riven, producing anxieties that race rhetorically functions to manage. Read along this register, understanding Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s rhetoric, as well as the response to it by both the mainstream white media and then candidate Obama, “requires a toleration of paradox,

an appreciation of the fact that it is an inherently contradictory discourse, and a willingness to see beyond relations of power in order to mine the depth of subjective investment in it” (*Desiring* 9). It is toward a mining of this investment, indexed in Wright’s rhetoric and reactions to it, that we now turn.

What’s Wrong with Wright? (Re)signing Racial Invisibility Through Spiritually Inspired Militancy

Wright came to national prominence when ABC news correspondents Brian Ross and Rehab El-Buri wrote and broadcast a deliberately sensational story on *Good Morning America* titled “Obama’s Pastor: The Wright Message?”—which was also broadcast as “Obama’s Pastor: God Damn America, U.S. to Blame for 9/11”—on March 13, 2008. After reviewing dozens of taped sermons, Ross and El-Buri excerpted and reframed multiple statements in order to suggest Wright was righteously unpatriotic and racist. “The Rev. Jeremiah Wright,” said Ross on the broadcast, “has a long history of what even Obama’s campaign aides concede is ‘inflammatory rhetoric’” (Ross and El-Buri, para. 1). The most controversial sound clips unearthed and edited by Ross and El-Buri were twofold. The first is the “God damn America” clip:

[Ross voiceover] Reverend Wright has built a large and loyal following at his church, the Trinity United Church of Christ on Chicago’s south side. With a powerful voice and his strong words, Rev. Wright can be a mesmerizing presence. [Video clip of Wright] “The angels in heaven were singing ‘God never fails!’” [Ross voiceover] And he often uses the gospel to affirm his strong political views, as in this 2003 sermon damning the United States for its treatment of blacks: [Video Clip of Wright] “The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing ‘God Bless America.’ No, no, no, God damn America, that’s in the Bible for killing innocent people” . . . “God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human.”⁶

The second “inflammatory” statement is Wright’s suggestion that U.S. foreign policy was in part to blame for 9/11, echoing Malcolm’s 1963 diagnosis. After showing a video clip of Obama defending Wright’s arguments for divestiture in South Africa, Ross continues with a tightly edited series of video clips taken from many different sermons:

[Ross voiceover] But, an ABC news review of more than a dozen sermons, which are offered for sale by the church, found Rev. Wright going far beyond the issues of Africa. He refers to the U.S. as under the influence of the Klu Klux Klan. [Video Clip]: “And they will not only attack you if you try to point out what’s going on in white America, the U.S. of KKK.” . . . [Ross voiceover] In his first sermon after September 11th, 2001, Rev. Wright said the U.S. had brought on the attacks with its own Terrorism: [Video Clip] “We bombed Hiroshima, we bombed Nagasaki,

⁶To see the entire segment, see http://joshiejuice.com/academic/wright/01_wright_spot.mov

and we nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon, and we never batted an eye.” [edit] “We have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans, and now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought right back to our own front yards. America’s chickens are coming home to roost.”

Ross and El-Buri “cherry-picked” the most dramatic statements from dozens of videotaped sermons, stringing them together and *deliberately* downplaying or ignoring their context (some of the sermons are years apart). For example, in the ABC segment there is no mention of the fact that Wright deliberately referenced Malcolm X’s 1963 remarks *and* a Fox News television interview with the retired diplomat Edward Peck:

I heard Ambassador Peck on an interview yesterday. He was on Fox News. This is a white man and he was upsetting the Fox News commentators to no end. He pointed out, a white man, an ambassador, that what Malcolm X said when he got silenced by Elijah Muhammad was in fact true: America’s chickens are coming home to roost. (Stein)

In the actual sermon, then, Wright acknowledges his sources: “A white ambassador said that y’all, not a black militant, not a reverend who preaches about racism, an ambassador whose eyes are wide open and is trying to get us to wake up and move away from this dangerous precipice” (Stein). Regardless, a day after the ABC story aired the mainstream news media exploded with editorials and stories about Wright’s “rage,” and for months thereafter “the Wright-Obama relationship was the most frequently reported news item” (Herman and Peterson 4).⁷ As literary scholar Bernard W. Bell persuasively argues, however, aside from the fact that the ABC story was an exemplar of yellow journalism in postmodernity,⁸ it also betrays an obvious ignorance of the African-American jeremiadic tradition in the United States.⁹ Nevertheless, the ABC news report ignited a mediated inferno that raged

⁷For a good example of the characterization of Wright as a ranting and angry black man, see the editorial, “Discovering Obama,” A16.

⁸Ross’ integrity as a reporter has been seriously questioned, first as a result of false and alarmist reporting regarding the 2001 anthrax attacks in the United States, and second for suggesting the Fort Hood shooter in 2009 was associated with al Qaeda (see Greenwald; Cook).

