

Children in the Dream: Barack Obama and the Struggle over Martin Luther King's Legacy

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The rhetoric in the relationship between Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech and the election of Obama reveals hopes and anxieties about contemporary race relations. Examining the connection between an old rhetoric and its new realities, this study elaborates on the implications of popular articulations of Obama's initial election to King's Dream. Drawing on theories of constitutive rhetoric and interpellation, the essay frames King's speech as a constitutive narrative with which we imagine race in America. Beyond its rhetorical situation, the speech continues shaping us as its political subjects, children of the Dream. An analysis of competing characterizations of Obama regarding that subject positioning elaborates on the rhetorical tension that developed into the debate about whether society has become post-racial or not. Perhaps innocent exuberance at first, the King-Obama link lays bare the consequences of positions Americans take in relation to increasingly divergent ideologies about race in America.

Keywords: constitutive rhetoric, post-race, King, Obama, interpellation, narrative, subject position

I think he has fulfilled Martin Luther King's Dream of there being a Black American President, and that's cool.

Haria Sedu, 13-year-old Ghanaian student
NPR, All Things Considered, 10 July 09¹

In anticipation of President Obama's first trip to Africa after being elected, this youth's remark identifies Obama as the mythic fulfillment of King. Certainly, we might dismiss her comment as a naïve misunderstanding Dr. King's Dream rhetoric, which was not about getting a Black American president. However, her inaccuracy highlights an initial compulsion of reading Obama regarding King's Dream. Furthermore, her idea illustrates how both the hopes of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech and of Obama's election reached across national and natural borders to touch the continental homeland of the African diaspora. This young Ghanaian not only suggests Obama completes the King's Dream narrative but also goes so far as to change the narrative to make him fit. Though others were more reserved about making such dramatic assertions, National Public Radio's selection and the inclusion of Sedu's words betray an editorial belief that the mythic configuration would have resonance among its American audience. In fact, the broadcast disseminated the myth and perpetuated it. This myth and its detractions sowed the seeds of contemporary racial tensions and are the subject of this essay.

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¹ Ofeibe Quist-Arcton, "Ghanaians celebrate Obama's visit," July 10, 2009 in *All Things Considered*. Produced by National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=106486150>.

The rhetoricity of King-Obama articulation reveals hopes and anxieties about contemporary race relations. What is Obama's relationship to Dr. King's Dream that made the myth so compelling? Alternatively, to what extent was Obama used rhetorically to represent something else in King's Dream? Positing Obama's election as evidence of fulfillment of King's Dream suggested that American society was beyond racial judgment, "post-race" as it were. Others said "no," insisting that Obama was a sign that King's Dream is possible but remained unfulfilled, where race continued to be a significant social force for and against justice, and work needs to be done. Obama's election created the conditions for the emergence of the advocacy-denier debate about the existence post-racial society studied by Mark Orbe² and of what Kent Ono calls "postracism."³ The difference, as I argue here, is grounded rhetorically in how one characterizes Obama in relation to King's "I Have a Dream" speech narrative, which represents a rhetorical struggle over how Americans envision themselves with regards to race and racial equality.

The particular struggle about the Obama-King connection provides an opportunity to interrogate the rhetoric in broader conversations about race in America. During his presidency, Obama may have attempted, as Scott Anderson argues, "to contextualize race paradoxically" so as "to establish the grounds for deliberation" about race.⁴ The legacy of King's rhetoric about race, however, already framed and continues to constrain American expectations about racial discourses (be it Obama's or others'), and therefore conditions for their success or failure in particular contexts.

Since rising to the national scene with his keynote address at the 2004 DNC Convention, Obama became a lightning rod for contemporary discussions of race. David A. Frank and Mark Lawrence McPhail's debate⁵ about Obama's 2004 DNC Address illustrates the struggle over the comparison, and it foreshadowed ideological tensions when he became president. Both Frank and McPhail are interested in racial reconciliation but differ about whether it is possible and explain themselves through their analyses of Obama's speech. Whereas Frank celebrates Obama's speech for its *consilience* as a multiracial narrative redeemed with post-racial sentiments, McPhail critiques it explicitly for its post-racial silences about racially unequal realities.

Both bring King to bear. Providing context for his Sharpton-Obama contrastive argument, Frank emphasizes King's death as the moment the civil rights movement's multiracial narratives and Roosevelt-Johnson legacy waned.⁶ Signifying King's death as an emptying of the frame in which to put Obama's rhetoric, Frank posits Obama's rhetoric as the progeny of King's rhetoric. McPhail characterizes the relationship quite differently. Despite recognizing similarities between Obama's and King's eloquence and use of "coherent principles of identification and empathy," McPhail contrasts them: "While King saw the ideals of democracy and equality as possibilities, Obama idealizes them as actualities."⁷ McPhail identifies King with a rhetoric of coherence between ideals and reality as opposed to Obama's compromised rhetoric.

² Mark Orbe, *Communication Realities in a "Post-racial" Society: What the U.S. Public Really Thinks about Barack Obama* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

³ Kent Ono, "Postracism: A Theory of the "Post" – as Political Strategy," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 34 (2010): 227-233.

⁴ Scott Anderson, "Barack Obama and the Paradox of Racial (In)Civility," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5, no. 3/4 (2015): 111-123.

⁵ David A. Frank and Mark L. McPhail, "Barack Obama's Address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention: Trauma, Compromise, Consilience, and the (Im)possibility of Racial Reconciliation," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8, no. 4 (2005): 571-93.

⁶ Frank and McPhail, "Barack Obama's Address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention," 575-6.

⁷ Frank and McPhail, "Barack Obama's Address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention," 582.

