

# Empathizer-in-Chief: The Promotion and Performance of Empathy in the Speeches of Barack Obama

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*Empathy has been a hallmark of Barack Obama's rhetoric, from his initial run for president to recent speeches in South Carolina and in support of prison reform. In this essay I argue that Obama does more than attempt to present himself as a relatable empathizer who understands mainstream America, as previous politicians have done. I demonstrate instead through the analysis of key speeches that Obama actively promotes and performs empathy as a means of understanding and as a civic value, especially in his use of personal stories and the recognition of context and history. I conclude with a consideration of the power of empathic rhetoric for how it creates expectations of feeling and accountability. These expectations also open it to necessary critique.*

**Key Words:** accountability, empathy, "I feel your pain," narrative, Obama, political rhetoric

When Barack Obama took to the lectern at the College of Charleston this summer to deliver his eulogy for Rev. Clementa Pinckney, he found himself again charged with trying to pull together and heal a grieving nation. To do this he returned to empathy, a familiar strategy and theme in his speeches. He cites an abundance of empathy as one of Pinckney's greatest qualities, saying, "He was full of empathy and fellow feeling, able to walk in somebody else's shoes and see through their eyes."<sup>1</sup> There could be no higher praise from Obama. The speech quickly was hailed as one of his finest. It was "his most fully successful performance as an orator," James Fallows wrote for *The Atlantic*.<sup>2</sup> The eulogy also demonstrated a continuation of Obama's rhetorical promotion and employment of empathy, which has been a hallmark of his speeches. In the eulogy empathy becomes a means of understanding and a type of grace, one not earned but given and honored as a way of seeing through another's histories and feelings. Grace is at work in the practice of empathy, Obama tells the mourners: "And I'm convinced that by acknowledging the pain and loss of others, even as we respect the traditions and ways of life that make up this beloved country—by making the moral choice to change, we express God's grace."<sup>3</sup>

Obama has been developing his empathic rhetoric throughout his political career. In this essay I track that development beginning with Obama's promotion of empathy as a theme in *The Audacity of Hope* and his celebrated speech "The Great Need of the Hour," delivered at the

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<sup>1</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President in Eulogy for the Honorable Reverend Pinckney," *The White House*, June 26, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/26/remarks-president-eulogy-honorable-reverend-clementa-pinckney>.

<sup>2</sup> James Fallows, "Obama's Grace," *The Atlantic*, June 27, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/06/grace/397064>.

<sup>3</sup> Obama, "Remarks by the President in Eulogy."

Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta during his initial run for president. In these I show how candidate Obama identifies empathy both as a guiding principle and as a means to social action. I attend to Obama's performance here as an empathizer, which is critical for establishing his character as one who understands and is able to be understood by a multiracial America. I then turn to Obama's much praised speech on race, "A More Perfect Union," to consider the ways in which he offers his own story and identity as sites of empathy. I end with consideration of the limits and criticisms of empathic rhetoric within presidential discourse for how it creates and evades accountability. Empathic rhetoric sometimes flattens critical distinctions and can be used to silence critique through the appropriation of another's feelings. But when employed responsibly, empathic rhetoric may also help people recognize and transcend differences.

Throughout this essay I focus on how empathic rhetoric has progressed in the speeches of Obama, as well as how Obama's speeches contribute to an understanding of empathy as political theme and means. George Lakoff notes that much of contemporary political discourse centers upon emotional response, identification, and moral judgments.<sup>4</sup> Attention to empathic rhetoric provides valuable insight into that process through which empathy combines emotion, identification, and moral judgment. The rhetorical work of empathy is important here. Instead of trying to move his audience only to empathize with him, Obama works to perform and promote empathy, and with that himself and his vision for the country. The progression of Obama's reliance on empathic rhetoric is on display as he promotes and employs empathy, using it as political theme and rhetorical means, to move people toward recognition and political action.

## Running on Empathy

Political campaigns frequently run on empathy. That is to say, much of politics is concerned with one's ability to relate to the general public and the ability of the general public to relate to the politician. As Dennis Lynch notes, "Empathy used to be at the center, at the heart, of rhetorical studies," and it remains at the center of political rhetoric.<sup>5</sup> Empathic rhetoric is often equated with appeals to sympathy, pity, compassion, and Kenneth Burke's notion of identification. None of those, however, quite capture how empathy simultaneously operates on an affective level of bodily and emotional response and on a cognitive level of perspective taking and moral judgments. Kristie Fleckenstein, for example, has identified empathy as "a complex network of thinking and feeling" and "the heart of social activism."<sup>6</sup> Empathy has received renewed attention within rhetoric and the humanities in general due to the discovery of mirror neurons and a greater awareness that we need some way to help account for possibilities of understanding and persuading one another across critical differences in cultures, histories, situations, emotional responses, and personal experiences. To that end, Lisa Blankenship focuses on "rhetorical empathy" as a strategy of "extending Burke's identification by entering into the experience of the Other using appeals based on emotion and personal connection."<sup>7</sup> As evident in Blankenship's analysis, empathic rhetoric is particularly useful in response to political questions and those that concern the

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<sup>4</sup> George Lakoff, "What Made Obama's Speech Great," *AlterNet*, March 25, 2008, [http://www.alternet.org/story/80549/what\\_made\\_obama%27s\\_speech\\_great](http://www.alternet.org/story/80549/what_made_obama%27s_speech_great).