⁹In a broader, historical context, the American jeremiad is an oratorical structure rooted in seventeenth-century, Puritan “rituals of self-reproach and exhortation” that gradually evolved to include “three elements: cite the *promise*; criticism of present *declension*, or retrogression from the promise; and a resolving *prophecy* that society will shortly complete its mission and redeem the promise” (Howard-Pitney 7). Among African-American communities, however, the jeremiad metamorphosed in the eras of abolition and black nationalism to take on different, critical character. David Howard-Pitney observes that, in its “purest form,” the black jeremiad came to feature, “boldly and unrelentingly,” the “censure of white Americans” (13). As with the oratory of figures as diverse as Ida B. Wells, Malcolm X, and Jesse L. Jackson, many of Wright’s highly publicized sermons and interviews feature the censorious style typical of the black jeremiad, thereby placing his rhetoric squarely within this tradition. With the exception of the ecological jeremiad that has emerged in environmental discourse, perhaps the relative absence of the jeremiadic address from presidential speechcraft for over a decade contributed to the failure to acknowledge this crucial, generic context for Wright’s rhetoric? Also see Ross Singer, “Neoliberal Style” 135–151.

until Obama temporarily quelled it with the “A More Perfect Union” speech, also known as the “race speech,” on March 18, 2008.

ABC’s “news” segment on Wright led to weeks of wrangling in the news media. After Obama’s subsequent “race speech,” designed to shift the focus of the presidential campaign away from Wright, and after a month of avoiding the media spotlight himself, Wright emerged on April 25, 2008 in a PBS interview with Bill Moyers to defend himself and his church. Like Obama’s speech, Moyer’s show was dedicated to re-contextualizing the ABC sound clips. Wright’s appearance with Moyers largely focused on his biography and was devoted to explaining what was meant by the more alarming statements clipped and circulated by ABC. Wright did not have an opportunity to discuss black liberation theology in depth until he gave an address at the NPC on Monday, April 28, 2008.

Although it was not reported in the mainstream media, Wright conspicuously situated his speech at the NPC as the opening address of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference (SDPC), a two-day symposium sponsored by a non-profit organization of the same name.¹⁰ Wright’s NPC speech, titled “The Black Religious Experience,” was directed to multiple audiences—at the very least three: the press (for whom the club is intended); SDPC conference attendees (who were using NPC’s conference facilities); and media-watching publics staring at screens. The speech itself, which Wright described as a defense of the “black church,” is a well-reasoned, well-paced, and deliberately literal apologia for African-American religious traditions that is both a symbolic and embodied (re)signing of the Racial Contract. He begins by implicitly exposing the moral incoherence of the social contract by referencing the “Black Codes” and the spiritually inspired militancy that they evoked in response to the subordination and denial of black personhood:

The Black Codes prohibited the gathering of more than two black people without a white person being present to monitor the conversation, the content and the mood of any discourse between persons of African descent in this country. Africans did not stop worshipping because of the Black Codes. Africans did not stop gathering for inspiration and information and for encouragement and for hope in the midst of discouraging and seemingly hopeless circumstances. They just gathered out of the eyesight and the earshot of those who defined them as less than human. They became, in other words, invisible in and invisible to the eyes of the dominant culture. (Wright, “Black Religious”)¹¹

By invoking the Black Codes, Wright makes visible the invisible in two ways. First, the codes illustrate the capricious character of the nation’s professed core values and contractarian commitments by symbolizing the complicities of Whiteness. Second,

¹⁰The minister Samuel DeWitt Proctor (1921–1997) is widely recognized as a friend and mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr., and worked closely with the Kennedy administration on the Peace Corps and civil rights. Iva E. Carruthers, Frederick D. Haynes, and Jeremiah A. Wright created the religious, non-profit organization to honor and continue his work and memory.

¹¹To view a video clip, see http://joshiejuice.com/academic/wright/02_black_codes.mov

Wright stands as an embodied contestation of the codes by *enacting* black theological principles, suggesting that rhetorical transparency is itself a form of liberation, and engaging in the act of spiritually inspired militancy that is a hallmark of the African-American tradition.

Wright's enactment of black theology contests the negative differences of Whiteness and calls for their reconciliation through a spiritually inspired militancy that affirms the coherent and complementary character of apparent oppositions. For Wright, this coherence is expressed in the "prophetic theology of the black church" which "is preached to set African-Americans and all other Americans free from the misconceived notion that different means deficient." Wright seeks to liberate his audiences from the basic beliefs and assumptions embodied in the Racial Contract: *that difference is essentially negative.*

Being different does not mean one is deficient. It simply means one is different, like snowflakes, like the diversity that God loves. Black music is different from European and European-American music. It is not deficient. It is just different. Black worship is different from European and European-American worship. It is not deficient. It is just different.