Recognizing their very different perspectives, Frank and McPhail conclude, “Barack Obama’s speech before the 2004 Democratic National Convention reveals this tension between a dream idealized and a dream deferred.”⁸ The speech, however, does not reveal the tension; Frank and McPhail’s analyses of the speech do. Though they might not deny this point, it is not insignificant. Each interpretation comes from a different perspective, which is enabled and limited by subject positions they hold. More broadly, how Americans understand race and racial discourses depend on the position through which we have already been prepared to see race and to which we are interpellated, as Althusser⁹ puts it. Attempting to understand “this tension” and its implications, this essay examines the positioning by the discourses of racial reasoning rooted in King’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

Fully diagnosing the positioning of subjects may be impossible because of the diffusion of discourses diversely encountered by different people, but we have more than a glimpse when a particular address is one that hails whole populations across generations as its subject¹⁰ and especially when significant events require such constitutive rhetoric to undergo adaptation or reinvention.¹¹ Such an address-event nexus draws the attention and interpretation of popular interlocutors, who provide material with which to analyze not only how ideological messages are encoded but also how they are decoded.¹² With the intersection of King’s Dream with Obama’s election, we have such an opportunity.

How Americans read themselves into the Dream narrative governs their perception of the status of racial reconciliation. The position to which Americans subject themselves in the Dream may be the same, but the interpretations of it are different. As I will demonstrate, we are hailed as “children” of the Dream. As we learn from Bakhtin, Hall, and McGee¹³, the lack of singularity in any address (text) allows multiple interpretations, which requires that we consider the possibility of oppositional interpellations by the same rhetoric, what Zagacki refers to as a “constitutive paradox.”¹⁴ Competing conceptions over what it means to be the children of the Dream is at the heart of the struggle over the ideological significance of King’s Dream, the meaning of the Obama presidency, and the changing status of race in America.

This essay examines the connection between an old rhetoric and its new realities, specifically the rhetorical relationship between King’s Dream and the election of Obama. This paper proceeds in two parts. First, it frames King’s “I Have a Dream” speech as a constitutive narrativity for how we imagine race in America, which crafts “children” as its political subject; and second, it analyzes competing placements of Obama regarding that subject in the Dream narrative. In King’s Dream through Obama’s election, this essay examines the rhetorical tension that devel-

⁸ Frank and McPhail, “Barack Obama’s Address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention,” 590.

⁹ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. B. Brewster (1970; repr., London: NLB, 1971), 123-173.

¹⁰ Maurice Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *Peuple Québécois*,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73 (1987): 133-150.

¹¹ Jolanta Drzewiecka, “Reinventing and Contesting Identities in Constitutive Discourses: Between Diaspora and its Others,” *Communication Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2002): 1-23.

¹² Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*, eds. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (1974; repr. London: Hutchinson, 1980): 128-138.

¹³ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed., Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (1934-1935; repr. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259-422; Hall, “Encoding/Decoding”; Michael Calvin McGee, “Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 54 (1990): 274-289.

¹⁴ Kenneth S. Zagacki, “Constitutive Rhetoric Reconsidered: Constitutive Paradoxes in G. W. Bush’s Iraq War Speeches,” *Western Journal of Communication* 17, no. 4 (2007): 272-93.

oped into the debate about whether society has become post-racial or not. The different hermeneutic trajectories highlight a larger ideological struggle over the reconstitution of political subject positions related to race in America.

King's Dream as Constitutive Narrativity

To understand the ideological significance of the Obama events (nomination, election, inauguration) and their relation to King's Dream, we return to King's speech to interrogate the rhetoricity of the narrative in which Obama is placed. Rhetoricians have called King and his "I Have a Dream" speech "a moral compass in American political culture,"¹⁵ "part and parcel of our national heritage,"¹⁶ and "contemporary cultural icons, symbols of the civil rights movement, and the great American promise of freedom, justice and equality."¹⁷ For Eric Sundquist, King's speech is "a new national scripture."¹⁸ When it comes to Americans' understandings of race and its relations, Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech provides an influential, if not the most influential, ideological script into which Americans read themselves.

Many analyses of public address, such as Dr. King's speech, limit the examination of symbolic action to the historical moment in which a rhetoric emerges, as discovering the available means of persuasion for a situation or addressing an exigence in a rhetorical situation.¹⁹ This essay is not such a study. For this analysis, we need only note that recognition of the speech's significance was immediate. As Taylor Branch noted, the speech "stamped King's public identity" and "gave King authority to reinterpret the core institution of democratic justice."²⁰ In their well-known essays, Cox asserts an interpretation situating King with regard to white, mainstream America, and Hariman differs with it by situating King's speech within Black America.²¹ Both situate King and his address in his time by constructing a context for it. Near the end of his piece, Hariman innocuously transitions and contrasts, "For just as the speech has two audiences and two attitudes toward history, so did it have dual effects."²² Though leaving a conciliatory opening to Cox's analysis, his remarks still limit interpretation to the speech's own historical milieu. King's speech, however, transcends its own time and operates rhetorically out of its time. Traditional modes of rhetorical analysis end with the legacy of the speech as if rhetoric were trapped in its time and by its time. Usually, speeches are considered timely because they address "an im-

¹⁵ J. Robert Cox, "The Fulfillment of Time: King's 'I Have a Dream' Speech (August 28, 1963)," in *Texts in Contexts: Critical Dialogues on Significant Episodes in American Political Rhetoric*, ed. Michael C. Leff and Fred J. Kauffeld (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1989), 181.

¹⁶ Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John L. Lucaites, "Introduction," in *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, ed. Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John L. Lucaites (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1993), 13.

¹⁷ David A. Bobbitt, *The Rhetoric of Redemption: Kenneth Burke's Redemption Drama and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' Speech* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 102.

¹⁸ Eric J. Sundquist, *King's Dream* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 18.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (Dover Publications); Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968): 1-14.

²⁰ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 887.

²¹ Cox, "The Fulfillment"; Robert Hariman, "Time and the Reconstitution of Gradualism in King's address: A Response to Cox," in *Texts in Contexts: Critical Dialogues on Significant Episodes in American Political Rhetoric*, ed. Michael C. Leff and Fred J. Kauffeld (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1989), 205-218.

