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Theodore F. Sheckels¹

Abstract

Obama's ceremonial (i.e. convention speeches and inaugurals) discourse from 2004 to 2012 constitutes an evolving polyphony. The voices of the polyphony shift from offering the Biblically-rich, personal story of Obama as an African-American to the rather partisan story of Obama as a public policy leader. Obama remains the hero in the story the polyphony presents; however, the opposition shifts from being those who doubt the dream to those who oppose policy initiatives. The voices sustain Obama's inspiring story throughout the discourse; however, the personal fades and is replaced by an emphasis on the people he is trying to serve, the policies he is advocating on their behalf, and the partisan turmoil those policies have become entangled in. Grounded in the theoretical work of Mikhail Bakhtin, the account treats Obama's discourse as a non-finalizable orchestration of voices.

Keywords

strategic, campaign, polyphonic, Obama, Bakhtin

Increasingly, political figures are more stories than a set of policy proposals or principles. The shift may be due to three converging trends: one, media coverage that is more narrative or dramatic than straightforwardly factual; two, our cultural immersion in story in a media environment dominated by television, film, and the many mininarratives available through the Internet; three, media coverage of political figures,

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especially candidates, that refuses them privacy as it offers personal information—stories about them—rarely disclosed in earlier eras.

Political figures have frequently been disadvantaged by these trends. One of the hallmarks of the political acumen of Barack Obama has been his control of his story. From his first prominent political address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention to his November 6, 2012, election night address, Obama has presented a consistent but expanding and evolving story. I would suggest that this compelling story has as much to do with Obama's electoral success as policy positions, get-out-the-vote efforts, televised advertising, or Republican mistakes. This is a rhetorical claim, and rhetorical claims are rarely if ever advanced with data. Nonetheless, I hope in this essay to offer a compelling argument that Barack Obama is a masterful storyteller. The overall story he offers is compelling; the shift in it from 2008 to 2012 is strategic and compelling in a somewhat different way.

Rhetoricians require lenses through which to see texts, and many are available. In this case, I wish to suggest that the work of critic Mikhail Bakhtin provides a useful lens. His refusal to grant finalizability to discourse will prove to be an important fundamental assumption in analyzing Obama's story. More important, Bakhtin's concept of polyphony will illuminate the continuing Obama text because it is less drama and less narrative than it is an orchestrated collection of voices that swirl about an often-repeated life story and often-repeated maxims about America and government.

This essay will, first, sketch the theory underlying the analysis. Then, it will consider the polyphony Obama creates in six political speeches: his 2004 Democratic National Convention (DNC) address, his 2008 DNC address, his 2008 election night address, his 2009 inauguration address, his 2012 DNC address, and his 2012 election night address. The essay will, finally, pay close attention to the 2012 speeches because, although Obama's story and his discourse are not yet final, these two addresses do try to function as both a summation and a slight redirection of the Obama story. And it is crucial to note that the story is indeed evolving, that the polyphony—although similar throughout Obama's campaign-oriented rhetoric from 2004 onward—is interestingly different in 2012 from what it was before Obama assumed the presidency. In other words, the story has changed. I would suggest that the changes are rhetorically calculated: Obama remains very much in control of the story he enacts.

Theory

Michael Bernard-Donals noted in *College English* (1994) that there seemed to be as many Bakhtins as there were commentators on the Russian critic's work. There is some truth to this remark, but that truth is rooted in the difficulties the Bakhtin oeuvre poses not academic confusion. Bakhtin was a prolific writer, but, from his location outside the centers of Russian academic life, his work rarely saw print. Some of it barely saw paper, as Bakhtin was forced to scribble wherever he could, including down the margins of previously penned works. Bakhtin also tended to revise endlessly. As a result, there are many textual issues surrounding Bakhtin's work that his

editors have ably wrestled with. They have assembled single texts; they have anthologized together works that seemed thematically related; they have dealt with issues of sole or joint authorship.

Those who have benefited from this textual work have their own hurdles to surmount: Where to begin? What to give precedence to? Here is where the many Bakhtins begin. Some have found Bakhtin's work on French satirist Rabelais provocative and have run with the concept of "carnavalesque" as their Bakhtinian key (Bakhtin, 1965/1984); some have found the rather diverse work anthologized in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Bakhtin, 1981) provocative and have run with dialogic as their Bakhtinian key; a few, especially in the communication discipline, have focused on Bakhtin's work on what he termed "speech genres," an interesting concept, although rather clearly not a major concern of the theorist, and made that their key (Bakhtin, 1986). I would argue that the key to understanding Bakhtin is none of these but the book he labored on throughout his career, his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Bakhtin, 1984), in which he presents the crucial concept of polyphony.