<sup>5</sup> Dennis Lynch, "Rhetorics of Proximity: Empathy in Temple Grandin and Cornel West," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 28, no. 1 (1998): 5.

<sup>6</sup> Kristie Fleckenstein, "Once Again with Feeling: Empathy in Deliberative Discourse," *JAC*, 27, no. 3/4 (2007): 705.

<sup>7</sup> Lisa Blankenship, "Rhetorical Empathy in Dustin Lance Black's 8: A Play on (Marriage) Words," *Present Tense*, 3, no. 1 (2013): 2.

shared values of a community, which always entails recognition and bridging of differences. Blakenship adds, “A rhetorical stance and way of being in the world characterized by rhetorical empathy requires that we see the Other as a real person rather than as a disembodied, threatening argument—someone who may be more like us than we want to believe.”<sup>8</sup> This approach to rhetorical empathy is in line with moral philosopher Arne Vetlesen’s attention to human lives and a general focus on particular experiences.

I approach Obama’s speeches through the concept of empathic rhetoric in order to build upon these understandings of appeals to empathy while also attending to Obama’s promotion of empathy itself as a critical value in democratic societies. Empathic rhetoric, when properly considered, also raises necessary questions about how communities are formed and how we attempt to relate across differences. Ann Jurecic reminds us that empathy is a practice and is “multidimensional, flawed, fascinating, and inescapably—for better *and* for worse—at the heart of social relationships.”<sup>9</sup> Lynch adds that “empathy is productive not in spite of but because of the dangers to which it is prone.”<sup>10</sup> In my analysis I consider both the promises of Obama’s empathic rhetoric as well as the questions and expectations such a rhetoric creates, which opens it to necessary critique.

The social and democratic work of empathic rhetoric is often accomplished through narratives. Martha Nussbaum and Mark Bracher both credit narrative, and fiction in particular, as vital in cultivating humane and civic-oriented dispositions through the practice and refinement of empathic cognitive processes in pro-social pedagogies.<sup>11</sup> In a remarkable conversation with novelist Marilynne Robinson, Obama himself identifies narrative empathy as helping him learn to be a citizen. “When I think about how I understand my role as citizen, setting aside being president, and the most important set of understandings that I bring to that position of citizen, the most important stuff I’ve learned I think I’ve learned from novels,” Obama says.<sup>12</sup> “It has to do with empathy. It has to do with being comfortable with the notion that the world is complicated... And the notion that it’s possible to connect with some[one] else even though they’re very different from you.” Here Obama is arguing for the power of empathy in building communities and creating common cause, which is exactly the use of empathy argued for by Nussbaum and Bracher. The possibility of connection is rooted for Obama in stories and empathy, which he has used throughout his political career.

Presidential candidates have a history of campaigning on their personal stories, especially those that highlight their ordinary roots and, by extension, their ability to empathize with ordinary people. We have Jimmy Carter the peanut farmer and Bill Clinton’s modest upbringing in Hope, Arkansas. For many, the classic example of political empathic rhetoric is Clinton’s 1992 campaign remark, “I feel your pain” (which I will return to later). Writing for *Slate*, John Dickerson calls such moves and characterizations the “empathy tactic.”<sup>13</sup> He traces “I feel your pain”

<sup>8</sup> Blakenship, “Rhetorical Empathy in Dustin Lance Black’s 8,” 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ann Jurecic, “Empathy and the Critic,” *College English*, 74, no. 1 (2011): 12.

<sup>10</sup> Lynch, “Rhetorics of Proximity,” 7.

<sup>11</sup> See Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997), and Mark Bracher, “How to Teach for Social Justice: Lessons from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Cognitive Science,” *College English*, 71, no. 4 (2009): 363-388.

<sup>12</sup> President Barack Obama and Marilynne Robinson, “President Obama & Marilynne Robinson: A Conversation—II,” *The New York Review of Books*, Nov. 19, 2015, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2015/nov/19/president-obama-marilynne-robinson-conversation-2/>.

<sup>13</sup> John Dickerson, “The Empathy Trap,” *Slate*, May 12, 2011, [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/politics/2011/05/the\\_empathy\\_trap.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2011/05/the_empathy_trap.html).

first to Carter, who in his 1976 campaign promised to be “a president who’s not isolated from the people, but who feels your pain.” Empathy also helps explain the success and popularity of George W. Bush, the candidate with whom voters most wanted to have a beer. Obama adheres to what Kathleen Woodward calls “the presidential politics of empathy,” but his use of empathic rhetoric differs in significant ways.<sup>14</sup> Obama not only wants people to empathize with him and to show that he empathizes with them as well, but he actively and explicitly promotes the concept of empathy and attempts to cultivate it in his audience. He incorporates the personal stories of others in his speeches to demonstrate empathy and to move his audience to understand what Vetlesen calls the “human dimension” of issues by empathizing with the lived experiences and situations of those affected.<sup>15</sup> He also tells his own story to enable empathy and to serve as a type of allegory for the nation.

