

Under the Bus: A Rhetorical Reading of Barack Obama's "More Perfect Union"

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Abstract

Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech, delivered during the 2008 presidential campaign in response to controversy surrounding Reverend Jeremiah Wright's sermons, responds to a split and often conflicting need both to reassure voters and to challenge conventional notions of identity. In doing so, the language of the speech simultaneously deploys and undermines the liberal models of subjectivity to which we are accustomed in American political rhetoric. While the resulting aporia have been read by some as throwing subjects (like Reverend Wright) "under the bus," they can also be understood as enactments of ethical subjectivity, especially in the terms of Emmanuel Levinas's thought. The article suggests that Obama's speech can serve as a study in the uneasy and generative coexistence of Levinasian ethics and liberal political thought, one that reveals liberalism's incongruities and asks listeners to imagine social relations otherwise.

Full Text

Barack Obama's place in the pantheon of American rhetoric was secure the moment he finished what has come to be called "the race speech." Pundits compared him to King and to Lincoln even more freely than usual; over a million viewers watched it online in a day; newspapers reprinted the transcript; even rivals conceded its rhetorical brilliance.¹ Alongside such praise, however, ran a critique of the way Obama treated the subjects of his speech: dozens of commentators accused the candidate of throwing his grandmother, the Reverend Wright, and the nation itself "under the bus." In this reading, the speech was little more than a ruthless bid for political self-preservation, and it wasn't only Obama's political opponents who took this view. Although arch-conservatives like Ann Coulter were among those who deployed the violent metaphor ("Throw Grandma Under the Bus" headlined her column the day following the speech), it was Houston Baker Jr. who offered perhaps the most pointed version of it: "In brief, Obama's speech was a pandering disaster that threw, once again, his pastor under the bus."² Though the victims of the figurative bus vary, the imagery is consistent. In fact, the phrase was ubiquitous in the months following the speech, prompting one columnist to suggest that it was "getting crowded under Obama's bus" (Moran).³ Reactions were distinct and extreme enough that media columnist Howard Kurtz wondered "whether these pundits were watching the same speech."⁴

This question is worth considering in earnest, for the exigency of the address demands at least two competing trajectories: on the one hand, Obama pointed beyond what he calls a "racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years," requiring him to interrogate deep assumptions beneath American identity politics. On the other, as a campaign speech, the occasion called for the kind of traditional, reassuring language that might ease the minds of voters made anxious by the racially-charged debate surrounding the infamous sound bites from Reverend Jeremiah Wright's sermons at Trinity United Methodist Church. In simultaneously challenging and reassuring listeners about race in the United States, the language splits the speech between traditional liberal discourse and tropes that undermine the most fundamental tenets of that discourse. It is the kind of aporetic moment that Emmanuel Levinas theorizes as constituting the subject: the speech reenacts the encounter that founds subjectivity by calling it into question; it is a moment characterized not by the reciprocity and equality imagined in the liberal social contract, but rather, by surplus, asymmetry, and aporia.

Far from shedding the vocabulary of liberal political thought, Obama frames his approach using familiar figures of identity politics and liberal universalism: repeated calls for unity are among the most obvious of such moments. The assertion that "we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction - towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren," rests on both an identity-based model of subjectivity and a progressive view of history. When "we" come together to move toward that better future, in this mode, we do so as autonomous individuals who remain defined by our ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and other categories of identity. Thus, as Obama calls for the nation to work together to solve "problems that are neither black or white or Latino or Asian," it is understood that people will do so as subjects who are, precisely, black or white or Latino or Asian. Reading the speech exclusively in this mode gives one the sense that, as one journalist suggests, Obama is reassuring voters that racism "does exist. . . but mostly as a memory," or that "white people" are "off the hook" for past injustices (Hendricks 175; Mansbach 69).

Perhaps this is the pandering detected by Baker and others. Indeed, to read the speech in the mode of identity, where repetition is imitative, is to find that it parrots messages of American exceptionalism, that it might be understood as little more than a well-delivered "moment of mimicry," as Baker calls it. An alternate reading, in which these repetitions are not mimicry but performative iterations, one that considers substitutions, contradictions, and the anachronic treatment of history, reveals the way in which the speech simultaneously deploys and undermines the model of subjectivity to which we are accustomed in American political rhetoric. Read in this way, the subjectivity that critics locate "under the bus" is not so much *run over* in the speech as it is *called into question* in a way that Levinas would recognize as profoundly ethical.

By constructing subjects that push against conventional assumptions of liberal political rhetoric, the speech invites us to step outside the pragmatist mode of reading that is conventionally applied to Obama's thought.⁵ The recurring preoccupation with the relation to the other invites a reading that takes into account what Levinas names the face-to-face relation, a metaphysical concern that invisibly but powerfully impacts the social and political relations of any moment. Using this model to comment on such relations is neither simple nor unproblematic, for Levinas has been critiqued alternately for failing to comment on social questions and for his patriarchal theology and Eurocentric orientation. Other scholars, however, have productively linked his thought to questions of social and political power. Jeffrey Nealon builds just such a bridge by theorizing "alterity politics" as a performative alternative to identity politics that addresses the problems of lack and resentment embedded in the latter construction of difference. Nealon's work reveals how Levinas's ethics can and do function in political discourse, and Obama's navigation of the competing rhetorical demands on the occasion of "A More Perfect Union" is a study in the uneasy and generative coexistence of this ethics and liberal political thought. On this level, Obama's speech--like Nealon's work on Levinas--reveals liberalism's incongruities and asks listeners to imagine social relations otherwise.