Polyphony—and the associated Bakhtinian term "novelization"—are often treated as simply the assumption that discourse offering more voices is richer discourse. The assumption is true, but it overlooks the systematic way Bakhtin classifies the voices in discourse in his study of Dostoevsky. There, he divides discourse into two basic types, univocal and double-voiced. The first, the un-polyphonic discourse of science and government, holds little interest for Bakhtin. Double-voiced discourse is the essence of polyphony, and it can be active or passive. Active double-voiced discourse admits voices into a text without the rhetor controlling or, even, being aware of them. All words and phrases, according to Bakhtin, have been uttered before; and these previous utterance are entailed whenever words and phrases are used. Passive double-voiced discourse admits voices with the rhetor controlling, and it may be either unidirectional or varidirectional. Unidirectional passive double-voiced discourse proceeds in the same direction as the rhetor's overt intent. Quoting someone in support of a position would be an example. Varidirectional passive double-voiced discourse proceeds in a direction other than the rhetor's overt intent. Parody would be an example, where the embedded "voice" undermines or mocks the overt intent.

Active double-voicing can sometimes wreck a text—if, for example, one uses a term such as "appeasement" in the 1940s without an awareness of Neville Chamberlin's use. But if the critic's goal is to understand how a rhetor has constructed a text, passive double-voicing should be the focus with more attention paid to the unidirectional. In this category, one might—following what Bakhtin says in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*—consider quotations and citations, what Classical rhetoricians termed *proso-popeia*, stylization (where the rhetor echoes another without quoting), what characters in the story say or might say, or any popular culture references that might be present intertextually.

One following Bakhtin, then, would examine the richness of a polyphonic text using a list such as the one above as a heuristic.¹ One would also be aware that Bakhtin defines text a bit differently than a classical rhetorician might. A text for Bakhtin is ongoing: it lacks finalizability, for he assumes that language both precedes

and follows a segment of discourse a more classically inclined critic might choose to examine. For fiction, this observation means that the characters and narrators are presumed to have spoken before page one and are presumed to live on in language after the novel *per se* closes. For other kinds of texts, this observation means that whatever is at issue in a segment of discourse has been in dialogue before and will be in dialogue afterwards. These pre- and post-dialogues color the segment, with the latter establishing an ongoing process of revision. In the case of Obama, that means that his discourse builds, his story builds, with latter speeches being in dialogue with the former. A whole emerges; however, it is a whole only until the discourse—and the polyphony—continues.

Obama's Campaign Discourse, 2004 and 2008

DNC, 2004

First, let us acknowledge that this address, as a member of the evolving convention keynote genre, brings in John Kerry and John Edwards. But if the critic is tracing Obama's evolving story, the fact that the 2004 standard bearers are evoked (but never quoted) is beside the point. What is more important are six threads of voices Obama begins weaving: the platitudes of American patriotism, his personal story, the stories of average Americans, the voice of the American citizen he wishes to serve, the voices of those in opposition, and echoes of scripture.

First, he quotes the Declaration of Independence, and he voices the national slogan "E pluribus unum."² He also refers to the Pledge of Allegiance. These "voices" are brief: Obama is not a flag-waver. However, he does deftly position himself at the center of the political spectrum. Voicing Jefferson's words associates him with all of those who have, through the years, fought to ensure the equality of all; referring to the pledge associates him with a traditional conservative cause.

Second, he tells the stories of his grandparents and his parents. He brings these characters to life: it is as if they are before us, speaking. Since Obama was a relative political unknown at this point in his career, he tells their stories at some length. He also, in the context of talking about Kerry and Edwards as young men, refers to himself as a tall, skinny kid with a funny name. The mildly self-deprecating humor mitigates against any accusation that his storytelling was egocentric.