Obama provides a personal definition of empathy in *The Audacity of Hope*. He writes that he appreciates empathy more and more as he gets older and that it is at the heart of his moral code. Empathy is how he understands the Golden Rule, he writes, “not simply as a call to sympathy or charity, but as something more demanding, a call to stand in somebody else’s shoes and see through their eyes.”<sup>16</sup> He shows some consideration of empathy in not simply conflating it with sympathy but in treating empathy as a means of perception or understanding, a move that reaches a pinnacle in his Charleston eulogy. Obama writes of empathy as an obligation and states that empathy “calls us all to task, the conservative and the liberal, the powerful and the powerless, the oppressed and the oppressor. We are all shaken out of our complacency. We are all forced beyond our limited vision.”<sup>17</sup> Obama places a heavy and idealistic expectation on empathy as leading to social transformation. There are parallels here to the empathy-altruism hypothesis—the position supported most prominently by psychologist C. Daniel Batson that greater empathy leads to greater altruistic actions<sup>18</sup>—as Obama diagnoses a lack of empathy as a significant shortcoming of the nation and a barrier to social justice. “As a country, we seem to be suffering from an empathy deficit,” Obama writes.<sup>19</sup> All of this amounts to a promotion of empathy as a personal, national, and political value, one that guides understanding and action.

Developmental psychologist Martin Hoffman, a leading theorist of empathy whose work has proven influential in the humanities, notes that empathy is typically defined in psychology as “cognitive awareness of another person’s internal states” or as “the vicarious affective response to another person.”<sup>20</sup> Hoffman defines empathy as “an affective response more appropriate to another’s situation than one’s own.”<sup>21</sup> He details processes through which empathy leads to moral internalization, or adopting a set of prosocial principles and behaviors.<sup>22</sup> In this way empathy contributes to moral development. Obama’s definition of empathy is more focused on perception and civic purpose than it is on affect. Like Hoffman’s definition, however, it shares an emphasis

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen Woodward, “Liberal Compassion, Compassionate Conservatism,” in *Statistical Panic: Cultural Politics and the Poetics of the Emotions* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2009), 109.

<sup>15</sup> See Arne Vetlesen, *Perception, Empathy, and Judgment: An Inquiry into the Preconditions of Moral Performance* (State College, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), 66.

<sup>17</sup> Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 68.

<sup>18</sup> C. Daniel Batson, *Altruism in Humans* (Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 2011). For more on the empathy-altruism hypothesis, see also Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 67.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2001), 29.

<sup>21</sup> Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development*, 134.

on morality and civic engagement. He likely would agree with Hoffman, who writes, “To me, empathy is the spark of human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible.”<sup>23</sup> In his discussion of empathy—in relation to the Golden Rule, as more than sympathy, and as a moral guide—Obama demonstrates a deeper consideration and appreciation of empathy than tends to circulate in political rhetoric.

Obama’s thematic focus on empathy gains poignancy at the end of “The Great Need of the Hour,” his speech in January of 2008 at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, when he turns to a personal story. The story is told in support of empathy and is an example of empathy on multiple levels, the first being empathy as displayed in the story, and the second being Obama’s empathy in relating to the characters. Stories have power, Obama says, and his campaign and presidency have shown the potential he sees in telling stories to promote action. Obama goes on to tell the story of a 23-year-old white campaign worker named Ashley Baia in Florence, South Carolina, who has been organizing a predominantly black population. At a neighborhood meeting Baia tells the story of her mother getting cancer and losing her healthcare. “She told everyone at the roundtable that the reason she joined our campaign was so that she could help the millions of other children in the country who want and need to help their parents too,” Obama says, in order to highlight the work of empathy.<sup>24</sup> The story continues as Baia asks the others at the table to say why they are there. As Obama tells it,

And finally they come to this elderly black man who’s been sitting there quietly the entire time. And Ashley asks him why he’s there. And he does not bring up a specific issue. He does not say healthcare or the economy. He does not say education or the war. He does not say that he was there because of Barack Obama. He simply says to everyone in the room, “I am here because of Ashley.” By itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is not enough. It is not enough to give healthcare to the sick or jobs to the jobless, or education to our children. But it is where we begin.<sup>25</sup>

Here Obama establishes empathy as the starting point for political action. He is relating a personal story about the power of empathy in further support of political empathy. He also is performing simultaneously as an empathizer and as a champion of empathy. Obama’s promotion of the theme of empathy as well as his efforts to be seen as an empathizer are mutually supportive. Empathy and political action begin with recognition, he says, in seeing oneself in another. This is also the promise of narrative empathy as outlined by Amy Shuman when she defines empathy as “the act of understanding others across time, space, or any difference in experience.”<sup>26</sup> Shuman notes, however, the limitations of this promise when she adds, “Although empathy holds out a great, perhaps the greatest, promise of storytelling, it is at the same time a destabilizing element in storytelling” because of the generally uneven relationships between those who tell stories and those whom the stories are told about.<sup>27</sup>

Empathy can motivate political action and might even transcend politics, at least according to Obama’s definition. If we take this story as Obama tells it, the elderly man is not at the meeting

<sup>23</sup> Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Barack Obama, “The Great Need of the Hour,” *Real Clear Politics*, January 21, 2008, [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2008/01/the\\_great\\_need\\_of\\_the\\_hour.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2008/01/the_great_need_of_the_hour.html).

<sup>25</sup> Obama, “The Great Need of the Hour.”

<sup>26</sup> Amy Shuman, *Other People’s Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>27</sup> Shuman, *Other People’s Stories*, 4.

for political purposes but because of that “single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man,” which is a moment of empathy. This is a touching story and in many ways an idealistic one. The story is important because it says something about how empathy works as a theme and as political rhetoric. It develops an empathy that begins with personal recognition, relies upon the telling of personal stories, seeks common cause and general well-being, and leads to political action. These are reasons why empathy in the form of personal stories and anecdotes has become such a familiar device in modern political discourse, although entitlements to the telling and the commitments made in doing so are less frequently considered.