²² Hariman, "Time and the Reconstitution of Gradualism," 215.

perfection marked by urgency”²³ in its own historical moment, as if less meaningful out of its context. This speech, however, continues to find new audiences through the mediation and proliferation of text, audio, and video, despite the King Estate’s attempt to control and charge for its distribution even as early as a couple of weeks after the original performance.²⁴

With each new audience, King’s speech is taken further away from its historically situated context, even to the point of disregarding that context altogether. For example, the 2008 Republican National Committee chair, Michael Steele told Gwen Ifill:

The civil rights moment—that central moment in August of 1963 when Dr. King gave that famous speech—he wasn’t speaking to the people in front of him. He was speaking to this generation. He was giving them the blueprint that they would need to realize the fulfillment of the American dream.²⁵

In Ifill’s argument, Steele reaches to this past moment for present symbolic capital to map a future (for Republicans). King’s speech is still doing rhetorical work, regardless of King’s intent. At some point in the past 50 years, that work became more constitutive than persuasive. Jim Crow and blatant segregation are no longer exigencies, but “race” remains a potent political identity-category and one of the political topoi to which Americans continue to return. King’s speech is still “the” answer to which nearly all others are compared. In other words, Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech is constitutive rhetoric, especially with regard to racial identity in America. Consequently, without the constitutive compulsions of King’s communication, the credibility of contemporary claims of a post-racial America would have less, if any, cultural capital. Put differently, whether we buy the idea of a post-racial society or not depends on how we see ourselves in the Dream.

Constitutive rhetoric prepares audiences for persuasion by positioning them as subjects within constitutive narratives. While providing the seminal understanding for constitutive rhetoric, Maurice Charland’s critical concern centers on the idea that rhetoric as “persuasion requires a subject-as-audience who is already constituted by discourse and within ideology.”²⁶ The rhetorical action that takes place before persuasion is constitutive rhetoric, which creates identity, induces cooperation and becomes ideological through the stories we tell about ourselves. Bringing together Burke’s identification, Althusser’s interpellation, and McGee’s ideographic notion of “the people,”²⁷ Charland describes how ideological narratives interpellate their audiences, hail their subjects into positions, or rather call upon a political identity with which people identify in the discourse and through which they act. Subjugated and yet enabled, constituted subjects act in ways that are not only legitimated by political myth but also made possible by it.

Constitutive rhetoric is never static, despite the impression left by Charland’s analysis. The language of a historical speech itself does not change, the historical moment in which it was uttered is not denied, the person who spoke/wrote it is the same, and the purported original intentions for the speech may remain the same. Despite these presumable fixities, the rhetoric lives beyond the rhetor. Charland’s project directed its attention at dislodging our fixation on the immediacy of persuasion to suggest that rhetorical scholars need to account for the preparation of

²³ Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation.”

²⁴ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 288.

²⁵ Gwen Ifill, *The Breakthrough: Politics and Race in the Age of Obama* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 242.

²⁶ Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric,” 134.

²⁷ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950; repr. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”; Michael Calvin McGee, “In Search of ‘the People’: A Rhetorical Alternative,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 61 (1975): 235-249.

the audience for persuasion. We make similar mistakes if we treat audiences' identification with constitutive texts as fixed. With each new or renewed interaction, audience and text change. Such structuration, as Anthony Giddens calls it,²⁸ involves the reproduction of ideology and identity through audiences' use of symbolic resources. Therefore, we would be wise to pay attention to how constitutive rhetorics change their rhetorically constitutive impact through adaptive interpretation by audiences for themselves. With King's speech, the character and direction of that adaptive structuration are not coherent but conflicted.

Before examining this structural struggle, let us turn to the structuring role of narrative in the speech. As with Charland's case of the Quebec government crafting the White Paper of the *Peuple Québécois*, King's "I Have a Dream" speech operates via a narrative form.²⁹ Quoting *The Declaration of Independence* (instead of *The Constitution*) through *The Emancipation Proclamation*, King evokes a uniquely American story as a narrator marked by race. He reconstitutes the American Dream in racial terms, but there is an even older structure on which the speech relies. The speech follows a deep cultural script, as Cox points out, of the Biblical Exodus "of bondage (Egypt), struggle (Sinai wilderness), and deliverance (Canaan)."³⁰ This Biblical narrative framework is not surprising, given King often tapped into the currents of African-American self-association with the Exodus ethos and framed the civil rights movement in terms the Exodus narrative.³¹ Though he concurs with the influence of this sacred historical narrative, Bobbitt draws out Burke's guilt-purification-redemption drama, as a rhetorical manifestation the human psyche.³² From national secular story to archetypal sacred narrative to rhetorical redemption drama, the "I Have a Dream" speech is thick with narrativity.

The narrative layers in the speech function to define its main character, the rhetoric's collective subject position: children. King says, "Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children." Through such claims, King not only makes a universalist claim for "equality,"³³ but also suggests we are all God's *children*. As a preacher, King speaks as if God were speaking through him. In effect, we are children of the text, in the text, and for the text. Eric Sundquist observes that the text makes "both a theological and a political argument. Not only were all human beings the children of God but all Americans, regardless of skin color, were children of the nation's Founding Fathers."³⁴ Children are the speech's political subject, explicitly undergirded by both Judeo-Christian and American mythoi.

The children of the Dream are not just of God and Nation. Children are personal. King refers to his own children in perhaps the most often quoted portion of his speech: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." Though referring his own children, King relies on the concrete specificity of his children to enrich the metaphoric framework for others to envision the reality of Dream's subject position.

On the one hand, he creates identification with anyone's children, a universalized but time-oriented position. As such, *children* is used as an ironic trope for the future (e.g., "children are

²⁸ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

²⁹ Cox, "The Fulfillment"; Bobbitt, *The Rhetoric of Redemption*.

³⁰ Cox, "The Fulfillment," 191, his parentheses.

³¹ Gary S. Selby, *Martin Luther King and the Rhetoric of Freedom: The Exodus Narrative in America's Struggle for Civil Rights* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008).

³² Bobbitt, *The Rhetoric of Redemption*.

³³ Celeste Michelle Condit and John L. Lucaites, *Crafting Equality: America's Anglo-African Word* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

³⁴ Sundquist, *King's Dream*, 20.

our future”). Children are present in time, existing as a new generation. Figuratively, children symbolize a horizon, an abstractly illusive time. In a historical sense, consequently, King’s four children represent the generation on the cusp of the Baby Boomers. In a mythic sense, his children signify the final chapter in the story of race in America. Within each narrative hermeneutic, *children* call attention to time universally lived and time universally imagined.