Third, he brings into his speech workers in Galesburg, Illinois, who are dealing with a closing factory, and a young woman in East St. Louis, Illinois, who desires higher education. Then, after referring vaguely to people in small towns and big cities, he evokes people living in the Chicago suburbs who are concerned about excessive federal spending and people living in the Chicago inner city who are concerned about wasteful government programs. Later, we hear about Shamus from East Moline, Illinois, who is going off to war, and the many American families who have been touched by the wars orchestrated by the Bush administration. In telling these stories, Obama is arguably following in the rhetorical footsteps of Ronald Reagan and, later, Bill Clinton, who made such storytelling almost a requirement of presidential (and

would-be presidential) rhetoric. Obama's voices, however, are strikingly Illinois ones: he is positioning himself as Senator from the state, not anything broader. Late in the address, he looks back into history and voices slaves gathered around a fire, singing freedom songs, as well as immigrants; but these broader references, because historical, do not deflect from his Illinois focus.

Fourth, he does voice on behalf of a larger audience, what its aspirations are. Here, he voices what "we" believe.

Fifth, he sets that united voice against the "spin masters," "ad peddlers," and "pundits," whose voices are divisive. Interestingly, the opposition voice is not that of the Republican Party—or George W. Bush; rather, it is that of political insiders, whether they be campaign- or media-connected. Obama is positioning himself outside "politics as usual."

Sixth, Obama evokes the Bible, but in a constrained manner. There are only two brief references. The brevity is more interesting than the use, for, by being brief, Obama separates himself from both conservative politicians and previous African American politicians, who use the words of scripture much more heavily, but for rather different political purposes.

DNC, 2008

Since our focus is on the evolving story and on Obama's discourse as not finalized, the first critical question to ask of the address he gave at Mile High Stadium in Denver is, Does he continue weaving the six threads seen in 2004 and, if so, how does he alter the pattern?

So, does Obama voice the documents that are important to the nation? The answer would seem to be no. Before one makes too much of this departure, one should wait for the next speech. Other threads among the six may require more attention here, for Obama's rhetorical situation and genre are different; additional threads might be in order as well, either because of these generic, situational differences or because the Obama story is evolving. We will find those new threads, but also the five others initiated in 2004.

Does Obama voice his family? Yes, his grandparents and parents are referred to (as are wife Michelle and daughters Sasha and Malia), but there is no biography section of the address. Rather, after briefly referring to his family, past and present, at the speech's beginning, Obama uses the particular stories of family members to make points, good and bad, about America. He talks about how his maternal grandmother worked hard and achieved, despite educational limitations, and how his maternal grandfather chose to serve after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor; he talks about how his mother had to struggle with insurance companies as she was suffering with cancer. Obama is less offering voters his life story so that people will become acquainted with him and more using his life story for rhetorical ends.

Does Obama voice the stories of others? Most definitely. He refers to a woman in Ohio who is nearing retirement and worried about healthcare; he refers to a man in Indiana who is watching jobs leave the United States for China. Note that both Ohio and Indiana were "in play" in 2008. He then refers to veterans who are sleeping in the

streets and families that are sliding into poverty. These are not tied to particular places, but the victims of Katrina—and government indifference—in Louisiana and the struggling auto workers in Michigan are. Their stories are brought in as well as, in an attempt to unite the second and third threads, the people on Chicago's South Side, who Obama, as a community organizer, fought on behalf of two decades earlier when a steel manufacturing plant closed there.

Obama does voice the people as well. They say "Eight is Enough," referring to Republican Party government; they also say "enough to the politics of the past," referring to not just the Republican Party but, more broadly, to the way government conducts itself.

Obama voices the opposition at some length, but here, because this speech is part of a campaign against presumptive Republican nominee John McCain, he voices both the opposition in general and McCain in particular. The opposition's words designed to frighten Americans are scorned; the opposition's philosophy of "you're on your own" and "tough luck" are recalled. McCain's endorsements of Bush administration positions are also recalled, as well as his "great progress" assessment of the economy and his economic advisors' assessment—"mental recession"—and dismissal of those complaining—"nation of whiners."

And we hear the Bible. Obama says, as he did in the 2004 keynote, that we are our brother's—and our sister's—keepers, echoing *Genesis*. In conjunction with the biblical references, Obama voices Dr. Martin Luther Jr., identified simply as a young preacher from Georgia, quoting his words on August 28, 1963, 45 years to the day before the date of this Obama convention address. Voicing King links Obama to a Civil Rights Movement legacy; naming Franklin Roosevelt, quoting John Kennedy, and repeating Lyndon Johnson's 1964 campaign slogan ("The stakes are too high") link Obama to the Democratic Party mainstream. But Obama also, in saying that "America is once again that last, best hope" voices Republican Abraham Lincoln. This seventh thread, composed of heroic voices, is one Obama will work with further in future speeches.

