This symposium reaches print as the US electoral machinery—thus far, the bizarre and often troubling marketing campaigns of both party primaries—whirs and spins and thuds into high gear. This coming autumn, in November 2016, voters throughout the United States (and writing in from abroad) will cast ballots, offering guidance to an Electoral College that, by tradition, will adhere to that guidance in selecting a president. Next winter, in January 2017, the “Age of Obama,” called such appreciatively or derisively, will come to an end. This symposium, “Barack Obama’s Significance for Rhetoric and Composition,” aims to provoke and renew disciplinary conversations about the meaning of an age now nearly past, as well as to pose questions that resonate for presidential rhetoric generally. As scholars of rhetoric and writing, and classroom teachers, taking up Morris Young’s call for attunement to “deeper-seeded problems that
only continue to injure those who we often assume are provided with new opportunities for expression” in this age (586), we ask here what Obama’s rhetoric signifies for (or how it disruptively Signifies, à la Henry Louis Gates, Jr.) our field. In so doing, we acknowledge that the rhetorical significance of Barack Obama goes beyond Barack Obama. Whatever his candidacy and presidency will have been for our field will impact, for years to come, how we treat presidential composing, race in the public sphere, and rhetorical ethics generally. So, how does Obama signify (for) rhetoric and composition? What does the Age of Obama mean for the study and teaching of writing in the United States today?

At the very least, we can say this age has comprised some extraordinary contradictions, revolving around issues central to our field: the value of eloquence, the contingency of rhetorical efficacy, and the ethics of persuasion. In her 2008 NCTE presidential address, Kathleen Yancey underscores the kairotic power of candidate Obama’s rhetoric: “through writing in many media to multiple audiences . . . an unlikely candidate became a spokesman for a generation of hope” (317). Though not always in celebratory tones, it was more or less universally agreed that candidate Barack Obama was rhetorically gifted. By contrast, though President Barack Obama is no less eloquent, his nearly eight years in office have been marked by an enduring inability to persuade broad swathes of the populace of even such basic facts as his citizenship. As political scientist Joseph Lowndes notes in a compelling discussion of presidential bodies, “During [Obama’s] term in office his presidency has been challenged on birthright grounds; he has been visually portrayed as a figure of urban menace; and a major oppositional movement to his presidency emerged that is at least partially motivated by race” (470). Obama’s tenure in the White House has met with some of the most resistant, and most personally rejecting, public rhetorics faced by any president to date.

Meanwhile, the ethical charm Obama’s rhetoric held for rhetoric and composition scholars in those early years seems largely to have worn off. Democratic disillusionment has set in among many who once thought his composing style particularly virtuous. But was candidate Obama’s rhetoric ever really all that “good”? What is “good” presidential rhetoric for teachers and scholars of writing? Are we right to continue taking our lead from Jeffrey Tulis’s classic The Rhetorical Presidency, which contends that the “essential task” of the presidency is now to “promote policy initiatives nationwide, and to inspirit the population” (4)? In raising such questions, this symposium builds on lines of thought pursued by rhetoric, composition, and communication scholars in
Symposium / Obama’s Significance for Rhetoric

Recent volumes like Matthew Abraham and Erec Smith’s The Making of Barack Obama: The Politics of Persuasion and Justin Vaughn and Jennifer Mercieca’s The Rhetoric of Heroic Expectations: Establishing the Obama Presidency. As is appropriate for the end of an era, however, this symposium often strikes a critical note. Beginning with Nicole Ashanti McFarlane’s piece, the symposium especially examines intersections of race, gender, language politics, and political possibility.