Wright goes on to embody again the very tradition of which he speaks and with which he is identified, and in doing so implicitly contests the attributions of the mainstream media's dismissal of his rhetoric as that of an "angry black man." "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" (Wright, "Black Religious").

Wright's (re)signing of race is both rhetorical and corporeal: he speaks in the white vernacular, carefully attending to the semantic and, for most of the speech, presenting a calm, rational demeanor. Moreover, his frequent jokes and asides to the C-SPAN audience are meant to be inclusive, unifying the press and conference-goers at the NPC into one, local audience. Although he does move toward a prophetic tone toward the end of the speech (when he makes a quip about sending young people to fight in wars in the Middle East), Wright remains relatively faithful to the syntagmatic horizon, carefully acknowledging the dominant audience for the event, which is *not* his immediate audience but, rather, as he says repeatedly, the C-SPAN audience. He embodies the traditional rhetorical trope of "the good man who speaks well," exemplifying in this discourse the logical, ethical, and emotional proofs that should, in theory, make his speech a success.

In the midst of this deliberate dance with the dominant vernacular, however, Wright begins signifyin[g], "making a joke to slip the yoke" and surreptitiously acknowledges his audience along racial lines. Wright transitions to the third part of his speech by humorously commenting, "we had one or two working press clap along with the non-working press" after the runs on the "deficient" and the

“different” phrase.¹² He concludes with a re-invocation of a spiritually inspired contestation of the Racial Contract.

Our congregation feeds over 5,000 homeless and needy families every year while our government cuts food stamps and spends billions fighting in an unjust war in Iraq. Our congregation has sent dozens of boys and girls to fight in the Vietnam War, the first Gulf War and the present two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. My god-daughter’s unit just arrived in Iraq this week, while those who call me unpatriotic have used their positions of privilege to avoid military service while sending—while sending over 4,000 American boys and girls of every race to die over a lie. (Wright, “Black Religious”)

While most video recordings of the speech focus exclusively on the podium area, Fox’s cable news channel coverage was different from all the others: Fox’s camera operators periodically scanned the audience’s reaction to Wright’s speech. There is a telling shot from Fox News that pans the crowd during this most rousing moment of Wright’s speech (“die over a lie”), during this third and final section focusing on Trinity United’s community outreach and social justice programs.

In the Fox shot, the television viewer can then see African-American men and women standing up and clapping while others are sitting. Moreover, the shot reveals a racially segregated audience; the main, lower-floor area consists of mostly African Americans; the camera’s pan of the auditorium reveals that the majority of white people are in the balconies (we know from *PBS News Hour* coverage that the main floor consisted mostly of African Americans attending the SDPC symposium).¹³ We call attention to the audience’s segregation in Wright’s immediate rhetorical situation because of the way in which the *framing* of the speech by others in the room is central to contractual dynamics. Crucial to this framing is the term “the working press,” which Wright’s references several times in a joking manner. Concluding his remarks on the differences between “black preaching” and “European and European-American preaching,” Wright quips: for “[t]hose of you who can’t see on C-SPAN, we had one or two working press clap along with—(laughter)—the non-working press (Laughter).”

Why does Wright directly appeal to the television audience and acknowledge “the working press” with a verbal wink? The answer has to do with the rhetorical framing of the white moderator, Donna Leinwand, the NPC vice president at the time and subsequent president. Before anyone takes the NPC podium to speak, it is customary for a canned, introductory script to be read by the moderator:

We’re looking forward to today’s speech, and afterwards I will ask as many questions as time permits. Please hold your applause during the speech so that we have time for as many questions as possible. For our broadcast audience, I’d like to explain that if you hear applause, it may be from the general public and guests of members who attend our lunches and not necessarily from the working press.

¹²For a video clip of the joke, see http://joshiejuice.com/academic/wright/03_first_joke.mov

¹³To view a video clip, see http://joshiejuice.com/academic/wright/05_high_point.mov

In and of itself, such a statement is well intentioned. In Wright's speaking situation, however, the introductory script was actually delivered by Leinwand this way:

Good morning. Good morning, and welcome to the National Press Club for our speaker breakfast featuring Reverend Jeremiah Wright. My name is Donna Leinwand. I'm the vice president of the National Press Club and a reporter for *USA Today*. I'd like to welcome club members and their guests in the audience today, as well as those of you watching on C-SPAN. And I—we have many, many guests here today. We're looking forward to today's speech, and afterwards I will ask as many questions as time permits. Please hold your applause during the speech, so that we have time for as many questions as possible. For our broadcast audience, I'd like to explain that if you hear applause, it may be from the general public and guests of members who attend our luncheons (sic) and not necessarily from the working press. (Laughter.) And there are a lot here today. [Introduction of the panel of guests seated at the front of the room.] . . . Reverend Wright, we welcome you to the Press Club and to take some questions from—(laughter)—from this gigantic audience. We have here reporters. And so, Reverend Wright, the floor is now yours. (Cheers, extended applause.)¹⁴