### **A Nation Empathizing with Its Many Selves**

A remarkable use of empathic rhetoric is presented in Obama’s landmark speech on race, “A More Perfect Union,” delivered in March of 2008 when his presidential campaign was confronted with a number of problems. Spurred by the conservative media, people were questioning Obama’s patriotism, his thoughts on race, his religious affiliation, and his allegiance to his pastor, Jeremiah Wright, in light of inflammatory sound bites that had surfaced from Wright’s sermons. Obama’s speech was soon celebrated as perhaps his finest and as one with historical significance. The speech is notable for many reasons, but here I focus upon Obama’s use of empathy as a theme and as a means of persuasion. The importance of empathy in “A More Perfect Union” is commented upon by Lakoff in an analysis of the speech soon after its delivery.<sup>28</sup> Yes, it is a speech about race, Lakoff writes, and as such it is “the most important statement about race in recent history.” But what many commenters miss, he argues, is the importance of empathy and American character and identity in the speech. Empathy and identity reinforce each other here, so that it is through stories and empathy that Obama is able to make his argument about empathy and American identity. “It is the mark of a great speech, not just to mention its themes but to exemplify those themes,” Lakoff writes.<sup>29</sup> “The speech works via empathy, via the emotional structure built into the speech and into our national ideals,” he continues in a partisan but astute analysis of Obama’s speech. One of Lakoff’s key insights is that Obama’s speech is about more than race and that it works by employing empathy in arguing for the importance of empathy as an American value. Lakoff does not, however, elaborate on how Obama employs empathy in the speech in light of his reliance upon empathy and personal stories throughout his political career. Obama’s employment of personal stories as vehicles for empathy is distinguished by his use of his own story as an allegory of American history and identity.

Stories are a central concept in “A More Perfect Union.” Like Shuman, Obama recognizes the power of stories to support empathy and understanding across differences of circumstances and experiences. For Obama, stories are opportunities for sharing common hopes that can bring people together in common cause. There is empathy at work here akin to what Burke describes as “consubstantiality,” an identification through shared interests and purposes. As Burke writes, “in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them consubstantial.”<sup>30</sup> Obama considers stories rhetorical means of bringing people together to form communities and act together. Stories contribute to community character, identity, and purpose. They serve as sites and repositories of feeling and memory, and they motivate political action. The importance of stories in these regards is made clear when Obama tells of his experience

<sup>28</sup> Lakoff, “What Made Obama’s Speech Great.”

<sup>29</sup> Lakoff, “What Made Obama’s Speech Great.”

<sup>30</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), 21.

of first attending a service at Wright's church. In his speech he quotes from the account he wrote in his book *Dreams from My Father*:

I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians in the lion's den, Ezekiel's field of dry bones. Those stories—of survival, and freedom, and hope—became our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears our tears; until this black church, on this bright day, seemed once more a vessel carrying the story of a people into future generations and into a larger world. Our trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal, black and more than black; in chronicling our journey, the stories and songs gave us a means to reclaim memories that we didn't need to feel shame about...memories that all people might study and cherish—and with which we could start to rebuild.<sup>31</sup>

Obama is describing the process, feeling, and power of empathizing with another's story, of becoming consubstantial. In empathizing with the people in the stories, the members of the congregation are able to share those stories. As Obama says, those stories become their stories, the blood shed their own, "the tears our tears." The description works like a definition of narrative empathy as those hearing the stories begin to feel with the subjects of the stories and their experiences. It is worth remembering, too, that empathy is based upon recalled and imagined experiences, the kind of truth that is most vitally emotional. The congregants share these stories despite significant differences in circumstance and experiences. This is always the case with empathy; the greater the distance and differences, the further the empathic reach. Obama recognizes the persistence and importance of difference in empathy when he discusses the coexistence of the distinct in the universal. The congregants' "trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal," he says, adding the further possibility that "all people might study and cherish" these unique and universal stories and songs that are "black and more than black." The power of stories for Obama, as described here, is based upon empathic values. Stories are significant, persuasive, and meaningful to the extent that people can identify and feel with them, even while maintaining a sense of the distinct in the universal.

The speech works because Obama attempts to move his audience to empathize with personal stories, just as he and his fellow congregants were moved to empathize with the stories in church service. But rather than attempting to move his audience to support a political agenda, as he has in other speeches, most notably those concerning healthcare, here Obama is attempting to define himself and his candidacy through empathic rhetoric in which his story is the American story. He is telling his story not just so that people might empathize with him but so that they might see him as an empathizer and as a facilitator of empathy. In a way, they are moved not to empathize *with* his story directly but to empathize *through* his story with their fellow citizens. This is a novel empathic move. The object of their empathy is not Obama so much as American identities—unique and universal—accessed through Obama's own story and the others he tells. Empathy becomes a way for Obama's audience to better understand their own identities, individually and communally, through Obama's story.