For McFarlane, Obama’s use of Black vernacular is a mixed blessing, at once improving the social standing of African American English and serving a white supremacist status quo. With similar ambidextrousness, essays by Erec Smith and Elizabeth Flynn query the gender dynamics and commitments of Obama’s rhetoric. Smith explores Obama’s use of feminine-gendered language to negotiate white audiences’ perception of him as racially threatening—and at once laments and celebrates this. Flynn, meanwhile, paints a picture of Obama as a feminist rhetor, a powerful advocate for women’s issues. She complicates this picture, however, by placing Obama’s rhetoric in the constrained tradition of liberal or modernist feminism. Ira Allen, in closing, warns against too-ready celebrations of Obama’s (or anybody else’s) presidential rhetoric, urging a rethinking of presidential rhetoric’s ethical stakes in nondemocratic political systems like the United States. Taken together, the essays of this symposium aim less at establishing a single story of Barack Obama’s significance for rhetoric and composition and more at fostering ongoing conversation about that significance. As teachers of writing move in spring and fall 2016 to discuss the rhetoric of a new presidential election, we hope this symposium will recall the dissoi logoi of classical rhetoric. Whatever a candidate or president’s particular significance for our field, it is surely multiple and contradictory. As rhetoricians and composition specialists, we are charged with attending to—and arguing the various sides of—those contradictions.

In “Obama’s Rhetoric: Black Talk Flow, White Talk Fluent,” Nicole Ashanti McFarlane sets the tone with a critically bivalent reading of Obama’s rhetoric. On the one hand, she argues, his frequent recourse to Black vernacular underscores the positive presence of Obama’s Black body in the white White House—and drives up the public stock value of African American English. A part of what Obama signifies for rhetoric and composition, McFarlane shows, is that we need to invest anew in vigorous mechanisms for valuing dialectal variance in the teaching of writing. And yet, McFarlane also sees in Obama’s Black rhetorical flourishes a troubling complicity with the system of white supremacy.
She argues that, in some ways, Obama’s discursive Blackness serves as cover for the unrelenting whiteness of a political system geared toward maintaining privilege more than toward democracy. Any reckoning with Obama’s significance for rhetoric and composition will need to account for his imbrication in a racialized system that rhetoric and composition, in its basic orientation, has long aimed to teach students how, through writing, to navigate and to change.

At the intersection of race and gender, Erec Smith considers Obama’s feminized rhetoric in terms of both constraint and agency. In “Obama’s Feminine Discourse: A Rhetorical Necessity of Black Male Leadership,” he establishes that Obama employs feminine discourse as a way of appealing to white audiences fearful of black men. Smith begins by quoting pundit Matthew Continetti’s assertion (alongside others) that Obama has been the first woman president. Continetti’s use of the word girl in that assertion makes clear his disdain. Ironically, Obama’s position as one of the most powerful men in the world and yet also black has dictated that he represent himself as feminine, often coded as weak, secondary to men. Smith concludes, “Black leaders must put forth a nonthreatening persona that does not smack of hegemonic masculinity. President Barack Obama is no exception.” In analyzing this “must,” Smith’s essay invokes intertextual references to the considerable work in rhetoric and composition on the feminization of women compositionists and of the field itself. Susan Miller’s image of the sad women in the basement has become iconic. To be feminine and feminized is not a good thing, it would seem. Importantly, however, Smith does not agree entirely. For him, Obama’s feminine discourse suggests important political possibilities.

Are feminine and feminist, in this instance, one and the same? In “Is Barack Obama the First Feminist President?” Elizabeth Flynn builds on past theoretical work to suggest that Obama may be the first feminist president. Contrasting liberal with radical and postmodern feminism, she sees in Obama’s speeches elements of the former. Especially in the 2014 State of the Union Address, she shows, he foregrounded women’s issues and highlighted successful women or women in challenging situations. He was deliberately appealing to the women in his audience and those men who are sympathetic to women’s issues. Moreover, audience analysis makes clear the risk he took in doing so. The overall response to the address, in terms of tweets at least, was negative. Perhaps, Flynn offers, this negative response indicates a constraint on presidential feminism. An understanding of constraint is helpful in assessing Obama’s liberal feminism. Proposals such as increasing the minimum wage, which would seem progres-
sive by some measures, are seen as regressive by more radical feminists. Raising the rate to $10.10 an hour is not enough if what is needed is $15.00 an hour. But perhaps economic justice is simply not within the purview of presidents. Might liberal feminism be as good as it gets, at the top?