On the other hand, King’s reference to his own children limits identification in racial terms. The rhetoric and the rhetor are marked by race, which suggests that the children of the speech and the speaker are marked by race too. Paradoxically while King means “all God’s children,” he also does not. His children are Black. Despite Sundquist’s claim, the political subject is also marked as Black. When King describes his Dream’s goal as a time when “little Black boys and Black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers,” it is the Black children seeking to hold hands with white children. Furthermore, references to the “children of the Dream” often specifies the generation of *Black* Americans immediately following the civil rights movement rather than *all* Americans.³⁵

Bonding the Exodus and the American Dream narrative with the African American experience, King’s Dream creates human, generational and racial identifications among its subjects through the trope of *children*. The speech constitutes a collective subject, a character with which we all can identify in our own particular way. Certainly, seeing oneself as among the children of the Dream does not necessarily mean that we will see the same in others.

On the flip side, children in the Dream are characters we can identify as *others*, sometimes future others, sometimes generational others, and sometimes racial others, but often an amalgam. Positing the subject as Other configures the position in somewhat different terms. Children are passive agents. They are dependent, exert relatively little control over their lives, and have few means by which to provide for themselves, which is why people work to care for and protect them. Usually, they lack much agency. “The children’s miracle,” as Branch calls it, in Birmingham in the summer of 1963 might serve as an exception, but it was one that King resisted.³⁶ During those demonstrations, the depiction of Bull Connor’s attacks on children operated to focus attention on segregation’s enmity on the innocent. Children served rhetorically to depict blameless purity because they lack the responsibility for current conditions. Now, though, the rhetoric of innocence relies on the temporally situated position of King’s children to create generational distance from accepting responsibility for racism’s abject past. For the most part, children are the recipients of the struggle. Such innocent passivity is crafted for audiences of the speech. From his analysis of the Dream’s narrative, Bobbitt concludes that the “I Have a Dream” speech’s metaphors “ascribe to the audience an essentially passive role in the social drama of the civil rights movement.”³⁷ As children, the speech’s audiences (then and now) are recipients of the struggle for civil rights more than they are participants in that struggle.

Children operates for King in persuasive terms and, in so doing, becomes a constitutive subject position into which Obama is placed. In King’s historical moment, this recipient status makes sense as a means of persuasion for acting in the now for the future other. Used to evoke a hopeful future and/or to warn against horrific one, *children* is used for political purposes to culti-

³⁵ Audrey Edwards and Craig Polite, *Children of the Dream: The Psychology of Black Success* (New York: Doubleday, 1992); Laurel Holliday, *Children of the Dream: Our Own Stories of Growing Up Black in America* (New York: Pocket Books, 1999); Earl Graves, “Obama and a New Generation Come to Power,” *Black Enterprise*, March 2009, 10.

³⁶ Branch, *Parting the Waters*.

³⁷ Bobbitt, *The Rhetoric of Redemption*, 123.

vate support for actions, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The use of children as symbolic evidence for political purposes persists. On Saturday, 7 November 2009, both John Shadegg (R-AZ) and Pete Stark (D-CA) brought children to the floor of the U.S. House as concrete illustrations of “the future” in the debate over the Affordable Care Act. Such symbolic actions reinforce trajectories for ideological apparatuses to evolve, but few children actually support those actions themselves. Decades past its historical moment, the “I Have a Dream” speech continues to have rhetorical efficacy but in different terms. It became the constitutive narrativity through which race relations are measured, and consequently through which to make sense of Barack Obama’s presidency. What constitutes the children of the Dream has become the subject of rhetorical struggle because that position determines the ideological status of and direction for future action (or inaction) toward racial reconciliation.

Obama in King’s Dream

Barack Obama’s ascendency to the Presidency of United States was a first. Some firsts go unnoticed, but this one was a remarkable collective experience. The uniqueness of Obama’s election disrupted scripts told about race in America and called for mythical revision. The designation as “the first” is one for adulation, but it often demands ideological reconciliation. Firsts require explanation. New conditions provide opportunities for hegemonies to get tested and revised. Scripts composed in constitutive narratives either evolve or wither. Fitting something new into existing epistemologies requires rhetorical work and often leads to hermeneutic struggle. Despite plenty of resistance, powerful symbolic forces push towards reading Obama as a child not “judged by the content of [his] character, not the color of [his] skin,” the purported resolution of the Dream.

Two key moments in Obama’s rise to the presidency focused attention on an Obama-Dream relation. One moment was Obama’s acceptance of the nomination to be the Democratic Party’s candidate for President. On the night before, for example, Brian Williams of the *NBC Nightly News* framed Obama’s speech, which was to happen on the 45th anniversary of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, by suggesting “that speech made this day a day many have dreamed about.” Another was Obama’s Presidential Inauguration, which was the day following the 2009 King Holiday celebration. On the Capitol steps looking toward the Lincoln Memorial, Obama stood to take the oath as if he just completed the journey down the National Mall that King started. These instances of politically convenient timing provided the fertile conditions for the news media. Only the election itself rivals these moments regarding the concentration of public discourse suturing King’s Dream and Obama.

Generational timing is another linking factor, one that draws attention to the Dream’s subject position. Just after Barack Obama turned two years old, Dr. King stepped up to the microphone at the Lincoln Memorial. In age, Obama is just a bit younger than King’s youngest son, Dexter, but older than his youngest daughter, Bernice. Temporally speaking, Obama is among the children in King’s illustrations. He fits the historically situated representation of the ideological subject in King’s Dream rhetoric. This generational position evoked by King’s speech and embodied by Obama implicates the strictly rhetorical timing with the biological timing of birth. King’s reference to own children of a certain age hailed the same generation of Americans as children of the Dream. That rhetoric-birth articulation serves as one of the grounds for the Dream’s ideological reconciliation and mythic reinterpretation.