Leinwand's introduction underscores the number of guests in the audience. With each mention of the guests or the "gigantic audience," she raises her eyebrows and grins. Her tone is both amused and anxious. These non-verbal messages appear to be a subtle form of discipline in the guise of humor (the subtext, of course, is that "the guests" better behave). Wright's joking asides about "the working press" and "non-working press," then, appear to poke fun at the disciplinary function of Leinwand's admonition. Notably, when Leinwand ad-libs by qualifying "the working press" with the phrase, "who are mostly in the balconies," she points upward with both hands, smiling and betraying the suggestion of a nervous laugh. Leinwand's gesture clearly made the audiences at the NPC attend to the racial segregation in the room (as if they were not already aware), which is strongly underscored by what happens next in the back-and-forth question and answer session between Leinwand and Wright.

In addition to the verbal and gestural embellishments of the canned NPC introduction, Leinwand directly acknowledges the racial segregation of the immediate audience at the conclusion of Wright's speech. In transitioning to the Q&A, Leinwand's tone shifts from one of nervous discipline to one of resolute identification with "the balcony." In a stern tone she explains, "for those of you watching us on C-SPAN . . . we do have a number of guests here today. And so the applause and the comments, that you hear from the audience, are not necessarily those of the working press, who are mostly in the balconies." Thus, the term "working press" became a metonymy for white people, and "guests" and "the public" came to connote blacks. Understanding the slippery signifiers and the racial psychodynamics they aroused in this situation is crucial for explaining why Wright's *tone* changed rather dramatically in the question and answer session.

¹⁴To view a video clip, see http://joshiejuice.com/academic/wright/06_wright_answers_donna.mov

By most accounts, Wright's responses in the question and answer session following his speech elicited candidate Obama's ire. In the formal speech, Wright remained relatively faithful to the norms of white vernacular; attention to the script and tone of the moderator, however, reveals an affective dynamic that underscores the embodied experience of race in this particular rhetorical situation. More than the terms "the working press" and "the balcony," understanding their tonal vehicle is critical for gauging how Wright was responding to the rhetorical situation in the moment. Because tone betokens the body-in-feeling, it offers a better sense of the bodies-in-space during the speech situation, and thus its psychodynamics. It also illustrates clearly the complex interplay of innocence and oppositionality that too often circumscribes and constrains interracial rhetorical situations.

As Leinwand reminds the C-SPAN audience that applause and comments from the audience are "not necessarily those of the working press," Wright is standing behind her and mouths her words in a seemingly humorous, good-natured pantomime. Then, as Leinwand transitions to her first question, Wright is smiling and interacting with friends in the audience with his non-verbals (a smile, a head-nod). After Leinwand literally points out the white and black constituencies with her hands, she launches speedily into her first question: "You have said that the media have taken you out of context. Can you explain what you mean in a sermon shortly after 9/11 when you said the United States had brought the terrorist attacks on itself, quote, 'America's chickens are coming home to roost?'" At the exact moment that Leinwand says "media," Wright cocks his head and his facial demeanor changes; the smiling is abruptly gone.¹⁵ It seems as if this was the moment in which Wright made a decision to depart from the horizontal axis of clarity and exposition to affect and association. That is, at this moment Wright appears to make the decision to Signify, but in a much more powerful and conspicuous way than in the third part of his speech.

Wright's answer to Leinwand's first question immediately identifies the two audiences—one white, one black—that Leinwand just made explicit. He asks Leinwand: "Have you heard the whole sermon?" to which she responds, "I . . . most . . ." Before she can answer Wright continues: "No, no, the whole sermon. That's—yes or no. No, you haven't heard the whole sermon? That nullifies that question. Well, let me try to respond in a non-bombastic way." (Re)signing the trope of the angry black man, Wright speaks truth to power by stating the facts of the situation "If you heard the whole sermon, first of all, you heard that I was quoting the ambassador from Iraq. That's number one." He then shifts into the spiritual, signifyin(g) on Leinwand and playing upon an anticipated antiphonal response: "But number two, to quote the Bible, 'Be not deceived; God is not mocked, for whatsoever you sew that you also shall . . .'" his audience completes the phrase with "Reap," and Wright concludes, "Jesus said, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' You cannot do terrorism on other people and expect it never to come back on you.

¹⁵To view a video clip, see http://joshiejuice.com/academic/wright/07_head_cock.mov

Those are biblical principles, not Jeremiah Wright bombastic divisive principles.”¹⁶ By invoking reason and religion, the two core qualities of Anglo-American identity, Wright embodies the very rhetorical tradition that is under scrutiny while simultaneously exposing the ideological tradition that resists its own visibility: the conceit of Whiteness.