Registering still deeper skepticism about the prospects of presidential rhetoric, Ira Allen’s essay, “On Obama’s Eloquence as a Disciplinary Dilemma,” asks how rhetoric and composition should respond to that rhetoric in an oligarchy, a system of rule by the few (and, specifically, by the wealthy). For Allen, celebratory responses to Barack Obama’s rhetorical prowess present a dilemma for the discipline. How are we to safeguard the ethical commitment that distinguishes our field from others interested in persuasion when studying and teaching presidential rhetoric in a non-democracy? What are we to do with eloquence that is purportedly deliberative in a system that precludes effective popular participation in political decision making? In these questions and those of all the essays of this symposium, questions of professional identity surface. When writing teachers talk with students about political rhetoric, we face a tension. On the one hand, most of us are citizens in systems that call on us to deposit opinions in ballot boxes. On the other hand, we are critical writers and interlocutors in systems that call on us, as Kathleen Yancey puts it, to “help students create the texts of their lives as we connect to and carry forward the larger history of composing”—that they may become the “citizen writers of our country, the citizen writers of our world, and the writers of our future” (334–35). A crucial question, then, and one bearing directly on what Obama’s significance for rhetoric and composition will have been, is how best we may balance those identities.

Obama’s Rhetoric: Black Talk Flow, White Folk Fluent

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It was 2008. We were all returning to campus after fall break, and there, as elsewhere, the top subject of discussion was Barack Obama’s historic presidential win. Knee-deep in my first semester of PhD coursework, my scholarly focus still inchoate, I was greeted by a cohort enrolled in the same program. She breathlessly expressed her thrill at electing our first African American president. After
a few minutes of triumphant commentary and the usual departmental banter, she somberly switched tones to ask (in all earnestness, without the slightest hint of irony) how I felt about race rhetoric no longer being a relevant topic for serious study—what with the whole racism thing having just been solved last Tuesday. Puzzled and more than a bit taken aback, I mumbled that I’d somehow find adequate research, and attributed the pathos of her question to the typical apprehensions shared among first-year doctoral students. As chance would have it, the subject of the election came up in another seminar that week. I listened. Happily anticipating Obama’s impending inauguration, one student joined in. He extolled the integrity of Obama’s savvy media campaign and predicted the foreign diplomatic ground that would be regained by the US as a result of the new administration. But it was the last thing he said about the merits of Obama’s campaign that caught me so off guard. “Above all,” he crowed, “this election will once and for all end the constant identity politics and definitively prove that America has no more race problems! Racism is no longer an issue.” The sentiment provoked by this last remark elicited such a profusion of nodding heads and collectively uttered “uh-huhs” and “thank goodneses” that, if ever there was such a thing as a “White Folk Amen Corner,” it existed on that day, in that classroom. I almost fell outta my chair.

True Story. And so it was . . . or so it seemed.

A decade ago, in the years leading up to Obama’s first election to executive office, many scholars in our field praised the persuasive genius of his 2004 keynote address at the Democratic National Convention (Frank and McPhail 571). Accolades for his 2008 Philadelphia campaign trail speech on race, formally referred to as “A More Perfect Union,” only added to the perceived brilliance of Obama’s rhetoric. But troubling attitudes can run through such praise, as in Senate Democrat Harry Reid’s reported musing over Obama’s political viability: derived from his light-skinned complexion and having “no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one” (qtd. in Heilemann and Halperin 37). In the wake of Obama’s decidedly mild responses to Ferguson and other moments of deep racial tension—and the dramatic backlash that has each time ensued—we can scarcely deny what critical race scholars suspected from the outset. Whatever heights have been achieved through his rise, Barack Obama’s discourse remains firmly situated within the rhetorical horizon of racism.