We also hear—an eighth thread—Obama voicing himself. He recalls both what he said—for example, in opposition to war in Iraq—and he forecasts what he will say. Some of these he casts as "promises," connecting his promises to others including those made to one's daughters, to yearning immigrants, and to *all* of the nation's citizens, regardless of race or religion. He thereby blends his voice and that of the American promise.

Election Night, 2008

The location of the 2008 DNC speech was interesting insofar as the candidate took his acceptance speech beyond the convention hall to a stadium, where many could gather. This relocation was not without precedent: Kennedy had done much the same in 1960. The location of the 2008 election night speech also defied tradition. It was in neither the headquarters hotel nor a sizeable arena in the successful candidate's home city. Rather, it was outdoors in Chicago's Grant Park, where a truly sizeable crowd could

gather. Obama's campaign staged the address here to embrace as many as possible of "the people" who elected Obama in the celebration. A sense of history and an awareness of allusion suggest another reason why Grant Park was chosen. More on that in a moment.³

With the developing polyphony in mind, we see many of the same threads used earlier used in this address of celebration.

Patriotic voices are evoked. "E pluribus unum," the slogan used as *topos* in the 2004 speech, is used again, but not in Latin this time. The Constitution is evoked as well, when Obama refers to the "perfect union," a phrasing echoing the Preamble's.

Obama continues to tell his personal story. This time, it does not involve his ancestors (although he refers to grandmother, wife, and daughters); rather, it involves the campaign and the election. These are presented as not so much Obama's story as the story of the many who had long felt not included in the American dream. They donated small sums to the campaign; they lined up that day to vote.

Many of these voters were average Americans. Obama does not tell many of their stories in this address; however, he does tell the story of 106-year-old Ann Nixon Cooper, who lined up to vote in Atlanta. Her life, which began a generation after slavery, is used by Obama to trace the gains made by Americans in quest of the American dream. Whereas, he notes, women's voices were long silenced, Cooper's voice, as a woman and as an African American, was heard on election day.

Some voices are missing in the election night address. We do not hear the opposition, except for the quick reference to Senator McCain's conceding telephone call. We do not hear the general public, although we do hear popular culture voices that the general public might note before the scholar does. The phrase "long time coming" is one. It alludes to Sam Cooke's song, which had been appropriated by some in the Civil Rights Movement, but it also alludes to Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young's "Long Time Gone" (often attributed to just David Crosby). Others have sung songs with the one title—"Coming"—or the other—"Gone," and the titles have been used for the memoirs of Crosby and a biography of Bob Dylan. But the Cooke song and the Crosby song seem the most relevant. The former roots the moment of the Obama election in the Civil Rights Movement; the latter links the moment to the place where the speech occurs. "Long Time Gone" evokes not just the lyrics of the particular song, but other Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young songs. Their canon, so to speak, is voiced by Obama. Among those songs would be "Ohio," about the May 1970 Kent State shootings; and the bitter "Chicago," about the 1968 Democratic Convention and the "police riots" in Grant Park, riots that gave Grant Park an association in the minds of many with when the counterculture dreams of the 1960s crashed. Obama's address then might well be set in Grant Park to redeem both the place and the dreams.

The Bible is missing, as are occasions when he voices himself, but the heroic voices Obama began weaving into his polyphony in Denver are present in Chicago as well. He voices King; in an eloquent paragraph that stylizes Kennedy's inaugural, he voices JFK; and he voices both Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" and Lincoln's second inaugural.

2009 Inaugural

Although not a campaign speech *per se*, the 2009 inaugural address completes the story—or at least the initial chapter in the story. Because of its genre, we should expect the address to be more somber. Thus, it will downplay what might be considered partisan politics. No evoking of opponents' words in order to criticize them would be expected, but the other threads we have seen thus far might well be.

The address does indeed voice the nation's founding documents; in fact, it calls for people to be true to the ideals found in "our founding documents." The speech, more explicitly, voices the Constitution's Preamble, the Bill of Rights, and the inspiring words of General George Washington at Valley Forge during a despairing winter before a new nation had been established.