Identity and Alterity

The subjectivity theorized by Levinas is paradoxical: its relation to the other at once makes the subject possible and renders autonomy impossible. Any clear separation between

subject and object is factitious, because we are infinitely responsible for the other in a double sense: our subjectivity is a response to the other's call, and as a result, we owe everything, including our identity, to the other. The self that underpins liberal political thought, on the other hand, resides in an ego that not only imagines itself to be sovereign, but operates in an imperialist and procrustean mode, appropriating otherness by comprehending it in terms of the horizon of self, always amputating what is incomprehensible or unassimilable. If I approach others in this mode, "their *alterity* is thereby reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or a possessor" (Levinas, *Totality* 33; original emphasis). Moreover, because we are responsible to the other, we can never achieve the stability sought in this mode, premised as it is upon a violation of its founding otherness. The completion, the self-identity that we imagine to be essential, the "regulatory ideal of complete subjective freedom," in Nealon's words, remains unrealized, so our debt to the other must be understood as a failure of independence (7). To be sure, Levinas's reimagined view of subjectivity is not without violence: to be called into subjectivity is, he insists, a traumatic event characterized by an imbalance of power; I become *hostage* to the other. The difference, for him, is that I am no longer striving for autonomy, and thus intersubjectivity is not failure. The subject is other than whole not because of a lack, but because of a surplus--it exceeds the bounds of the *said* and of the categories by which identities must be defined. In the realm of the performative and variable *saying*, a subject can never be a simple, self-identical, bounded entity. Obama's language points toward this kind of subjectivity when he asserts that "this nation is *more* than the sum of its parts" (my emphasis).

Surplus, an inevitable aspect of subjectivity from a Levinasian perspective, constitutes a failure for the conventional liberal subject. Nealon calls it an "excess-that-is-lack," one that prevents the subject from achieving self-identical wholeness, a condition for which s/he blames the other (13). The ensuing Nietzschean resentment renders identity politics an "inevitable *social and political failure*," as in the case of the sometimes hysterical racially-charged rhetoric that prompted Obama's speech (Nealon 4; original emphasis). Obama characterizes it as part of a "a racial stalemate," implying that the way in which Americans have approached race in the United States has not only failed to bridge divides, it has kept American society from making any movement at all. It has, to paraphrase his own metaphor, blocked our "path to understanding." This is a failure of identity politics that is made inevitable by the very assumption that founds such a politics: subjects who are defined in terms of identity categories are forced to approach the other in a way that attempts the impossible task of containing his or her alterity, of violently reducing his or her otherness to a "subset of the same," a homogenous category that is defined in relation to a normative center. This identity-based approach to difference is what has characterized the dominant conversation on race, as Obama himself contends: "We can tackle race only as spectacle - as we did in the OJ trial - or in the wake of tragedy, as we did in the aftermath of Katrina - or as fodder for the nightly news." The alternative suggested by Obama is in the same Levinasian vein as Nealon's: "an ethical *alterity politics* that considers identity as beholden and responsive first and foremost to the other" (Nealon 2; original emphasis).

This politics shifts its focus away from an ontological attempt to pin identity down and towards a focus on the ethical effects and exigencies produced by difference. Nealon asserts that:

The stake of the subject and its ethical force remains a question of effects: the crucial question is not primarily a hermeneutic one, but rather a performative one--not What does it mean? but rather What can it do, how can it respond (otherwise)?

(170)

Such a shift from what something *means* to what it can *do* and, importantly, how it *responds* is one way of understanding Obama's treatment of race and racism in the speech through Levinasian responsibility. He doesn't ignore questions of hermeneutics or ontology, insisting that white Americans must acknowledge that oppression "does not just exist in the minds of black people" and "that the legacy of discrimination--and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past--are real and must be addressed." In the last phrase, Obama plants one foot in identity before stepping outside of it: he asserts that discrimination is *real* to begin with, answering the need for social recognition that lies beneath identity politics. However, by adding that "it must be addressed. . . not just with words but with deeds," he figures discrimination not merely as a fact but as a call that demands a response, one that makes us responsible--an echo of the face-to-face encounter that founds the subject. Such an encounter will recur in the speech, as I will address below, as the originary moment of national subjectivity.