We have taken care to isolate the framing—and to our knowledge, the ignored patter, asides, and gestures—of Wright’s NPC remarks because we argue this seemingly incidental discourse is crucial for understanding Wright’s rhetoric and the controversy surrounding it. Significantly, Leinwand’s absence in media representations of the event and discussions of Wright’s remarks at the NPC demonstrates how Whiteness operates in general, as the unremarked horizon of intelligibility or, alternately stated, as the Master Signifier. However unwittingly, Leinwand’s tone, ad-libbing, disciplining, and continual reminders that the audience was segregated turns what was presumably a conciliatory rhetorical situation into a racially charged one. In the formal speech, Wright appeared to be fairly measured and comfortable operating in the white vernacular and offers a fairly clear explanation of “the black church” by recourse to history and black theology. The subtle suggestion to the black audience that rhetorical transparency is a form of liberation gave him license to code switch and to speak in the white vernacular. And yet, in the Q&A, it seems as if Wright was simply tired of the implicit (and likely unwitting) racism channeled by the moderator. At that moment Wright elects to model, first hand, that which the news media continually fail to represent with any care or understanding.

By electing to Signify, however, Wright may have also become complicit in the very system of differences he elected to contest. As Seshadri-Crooks reminds us, we cannot speak of race without becoming invested in it, for “race organizes difference and elicits investment in its subjects because it promises access to being itself. It offers the prestige of being better and superior; it is the promise of being more human, more full, less lacking. The possibility of this enjoyment is at the core of ‘race’” (*Desiring* 7). The enjoyment of race is thus marked by complicity. Even as we contest it, we desire to embrace it; the more we insist on denying it, the more we affirm its existence because we are unaware that the promise of a civil society without racism is fundamentally an unconscious reification in the promissory note it signifies—*Whiteness*:

Modern civil society engages in such reification because ultimately its desire is to keep the dialectic between races alive. It must thus prohibit what it terms “racism” in order to prevent the annihilation not so much of the “inferior” races but of the system of race itself. This is how the system of “desiring Whiteness” perpetuates itself, even in the discourses that are most pragmatically aimed against racism. (*Desiring* 9)

¹⁶For a video clip, see http://joshiejuice.com/academic/wright/08_speaking_to_two_audiences.mov

Our point here is not to suggest that Reverend Jeremiah Wright is a “black” or “reverse” racist. Indeed, if anything, his response to the situation we have described here approximates the rhetorical strategy which Seshadri-Crooks describes as “an adversarial aesthetics that will throw racial signification into disarray. Given that race discourse was produced in a thoroughly visual culture, it is necessary that the visual be used against the scopic regime of race” (*Desiring* 158). While she argues that psychoanalysis is “the most appropriate discourse for the examination of why we or certain groups may resist such an adversarial aesthetics,” we are forced to wonder, given her conclusions, if this is possible in the case of black rhetoric. “Working through our fantasies will involve the risk of desubjectification that many of us dread. Such dread, such an encounter with our own limit, is the only means of articulating an ethic beyond the specious enjoyment enjoyed by Whiteness” (*Desiring* 160).

Insofar as Wright promotes and embodies an African American rhetorical tradition and the psychodynamics of the NPC rhetorical situation—not to mention Leinwand’s role—have been until this writing forgotten and invisible, we might conclude that such an ethic of “working through” may be beyond the scope of any movement toward better racial relations in our political imaginary. Indeed, when placed within its actual context, a goal shared with Wright and, at least initially, Obama too, it becomes clear that Wright’s rhetoric is much more complex and less irresponsible than it has been portrayed in popular “news” media. In their reactions to the ABC news segment about Wright, both Obama and Wright argued that the context needed to understand African-American rhetoric is lost in bytes and clips; double-voicedness is hard to capture absent an embodied context. They also both suggested that the misunderstanding of Wright’s rhetoric has more to do with the way in which entire sermons or speeches are missing in the mainstream media, thereby changing the play and performance into *meaning in the register of the literal*. To wit: the most needed contextualization for Wright’s oratory is classically *rhetorical*, as his remarks are best understood as an appropriate response to an imperfection marked by urgency. Wright’s remarks must be understood as participating in a particular speech tradition in which the role of the figurative and affect is acknowledged and affirmed. Yet the question remains: Is such an understanding even possible when the specter of race haunts our deepest fantasies about identity and difference?