The address acknowledges, as is the wont of most inaugurals, the nation's and the occasion's historic roots. The address evokes martial events such as the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, World War II, and Vietnam; it voices what the soldiers in some of these conflicts might have said, as well as what our soldiers abroad at the present time might say. Obama's personal story is scarcely present in this historical frame. It is, of course, present, for the story, not so much in words as in almost every frame of coverage, is Obama's. But he does bring the story in to the address once when he notes that a celebration, one very much about Obama the person, is occurring that day "across this magnificent mall," not just in the area immediately in the front of the Capitol, and when he marvels at how "a man whose father less than sixty years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath."

Obama brings in the stories of average Americans briefly. Within the speech's historical frame, he refers to the average Americans who labored to build the country. Obama suggests that the same spirit exists in Americans today and points to those who rushed to aid their fellows in the wake of Katrina, those who cut their factory hours so that others did not lose their jobs, and firefighters who risk smoke and fire to save lives.

These Americans, Obama argues, keep a legacy alive. These Americans are, Obama implies, telling government now to act in a manner that sustains the nation on its journey toward continued prosperity. They call for "hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord"; they call for "an end of petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn out dogmas, that for far too long have strangled our politics." They are said to be celebrating: the speech voices their celebrating tone. However, standing in the way are, of course, the political enemies lurking in the background, waiting to undermine Obama's efforts. They are alluded to. They "question the scale of our ambitions"; they "suggest that our system cannot tolerate too many big plans." Their views are offered only to be discredited, as is that of revered Republican President Ronald Reagan, whose questions about government in his first inaugural are evoked only to be refuted when Obama says, "The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works."

Obama cites Scripture; he even goes so far as to cite God as a source of the call to Americans as a nation “to shape an uncertain destiny.”

Obama brings supporting voices into the inaugural. Lincoln and King are not present, but Kennedy is very much so. The rhythms of sentences—even paragraphs—are Kennedyesque. In fact, the 1961 inaugural seems to have been in Obama’s mind insofar as he both addresses large sections of the 2009 inaugural to the nations of the world and he summons Americans to a new era. He may allude to Democratic President Jimmy Carter when he notes that there “is a sapping of confidence across our land”: a strange note given the prevailing view that Carter’s presidency was a failure and his speech questioning the national level of confidence was a reflection and cause of that failure. Obama does not, however, voice himself: He neither reminds us of what he has said nor tell us what he will. The speech revels in the moment—thus, the celebratory tone—but roots itself in history.

Inter-Section

At this point, it is useful to recapitulate the polyphony we saw in the addresses that preceded January 21, 2008. Campaign rhetoric is different from governance rhetoric, so we should expect the voices that make up the Obama polyphony to change as he begins to govern. How that polyphony differs from what we have already seen is outside the scope of this essay. What is within the scope is the question of how the polyphony will change once the rhetoric becomes campaign rhetoric once again.

To guide that analysis, let us review what the discourse of 2004 and 2008 pointed to. It pointed to the interweaving of eight kinds of voices. First there were voices extracted from the founding documents of the nation as well as its founders. Second, there were voices extracted from Barack Obama’s personal story—not so much his voice as those of his parents and grandparents. Third, there were voices of average Americans. Related to these voices are the fourth thread we found: the imagined voice of the population at-large, that is, what the people are saying. Fifth, there were voices of the opposition—usually raised in order to criticize them. These voices were rarely partisan opponents; instead, they were more general such as “cynics” or “Washington insiders.” Sixth, there was the voice of Scripture. With Dr. King as a bridge, there were, sixth, voices of noteworthy Americans Obama wishes to be associated with. Lincoln, Kennedy, and King are the prominent ones. And finally, there were the voices of Obama himself, both what he said and what he will say.

The critical question, then, is whether any of these threads are dropped and whether any new threads are added when campaign rhetoric becomes once again prominent.

Obama’s Campaign Discourse, 2012

DNC, 2012

Much governance—and much public speaking about matters of governance—intervenes between the 2008 inaugural and the campaign addresses of the 2012 season.