Obama's pragmatic concern with effects is characteristic: asserting that there is anger at the root of Reverend Wright's most controversial comments as well as the explosive public reaction to them, he reminds us that such anger "is not always productive; indeed, all too often it distracts attention from solving real problems." This critique of Wright takes little account of the content or meaning of Wright's remarks; the first question at issue is not whether anger like Wright's is valid, but whether its effects are desirable, whether it serves to alleviate oppression. He acknowledges "a similar anger. . . within segments of the white community," that "they don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race." Critics have read this comparison of black to white anger as a leveling of difference, seeing it as an assertion that the history of overt and deeply-entrenched structural racism is "similar" to hurt feelings about being called "privileged." Read this way, as a comparison on the level of ontology, it is understandably seen as "disingenuous, even irresponsible," as pandering to white voters (Mansbach 75). It is worth noting, however, that the speech does not compare these angers on the basis of validity or depth, but rather on the basis of their effects and, most interestingly for my purposes, their shared assumptions about subjectivity. Obama is explicit about the former: white resentment, justified or not, has "helped shape the political landscape for at least a generation." Its *effects* are equivalent to those he attributes to Wright's anger: it obscures one's vision, spawning (among other things) "talk show hosts and conservative commentators" whose appeals have much the same rhetorical effect as the particularly incendiary comments made by Reverend Wright.

Even as the *effects* of both groups' feelings are compared, however, the language carefully preserves a distinction between the root feelings. Describing the effects of injustice on Reverend Wright and his generation, Obama uses the word "anger" exclusively. As he focuses on white Americans, what he initially calls "a similar anger" is immediately replaced by "resentment." In subsequent paragraphs, the comparison is between black *anger* and white *resentment*: "Just as black anger often proved counterproductive, so have these white resentments distracted attention from the real culprits of the middle class squeeze." To read the two as synonyms, as we would have to in order to conclude that Obama levels the difference between the experiences of African Americans and white Americans, is to miss a key distinction between anger and resentment: one is a response to injustice, where the other, resentment, is "anger at the other." The latter is, in Obama's logic (and in Nealon's), rooted in a mistaken view of subjectivity. The mistake is precisely the conventional notion that the subject is finite, autonomous and exhaustible, rather than excessive, intersubjective, and endlessly performed. Ironically, Reverend Wright's "profound mistake," according to Obama, is similar to that of resentful white citizens: "He spoke as if our society were static," mistaking ongoing iteration and revision for repeated failure, a "profoundly distorted view of this country." Among the distortions that follow is that "opportunity comes to be seen as a zero-sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense."

Obama offers a corrective to the zero-sum formulation with another lexical shift: rather than rejecting it outright, he reminds us that "most working-and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race," and he performs a substitution: "their experience is the immigrant experience." By replacing an identity category, race, with "immigrant experience," he offers what Deleuze and Guattari might call a line of flight for the "white" subject (or, at least, for the working-and-middle-class white American subject), freeing it from the totalizing category of race. This could justifiably be read as letting white Americans off the hook, of course, and it is also yet another pragmatic move away from ontology--shifting focus away from what a people putatively *are* (white) and toward what they have *done* (immigrated). Running alongside and perhaps counter to that, however, is a Levinasian current. Where "white" functions, like other racial categories, to efface difference and create the illusion of a homogenous group, "immigrant experience" highlights what had been concealed: the trace of the uncontainable *saying* within the *said* that characterizes Levinasian subjectivity. In other words, the phrase points to far more than it can actually hold: a signified that is more vast and varied than any signifier could contain. "Immigrant" is a more obviously diverse group than "white Americans," and "experience" points to an infinite singularity that resists being totalized. The phrase gestures towards the radical unknowability of every "other" we might approach--though still functioning within the realm of the said, as all utterances must, it does so more transparently. A move towards the saying, Levinas asserts, "absolves me of all identity" and in doing so, serves as "a de-posing or de-situating of the ego," creating a space for alterity (*Otherwise* 50). To thus unseat the stable, comprehensible identity imagined to be at the core of the ego points to a profoundly unstable subjectivity that, for Levinas, makes the ethical subject possible. For Obama, it offers an alternative to the zero-sum game. "This nation is more than the sum of its parts," not a totality in which gains in one area must be offset by losses in another; it is no known quantity. Because the national subject is characterized by surplus, "your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams." Ethics is possible precisely because the subject--whether the national subject or the individual--is not reducible to categories or sums. In this face-to-face relation, we cannot know the other, yet it calls us to respond, and for that we are enduringly indebted.

The Individual Subject

Obama's reading of the national motto offers another glimpse of the unruly subject lurking in his speech--even in the most seemingly conventional trope. "Out of many, we are truly one," he offers, later referring to this as the "message of unity" that underpins the campaign. His invocation of *E Pluribus Unum* points most immediately, of course, to the Enlightenment era in which it was first attached to the seal of the United States, and thus evokes precisely the self-identical, autonomous subject I am claiming he points away from. At the same time, the possibility of such a subject is undermined from the start; the *unum* that comes out of the *pluribus* is excessive, "more than the sum of its parts." It conjures up the image of a seamless unity--as perhaps the founders envisioned--even as it evokes a subject that is founded in multiplicity, enacting contradictions and exceeding its own boundaries. Viewed against the expectations of liberal subjectivity, this is a flaw or a failure--but Obama's language figures contradiction instead as a necessary and inevitable part of subjectivity. In doing so, listeners are reassured that we Americans are all one, even as Obama presents individual subjects, one after another, that are multiple and contradictory.