Empathy is more than a theme for Obama; it is a recurring rhetorical strategy. Obama offers two critical stories as sites for empathy, those of black America and of white America. These stories are personified by Wright and Obama's maternal grandparents. They are also personified in Obama himself. Obama tells Wright's story through the lens of American racial history. Wright

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<sup>31</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: 'A More Perfect Union,'" *The Huffington Post*, November 17, 2008, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/18/obama-race-speech-read-th\\_n\\_92077.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/18/obama-race-speech-read-th_n_92077.html).

as he has been represented in the news and in video clips, Obama says, “isn’t all I know of the man.”<sup>32</sup> He describes Wright’s personal history and his good—and empathic—work through the church. “He contains within him the contradictions—the good and the bad—of the community that he has served diligently for so many years,” Obama says. He then goes on to tell of the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, of “a lack of economic opportunity among black men, and the shame and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one’s family.” Throughout this Obama demonstrates his empathy for Wright and invites his audience to join that empathy. “This is the reality in which Reverend Wright and other African-Americans of his generation grew up,” Obama says. In order to empathize with Wright we must understand his history, circumstances, and the emotions and reactions that follow. Obama does some of the same rhetorical work in describing the circumstances and feelings of white Americans. “Most working- and middle-class white Americans don’t feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race,” he says. Obama tells of the factors and situations that contribute to “black anger” and “white resentments.” He attends to history and circumstance so that the audience can focus blame not upon individuals but upon social conditions, which is an important empathic and political move because social conditions can be changed.

Obama also concentrates on feelings throughout these narratives of white and black America. That attention to circumstance and feeling is vital if his audience is to feel with others and to entertain moral considerations. By doing this, by telling these stories, Obama offers individual and communal stories as ways to understand one another and make sense of one another’s feelings. He is employing allegory in the way that Shuman describes it, as “a primary trope for translating experience,” and, by extension, coming to some new understanding.<sup>33</sup> Without equating their experiences—while keeping the unique in the universal, as Obama says—both black and white America have suffered negatively, although clearly unequally, due to America’s racial history. In understanding one another’s experiences and feelings and pain, we might escape our own pain. This is what Shuman refers to as one of the promises of empathy, that of “transcendence through compassion toward others.”<sup>34</sup> In order to facilitate that empathic transcendence, Obama can also be seen as employing what Suzanne Keen calls “ambassadorial strategic empathy.”<sup>35</sup> Keen’s term, as with much of her work, is in the service of narrative fiction, but it is useful in a rhetorical context because it describes the ways that Obama is attempting to move his audience. Ambassadorial strategic empathy is an attempt to bridge the gap between audiences. As Keen defines it, “Ambassadorial strategic empathy addresses chosen others with the aim of cultivating their empathy for the in-group, often to a specific end. Appeals for justice, recognition, and assistance often take this form.”<sup>36</sup> Viewed in light of Keen’s concept of ambassadorial strategic empathy, Obama may be understood as speaking to white America as an ambassador of black America. This certainly fits his emphasis on the history and circumstances of black anger and with the circumstance of having to address Wright’s sermons. But his position is not so unidirectional. Obama’s ambassadorial empathic rhetoric works both ways, for white and black America, as he demonstrates empathy and identification with each. This mutual empathy achieves its most powerful moment in the speech when Obama compares his relationship with Wright to his rela-

<sup>32</sup> Obama, “Remarks of Senator Barack Obama.”

<sup>33</sup> Shuman, *Other People’s Stories*, 71.

<sup>34</sup> Shuman, *Other People’s Stories*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Suzanne Keen, “Strategic Empathizing: Techniques of Bounded, Ambassadorial, and Broadcast Narrative Empathy,” *Deutsche Vierteljahrs Schrift*, 82, no. 3 (2008): 477-93.

<sup>36</sup> Keen, “Strategic Empathizing,” 483.



tionship with his maternal grandmother. These relationships serve as allegories for Obama's multi-racial identification, and for those of the nation. Explaining why he maintains his relationship with Wright, Obama says,

I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother—a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.<sup>37</sup>

This passage is charged with feeling. Obama is describing people with contradictions, but he loves and empathizes with them despite those contradictions. He describes an experience with his grandmother with which many white Americans can empathize, the feeling of hearing a loved one express those “racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.” Obama is practicing empathic rhetoric here as an ambassador for white and black America, relating us to our country's own complicated racial heritage.

The overriding and more important story of “A More Perfect Union” is Obama's personal story as an allegory for American identities. Obama says of his grandmother and of Wright, “These people are a part of me. And they are a part of America, this country that I love.” That is, both Obama personally and America nationally are comprised in part by the white and black allegories of Wright and Obama's grandmother. Obama signals the allegorical significance early in his speech when he speaks of his faith in the American people, a faith that “comes from my own American story.” He goes on to tell of his black Kenyan father and white mother from Kansas; his grandmother and his grandfather, a veteran of World War II; his experiences in America and abroad, in some of the world's best schools and some of the poorest; his wife's family history, which includes slaves and slave-owners; and his relatives “of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents.” In telling his story Obama is also telling the story of America, one that extends to the wider world. He makes this all clear. “For as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible,” he says. “It's a story that hasn't made me the most conventional candidate. But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts—that out of many, we are truly one.” In her analysis of the speech, Susanna Dilliplane identifies the theme of unity, “that out of many, we are truly one,” as central to Obama's rhetoric.<sup>38</sup> “Perhaps most importantly, he portrayed himself as a symbol who embodied the reconciliation of diverse parts into a united whole,” Dilliplane writes.<sup>39</sup> As he stands there speaking, with American flags behind him, Obama is offering himself and his very presence as evidence that out of many stories there is also one.