Without a primary opponent, many of Obama's speeches might be considered quasi-political. When he speaks as president during the Republican Party's primary season and when he speaks as president once the Republicans have presumably made their choice of Mitt Romney, there are, of course, campaign implications. But this analysis will begin when the campaign *per se* began with Obama's address to the DNC in Charlotte.

Most of the threads identified thus far in the polyphony Obama created before he began governing on January 21, 2008, are present in this speech, but many are barely present. They are, perhaps, no longer needed, for Obama is the president and the fabric of his campaigning discourse is a known.

Obama does briefly voice foundational documents, but he is well into the speech before he paraphrases the Declaration of Independence and seems to evoke the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution by beginning a paragraph with "We the people."

Obama does refer to his story. He refers to wife Michelle's speech "a few nights ago"; he refers to his 2004 DNC keynote. He refers to how education represented a "gateway" for both Michelle and himself, and he refers to his grandfather's service in the Army and his grandmother's service on an armaments assembly line and, then, their joint ability to go to college after World War II and buy a home. These references are brief; the evoked voices, heard but not stressed.

Obama does bring in many stories about average Americans—and thus, implicitly, their voices. He goes back to his time working as a community organizer in Chicago and recalls the "people [living] in the shadow of a shuttered steel mill." He goes back to 2008 and recalls families struggling with bills and "folks racking up more and more debt." Later, he refers to automobile workers in Detroit and Toledo, "a little girl with a heart disorder in Phoenix," "a young man in Colorado" who is now able to attend medical school, "a young immigrant" who will now not be deported, "selfless soldiers" and their families, a young homeless woman who had just won a science fair, an auto worker who had just won the lottery and "bought flags for his whole town," a family business in Minnesota that accepted lower profits rather than lay off workers, and a young sailor who lost a leg in war but was now racing on his bicycle against fellow wounded warriors. We "hear" these voices as well as that of the general public—enacted by those assembled at the convention, who scream "No" to the idea of giving tax breaks to corporations that ship jobs overseas.

Obama makes one vague reference to Scripture. However, he voices the opposition many times—always to criticize it. Sometimes, it is the supposed voice of the Republican Party saying, "[t]ry a tax cut," "try another," and "[t]ake two take cuts, roll back some regulations, and call us in the morning." Sometimes, the voice is that of Romney or Romney and Ryan. Obama recalls that Romney called Russia "our number one enemy, not al Qaida"; Obama recalls that Romney managed undiplomatically to insult the British when he visited the Olympics; Obama recalls Romney saying "it was tragic to end the war in Iraq." Obama says, "Governor Romney and his friends in Congress tell us we can somehow lower our deficits by spending trillions on new tax breaks for the wealthy" and implies that these same politicians would tell students "to pay more for college," ask seniors "to pay thousands of dollars more" on healthcare,

advise all who cannot afford healthcare to not get sick and all who “can’t afford to start a business or go to college” to “borrow money from your parents.” These opposition voices blame others—“welfare recipients,” “unions,” “immigrants,” and “gays”—for the nation’s difficulties. These opposition voices want to tell people whom they can marry or tell women what healthcare choices they can make. They are joined by what Obama terms “other voices” who are trying to “buy this election” “with the \$10 million checks” and who are “trying to make it harder for you to vote.” Obama insists that the voters’ voices must be heard in opposition to these Republican oppositional ones.

Obama also brings in the voices—quoted, stylized, or implied—of others he wants on his side. He evokes Franklin Roosevelt’s advocacy of bold responses to economic difficulties; he refers to what Bill Clinton had said about the GOP’s economic strategies the night before; he stylizes John Kennedy when telling his audience that “America is not about what can be done for us”; and, in a serious, reflective moment, he quotes Lincoln, saying, “I’ve been driven to my knees many times by the overwhelming conviction that I had no place else to go” in characterizing his own frustration at how intractable the nation’s problems are. These other voices are minor, however. We hear more of the imagined words of the opposition, and we hear more of the real and imagined voice of Obama himself as leader.

Obama characterizes himself as someone who will tell the people the truth. He refers back to his voiced promises to end the war in Iraq and “refocus on the terrorists who actually attacked us on 9/11.” He refers to how under his leadership the nation has reasserted its “power across the Pacific,” “stood up to China,” and “advanced the rights and dignity of all human beings.”

Election Night, 2012

The 2008 victory was the cause of great celebration; the 2012 speech, although delivered to a large audience, was more restrained. So was the rhetoric.