He begins with himself, with origins that are irreducibly multiple: "I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas," reminding listeners that his experience includes both elite schools and an impoverished nation. He presents himself as a subject that is continually in flux, shaped as it is by experiences and encounters like the one he describes upon joining the Trinity congregation: "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 boundaries between subjects--"ordinary black people," Biblical figures, and Obama himself--dissolve as their stories "merge," and his identity shifts through religious conversion.⁶ This fluid identity and its diffuse genealogies defy categorization in ways that test the limits of discourse--as he points out, "At various stages in the campaign, some commentators have deemed me either 'too black' or 'not black enough.'" To some, his current affluence and Harvard education make him elite, while others construct him as the son of a single mother, a former community organizer with roots in the working class. The way in which Obama's identity continues to be raised as a question defies reason and evidence; perhaps these intractable doubts offer a glimpse into the effects of an identity that very obviously exceeds categories of race, nationality and class. If demands for his birth certificate gained more media coverage than they seemed to merit, might this be understood as a compulsion to pin down his unruly identity in order to rescue conventional assumptions about subjectivity? We might also consider such intrusive questions as echoes of the face-to-face encounter, which Levinas locates prior to society and history, at a pre-conscious level where "a calling into question of the same . . . is brought about by the other" (*Totality* 43). One's identity is called into question even before one's subjectivity is formed, and the question is never off the table: "The I is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being whose existing consists in identifying itself" (Levinas, *Totality* 36). In this view, questions could never be fully answered--not even by a long-form birth certificate--yet this does not indicate a failure or a fraud. This aggressive interrogation inaugurates the subject, again and again, for it is our response that constitutes our very subjectivity.⁷ The debt we owe to the questioner is "the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity" (Levinas, *Ethics* 95).

It is this same kind of indebted, intersubjective, and contradictory subjectivity that structures Obama's descriptions of his grandmother and Reverend Wright. The former is a subject not in spite of, but because of the fact that she lovingly raised a mixed-race child even as she "uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made [Obama] cringe." She is indebted to both her grandson and the people she feared. The same is true of Reverend Wright; he too "contains within him the contradictions . . . of the community that he has served diligently for so many years." It is his community, described in the previous paragraphs as encompassing "the doctor and the welfare mom, the model student and the former gang-banger," that makes Wright the subject that he is. He, too, is the overflowing "one" rendered "out of many." Obama's *E Pluribus Unum* theme invites us to consider others as the origin of American subjectivities without straying outside the bounds of safe political tropes. It hints at, without fully enacting, a shift from a worldview that is centered on the stable self to an alterity ethics in which indebtedness and contradiction are irreversible--they are not a symptom or injury, but a foundation that makes justice possible.

The speech concludes with a disconcertingly simple story about a campaign organizer named Ashley, a young white woman working for the campaign in a primarily African American community. The story of Ashley's effort to support her struggling mother appears at first to be more heartwarming platitude than profound meditation on otherness. As the kind of pseudo-personal story that politicians roll out by the dozen, it is a repetition of a familiar trope. In this repetition, however, there is a difference worth noting. The story ultimately points us not toward the same--not toward Ashley as a Joe-Sixpack kind of stand-in for the listener--but toward that call of the other that Levinas would identify as the originary experience of subjectivity. At a roundtable she organized, we're told, participants shared their reasons for attending. They named specific social issues, for the most part, except for the last speaker:

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. . . . He simply says to everyone in the room, "I am here because of Ashley."

"I'm here because of Ashley." Now, by itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is not enough.

Ashley's invitation to the round table is only the most literal reenactment of the Levinasian call of the other; when it is cited and repeated by Obama, it functions on other levels. "I am here because of Ashley": Because of the other, I am here. Obama repeats the phrase, and as this is a speech, lacking textual markers such as quotation marks, it is unclear to the listener whether he is again quoting the man's words, or whether he is telling us that he himself is also "here" because of Ashley. The phrase becomes more than the recognition of a specific other named Ashley. To paraphrase Levinas's fitting formulation, it describes a moment during which the subject's spontaneity is called into question by the presence of the other (*Totality* 43). Alterity is not a choice freely made, for if we are to imagine that we can choose it, we are still starting with "I." It is instead an involuntary response to the call of the other. I am here not of my own volition; I owe my subjecthood to the other. Obama's phrase, doubly highlighted by repetition and by a simplicity that contrasts with the syntax of the bulk of the speech, bears a trace of the radically unsignifiable encounter that underpins consciousness (Levinas, *Otherwise* 159). For both Obama and Levinas it is an originary moment: it is "where the perfection begins" (Obama, "A More Perfect Union"); it is the "structure upon which all the other structures rest" (Levinas, *Totality* 79). In establishing it as a kind of origin, the relationship between Ashley and the nameless man unhinges time--the "perfection" called for by the constitution "begins" in a twenty-first century encounter. Obama situates this moment not as an effect of the Declaration of Independence but as an anachronic condition of its possibility. History, here, is no longer the story of linear progress--and the nation that emerges from it is a subject that is just as contradictory and unruly as the individual.