For all Barack Obama’s rhetorical skill, he cannot talk his, or our, way out of imbrication in oppressive power structures. Examining Obama’s linguistic assemblage of ostensibly White-sounding speech with Black language performances sheds light on the racial intricacies of his presidential situation.
Throughout his two terms, the verbal and visual vitriol levied at Barack Obama by partisan opposition, fueled by elements of the far right media, most would agree, seems to have stemmed from the mere fact of Obama’s historic role in presiding over this first Black White House (Rowland 31). After all, the edifice that houses the president is doubly named: as much for its outer facade as for the face of racial power. For half its history, the famous residence at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue was known simply as the Executive Mansion—up until 1901, that is, when Theodore Roosevelt invited Booker T. Washington to dinner and the engraving on the stationery was officially changed to read “White House—Washington” (Seale 689). Through White populist foreclosures of Blackness and the policing of racial boundaries, Whiteness was baked into that house’s very bricks. But the moniker White House was formalized only in the twentieth century, speaking to a history of White antipathy for Black presence in the executive branch home as in the country at large.1

In this essay, I consider the significance of the fact that Barack Obama’s rhetoric functions, and has to function, as a continual semiotic oscillation on two basic fronts: Whiteness and Blackness. My own claims are thus necessarily bivalent. On one end, I forward an argument that Obama’s approach to public speech marks a cultural turning point for the way it behooves White audiences to register the nuances of African American English (AAE) with more consideration. On the other end, I note that this symbolic interplay has done little enough for the greater esteem of Blackness itself. Thinking through the significance of Obama’s linguistic Blackness and Whiteness is crucial for rhetoric and composition, a field that has long recognized students’ right to their own language—but still struggles to come to terms with its own commitments and institutionalized responsibilities to the dominant discourse (Smitherman 22). “Blackness” and “Whiteness,” of course, each carry a host of competing definitions. I define the former as an identity that one becomes and that represents an epiphany about having been conscripted into a racial taxonomy, placed at the bottom of a social hierarchy. Blackness is the negotiation of an ethical and political stance within dominant frameworks of Western philosophical, scientific, and religious thought. Whiteness functions in a separate mode that implies more than mere inversion. Whiteness systematizes how race is formed in the first place. Blackness articulates the violence of racial politics by graphically exposing the remarkability of Whiteness.

The racial constrainedness of Obama’s rhetoric highlights enduring questions about citizenship and democracy in the United States, questions that
are central for rhetoric and composition. I begin this discussion by explaining why I’m encouraged by Obama’s role as a presidential rhetor and African American rhetorical change agent. Obama’s performative endorsements of Blackness by way of African American expression work not only to make AAE more comprehensible to white ears, but promote it in such a way that Black speech is normalized as a standardized dialect to rival the Language of Wider Communication (LWC) as the dominant speaking form (Taylor 27). American presidential rhetoric qua racial rhetoric cannot transcend the basic racism of its situation. But, although negotiating a negatively racialized communication context, Obama's style of presiding over national politics as a fluent and unabashed speaker of Black English more firmly establishes Blackness as an essential medium of production for public address. Moreover, alongside his actual speech patterns, Obama’s “foreign-sounding” name itself can be seen as a hack into America’s monocultural linguistic framework. Barack Hussein Obama constitutes its own rhetoric. Since cultural naming is proxy for race and the auditory equivalent of racial and ethnic phenotype, the president’s name serves as a sort of slogan, defying and defining a web of conflicting significations. In a context where Black-sounding names are still considered exotic to American whites, resulting in a range of discriminatory social practices that impact factors related to educational, economic, and medical outcomes, “Obama” registers greater possibilities for political equality (Fryer and Levitt passim). Since African American naming conventions, as a type of ethnic identifier, remain subject to racial discrimination, simply saying the president’s name voices a rhetoric that celebrates Black linguistic and cultural production. From this standpoint, enunciation is provocation. Not merely “Obama,” but “President Obama,” the name and title together underscore the presence of a brown face in the Oval Office, a political accomplishment with rhetorical implications. The phrase “President Obama” is a defense of Blackness itself. Having a US president with a name whose origins are obviously non-European (and African, to boot) represents a cultural and social breakthrough.