Obama does not voice foundational documents; he also does not insert voices from his personal past. He does, however, heavily weave in the voices of average Americans—both individually and in the aggregate.

The range of individual voices is striking. Some are campaign workers: a field organizer who is working his way through college; a door-to-door volunteer who is delighting in her brother’s new job; a phone bank volunteer whose spouse is in the military and is counting on support once the spouse returns from overseas service. Others are familiar ones in much liberal rhetoric: an immigrant’s daughter studying hard in American schools; a young boy in South Chicago; a furniture worker’s child in North Carolina who wants to be a doctor or even a president. Others are, presumably, people Obama met during the campaign: family business owners who reduce profits rather than lay off workers, workers who reduce hours rather than see compatriots dismissed; soldiers who reenlist; Navy Seals who risk their lives; leaders in New York and New Jersey who put politics aside to service their constituents in the wake of Hurricane Sandy; a man in Ohio whose daughter is suffering from leukemia and is seeing his resources dwindle. Those who heard his story are also evoked: their tears

speak their support for this man who is struggling but getting by thanks to “Obamacare” provisions that prevented an insurance company from ending its assistance. Only this man’s location—Ohio—is noted. The remainder are simply Americans.

The aggregate voice is so constructed by Obama to support his future second term. The voice is said to reaffirm the American spirit that has triumphed previously against depression and despair; the voice is said to remind us that we have fought back before. The voice, Obama assures Americans, has been heard as voters cast their ballots.

Obama introduces no voices from his family past. Presumably, those voices have been heard enough. So he pays tribute to wife and daughters but says nothing else about his story. His story then was the important thing in the first campaign but less so now in the second.

The president does bring in opposition voices. Initially, the voices are those of “the cynics” who demean the political process as involving special interests and egos. But Obama admits that amidst the noise of the campaign there were arguments voiced on opposite sides. That they exist is, according to Obama, “a mark of our liberty.” Some of the voices on the opposite side were fierce, but Obama tries to soften them by lumping them together with equally fierce voices on his side and saying that he learned from all of these voices.

The Bible is not voiced, and the only noteworthy political figure heard is John F. Kennedy, whose famous “Ask not” line from his inaugural is vaguely evoked by an antithesis struck by Obama between what America can do for us and what we—*together*—can do for America. Obama does not revoice his previous lines, but he does allude to what he might say in coming weeks and months to congressional leaders from both parties.

All in all, the address seems devoted to voicing the concerns of average Americans. They are heard throughout; other elements of the Obama polyphony are heard rarely or not at all. The thrust of this new polyphony would seem to be that average Americans are speaking, Obama is listening, and—then—Obama is advocating for them in the policy directions he pushes Congress in. All polyphonies in politics have a purpose. Whereas the rich polyphony of 2004 through 2009 seemed to serve many purposes, which will be discussed in this essay’s next section, this polyphony seems more focused on making the concerns and needs of average Americans something his government intends to serve.

The Changing Polyphony

I envision this study as having eight registers; each one can be represented by a vertical bar graph. Imagine, then, two figures I might have offered if this study had been quantitative, not rhetorical. The first would offer the eight registers with the 2004 through 2009 rhetoric in mind. This first figure would show measureable content in all eight, corresponding to the eight kinds of voices the speeches contain.

The story would merge a national one and a personal one. This story would also be an African American story, although that thread would thin as the years past. While a strongly African American story, it would have biblical resonance. As these threads

thin, replacing them would be a more Democratic Party story with references to what the president had said within that more traditionally defined political story. Others would participate in this story, both as individuals and collectively, as beneficiaries and as the cheering throng. And there would be characters in opposition. Some would be those cynical ones who refuse to believe that politics can promote the good; a few would be specific opposition figures.

The Obama of this story is a hero. He has achieved, despite a background that would not promise success. As hero, he will now shift his attention from his success to the needs of those he now can serve because he has been successful. With that shift, his heroism begins to become more that of a party figure than an African American one. With that shift, the opposition begins to shift as well from those who doubt the American dream he has lived to specific political opponents who differ with him on both philosophy and policy.

The second figure shows some registers down and some registers up. Markedly down would be biblical voices; also down would be the voices that tell Obama's personal story. Markedly up would be the voices of Democratic Party luminaries, especially Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy; the voices of many individuals who need the policies advocated by Obama; the voices of opposition political figures; and Obama's own voice, recalled from previous campaigns and the first term.