Following Seshadri-Crooks, in order to achieve an understanding of this magnitude “we” must work through “our” fantasies in order to effect an ethic beyond Whiteness. Yet, acknowledging Mills, who offers a similar understanding of Whiteness, the motivation for “us” to do so is different, since some of “us” are “beneficiaries” of the Racial Contract, while others are “signatories” (perhaps the authors of this essay?). “All whites are *beneficiaries* of the Contract, though some whites are not *signatories* to it [italics in the original],” Mills explains, and further notes that “the Racial Contract is not a contract to which the nonwhite subset of

humans can be a genuinely consenting party (though, depending again on the circumstances, it may sometimes be politic to pretend that this is the case)" (11–12). In addition to its material manifestations, the Racial Contract is premised on "a moral psychology (not just in whites but sometimes in nonwhites) skewed consciously or unconsciously toward privileging [Europeans and their descendants], taking the status quo of differential racial entitlement as normatively legitimate, and not to be investigated further" (40). Furthermore, according to Mills, individuals of any race "can fall into Whiteness under the appropriate circumstances" (129), embracing what Seshadri-Crooks calls its "specious enjoyment." In contrast to the fantasy of a "more perfect union" promised by the social contract, the "Racial Contract" makes visible the imperfections that haunt the national imaginary.

For this reason, making the Racial Contract visible, (*re*)*signing* it, has been the primary motivation at work "in the long, honorable tradition of black oppositional theory," a tradition deeply embedded in the aesthetic and rhetorical practices of African American culture(s):

The "Racial Contract" can thus be regarded as a black vernacular (literally: "the language of the slave") "Signifyin(g)" on the social contract, a "double-voiced," "two-toned," "formal revision" that "critiques[s] the nature of (white) meaning itself," by demonstrating that "a simultaneous, but negated, parallel discursive (ontological, political) universe exists within the larger white discursive universe." It is a black demystification of the lies of white theory, an uncovering of the Klan robes beneath the white politician's three piece suit. (131–132)

In short, the "adversarial aesthetics" that Seshadri-Crooks imagines as a *transcaucasian* ethic has long been expressed in the "unacknowledged political history of the past few hundred years, the 'battle of the color line,' in the words of W. E. B DuBois" (132), a political history expressed and embodied in the rhetoric of black Americans.

Our point is not that *all* black rhetoric is motivated by (*re*)*signing* the Racial Contract, or that it exhibits the properties of signifyin(g); indeed, we wish to suggest that these practices remain largely constrained by a possessive, psychical investment in Whiteness that at times transcends the color line. The Obama/Wright divorce was but another rehearsal of the "good black/bad black" trope that has historically marked African-American discourse: Washington and DuBois, DuBois and Garvey, Malcolm and Martin, and in a foreshadowing of the rhetorical controversy under consideration here, Sharpton and Obama. For example, the mainstream white media's response to Al Sharpton's address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention was in many ways rehearsed again in the Obama/Wright controversy. Sharpton, whose brilliant moment of signifyin(g) was embodied in this claim that black folk "would ride this donkey as far as it would take us," was criticized and demonized by the media, despite the enthusiastic reception that his address received by the immediate audience (see Frank and McPhail). Sharpton's address was clearly

a critique of the Racial Contract, sharply juxtaposed against Obama's ahistorical and inaccurate characterization of race in America. That characterization not only set the scene for Obama's ascendancy to the presidency, but also became the substantive basis for the claim that we had entered a "post-racial" America. The "More Perfect Union" address, and Obama's subsequent election, further sealed the deal. Yet Obama's presidency has been anything but "post-racial." Indeed, the views on race that he articulated in his "More Perfect Union" address have neither materialized nor been embraced by the nation that elected him.

On the day following Wright's NPC speech, in perhaps one of his most inelegant and contradictory press conferences to date, Obama condoned Wright's rhetorical crucifixion. He sternly noted Wright's comments offended him and that "they rightly offend all Americans." Obama's argument for hanging Wright out to dry—or better, bleed—was *explicitly* based on the consequences of Wright's rhetoric for his campaign:

What we saw yesterday out of Reverend Wright was a resurfacing and, I believe, an exploitation of those old divisions. *Whatever his intentions, that was the result.* . . . And the fact that Reverend Wright would think that somehow it was appropriate to command the stage for three or four consecutive days in the midst of this major debate is something that not only makes me angry, but also saddens me. [italics ours]

In other words, Obama seems to suggest he "gets it," but that Wright's rhetoric was strategically harmful to his bid for the presidency. In this respect it is tempting to locate this speech under the aegis of Signification as well, since there is also a double-voicedness to his oratory; Obama unquestionably speaks—at least sometimes—in the African-American rhetorical tradition. Even so, Obama's "black rhetoric" at this moment was decidedly different and designed to underscore his horizontal allegiances. In Obama's press conference response he repeatedly refers to Wright's NPC Q&A remarks as a *performance*. "There wasn't anything constructive out of yesterday. All it was was [sic] a bunch of rants that aren't grounded in truth." Notably, while Wright often cultivates the figure with deliberation, Obama deploys the "angry black man" stereotype without any qualms of conscience, arguably upending any claims to authenticity in the "More Perfect Union" speech. In short, the press conference is a direct and *stark* contradiction to the "More Perfect Union" speech and, we would suggest, in a manner so disingenuous that rhetorical scholars need to soberly reconsider the latter's assumed greatness.