Obama's story and identity thus become an allegory for American identity. He offers his own story as a site and means of empathy, and he performs empathy for those many stories that make up and parallel his own. As Lakoff writes in his analysis, highlighting Obama's move to identify his story with the American story, “In this speech, Obama becomes contemporary America...How could he be anything but patriotic when he is America? And how can we, identifying with him, be anything but patriotic when we are America?”<sup>40</sup> Offering one's own story as an al-

<sup>37</sup> Obama, “A More Perfect Union.”

<sup>38</sup> Susanna Dilliplane, “Race, Rhetoric, and Running for President: Unpacking the Significance of Barack Obama's ‘A More Perfect Union’ Speech,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 15, no. 1 (2012): 127-152.

<sup>39</sup> Dilliplane, “Race, Rhetoric, and Running for President,” 135.

<sup>40</sup> Lakoff, “What Made Obama's Speech Great.”

legory for the nation is especially powerful when one is campaigning to be the leader of that nation. People want to be able to empathize with, to identify with, their leaders. They also want leaders who they think can identify with them. Just as allegory depends upon narrative, identity itself is a function of narrative. As Shuman notes, “the concept of self is itself allegorical.”<sup>41</sup> Obama is arguing for a national identity modeled after his own. Commenting upon the speech, Marilyn Cooper similarly finds that Obama “shaped a narrative that aligned his personal identity and disposition with strongly held cultural narratives of American optimism, belief in the inevitability of progress and exceptionalism, and with a common understanding of Martin Luther King as a moderate conciliator and national healer.”<sup>42</sup>

The empathic rhetoric at work here merges the personal with the national. Obama performs as one who empathizes with the nation, and he tells his story as a site for the empathy of his audience as Americans. In doing this, Obama is able to dodge some of the criticisms of empathy even while he makes empathy a signature feature of the speech. There are no critiques of entitlement, no accusations of using others as political props, because Obama is telling his own story. With some rhetorical finesse, he also is telling the nation’s story at the same time. But he does so by collapsing the difference between his story and that of America. He also does so by employing an empathic rhetoric that argues for the value of stories, that showcases his own empathy, and that conflates empathizing with Obama as empathizing with one’s own American identity. Obama is telling his story not so that his audience might empathize with him exclusively but so that they might empathize through him with the nation as he presents it and, by extension, with themselves as Americans.

Obama concludes his speech by telling again the story he told in Ebenezer Baptist Church, that of the young white campaign worker and the elderly black man who have come together through empathy, through the mutual and the personal rather than the political. This story is “pure empathy,” Lakoff writes.<sup>43</sup> The story reinforces Obama’s significant valuing of empathy as he relates it to democracy. He is not alone in doing so. As Lakoff argues, summarizing the rhetoric that he thinks the public has been waiting to hear from a presidential candidate such as Obama, “At the heart of our democracy is empathy-made-real, a political arrangement through which we care for one another, protect one another, create joint prosperity and help one another lead fulfilling lives.”<sup>44</sup> Obama returns again and again to the idea of empathy as a democratic value that holds a nation together by enabling mutual understanding and common concern, which is essentially Hoffman’s position. For Obama, empathy is where we start. It is a process in working toward an ever-evolving democracy. His understanding of empathy appears to mirror that of Jurecic, who writes, “In the end, empathy is a *practice*, a process that extends in time. To make it work takes both effort and humility.”<sup>45</sup>

A useful way to think about empathy rhetorically is in terms of subjects and objects, through questions of who gets to empathize with whom, and attention to the interests and purposes that empathizing serves in a given context. Obama’s speeches and writing demonstrate the political and social currency of empathy as a concept. They show how presenting oneself as an empathizer—as the subject of empathy—has become standard political practice. In this way empathy is

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<sup>41</sup> Shuman, *Other People’s Stories*, 58.

<sup>42</sup> Marilyn Cooper, “Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted,” *College Composition and Communication*, 62, no. 3 (2011): 420-49, 434.

<sup>43</sup> Lakoff, “What Made Obama’s Speech Great.”

<sup>44</sup> Lakoff, “What Made Obama’s Speech Great.”

<sup>45</sup> Jurecic, “Empathy and the Critic,” 22.

almost reciprocal. The public seems to better empathize with those they consider as best empathizing with them, all of which shortens the distance between candidate and people. Obama goes further, however, in actively promoting empathy as a value, as rhetorical means, and as a critical mode of judgment. Obama's speeches demonstrate how empathic rhetoric performs allegorical work so that in identifying with another's story we are able to access Vetlesen's "human dimension" of a situation in order to make moral judgments better informed by consequences at the personal level.<sup>46</sup> In "A More Perfect Union," we see how Obama is able to use empathic rhetoric to change not only how he is seen as a candidate but also how Americans identify with themselves as Americans through the stories we share. Here empathic rhetoric tells us much about Obama and his popularity as a candidate, as one who empathizes, moves us to empathy, and who offers his own story as means to understanding who we are as a nation.