The National Subject: A more perfect union

Where the encounter between Ashley and the nameless man offers insight into the individual subject, Obama reads the Constitution for a view of the national subject, which he invokes by opening with a quote from the Constitution: "We the people, in order to form a more perfect union." As a sentence that most American children memorize without even trying, the quote teeters on the edge of threadbare cliché. Ultimately, though, it does much more work than it appears to do; the fact that we recognize the phrase is essential to its operation as a (re)iteration of the performative utterance that, in some sense at least, brought this nation into being. Obama tells us that these words "launched" an experiment; they "made real" the Declaration of Independence. As "launch," the Constitution is originary; as the "making real" of a prior declaration, it is itself a repetition. What happens when those founding words are repeated *again*, performed again, as they are in Obama's first line? The logic of performativity insists that each time the Constitution is quoted, it is not merely a repetition of the words written in 1787; it is a singular event in its own right. It is every bit as much an act of nation-building when it is quoted as when it was put on parchment, for the nation that came into being in 1787 was not, as we will be forcefully reminded in the speech, an unambiguous entity already filled with meaning. Obama's opening gambit is to engage in a bit of nation-building, highlighting the fact that the nation is an effect of such performative responses; that it comprises a process of perfecting that begins in 1787 *and* in 2008; that it is a chain of effects without origin. If the Constitution's work was to "make real" a declaration, then the work in repeating it is likewise to make real: to enact, and in so doing, to (re)make reality--to perform American nationhood and to revise it. Obama has set the terms and the stakes of the speech: more than an attempt to mollify critics, it is a response not merely to a particular controversy but to a Levinasian call; it is an enactment, and simultaneously a revision, of the nation itself. In and of itself this is not unique: national subjectivity is rhetorically at stake every time a speaker invokes founding documents. Here, however, the American subject is directed beyond what Levinas would call a totalizing ego towards seeing itself as an ethical subject that, like the rhetor himself, is (and must be) continually called into question. The speech's opening recitation of history enacts a process by which the national subject is "a being whose existing consists in identifying itself" over and over again.

The opening quote promises, and demands, a performance. Obama stops short of completing the sentence: "We the people, in order to form a more perfect union." He repeats a fragment, an incomplete thought. The phrase operates as a promise in multiple senses: most obviously, it opens the founding document that functions as a promise among citizens. Cited here as an incomplete thought, it also grammatically enacts a promise. Obama opens his speech by doubling the opening promise of the U.S. Constitution. The

role of such a "prefacing promise," as Nealon calls it, varies according to the discourse in which it is framed. In the mode of identity, such promises "are invariably broken because the later materialization of the promised deed will always produce a remainder. The deed will always exceed (and thereby fall short of simply fulfilling) the original promise" (Nealon 13). Approaching the promise from the perspective of performative subjectivity, on the other hand, opens up the "positive logic of the promise"--the one that moves beyond identity's inevitable lack (or excess-as-lack). Each promise is an act that promises another act (which will, in turn, promise another). It sets in motion a chain of performances, of responses "to the other--for the other" (Derrida, qtd. in Nealon 14). In fact, Obama's opening fragment doubles that promise: not only does he repeat the promise of the preamble, he also enacts it grammatically by editing it into a sentence fragment. Like the Constitution itself, the quote is unfinished; both promise (and demand) further performance. The effects of such an opening multiply from this point. The first eleven words of the Constitution, reenacted, invoke the ethics and logic of performativity as a response to alterity: they set in motion a chain of promises and actions, ensuring that the American nation will never achieve plenitude of meaning but will be forever reinvented by repeated performances, repeated responses to the others that inhabit "We the people."

The impossibility of plenitude that underpins performative logic is emphasized in the object of the opening phrase: "A *more* perfect union" is not the same as "a perfect union," any more than the verb "to perfect" is the same as the adjective "perfect." The adjective implies completion and stasis; the verb, process and movement. "More" leaves the phrase permanently open (and some would say grammatically fallacious): it is not simply a perfect union, but a *more* perfect one that we the people seek. It is what we are destined forever to seek, for whatever state of perfection we might reach, the preamble will always ask for "more"; it will repeat, keeping the totality of "perfect" perpetually out of reach. At the same time, the word itself offers a grammatical choice between the adjective that describes a state from which we will always fall short or the verb that describes our ongoing task. Obama consistently uses the verb form; moreover, he announces this choice: "This union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected." In a politics of identity, we are striving for *perfection*, and each time we fall short (which is every time) we have failed. *Perfecting*, by contrast, points to the performative mode of becoming, in which the process is what we are. We "form" the "more perfect union." It is almost, but not exactly, the American identity--not in the form of a goal or conclusion, but as a perpetually open question. The ethics at work here leaves "the foundation of the subject always in question, always open to another performative call or response" (Nealon 169). The nation's subjectivity lies in asking repeatedly, how can we perform ourselves as Americans in order to perfect our union? It is more verb than noun, a question rather than an answer. It calls us to the pragmatist process of perfecting our union even as it reminds us that this call is not one to which we can spontaneously assent or independently choose to answer--instead, it is an iteration of the deeply embedded metaphysical encounter with the other that initiates our national consciousness by compelling us to respond.

