

Present Tense

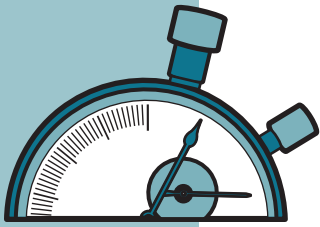
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Not to Shy Away: Barack Obama's Rhetoric of Friendship

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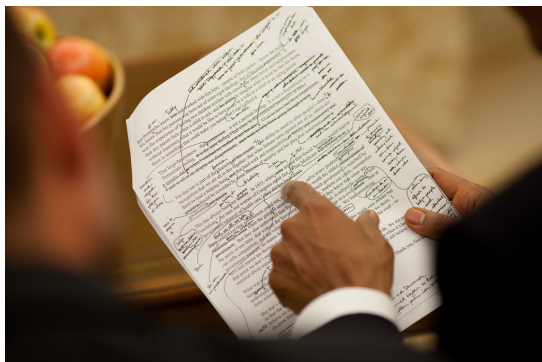
Not to Shy Away: Barack Obama's Rhetoric of Friendship

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"Each of us is an argument. [...] All the choices we've made, accidentally or on purpose, in creating our histories/narratives have also made us arguments, or, I should go on to say, sets of congruent arguments, or in some instances, sets of conflicting arguments."

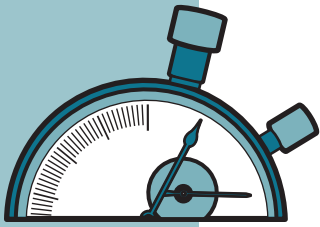
-Jim W. Corder "Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love" (18)

For scholars in rhetoric and composition, the Obama presidency has been a pedagogical godsend. If you're addressing the ancient [style vs. substance](#) or [rhetoric vs. reality](#) topoi, you can just Google these familiar pairs, along with "Obama," to find an [embarrassment of riches](#).¹ If you want to demonstrate the importance of multimodal writing, you might observe that the President "won the election for many reasons, among which was [his] writing—his two books, his eloquent speeches, his graphic posters, his emails with embedded video, and his text messages" (Yancey 317). If you want to discuss the importance of revision, you could show this photo of the President's process:



But the real lesson of Obama's rhetoric is captured by the topos of consilience-coherence, which I borrow from one of the earliest scholarly examinations of Obama's speeches: David A. Frank and Mark Lawrence MacPhail's analysis of Obama's 2004 Democratic National Convention (DNC) address ([transcript and video](#)). Though co-authors, Frank and MacPhail differ in their interpretations of the DNC speech. Frank feels the speech—which launched Obama into the national consciousness—offers consilience, a rhetoric "in which disparate members of a composite audience are invited to 'jump together' out of their separate experiences in favor of a common set of values or aspirations" (572). MacPhail, on the other hand, argues that Obama's version of consilience erases coherence, "a conscious understanding and integration of difference in order to transform division" (572). Coherence, in other words, demands an honest discussion of America's racist past, a discussion which, according to MacPhail, Obama studiously avoids in the DNC speech (573). MacPhail might be open to the consilience Frank perceives, but not at the price of a historical whitewash.² So divided are the authors on this question that they elect to "write together separately," each presenting his argument alongside the other rather than trying to unify them (573).

My purpose in this essay is not to take a side in that argument, but rather to examine a different speech



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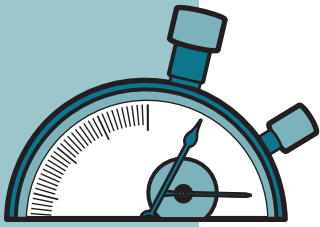
through this consilience-coherence hermeneutic. I refer to “A More Perfect Union” ([transcript and audio](#)), which Obama delivered in 2008 (almost four years after the DNC speech). Though the DNC speech put Obama on the national map, “More Perfect” addressed a much greater rhetorical challenge: the crisis occasioned by videos of Jeremiah Wright, Obama’s pastor. The emergence of [these videos](#), which showed Wright preaching at what seemed to be his angriest, suggested—at least to some—that Wright was some sort of America-hating demagogue.