In one of his earlier speeches as president, at the Holocaust Days of Remembrance Ceremony, Obama reiterates the importance of empathy. We have an obligation to empathize, he says, to not "wrap ourselves in the false comfort that others' sufferings are not our own."<sup>47</sup> We instead should "make a habit of empathy; to recognize ourselves in each other," once again recognizing empathy as a practice. There is here an echo of the idea of self-other overlap or eudaemonistic judgment, one of Martha Nussbaum's conditions of compassion, which are comparable to empathy and require that "the person must consider the suffering of another as a significant part of his or her own scheme of goals and ends. In effect, she must make herself vulnerable in the person of another."<sup>48</sup> That shared vulnerability and an attention to circumstance and fate is again on display in Obama's comments this summer after visiting a federal prison, the first sitting president to do so. "When they describe their youth and their childhood, these are young people who made mistakes that aren't that different than the mistakes I made and the mistakes that a lot of you guys made," Obama said in support of criminal justice reform.<sup>49</sup> He thought about the different paths a life might take, his and those of the prisoners, and added, "There but for the grace of God." At least rhetorically, Obama commits himself to this habit of empathy with humility and vulnerability in the other. In his speeches he provides performances, examples, means, and opportunities for empathy. The way we work toward perfecting our union is through empathizing, he argues. And the way we do that is by telling our own stories, one another's stories, and the nation's stories as exercises in empathy and shared vulnerability.

### **"I Feel Your Pain": Accountability and the Critique of Political Empathy**

In discussing empathy as theme and rhetorical means in the speeches of Obama, it is important to keep forefront a rhetorical awareness, that empathic rhetoric constitutes a performance of and via empathy for particular purposes in particular contexts. Without that rhetorical awareness, performances of empathy can begin to be directly equated with genuine empathy. The popularity of empathic rhetoric in political discourse has made rhetorical awareness all the more important and, at times, more obvious. It exposes some of the risks and limitations of empathic rhetoric, such as that employed by Obama. Namely, empathy makes demands on speakers as well as audi-

<sup>46</sup> Vetlesen, *Perception, Empathy, and Judgment*.

<sup>47</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the Holocaust Days of Remembrance Ceremony," *The White House*, April 23, 2009, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-holocaust-days-remembrance-ceremony>.

<sup>48</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2001), 319.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Peter Baker, "Obama, in Oklahoma, Takes Reform Message to the Prison Cell Block," *The New York Times*, July 16, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/17/us/obama-el-reno-oklahoma-prison.html>.

ences, and it can create expectations of accountability that candidates cannot or do not want to meet.

Bill Clinton offers a telling example of the success and liabilities of empathic rhetoric, particularly with his famous “I feel your pain” comment. He is often associated with empathic rhetoric, in part because of this comment. His ability to respond empathically and personally to a debate question about how his life has been affected by the national debt has been identified as a strong performance of empathic rhetoric and as contributing to his electoral success.<sup>50</sup> But he did not say in that debate, “I feel your pain.” That statement comes out of an exchange with AIDS activist Bob Rafsky, who interrupts Clinton during a campaign fundraiser. As recorded in *The New York Times*, Rafsky asks Clinton, “This is the center of the AIDS epidemic, what are you going to do? Are you going to start a war on AIDS? ...We’re dying in this state.”<sup>51</sup> Clinton attempts to respond by employing empathic rhetoric, saying, “I know how it hurts. I’ve got friends who’ve died of AIDS.” Rafsky replies, “Bill, we’re not dying of AIDS as much as we are from 11 years of government neglect.” Clinton and Rafsky then shout over and interrupt each other until Clinton begins talking about the importance of mutual civility and respect. He demands consideration from Rafsky, saying, “I have treated you and all the people who’ve interrupted my rally with a hell of a lot more respect than you’ve treated me, and it’s time you started thinking about that.” At this point that Clinton adds his famous “I feel your pain, I feel your pain” statement before criticizing Rafsky for attacking him personally. He ends by stating his commitment to fight AIDS.

This episode is telling because while “I feel your pain” is commonly considered shorthand for empathic rhetoric, the actual exchange demonstrates the rhetorical nature of this performance of empathy. When he first says that he knows how it hurts, Clinton is attempting to mollify Rafsky. Performing a position of empathy can be much easier than taking a stand on political policy, and it is precisely that rhetoric and governmental inaction that Rafsky claims is killing people. Rafsky will not be mollified, and he turns his question from one of empathy to one of governmental inaction. When Clinton says, “I feel your pain,” he seems to say it not out of sympathy so much as frustration and anger that Rafsky is interrupting him and not feeling more of Clinton’s pain. “I feel your pain” is a statement of empathy in an attempt not to feel another’s pain—and one might question how much Clinton can feel the pain of a man dying of AIDS—but to quiet dissent and regain control. Indeed, it is difficult to feel empathy in moments of anger. In his performance of empathy, Clinton in a sense assumes possession of Rafsky’s pain to all the more easily move on from it. To be fair, there also is here an acknowledgement of another’s emotional state and that there are people and lives at stake when talking about these policies. I cannot know what Clinton was feeling. But empathic rhetoric, such as performed here, can simultaneously work as a way to evade accountability for policies and the commitments that genuine empathy makes upon people. The exchange was useful nevertheless in making AIDS more of a campaign issue. Following Rafsky’s disruption, Clinton met with New York City AIDS activists to draft an AIDS agenda for his administration. Rafsky died the following year.