What do these changes suggest about the evolving story Obama is telling? First, the revised story is still about Obama, but it is now more about Obama as a public policy leader, less about Obama as an individual whose backstory would label him as unlikely to be in the White House. Second, the revised story is more about the people who need the government Obama advocates and the policy initiatives he argues for. Third, the revised story is more partisan. Obama situates his story in a line of Democratic Party stories, and the opposition voices morph from those of the amorphous cynics and insiders of the earlier rhetoric to those of Republican Party interests and leaders.

These three changes in the story can be encapsulated in three *Ps*: policy, people, and partisanship. The story, as seen in the polyphony Obama creates, shifts from being Obama's personal one presented in terms that would resonate especially with an African American audience to a populist progressive Democratic one. The story, of course, evolved: the Obama "people" did not, one day, decide to alter the president's rhetoric. The evolution is also somewhat predictable: one would have guessed that the Obama of 2004 to 2009 would be the person standing on the outside, while the Obama of 2012 would be the president fighting, from the inside, for specific policies. However, there are many ways to construct the presidential story. Although it would probably deal more with policy matters in any construction, it did not have to acquire the populist, partisan edge that it does. Taking the story in that direction was a choice.

Did this choice to alter the story correspond with other changes in the 2012 Obama campaign? Did Obama's advertising reflect policy, people, and partisanship? Did his stump speeches? Did his debate performances? Were all three elements consistently present—that is, if one were to have registers for these three, would they be equally high in all ads, all speeches, and all three debates? These are, of course, not questions this essay attempts to answer. Rather, the essay raises them. To the extent that Obama's

evolving story shifts from one orchestration to another, one would hope that a sense of the polyphony Obama creates could provide a rhetorical lens through which others, asking more typical campaign communication questions, might examine those questions. Put another way, an examination of the evolving story suggests what the Obama campaign in 2012 might have been like, overall, if the other communication in the campaign was consonant with the story the polyphony in his major addresses was offering listeners. Was it consistently about policy, people, and partisanship?

Walter Fisher has, of course, suggested that all arguments are inherently stories (1987). Following his approach, a critic would ask how persuasive the story is. If this critic discerned a consistent story in the speeches, he or she might then ask if other texts were consonant with it—that is, did they tell the same story? This essay's approach is different. Rather than use traditional narratological methods and treat each speech as a discrete artifact, this essay follows Bakhtin and, based on the premise that discourse lacks finalizability, considers the campaign speeches as an evolving story and tries to discern, speech by speech, the polyphony Obama creates. Then, this approach would ask not just if other texts are consonant but, whether they are or not, to what extent are we seeing a rhetorical strategy in execution. The goal, then, is less to ascertain persuasiveness than to describe how the rhetor tries to position himself or herself through the story he or she weaves.

Persuasiveness is not, however, irrelevant. If Obama is controlling the story, which this essay suggests he is, then is the shifting an example of shrewd control? Was the story, with certain voices emphasized, the effective one in 2004 through 2009? Was the continuing story, with somewhat different emphases, the effective one 4 years later? I would argue that the answer is yes. In 2008, voters were asked to embrace a compelling story of hope, which was simultaneously an American story, an African American story, and as outsider's story. The polyphony Obama constructed tells that story well. In 2012, voters were asked to do something else—to support certain policy directions, to support someone who would fight for average people, and to reject a stereotyped vision of the Republican Party for a noble vision of the Democratic Party. The polyphony Obama constructed offers a narrative frame that presents that story well. The evolving polyphony, then, is not the product of either chronology or history but, rather, a reflection of careful control of the story.

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Notes

1. I use a similar heuristic based on Bakhtin's notion of passive unidirectional double-voiced discourse in my *When Congress Debates: A Bakhtinian Paradigm* (Sheckles, 2000).

2. Obama's speeches are quoted from copies offered by different media sources on the Internet. They are listed, speech by speech, in the References section (Obama, 2004, 2008a, 2008b, 2012a, 2012b). As is the case for many texts online, there are no page numbers.
3. My essay on the 2008 campaign in this *American Behavioral Scientist* series focuses on this address, both the significance of the place where it was delivered and the significance of the voices Obama quotes and echoes (Sheckels, 2010).

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