It is in this sense that Levinas asserts that the subject's spontaneity is challenged by alterity. What appears to be a self-generated, original phenomenon is revealed to be a response or a repetition. In another deceptively simple move immediately after the opening quote, Obama again calls the spontaneity of the nation into question and reveals it to be one effect in a chain, an ongoing performance rather than an entity founded at a single point in time. In the second line of the speech, Obama orients himself by noting that the Philadelphia convention, like the words he has quoted in the first line, took place "Two hundred and twenty one years ago." There is of course nothing original about rhetorically measuring the distance in time between the present moment and the founding of the nation, about drawing a self-aggrandizing line from the "founding fathers" to oneself. The task of tracing such a line through time is, however, ultimately rendered impossible by the speech, and again we have an opening towards alterity. "Two hundred and twenty one years ago": It is hard not to recall Lincoln's "Four score and seven years ago," another overwhelmingly familiar opening phrase, an allusion that is not likely to be lost on listeners. It is, then, recognizable as a repetition of one moment that itself evokes another: Obama points to the Gettysburg Address, in which Lincoln points to the Constitutional Convention.⁸ Again we are denied a precise origin and instead directed to a chain of effects, more specifically to three moments in time: March 1787, September 1787, and September 1787. What appears to bolster the myth of the founding fathers--a shared and unitary past in which the "city on a hill" that we still inhabit was spontaneously built--breaks itself apart into three moments, three nation-building performances. The moments are not points along a timeline, though. Instead, they break history apart through what Derrida might call a "citational doubling," a repetition that splits that which it repeats ("Signature Event Context" 17). At the heart of each of the three texts is the open question of *union*, always left unresolved. The layered allusion suggests that an undivided, seamless union has never existed: in 1787 the Declaration of Independence was "made real" but left unfinished because of, as Obama will point out, the slavery question; in November 1863, Lincoln repeated the Declaration's "all men are created equal" even as the civil war raised the question of "whether . . . any nation so conceived . . . can long endure"; in March 2008, Obama repeats the Constitution's performance as part of the ritual of election, having been forced to address the divisive issue of race in a way no candidate in recent memory has. Just as time splits, so does each nation-building repetition; if we were attempting a linear journey through history, we would, with each repetition, encounter a fork in the road. Our subjectivity as a nation cannot be traced so easily.

History Unhinged

There must be ghosts all the country over, as thick as the sands of the sea.

-Ibsen

Obama's view of history typically falls into the progressive narrative of inevitable improvement that much liberal political thought takes for granted. He characterizes it early in the speech, for example, as a "long march. . . towards a better future." However, just as the liberal subject encounters aporia in the rhetoric, so does the U.S. American narrative of progress. The encounter with race, which demands an encounter with slavery, inevitably points to the dilemma at the heart of the nation, a question that both founds and undermines the national subject. In the discourse of Obama's campaign and presidency, race and slavery are specters--they are ever present but rarely manifested. As he points out, race lurked in the background in the early stages of the campaign, when the public resisted "the temptation to view candidacy through a purely racial lens"; eventually, it came into the foreground as questions about Obama's race and the role it played in his successes were asked and as the "firestorm" around Reverend Wright precipitated this speech. Turning to Faulkner, Obama suggests that the nation itself is similarly--in fact, far more profoundly--haunted: "'The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past.'" Moreover, as the past is, in fact, present, "we do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country." As with the opening words of the speech, Obama offers a quote followed by a standard rhetorical move (here, invoking racial injustice by disclaiming the intent to invoke it). And as before, this repetition enacts an important difference.

The figure of the past that is not past, a kind of ghost, is a figure of profound otherness --Derrida theorizes it as an alterity that cannot be erased or incorporated into a stable self, for its very existence undermines the notion of a boundary between self and other. The ghost is a "non-present present," a "being-there of an absent or departed one" (Derrida, *Specters* 6). Such survival of the past into the present can often be traced back to an omission, which Derrida illustrates with a passage in which Valéry quotes himself, omitting a single sentence. Derrida asks, "Why this omission, the only one? . . . Where did [the name of Marx] go? . . . The name of the one who disappeared must have gotten inscribed someplace else" (*Specters* 5). Haunting, here, is a recurrence of that which has been omitted, and it is just such a recurrence that destabilizes the subjectivity of the nation in Obama's speech. In this case, the specter arises from the most glaring omission from the Declaration of Independence: slavery. The paragraph that was famously edited out of Jefferson's original draft condemned it as a violation of the "most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people." The final version, of course, makes no mention of slavery, and the Constitution, far from condemning it, codified and arguably enshrined it. The erasure, then, did not secure the issue's disappearance, as even Jefferson seems to have anticipated in his reflection on the changes made to his draft: "the sentiments of men are known not only by what they receive, but what they reject also" (341). What Jefferson did not know, and what Derrida, Obama, and two hundred subsequent years of nationhood would bear out, is that "the name of the one who disappeared must have gotten inscribed someplace else": that the contradiction of chattel slavery in a nation founded on democratic ideals would turn up insistently, haunting the nation, endlessly calling it into question. In a passage that could just as easily be about slavery in the United States, Derrida describes how the specter of communism haunted Europe to this effect:

[I]t does not come to, it does not happen to, it does not befall, one day, Europe, as if the latter, at a certain moment of its history, had begun to suffer from a certain evil, to let itself be *inhabited* in its inside, that is, haunted by a foreign guest. Not that that guest is any less a stranger for having always occupied the domesticity of Europe. But there was no inside, there was nothing inside before it.