Empathy is seen as demanding something personally of a president, and so Clinton met personally with AIDS activists. An empathy constrained to speeches, however, is rarely enough. Dickerson describes this as “the empathy trap”: “The problem with empathy, however, is not just

<sup>50</sup> Woodward, “Liberal Compassion, Compassionate Conservatism,” 109.

<sup>51</sup> “The 1992 Campaign: Verbatim; Heckler Stirs Clinton Anger: Excerpts From the Exchange,” *The New York Times*, March 28, 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/28/us/1992-campaign-verbatim-heckler-stirs-clinton-anger-excerpts-exchange.html>.

that there's never enough of it to go around. It's that by offering it, presidents raise unrealistic expectations of a different sort."<sup>52</sup> Understanding or feeling with another is perceived to be a starting point, so that empathy alone is not sufficient. It requires follow-up. Dickerson is focused on the expectations of a president who empathizes with an individual, such as at a debate or campaign function, to take personal action based upon that empathy. As Dickerson describes it, "The risk of empathy is that it pushes a president into roles he's not really suited to play: job counselor, psychotherapist, loan officer." This is an expectation born of a president's personal interaction with people. It is not too serious of a risk; a public cannot expect a president to personally intercede on the behalf of everybody who speaks with him. The larger social and political significance of this empathy risk is that it speaks to an expectation that a president who empathizes must act upon that empathy for political change.

Questions about accountability and empathy also have followed Obama. Liberals who did not think he made good on the implied promises of his empathic rhetoric have been among his toughest critics. A notable example is Cornel West, who was a prominent supporter and campaigner for Obama. In an interview with Chris Hedges for the website *Truthdig* early in Obama's presidency, West talks of feeling deceived and betrayed by Obama, particularly in Obama's economic policies and appointments. "All this populist language is just a façade," West says, calling Obama "a black mascot of Wall Street oligarchs and a black puppet of corporate plutocrats. And now he has become head of the American killing machine and is proud of it."<sup>53</sup> These criticisms and accusations concern Obama's allegiances and the authenticity of his empathy with "the weak and the vulnerable." West then goes further in taking on Obama's personal history and identity, which had been offered as a site of empathy. "He's always had to fear being a white man with black skin. All he has known culturally is white. He is just as human as I am, but that is his cultural formation," West says. Obama's multiracial background in this telling is not the foundation for a greater capacity of empathy with whites and blacks, making the American story his own. Instead, West says of Obama, "He has a certain rootlessness, a deracination. It is understandable." West couches his criticisms in his own performance of empathy in understanding Obama's situation and that Obama is just as human as West or any of us. By running on his personal story, Obama also offers up that story for critique. By targeting Obama's allegiances and his personal history and identity, West goes after Obama's perceived strengths, as they were on display in "A More Perfect Union." West is pushing for greater accountability based upon Obama's performance and promotion of empathy. For West, empathy leads to commitments. He argues that Obama's performance of empathy with the economically stricken is merely a performance, one that masks his greater comfort with the establishment. Shuman notes in offering a critique of empathy that "empathy is almost always open to critique as serving the interests of the empathizer rather than the empathized."<sup>54</sup> This is the problem as West sees it, that empathy can be more a means than an end in itself. His criticism is harsh. It is valuable here because it demonstrates how empathic rhetoric may be questioned along lines of identity and policy, rhetorical purpose and accountability, and the interests of the empathizer and the empathized.

One more expectation of empathic rhetoric is simply the work of caring. Empathy is emotional labor. This is true for anyone, yet imagine the demands upon and potential exhaustion of a president's capacity to empathize. Still, political advisors and the public ask for more empathy

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<sup>52</sup> Dickerson, "The Empathy Trap."

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Chris Hedges, "The Obama Deception: Why Cornel West Went Ballistic," *Truthdig*, May 16, 2011, [http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/the\\_obama\\_deception\\_why\\_cornel\\_west\\_went\\_ballistic\\_20110516](http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/the_obama_deception_why_cornel_west_went_ballistic_20110516).

<sup>54</sup> Shuman, *Other People's Stories*, 18.

from their leaders. Going into the 2010 midterm election, former political aids of Clinton wanted to see more emotional connection from Obama. “If only Mr. Obama could more effectively demonstrate empathy, they argued, he might be able to convince the supporters he thrilled in 2008 that he’s still on their side,” John Harwood reported.<sup>55</sup> The empathy that Obama has demonstrated throughout his presidency, however, does more than convince supporters that he is on their side. He consistently promotes the very concept of empathy, uses it as way of understanding stories and one another, and relies upon empathy to motivate social action. The prevalence of empathy in politics, its promotion and criticisms, and the demand for greater and more authentic empathy all demonstrate the importance of empathic rhetoric in contemporary political discourse. The hope of the audience is that a performance of empathy signifies something more about a candidate’s character and policies, his or her attention to the human and therefore the moral dimensions of issues. Empathic rhetoric matters because it carries expectations of caring and accountability. The expectations contribute to the value of empathy. Obama has used that accountability as a way to move his audiences towards reciprocity and change, as when he told mourners in South Carolina that “justice grows out of recognition of ourselves in each other.”<sup>56</sup> It starts, Obama says, with “an open heart.” This promotion and performance of empathy has been a hallmark of Obama’s speeches and has created an accountability that rests upon his audience and upon Obama himself.

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<sup>55</sup> John Harwood, “Obama, Empathy and the Midterms,” *The New York Times*, September 25, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/26/weekinreview/26harwood.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President in Eulogy.”