Curiously, in the question and answer session following Obama's comments, like many politicians he appears to want it both ways. He confesses that he "can understand it [Wright's rhetorical practice]. People do all sorts of things." That Obama is playing dumb—that is, that Obama does, in fact, understand the Signifyin[g] that underwrites Wright's rhetorical style— is apparent:

I did not view the initial round of sound bytes that triggered this controversy as an attack on the black church [as Wright had suggested]. I viewed it as a simplification of who he was. . . . And probably the only aspect of it that probably had to do with specifically the black church is the fact that some people were surprised when he was shouting. That is just a black church tradition, and so I think some people interpreted that somehow as, wow, he's really hollering, and black preachers holler and woop. And so that, I think, showed a cultural gap in America.

In other words, it seems Obama is very well aware that the “black church” is a metonymy for a black vernacular speech tradition. The so-called “cultural gap” here is one in which the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes cannot intersect for those trapped on the horizontal, but for reasons Obama is unwilling or simply unable to explain: the truth of Wright’s rhetoric is not to be taken as literally as it has been reported. Wright often speaks in the black vernacular and under the sign of Signification, and Obama knows it. Even so, Obama shrewdly decided to give in, undoing everything he professed in his “More Perfect Union” speech: “yesterday I think [Wright] caricatured himself,” concluded Obama. “Upon watching [Wright’s performance], what became clear to me was that it was more than just him defending himself. . . . What . . . became clear to me was that he was presenting a worldview that contradicts who I am and what I stand for.”

Obama is here implicitly, if not explicitly, signifyin(g) on the “good black/bad black” trope, defining his identity and his deeds in opposition to a “worldview” that is decidedly *raced* in favor of one that is *raceless*. Obama conflates all of Wright’s words with those that violate the dominant conventions of reason and propriety. Indeed, some of Wright’s statements are factually incorrect and could and did offend members of his audience. For example, Wright’s insinuation that the federal government created the HIV virus to plague the black community has been widely reported and cannot be dismissed as a form of play. Although factually incorrect, the truth of such a claim resides in Wright’s suggestion that state governments—the U.S. government especially—will go to great lengths to harm black bodies, as it did with the infamous Tuskegee syphilis “study.” What is “reasonable” and “appropriate” under the terms of the Racial Contract can easily be dismissed as “a bunch of rants not grounded in truth,” as “holler and woop.”

Yet, as Gates insists, “rather than a proclamation of emancipation from the white person’s standard English,” black vernacular is entwined in a kind of vertigo with the white vernacular. In other words, while literalism does not have primacy, it is nevertheless *there* and important—there is no “pure” black rhetoric any more than there is an essential blackness. Although Gates notes that African-American rhetoric is organized by the master trope of signifyin[g] or Signification, we should not conclude that everything Wright says is figurative *nor that everything that Obama says is not*. This is why a fuller context is especially crucial for understanding African-American rhetoric, and why we need to understand how both axes, both vernaculars, were at play in Wright’s interaction with Leinwand at the NPC convention and in the condemnation of Wright by Obama that followed.

A Most (Im)Perfect (Dis)Union: Signifyin(g) on a (Post)racial State of Mind

In *The Preacher and the Politician: Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama, and Race in America*, Clarence E. Walker and Gregory D. Smithers suggest that the fantasy of postracialism framed the events leading up to and beyond the Wright/Obama estrangement. “The increasingly popular ‘postracial’ theories in effect proclaim that whiteness is normative. This in large part explains the media firestorm that followed Reverend Wright’s critique of racism in America” (8).

The fundamental incoherence of postracial beliefs, they also suggest, reveals some profound contradictions and incoherencies that continue to characterize the national polity when matters of race are at stake. “That ‘postracialism’ reinscribes whiteness as normative also explains why supporters of ‘postracial’ ideals have a difficult time acknowledging that Obama is *black*, an identity that he himself has publicly embraced” (Introduction). Walker and Smithers conclude their study on a sanguine note, with a final paragraph that begins with Dr. King’s “Dream,” and ends with a symbolic reconciliation of Wright and Obama that suggests the lessons of their history together and apart offers an opportunity for resigning the Racial Contract: “Rather than viewing a black minister like Jeremiah Wright as some sort of unpatriotic extremist, and black churchgoers like Obama, who listens to sermons like Wright’s each Sunday, as dangerous and foreign,” they conclude, “some Americans must come to understand that a moral and critical patriotism is essential to the survival of the nation” (Conclusion). While we agree with the sentiments expressed by Walker and Smithers, we believe that the rhetorical study of racism suggests that we have made little progress as a nation resigning the Racial Contract, and continue to be invested in the privileges and fantasies of race signified by the postracial dream of a more perfect union.