(*Specters* 4)

In this vein, slavery was never something inflicted upon the nation; this ghost, this haunting other, was always present--its return in Obama's speech as well as in so many conversations about race in the United States reveals the fact that there is no inside to the national subject from which slavery can be excluded; there is "nothing before it." This

quintessential "other" of American ideals is as much the "self" of the nation as are the founding documents themselves--an insight captured by Toni Morrison in her descriptions of an Africanist presence in the nation's founding principles: "The concept of freedom did not emerge in a vacuum. Nothing highlighted freedom--if it did not in fact create it--like slavery" (38). Slavery, Morrison suggests, *created* freedom even as it undermined it, much as the other both inaugurates the self and puts it in question. Slavery, in other words, made the Declaration possible and forever unstable. The "self" of the nation is, like our individual subjectivities, utterly beholden to the other; it will never be spontaneous or self-identical. In his discussion of slavery, Obama calls attention to that familiar contradiction at the heart of the nation, a contradiction that is most often cited as evidence of the nation's failure to fulfill its promise--an indelible "stain," as he will initially phrase it. Such a view takes as its baseline the possibility of a nation without such contradictions--the same kind of goal for subjectivity that, being unattainable, guarantees failure and resentment.

The speech intervenes in this conundrum with a shift in metaphor across iterations. Early in the speech, Obama claims that the Declaration of Independence was "ultimately unfinished" because "it was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery" (par. 3). The specter of slavery disrupted completion, then; the ghost, as past that will not pass, prevents full presence. It renders time "off its hinges" (Derrida, *Specters* 77). Obama's figure of unhinged time here is stalemate: slavery was "a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to . . . leave any final resolution to future generations." Stalemate functions as an interruption of movement-in-time, a deferral that causes a task in the present to fall behind, or outside, the time that we imagine marching towards future. Alternatively, we might understand stalemate as a kind of excess that disrupts completion, as over-satiety: an excess of meaning that renders a thing impossible to finish or to close. It is a moment in which contradiction cannot be contained in a consensus. In Levinas's terms it is a moment that reveals the impossibility of enclosing the *saying* within the *said*; it bears a trace of the encounter with the wholly other. For Obama, the moment of ratification was a moment of stalemate rather than of completion. If it were a fully present, complete meaning that we were yearning for, the Constitution would have to be considered a failure. If this is not the case, it is because performative *becoming* is more important than *being* in that American text: the document is important *because* it is unfinished. It was not a failure: it was a deferral, a promise, one effect in a long chain. The signers bequeathed the task of a "final resolution to future generations" (Obama, "A More Perfect Union"). This is what allows the document to reach into the future even though, in the past, it became mired in the politics of its slaveholding present. In his reading of the Constitution, Obama figures this lack of full presence not as a lack per se, but as generative force. He describes it as calling "Americans in successive generations . . . to do their part--through protests and struggle, on the streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience." In fact, as he tells us in the following paragraph, it is the very force that generated his own campaign. So this haunted stalemate that prevented full realization of meaning cuts across time, generating (as Obama notes) civil war, civil disobedience, and struggles for civil rights: all disturbances within the civic subjectivity, a chain of effects that highlights a profound alterity within the nation which, in fact, *is* the subject. How recognizable, after all, would the U.S. be without Gettysburg, Thoreau, King? Viewing the nation as an effect of destabilizing performances and iterations, however, undermines Obama's first figure of slavery as indelible stain or "original sin." It is at this point that the metaphor shifts in an important direction.

In his first metaphor, slavery is "stain" and "original sin"; both indicate a fixed, unitary, indelible mark. Obama's use of original sin alludes to a fall away from "original holiness and justice," as the Catholic catechism phrases it; it suggests humanity's imperfection or lack. The Bible's fallen humanity is strikingly similar to the figure of the subject in identity politics: we are constituted as subjects in terms of how far we fall short of what we wish to be--whether what we wish for is original holiness or inclusion in a normative center. If slavery is the United States's "original sin," then does its nationhood exist in the gap between the promises of the founding documents and the nation's actuality? Is American subjectivity one founded upon lack? Perhaps we are back to what I'm claiming we have been pointed away from: the discourse of identity. We are not left in this aporia, though, for the "original sin" metaphor unravels a few paragraphs later when held up against a second metaphor: slavery as "inheritance." If slavery is an American inheritance, it could be read as a kind of inescapable original sin that dooms Americans to perpetual insufficiency and resentment. Yet this is precisely how Obama characterizes Reverend Wright's mistaken view, again, "That he spoke as if our society was static." The inheritance invoked here has more in common with Derrida's reading of the concept, one that refutes stasis:

An inheritance is never gathered together, it is never one with itself. Its presumed unity, if there is one, can consist only in the *injunction to reaffirm by choosing*. 'One must' means *one must* filter, sift, criticize, one must sort out several different possibilities that inhabit the same injunction. And inhabit it in a contradictory fashion around a secret. If the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it. We would be affected by it as by a cause--natural or genetic. One always inherits from a secret--which says 'read me, will you ever be able to do so?'