Senator and candidate Obama was faced with a complex problem: how to explain a longstanding friendship with a suddenly infamous figure. He had to do this, moreover, within the context of the most delicate issue of his unlikely campaign: race. Obama faced a choice: choose consilience (in order to appeal to an idea of “post-racial” unity) or coherence (in order to justify the injuries and injustices that led to Wright’s anger). “A More Perfect Union,” however, refuses to resolve the tension between these competing visions. Instead, Obama pursues a larger rhetorical project—the development of the rhetoric of friendship.

In *For the Sake of Argument*, Eugene Garver outlines his idea of a rhetoric of friendship. Garver argues that liberal democracies, built as they are on negative liberty, tend to forsake public friendship in favor of public agreement. Citizens prefer irenic consensus rather than agonistic difference. But that search for consensus (what Frank might call consilience) can avoid seeking truth (what MacPhail might call coherence). Truth, Garver writes, “has too much divisive potential to be a subject for

political deliberation” (14). Truth risks conflict because “what is true is true for someone” and not necessarily for all (17). Where consensus prefers to settle on a single narrative, truth invites plural narratives. Garver’s primary example is the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which sought not to settle on a consensus narrative of apartheid, but instead to act “under the maxim that any freely offered account, especially if expressed by the oppressed, must be taken as true” (17). Abiding by this maxim, the TRC cast truth as “less a correspondence between statement and reality than a relation between speaker and hearer” (18). This relation is one of friendship in which one does not insist on agreement but rather remains willing to take the other’s story seriously. Friendship includes both consilience and coherence; people “jump together” with their particular stories and even grievances but without the need to settle on a consensus narrative.

In “A More Perfect Union,” this kind of friendship is Obama’s purpose. Obama admits that, in light of the videos of Wright, “the politically safe thing to do would be to move on from this episode and just hope that it fades into the woodwork.” Yet such a move would not only have defied credulity—Obama had chronicled his friendship with Wright in *Dreams from My Father*—but also would have committed the failing of which Obama accuses his pastor: “to simplify [...] the negative to the point that it distorts reality.” Obama would therefore have to explain his friendship, which would be no small feat. It might be one thing to countenance Wright’s “God damn America” within a prophetic, Biblical tradition. It is another to explain your regard for a pastor who claimed that the U.S. government had



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invented AIDS. Judged as an argument, Wright's latter claim is ridiculous and indefensible. Judged within the rhetoric of friendship, however, the question is not about whether the claim is true in a factual sense, but rather why it might be true for someone with whom we wish to maintain friendship.³

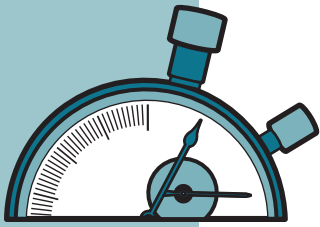
Obama addresses this complexity by offering a series of *dissoi logoi* on the American experience. He begins with the Constitution, which, while possessing the "core ideal of equal citizenship," is also "stained by this nation's original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least 20 more years...." This 2008 observation sounds a sharp contrast to the 2004 DNC speech's reference to slaves singing freedom songs, a reference that MacPhail dismisses as bordering on "the stereotypical image of the 'happy darkie' of traditional racism" (583). Obama goes on to praise America for being the only place on earth where his story is even possible, but he also recalls that his wife "carries within her the blood of slaves and slave owners, an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters." His own story suggests another such tension. As "the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas," he is still labeled both as "too black" and "not black enough." He thus casts himself as both product and producer of a tension that he makes no attempt to resolve.

These unsettling and unsettled conflicts include those displayed by his pastor, a good man who has said some bad things. Like Obama himself, Wright contains contradictions, "the good

and the bad—of the community that he has served diligently for so many years." Wright's church "contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and yes, the bitterness and bias that make up the black experience in America." There are also the black Americans of Wright's generation, for whom "the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away." These conflicting attitudes stem from a history that [he recounts in detail](#).

In a nice use of [paralipsis](#), Obama claims that "[w]e do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country" before going on to say that "we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist between the African-American community and the larger American community today can be traced directly to [...] the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow." This statement seems to reject concision and to embrace coherence. That coherence, however, also includes the perspective of those white voters who might be alienated by the Wright videos.