With his election and campaign, Obama is not merely a part of the Dream generation, along with millions of others. He represents it. This “breakthrough generation,” as Gwen Ifill calls it,³⁸ points to a generational transition. Per Ifill’s suggestion, the advancement of one generation results in a symbolic tension based on political succession from the old guard to the new. The election between the elder McCain and youthful Obama crystallized the contrast, even if it did not begin it. The voting behaviors based on age are telling.³⁹ Retired voters supported McCain on one end of the spectrum, while the youth supported Obama on the other. Since the 26th Amendment guaranteed 18-year-olds the right to vote, the election disparity between younger and older voters has not been so stark. A contrast between Boomers with Xers also became clear through the primary battle between the experience of Hillary Clinton and the inspiration of Obama. Though they might not be able to vote, some children even participated in drawing the lines. Ifill observes, “Many of Obama’s big endorsers—including PA Senator Robert P. Casey, Jr.—were white politicians who said they were urged into the Obama camp by the entreaties of their children.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Caroline Kennedy, daughter of JFK, endorsed Obama over Clinton. In her *New York Times* Op-Ed, she credits her children and other “young people.”⁴¹ Obama was marked as the incarnation of the Dream generation.

Not only did she designate a generational shift, but Ifill’s “breakthrough” label was also decidedly racial as well. This contrast became apparent well before the election. Unlike most of this new generation, many of the old civil rights generation, such as John Lewis and Julian Bond, did not support Obama’s candidacy at first. Instead, they favored Hillary Clinton, the establishment candidate of the Boomer generation. This initial backing suggests political support based on character and not color—indicative of post-racial sentiments or merely political loyalty and perceived experience. Eventually, they shifted support to Obama, largely because of the support he garnered among African-American voters. This shift, before the nomination was sealed, suggests that race still mattered. In wrestling with their support, the civil rights generation indicates their own struggle with the status of race in America.

Weeks before the Convention, Matt Bai wrote that the 2008 Democratic nomination fight accelerated an existing generational transition and “thrust it into the open as never before, exposing and intensifying friction that was already there.”⁴² “For a lot of younger African-Americans,” writes Bai, “the resistance of the civil rights generation to Obama’s candidacy signified the failure of their parents to come to terms, at the dusk of their lives, with the success of their own struggle — to embrace the idea that Black politics might now be disappearing into American politics.”⁴³ This so-called post-racial sentiment is an idea that creates significant friction among generations. From her experience and contact with political figures, Ifill differentiates some interpretations of what post-racial means:

For those interested in resisting discussion of racial difference, it is an easy way to embrace the mythic notion of color blindness. For civil rights veterans, it is a term that sparks outrage. (Why is “getting

³⁸ Ifill, *The Breakthrough*, 49.

³⁹ “Election results 2008: National Exit Polls Table,” *The New York Times*, November 5, 2008, <http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/president/national-exit-polls.html>.

⁴⁰ Ifill, *The Breakthrough*, 49.

⁴¹ Carolyn Kennedy, “A President Like My Father,” *The New York Times*, January 27, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/27/opinion/27kennedy.html>.

⁴² Matt Bai, “Post Race: Is Obama the End of black politics?” *New York Times Magazine*, August 6, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/10/magazine/10politics-t.html?pagewanted=all>.

⁴³ Bai, “Post Race.”

past” race considered to be a good thing? Does that make race a bad thing?) For some up-and-coming politicians hoping to build their success on erasing rather than maintaining lines of difference, the idea has some appeal.⁴⁴

The question of post-race is answered, in part, according to how audiences interpret King’s Dream, how they read themselves into it, and how Obama is placed within the Dream narrative.

Obama put himself in King’s Dream through his actions and in his discourse. Pointing out the “rhetorical function King serves as Obama seeks, as he must, to extend the confluence of his journey beyond the African American journey to the flow of the larger American journey,” James Darsey observes that Obama is dependent on the memory of King “professing belief in an American Dream that strives toward racial equality.”⁴⁵ Through King’s Dream, Obama and his election make sense. In fact, for Darsey, it is this memory of King “whom Obama repeatedly invokes in his speeches, a King who reaches across a hundred years of American history to Lincoln, and in this arc lies part of the significance of Obama’s choice of Springfield, Illinois as the venue for announcing his candidacy.”⁴⁶ Arranging his political lineage in space, Obama put himself into King’s version of the American story.

Despite a general resistance to talking about race, Obama’s public rhetoric weaves himself into King’s Dream. On Election night, tens of thousands of people gathered in Chicago’s Grant Park to hear Obama. Without much precedence on which to compare, Obama provides his audience with a context explicitly in his opening remarks of Election Night speech: “If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.”⁴⁷ Though not invoked explicitly, King’s Dream is there. King already welded an ideological framework between the American Dream and African American success. African Americans that speak about the American Dream, especially one who invokes King as often as Obama, also speak within King’s Dream. In Obama’s pronouncement, “your answer” is presented as obvious, as a final answer, a confirmation of the American Dream’s reality. Within King’s Dream, it suggests fulfillment, as if the “promissory note” of racial equality that King invoked in his speech has been paid. Obama’s smiling, crying and overwhelmed audience is reconstituted in the image of King’s ideological children joining hands as sisters and brothers.

Also celebrating this moment, much of mainstream media sought this resolution narrative. Oprah Winfrey framed her entire King Holiday show before Obama’s inauguration as a “Dream Fulfilled.” *USA Today* demonstrated a penchant for framing the election as a generational Dream fulfillment. One article quoted President George W. Bush:

Many of our citizens never thought they would live to see this day. This moment is especially uplifting for a generation of Americans who witnessed the struggle for civil rights with their own eyes—and four decades later see a dream fulfilled.⁴⁸

Though more representative of white America’s desires than those of Black Americans, Bush did not serve as the only confirmation for *USA Today*. Another article featured Fae Robinson, who

⁴⁴ Ifill, *The Breakthrough*, 16-17.

⁴⁵ James Darsey, “Barack Obama and America’s Journey,” *Southern Communication Journal* 74, no. 1 (2009): 97.

⁴⁶ Darsey, “Barack Obama and America’s Journey,” 97.