(*Specters* 16)

This inheritance is not indelible stain but ongoing task, a kind of call to responsibility, "never one with itself," like the Constitution, and like American national subjectivity. In this view, the coexistence of slavery and a proclamation of the inalienable rights of man renders fundamental questions undecidable, but it does not lead inevitably to failure. Multiple, contradictory possibilities constitute an inheritance, just as they do subjectivity. Inheritance in this sense echoes the way Obama gathers the experiences of "ordinary black people" and Biblical heroes into his own subjectivity as discussed above. As in that case, the boundaries between subjects are permeable, if not illusory. The distinction between the inside and the outside of the subject disintegrates in the implications of the metaphor: the oppression that we as Americans grapple with in our history comes from the inside, so from where did the nation "inherit" slavery, if not from itself? Inheritance, as a destabilizing force, calls for and defies interpretation, requiring continual "inhabitation" or performance. It does not guarantee failure but neither does it let the nation "off the hook," for it is a task, a demand to continue the repetitions that transform, the reinventions of subjectivity that are at the bottom of an ethics of alterity. What Americans have inherited is responsibility, a call for, in Obama's words, "a union that could and should be perfected over time."

If Americans were to aim for final perfection, for contained identity in the model of Enlightenment subjectivity, then a speech highlighting the haunted nature of American subjectivity, the impossibility of it ever being self-identical indeed throws not just two individuals, but the entire nation under the bus. Yet the language of the speech reveals that the ethic at work here is not one of the blame or betrayal that such a metaphor invokes. While we cannot escape their violence, while we are indeed held hostage by them, the specters that we have inherited do not doom us to perpetual insufficiency; rather, they demand repeated performance, iteration that changes that which it repeats. In doing so, they call the nation into being. Obama's speech enacts this very process of iteration: it simultaneously deploys liberal political discourse in a safe and instrumentalist way even as it calls into question the fundamental assumptions of that discourse. It is this aporetic performance that opens a space that, as one journalist hypothesizes, "has never been opened before" in mainstream U.S. political discourse (Quinn). In this view, Obama's performative ethics functions not as a condemnation of shortcomings but as an acknowledgment of the conditions that make justice possible. "It is," Obama assures us, pointing at once to our past, present, and our future, "where we start."

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Notes

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1. It is worth noting at the outset that, according to White House correspondent Marc Ambinder and others, the text was not the work of speechwriters. Obama himself dictated and edited it, sharing it with "only a few" advisors before delivering it.
2. Linguist Geoffrey Nunberg noted the particular "verbal violence" of this metaphor as compared to previously popular idioms that conveyed similar betrayal (such as "hanging out to dry" or creating "a fall guy").
3. Moran was not alone in noting the phrase's sudden spike in usage. Nunberg identified over 100 uses of "under the bus" in online, print and broadcast responses to this speech (and 400 uses in discussions of the presidential race). Columnist David Segal called it "the cliché of the 2008 campaign."
4. While this split characterized a large part of the media reaction to the speech, many writers have taken a closer and more nuanced look at the speech's language and

contexts. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting's excellent anthology *The Speech: Race and Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union"* offers a number of these.

5. To be sure, the overlap between pragmatism and what I am calling performative ethics is substantial. Derrida and Rorty agree that performativity, specifically, is one of the clear "places of affinity" between poststructuralism and pragmatism (Derrida, "Remarks" 80).

6. Elsewhere, Obama characterizes this moment more directly as a conversion, a moment he remembers thus: "I felt I heard God's spirit beckoning to me. I submitted myself to His will, and dedicated myself to discovering His truth and carrying out His works" ("A Politics of Conscience").

7. It is admittedly somewhat bizarre to consider that Obama might be "indebted" to those who have so fiercely and irrationally questioned his birthplace and citizenship--and I don't do so to dismiss the fairly obvious racism and unsettling historical resonance of demanding "papers" from a person of color in the United States--yet the rhetorical violence of such an act makes it an even more compelling model for the face to face relation, which Levinas insists is a traumatic one.

8. Gary Wills's compelling article, "Two Speeches on Race," investigates in much greater depth the (undoubtedly deliberate) parallels between this speech and the Gettysburg Address. He concludes that "each looked for larger patterns under the surface of the bitternesses of their day. Each forged a moral position that rose above the occasions for their speaking." My concern here is less about the similarity of the two speeches, however, than about the implications of the specific ethical position carved out by Obama's speech, which is accomplished in part by allusions to Lincoln's speech.

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