[Here](#), Obama seems to concede the perspective from which he is speaking—perhaps to a fault. He does not suggest that the real problem is white supremacy—that is, that whites tend to benefit from our system more readily than blacks and that blacks tend to suffer social pathology and institutional oppression more often than whites. Instead, he articulates the resentful suspicion that every successful African-American has probably benefited from affirmative action, a program perceived as an anachronistic attempt to make amends for a past that truly is the past. Obama seems willing to concede the



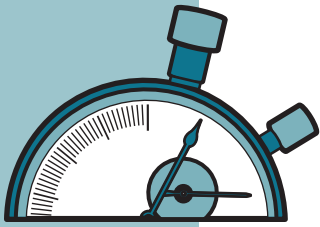
“cruelty,” “ignorance,” and “bitterness” of the black community, but he seems reluctant to suggest the cruelty of claiming reverse racism, or that bitterness and ignorance may motivate such claims. This seeming imbalance of perspectives allows Obama’s desire for coherence to bend back on itself and become a sort of consilience for the white voters to whom he is also trying to appeal.

Earlier in the speech, however, [Obama relates his pastor and his grandmother](#) in a strikingly coherent example of friendship. While the antithetical structure of this comparison (which becomes one of the speech’s most famous moments) appears to suggest what some called “[false equivalence](#),” its [anaphora](#) weighs Obama’s grandmother far more heavily than his preacher: “a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world.” From a stylistic perspective, there is not equivalence so much as relation: “These people are a part of me.”⁴

Meanwhile, the larger problem with the false equivalence accusation is that it implies truth is a matter of consistency and accuracy. “False,” in other words, suggests that Obama has misstated the facts—namely, that his grandmother must be more important to him than his preacher. Surely, Obama would not deny this. But the speech had long since rejected the idea that truth is about ratio rather than relationship. The two friendships that he claims do not rely on a consensus narrative in which loyalty is appropriately divided. Both consilience and coherence are cultivated in his refusal to adjudicate between the accuracy of his grandmother’s or his

minister’s perspectives. This friendship presumes that black Americans will continue “to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life.” But he adds that “the path to a more perfect union [...] also means binding our particular grievances, for better health care and better schools and better jobs, to the larger aspirations of all Americans—the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man who’s been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family.” The binding happens within struggle, not just after struggle. Truth is measured not in how we divide it—so much for his grandmother, so much for his pastor—but instead in how we join it together: this story with that story with another story, all the while tabling the law of non-contradiction.

This attitude may still seem like false equivalence or cheap consilience. But Obama then [tells this story of friendship](#) to close the speech. It is tempting to dismiss this story as a sentimental kumbaya moment. But it is also a story in which a black man feels sorry for a white woman who had experienced [childhood poverty](#). Though he never specifically identifies Ashley as [white](#), he does observe that “somebody [might have] told her along the way that the source of her mother’s problems were blacks who were on welfare and too lazy to work, or Hispanics who were coming into the country illegally.” In other words, Ashley is the type of white voter whom Obama has personified earlier in the speech. In this anecdote, however, those resentments are subtly rejected—not as false per se but as unproductive. After all, the friendship offered by this elderly black man reveals that commitment comes from someone who may be trailing “the kindness



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and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and, yes, the bitterness and biases that make up the black experience in America.” Invoking metonymy, we might say that coherence itself is here for Ashley, coherence offered in consilience. Friendship is extended by a member of the African-American community, whom Obama has portrayed within a framework of coherence to a member of the white community, whom Obama has portrayed within a framework of consilience.