⁴⁷ Barack Obama, “Reclaiming the American Dream,” *Vital Speeches of the Day* 75, no. 1 (2009): 2-4.

⁴⁸ Martha T. Moore, and Kathy Kiely, “A Dream Fulfilled,” *USA Today*, November 6, 2008, 1a.

“stood in a vast crowd in Washington and heard Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech,” who will “be back in Washington for Barack Obama’s inauguration,” and who “considers [the inauguration] the fulfillment of King’s dream—and her own.”⁴⁹ Almost syllogistically, the conclusion to the Dream seems quite logically to be Obama in the White House. These celebrations put Obama into King’s Dream, but the connection is vague.

Other articles were explicit about where exactly that articulation makes sense within the logic of King’s speech. The judging-character-not-color phrase circulated in news outlets as a refrain. In a particularly blatant attempt to legitimate ideological progeny, King’s biological children, Bernice and Martin III, reportedly framed Obama’s nomination in August as “decided not by the color of his skin, but by the content of his character.”⁵⁰ This version of the script concludes King’s Dream with Obama’s election. Simplified for national dissemination, the *USA Today* also perpetuated the tendency to suture it at this one point in King’s speech. In a Thanksgiving feature in the paper exhorting its readers to give thanks despite tough economic times, the paper’s number one reason that “optimism still reigns” was because “the election campaign ... achieved Martin Luther King’s dream that African Americans could one day be judged by the content of their character, not the color of their skin.”⁵¹ In this article not centrally about the campaign or the election, this one phrase serves as a synecdoche for the speech as applied to the Obama election, and the ubiquity of its use warrants it a closer examination.

When applied contemporaneously, this phrase is missing the character to which King applied it. This rhetorical ghost is key for understanding its significance for Obama and the status of race. The missing term identifies the subject position, where the articulation of other political identities to the Dream can be sutured. The absence of “children” allows for the fragment to be ideologically reconstitutive. In the above case, *children* is replaced by “African Americans,” but in Martin III and Bernice King’s rendition, the position occupied by *children* remains empty so that anyone may occupy it. The absence of the term equates *children* with African Americans through Obama. Without Obama, there is no national example of judging character over color. Secondly, the sustainability of the phrase despite its absence reinforces *children* as subject by calling attention to its strength as a position for people (a container for the contained) and therefore its ideologically constitutive force.

We would be remiss were we to assume that this subject position is only potent in its fulfillment form. King’s speech interpellates political subjects of different audiences in different ways. Audiences can “decode the message in a globally contrary way.”⁵² Any alternative, however, requires another interpretation for how Obama fits with the King narrative, which Obama provided himself.

Launching him toward election night, Obama proposed a somewhat different trajectory for himself in the Dream narrative.⁵³ This version explicitly involved generations. In his announcement speech for his presidential campaign in Springfield, Obama repeats a “Let’s be the generation that...” refrain from laying out his agenda of issues in terms that assume an already constituted collective political identity and in terms that reconstitute that position. By outlining each goal, Obama positions his audience with himself on the cusp of dream-fulfillment. They are not

⁴⁹ Judy Keen, “Many See Dream Coming True,” *USA Today*, June 2, 2009, 3a.

⁵⁰ E. Benjamin, “King’s Children Rejoice as They See His Dream Unfold,” *Daily News*, August 29, 2008, 10.

⁵¹ “Six Reasons to be Thankful in Tough Economic Times,” *USA Today*, November 28, 2008, 10a.

⁵² Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” 137.

⁵³ Barack Obama, “Announcement for President,” February 10, 2007,

http://www.barackobama.com/2007/02/10/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_11.php.

there yet. A month later, Obama elaborates. For the Selma Voting Rights March Commemoration, Obama recognizes his civil rights elders and returns to the Biblical narrative undergirding King's Dream, the Exodus:

I'm here because somebody marched. I'm here because you all sacrificed for me. I stand on the shoulders of giants. I thank the Moses generation; but we've got to remember, now, that Joshua still had a job to do.⁵⁴

Honoring the civil-rights generation, Obama also carves out a space for work by his generation. The continuation of the story of God's children is the perpetuation of King's Dream in terms that position King's children as a future Other. No fulfillment is articulated. Rather, Obama puts himself into the next generation of the sacred Exodus narrative, carrying on the African American struggle for Civil Rights posited by King.⁵⁵ In fact, Darsey observes, "the 'Joshua generation' must continue where the 'Moses generation' left off with no expectation that it will see the completion of the journey either."⁵⁶ Despite leading the children into the Promised Land, Joshua and his generation still strive. By implication of work yet to do, Obama and his generation cannot be the biologically historical children in King's Dream. Even if a temporary fit, Obama resists the suggestion of ideological fit. Rather, Obama argues that his generation are the Dream's inheritors, ones to carry on the fight for racial reconciliation.

After his election, others articulated similar resistant but no-less celebratory narratives. In contrast to President Bush's use of the Dream mythos, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi issued this statement to the press:

Just as Barack Obama's historic inauguration makes this Martin Luther King Day more poignant, our commitment to fulfilling Dr. King's dream must become more powerful. In his too short life, Dr. King showed us the way to build 'the beloved community' of which he spoke. All we need now is the will to make justice a reality for all of God's children.⁵⁷

Clearly, for Pelosi, the fulfillment is yet-to-be. The "children" are placed in the future.

Despite headlines equating the election and the Dream, some Black leaders also refrained from providing such closure. During the broadcast of the Democratic convention, the 40-year-old congressman, André Carson (IN-D) said of Obama, "He is the next step. We're the next step." On the Sunday before the inauguration, Tavis Smiley insisted on *Meet the Press* that Obama's election was a "down payment" not a final payment. On his website, John Lewis, a quintessential representative of the civil rights generation, concurred using the same language. Smiley's and Lewis's financial metaphor draws on the imagery of the "promissory note" central to King's "I Have a Dream" argument. "Down payment" suggests an acknowledgment of the unfinished business of the figurative financial transaction and leaves the Dream narrative open. If the children of the Dream are holding hands, then the metaphoric contact is a handshake agreement to future work rather than in celebratory embrace of hands as sisters and brothers.