Indeed, there is little evidence to suggest that Obama’s presidency will achieve anything close to what he envisioned in the “More Perfect Union” address. The events surrounding his estrangement from Reverend Wright indicate that it is unlikely that we, as a nation, will wake up from the dream of racelessness. As Tim Wise suggests, the indignation expressed by Obama and Wright’s critics rested on a fundamental inability to accept the evidence of our senses, to accept and acknowledge the realities of the Racial Contract: “As much as white America may not be able to hear it (and as much as politics may require Obama to condemn it) let us be clear. Jeremiah Wright fundamentally told the truth.” Wise argues that Wright’s words confronted the most basic beliefs held by white Americans about their “version of history,” and their possessive investment in the portrait of an “idealized” America “so divorced from the reality of the times in which they were produced as to raise serious questions about the sanity of those who found them so moving, so accurate, so real” (“Lies,” para. 21). Wise signify(s) on the “good old days,” juxtaposing *Father Knows Best* with Strom Thurmond’s 24-hour civil rights legislation killing filibuster speech, and *Leave it to Beaver* with Orval Faubus’ use of armed

force to block black students from entering Little Rock High. “*That* was America of the 1950s: not the sanitized version into which so many escape thanks to the miracle of syndication, which merely allows white people to relive a lie, year after year after year” (“Lies,” para. 22, italics in the original).

Wise’s reading of Wright’s condemnation confirms our suggestion that the response to Wright’s rhetoric might best be seen not as a problem of persuasion, but of the psyche:

No, it is not the pastor who distorts history; Nick at Nite and your teenager’s textbooks do that. It is not he who casts aspersions upon “this great country” as Barack Obama put it in his public denunciations of him; it is the historic leadership of the nation that has cast aspersions upon it; it is they who have cheapened it, who have made gaudy and vile the promise of American democracy by defiling it with lies. They engage in a patriotism that is pathological in its implications, that asks of those who adhere to it not merely a love of country but the turning of one’s nation into an idol to be worshipped, if not literally, then at least in terms of consequence. (“Lies,” para. 23)

Wise suggests that the pastor’s refusal to idolize the nation’s contractarian fantasies of nobility and innocence resulted in his being described in terms reserved for America’s enemies: “They are evil, crazy, fanatical, hate our freedoms, and are jealous of our prosperity,” explains Wise. “When individuals prattle on in this manner we diagnose them as narcissistic, as deluded. When nations do it—when our nation does—we celebrate it as though it were the very model of rational and informed citizenship” (“Lies,” para. 24). Such celebratory rhetoric rests on an inability to accept the reality of a realized Racial Contract, and to instead remain entrenched in the fantastical desire for an idealized social contract.

We believe that this inability points to the fact that black voices like Wright’s, which have the *audacity* to speak to the literal facts of history while trafficking in the vernacular, who dare to signify on the racial realities of an imagined social contract, will never be heard clearly in this country. The most significant events related to race after Obama’s election have not been signals of progress but regress: the open contempt of his authority and office, the rise of the Tea Party, the legislative stalemates, and most notably the execution of Troy Anthony Davis, the “self-defense” slaying of Trayvon Martin, and the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. These murders, in particular, bespeak a basic belief that has shaped the nation since its birth remains entrenched: that black lives have no value or meaning, or as Thomas Jefferson put it in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, “their griefs are transient” (146). As such, we are forced to conclude that the rhetorical situation evidenced by the Wright/Obama estrangement illustrates precisely what Golden and Rieke discovered long before the events that elicited Wright’s “chickens came home to roost” remark: “The study of the rhetoric of black Americans suggests the possibility that the rhetorical goal—communicating with white men about their beliefs and attitudes regarding black men—may be more a psychiatric than a persuasive

problem” (6). While we would substitute the term “psychiatric” with “psychical”—we are not, after all, concerned with biology—we nonetheless concur: whether Malcolm or Martin, Wright or Obama, field slave or house slave, the results are the same. Race remains the great taboo in America, the thing of which we cannot speak without paying the real price of freedom, which Malcolm X presciently recognized is *death*.

Death is here both figurative and literal, collapsing the vertical and horizontal axes of signifyin(g) and signification, literal and figurative, Blackness and Whiteness. Malcolm X paid that price, both literally and figuratively, and we end as we began with his words, in the audacious hope that they might awaken us from that most (im)perfect (dis)union of the post racial to a (re)cognition of what Seshadri-Crooks calls the “paradox of Whiteness,” and that they might prompt us to (*re*)sign its paradoxical impulse “to signify the unsignifiable, i.e. humanness, in order to preserve our subjective investment in race” (*Desiring* 45).

America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to, and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered white—but *the white attitude was removed from their minds* by the religion of Islam. I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color. (Malcolm X 59–60, italics ours)

It does not escape us, nor should it escape our readers, that the people whom Malcolm believed might take us beyond race have, since 9/11, become the mortal enemies of America. Perhaps, just perhaps, the chickens truly have come home to roost.

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