Ultimately, this anecdote suggests that MacPhail is right: coherence has to precede consilience. It remains unclear, even in a “post-racial” America, whether we as a nation have been able to articulate the former in a way that produces the latter. Frank and MacPhail, after all, must write contrasting arguments. But in presenting these arguments together, they also present the possibility of friendship. The paradox of this rhetoric is that coherence is the primary gift of consilience.⁵

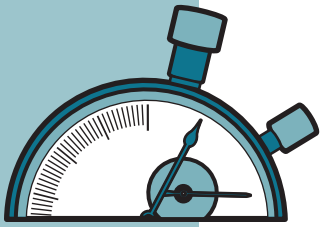
After his election, we would see this same paradox expressed in the President’s speech at Notre Dame (transcript), which addressed another intractable national dispute, namely abortion. As he did in Philadelphia, Obama’s Notre Dame address did not avoid reckoning with controversy: “I do not suggest that the debate surrounding abortion can or should go away. Because no matter how much we may want to fudge it [...] the fact is that at some level, the views of the two camps are irreconcilable.” Yet in addition to this admission, he once again addressed and apostrophized those with whom he might disagree, including

a pro-life doctor who had written him a letter imploring him to use “fair-minded words.” Most interestingly, he was offered the opportunity to use such words when an anti-abortion protestor interrupted him: “Abortion is murder! Stop killing children!” Through the boos and the chants of “We are ND! We are ND!” the President remained calm. “We’re fine, everybody,” he said. “We’re following [valedictorian E. Brennan Bollman’s] adage that we don’t do things easily. We’re not going to shy away from things that are uncomfortable sometimes” (emphasis added). Not to shy away from things that are uncomfortable: this is the rhetoric of friendship that includes both consilience and coherence, that assumes what is hard is also what brings us together. Obama’s sense of agonism thus includes the dual and divergent meanings of the word, which include struggle and contest and gathering and assembly (15). This complexity reveals the highest aspiration of Obama’s rhetoric. It should be the duty of rhetoricians, and citizens in general, to hold him to this aspiration.

A version of this paper was offered at the 2011 CCCC in Atlanta, GA.

Endnotes

1. Some impute such otherworldly skill to the President that they [claim](#) that he hypnotizes his audiences. As a term, oratory still rates higher than rhetoric, so the President is praised as often for the former as he is blamed for the latter. [His oratorical gifts](#) win him comparisons to [Aristotle](#), Cicero ([here](#) and [here](#)) and even [Lucius Septimus Severus](#), the first African-Roman emperor. As with all things Obama, there are doubts. Some believe that William Ayers wrote Dreams



from My Father, and even reputable sources have **suggested** that Obama is helpless without his teleprompter. In addition to inspiring teleprompter “**watchdog**” **blogs**, this accusation has prompted one republican lawmaker to **propose** cutting funding for the device. Obama recently **satirized** this legislation in his address at the White House Correspondents Dinner.

2. As I say, Frank and MacPhail ask the question of Obama’s rhetoric; however, their article does not consider that Obama’s primary purpose in the DNC speech was to get John Kerry elected. Perhaps it was too much to expect either consilience or coherence from this single address. As Jeremiah Wright would eventually tell Bill Moyers in an April 2008 **interview**, “He’s a politician.” That sounds like something of an insult, but Wright appears to offer it as a simple recognition of rhetoric: “He’s a politician, I’m a pastor. We speak to two different audiences. And he says what he has to say as a politician. I say what I have to say as a pastor. Those are two different worlds. I do what I do. [...] But he did not disown me because I’m a pastor.”

3. In *For the Sake of Argument*, for example, Garver relates the story of a black South African student who claims that English must have been invented in Africa. When challenged to defend this claim, he offers this logic: if Afrikaans is the language of oppression, then English is the language of freedom. Since black Africans insisted on being the authorizers of their own freedom, English must be something they invented (19–20). A rhetoric of agreement insists that this man is wrong; a rhetoric of friendship, however, demands that we

acknowledge the history behind the claim: “Simply to reject what someone thinks can be a rejection of the person as well” (20).

4. Nor did those commentators who accused him of false equivalence object to the “equivalence” between the resentments of the struggling white middle class and the wounds of black people who grew up under Jim Crow.

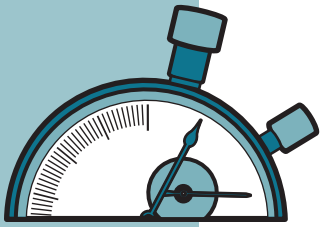
5. Their work offers what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca call a “contact of minds” (14) in which the rhetor begins by acknowledging, at the very least, “that he must use persuasion, think of arguments capable of acting on his interlocutor, show some concern for him, and be interested in his state of mind” (16). Rhetoric itself begins in an a priori show of friendship.

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