⁵⁴ Barack Obama, "Selma Voting Rights March Commemoration," March 4, 2007, http://www.barackobama.com/2007/03/04/selma_voting_rights_march_comm.php.

⁵⁵ Shelby, *Martin Luther King and the Rhetoric of Freedom*.

⁵⁶ Darsey, "Barack Obama and America's Journey," 96.

⁵⁷ Nancy Pelosi, "Statement in Recognition of Martin Luther King Jr. Day" (Washington D. C.: Federal Information and News Dispatch, 2009).

The yet-to-be-fulfilled interpretation spread its influence beyond the halls of Congress and the gates of the mainstream media. In our world of twitter sound bites, we might place more rhetorical power on a narrative encapsulated in less than 140 words. Whereas the fulfillment narrative relies on the judging-character-not-color line, the enduring narrative found its form in a text message from Kiari Day, a 19-year-old single mother, to Khari Mosley, the Democratic Party chairman for Pittsburgh's 22nd Ward: "Rosa sat so Martin could walk; Martin walked so Obama could run; Obama is running so our children can fly!"⁵⁸ It went viral, repeated without citation and became a collective expression. It has even picked up by (and sometimes attributed to) the ever-popular, generational representative, Jay-Z. The rhetorically ideological significance of the sat-walk-run-fly framework is two-fold. First, it became an everyday celebratory explanation. Second, it depicts Obama's campaign in relation to King's still-to-be-fulfilled Dream. Obama is placed within a civil rights narrative, a struggle being completed. He is one of God's children struggling for the freedom of all God's children. The generational connection remains, and so does the subject position. Further still, the explicit characterization of *children* in the dream-like state of flying positions King's subject as a future, transhistorical Other, and yet remains a manifest reality to mothers, to fathers, and in families.

Since Obama's election, inauguration, and reelection, political moods changed. Hopes faded, and anger rose. Within a couple of months of his election, the Tea Party showed the first signs of life. Its articulated anger at big spending and intrusive government carries with it strong currents of white supremacy, made evident early in Obama's presidency with the Birthers denying Obama's Americanness and those who insist that Obama is a Muslim. Fueling and feeding this reactionary anger, Trump ascended to succeed Obama in the White House. Compounding the racism present on the Right is the refusal by the Right to recognize and condemn its influence. This refusal reveals defense mechanisms in interpellation. Disbelief and denial of racism's presence and influence protect the hermeneutic coherence of political subjects' interpellating myth. Admitting to racism would mean that the Dream is not fulfilled, that children are not joining hands as sisters and brothers, and that they cannot generationally dismiss complicity with white supremacy using the rhetoric of innocence.

On the other hand, sweeping denouncements of ubiquitous racism among Tea Partiers risks reducing the Dream narrative to racial essentialism, which posits a dichotomy that justifies a perpetual struggle. When unrecognized, this complicity protects Leftist political subjects from experiencing an interruption in the work of their own constitutive interpretation of the Dream narrative. As children hailed by the Dream, they occupy this subject position in a struggle for their own children, who will struggle for their children. Rhetorical children do not grow up; they perpetually represent "the future." Pulled in opposite directions, the ideological lines between Right and Left and between fulfillment and perpetuation that drawn from King's Dream remain taut. Its subjects' diverging interpellations grow stronger in their commitment to their positions.

This tension manifested again on the 28th of August 2010. Channeling Tea Party rage and opposition to Obama, then-Fox News commentator Glenn Beck convened his supposedly non-political "Restoring Honor" rally on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on the 47th anniversary of the "I Have a Dream" speech. The significance of this timing was not lost on him or others at the rally, despite denials of its orchestration. Sarah Palin, using uncharacteristically erudite language to emulate King's allusion to Lincoln, proclaimed, "Over these grounds where we are so honored to stand today, we feel the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who on this very day, two score

⁵⁸ Khari Mosley, "Vote for Hope," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 1, 2009, <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/08306/924702-109.stm>.

and seven years ago, gave voice to a dream that would challenge us to honor the sacred charters of our liberty, that all men are created equal.”⁵⁹ Her remarks put the rally within King’s legacy and read it into the Dream’s American story. Race was muted in Palin’s speech and elided among her white audience. On stage was another matter. Black performers and preachers were on display. Their black presence does not deny whitewashing. With a drop of black, whiteness is made more pure, legitimated and reinforced.⁶⁰ The post-racial rhetoric of innocence relies on this authentication. To provide this display of token diversity and moral rightness, Beck made space for the children of the Dream in the flesh of King’s literal ancestry. King’s niece, Dr. Alveda King, bestowed blessings on the rally on behalf of her “uncle Martin” as “about freedom, about justice, about love.”⁶¹ Alveda King’s audience was already ready to be persuaded by her appeals because they were already constituted by proof of the Dream fulfilled. Honoring King, the rally placed the Dream’s struggle in the past. For the audience, they were the Dream’s children grown up, admitted only to judging character, not color, and saw themselves as innocent of racism.

Whereas Beck and Palin stood, Sharpton marched. On the same day, Reverend Al Sharpton led a “Reclaiming the Dream” demonstration, premised on the idea that “Martin Luther King’s legacy has been hijacked.”⁶² Many of its speakers expressly critiqued Beck’s congregation on the Mall as dishonoring of King’s Dream and the politics it represented. These detractors attempted to wrest constitutive interpretations away from Beck’s appropriation of the Dream. Accordingly, they were not the children of the Dream. “We are the children of the dreamers,” Sharpton reminded his audience. “In ’63 they were asking Kennedy to hear them, but in 2010...we have an African American president,” Sharpton includes the Obama presidency as one of many examples that define the progress in the journey toward the Dream. Resisting its completion with a call-response refrain, Sharpton also insisted: “we aren’t there yet.” According to Sharpton, the struggle for the future continues, literally signified when the rally became a march to the site of the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial, also on the National Mall. His audience was persuaded to march before they even arrived because they were already constituted as political subjects for the Dream. As children of the Dream, they grew to expect a continuing Exodus journey towards racial reconciliation for the children of God. The march was a symbolic enactment of that struggle in the face of its post-racial elisions.

Reconstitutive Rhetorical Struggles over King’s Dream

Constitutive narratives involve rhetorical invention that creates positions for publics with identity and within ideology. Despite it being articulated in one historically situated text, the “I Have a Dream” speech continues to wield ideological and rhetorical force because audiences still identify with it. Nearly fifty years after being spoken, the speech’s contemporary audiences cannot feel the “fierce urgency of the moment” as King experienced it. His time passed—yet, however, his words continue to speak to Americans, hailing them as children in the Dream. The speech’s constitutive subject position remains explicit in the text; the term *children* has not been deleted. However, interpretations of it are dynamic. While maintaining ideological mythoi, reconstitutive

⁵⁹ “Restoring Honor Rally,” C-SPAN, August 28, 2010, <http://www.c-span.org/Watch/Media/2010/08/28/HP/A/37551/Restoring+Honor+Rally.aspx>.

⁶⁰ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1953). By adding few drops of black, as Ralph Ellison’s narrator in *Invisible Man* discovers at Liberty Paints, we can behold the “pure white.”

⁶¹ “Restoring Honor Rally.”

⁶² “Reclaiming the Dream Rally,” C-SPAN, August 28, 2010, <http://www.c-span.org/Watch/Media/2010/08/28/HP/A/37562/Reclaim+the+Dream+Rally.aspx>; See also, Reclaim The Dream, <http://www.reclaimthedream.org/>.

rhetorics keep racial hegemonies alive through new articulations sutured to older constitutive discourses.⁶³ Reconstitution renews relationships between a text and its always already becoming audience.

Interpellation drift is revealed in discourses dealing with what Obama's election means for King's Dream. Reinforcing but distinct narratives (e.g., Exodus, American, generational movement) in King's Dream provide latitude for diverging characterizations, each of which hail competing versions of its political subject. Americans' identifications with the Dream separate along different storylines. One leads its subject to draw post-racial conclusions; another instills its subjects with a reason for continuing the journey. Conservative and progressive politics result can come from each; anger and hope proliferate. Public debate over Obama's placement reveals the struggle over the rhetorical adjustments to the existing Dream mythos, or rather mythoi, and therefore over the point of view that political subjects take about race in America.

Competing views pivot on how audiences interpret their position and Obama as children. Children grow up. The passing of time requires that the youth become adults, and yet children remain the children of their parents, always defined generationally. In generational terms, temporal inevitability enables ideological certitude. Obama grew up benefitting from the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement; his generation inherited improved racial conditions. Without those advances, a Black presidency would have been a structural impossibility. The pre-Dream past stands in stark contrast to the increasingly widespread participation in contemporary rituals of racial unity, diversity, and multiculturalism. The healthy majority of votes for Obama in the election signify judgment based on character, not color. In Burkean terms, the guilt of not having achieved King's Dream almost a half century after his speech was purified through the symbolic redemption of Obama's election. The rhetoric of racial recovery needs no other evidence. Providing a moral completion of interracial respect to the Dream narrative, the national electorate's judgment in favor of Obama provided the literal proof that King's children were not "judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." The children are in a Dream. From that position, a compelling narrative from race to post-race in one generation is told. Though, the reactionary election of Trump in 2016 was a reality check.

Alternatively, the Dream's children are of the past and in the future. The movement towards the Dream required and requires work. With centuries of embedded racism in the American consciousness, racial justice takes patient activism. An understandable expectation is that the Dream is for *future* generations. The journey is difficult and can lead to despondency and disillusionment. To keep King's faith "that we will be free one day," his children and all God's children need confirmation of a reality in dreamed possibilities. Movement victories in the fifties and sixties provided affirmations of faith, but decades passed with few identifiable successes. Obama's election rejuvenates the Dream's potency as the national narrative of race. The Obama presidency foreshadows the Dream, as a future that will be history. This ideological parable has yet to reach the moral of the story, according to this constitutive interpretation, but it will. For the children of the Dream, Obama in the White House was proof of post-racial possibilities rather than evidence of a post-racial reality.

Competing hermeneutics available within King's "I Have a Dream" speech hail different and often opposing subjects. The interpretation of *children* to which the Dream interpellates Americans makes a difference. Each version enables and/or limits its subjects' perspectives on race.

⁶³ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 1985).

The pull of empowering and disabling standpoints prompts a return to the deep tension identified by Frank and McPhail. Drawing on DuBois, they offer the following contrasting trajectories:

Reconciliation of racial difference would require a willingness to acknowledge the ways in which the color line has shaped not only the souls of black folk, but the souls of white folk as well. This recognition is compromised when we assume or assert that our collective dreams of freedom and justice have been achieved when in reality they remain, for too many, unrealized.⁶⁴

The version of Obama in the Dream narrative to emerge wields a strong constitutive force over the ability of its subjects to see race.

If subjects were hailed as children of a Dream fulfilled, then their view of racial difference is erased not reconciled. Consequently, racial injustice goes unrecognized and unaddressed, as exemplified by President Trump's equivocation about the 2017 Klan and Nazi rally in Charlottesville. While making explicit statements decrying white supremacy, he provided ideological alibies for rally participants and blamed "both sides" for the violence leading to Heather Heyer's death. The erasure of race may explain his refusal to recognize his own racism.

When Obama serves as confirmation rather than the conclusion of the Dream, the Dream narrative's interpellation acknowledges the color line's continued influence and sustains the journey towards racial reconciliation, even if through reactionary racism. As children for whom the civil rights movement advocates risked their lives, subjects are hailed to continue the struggle for their own children.

The rhetorical struggle over the children in the Dream continues despite the passing of Obama's presidency. Our positioning as children of the Dream depends on whether and how we, as American political subjects, see the significance of race in America. Despite the overwhelming push to accept the racial reconciliation mythos as complete, the resistance to closure signifies something important. Many Americans are subject to positions that remain unready to resign race and King's Dream to history.

⁶⁴ David Frank and Mark McPhail, "Barack Obama's Address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention," 589-590.