Obama’s spoken rhetoric further helps audiences develop increased levels of bidialectal proficiency. The expansive language repertoire afforded by Obama’s shifting forms of African American rhetorical address suggests new resonances for progressive multiracial and class coalitions. If, after all, the aim of African American rhetoric is to assert the collective humanity of those who have been historically disenfranchised and to serve as a primary tool for achieving sociopolitical empowerment in times when access to mainstream
institutions of political power is unavailable, then Obama’s version of presidential rhetoric seems to promise new modes of social justice. A president who meshes AAE with LWC certainly raises the cultural prestige of Blackness, as Vershawn Ashanti Young suggests (Your Average Nigga 98). Because Obama’s rhetoric is dichotomously informed by both Black and White cultural sensibilities, Obama is able to bring African American rhetoric to the fore in ways that can reframe broader questions of cultural significance and value.

For our own field, in light of the Blackness of at least some of Obama’s rhetoric, can rhetoric and composition afford to exclude, subsume, and at times, even silence treatments of African American rhetoric as central to American rhetorical studies? Of course, the field has asked (and answered) this question before. In the 1974 document “Students’ Right to Their Own Language,” reaffirmed in 2003 and again in 2014, the Conference on College Composition and Communication articulated a commitment to “cultural and racial variety” as expressed in “a heritage of dialects” (1). The statement, which is central to our field’s self-understanding, rejects the myth of a standard American dialect. And yet, it seemed possible to some in 2008 to celebrate the end of any need for rhetorics of race. And the “academic English” that many teachers of writing teach still looks an awful lot like “standard American dialect,” a dialect of economically privileged White folk. There is a divide between our self-concept and our achievement, as a field. It is here, as Keith Gilyard argues, that dominant cultural assumptions about Black language as the mark of the uneducated and politically uninformed deprive us all of opportunities to function as ethically responsive participants in our field and in our society (180). Perhaps the sometimey or fair-weather Blackness of Obama’s rhetoric can open up new space for conversations some in rhetoric and composition would like to believe are settled.

We need to consider more fully the intersection of Black language and Black cultural politics in Obama’s discourse. As H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman show in Articulate While Black, for instance, “Obama’s spoken black vernacular demonstrates his respect for hip-hop by showing that he engages directly with the culture and that he appreciates it for its complexity and political potential” (139). Obama’s deployment of AAE—both as formal oratory and everyday speech—can play a vital role in helping to create a critically informed, culturally aware, authentically enlightened citizenry and can foster a better understanding of pressing matters pertaining to race as well as the generational expectations of social equality and economic mobility mediated
Within rhetoric and composition, the time is at hand for renewed engagement with our own rhetorical multiplicity. Obama's rhetorical dabbling with dialect broadens the possibilities of the American rhetorical ecology in a salutary, even necessary fashion, challenging the function of White gatekeeping. In other words, as White folk begin listening more intently to AAE for the purpose of receiving political content accurately, how we think about academic English must also change. This is especially true at intersections of popular youth culture. Through his unique mode of presidential address, Obama, a practitioner of both high and low forms of African American English, opens a space to engage in conversations about a range of millennial anxieties regarding the continuing role of race as a materially shaping factor in individual life chances. These conversations put into question just what we who teach writing should encourage students to think and practice when it comes to dialects of English. With all this in mind, it seems the rhetoric of Barack Obama cannot but be good for composition and communication. But how can such optimism be sustained when one considers the 2012 American National Election Studies on racial stereotypes, which show that White millennials are just as likely as their baby-boomer parents to view Blacks as less intelligent and hardworking than they? Our optimism runs against a wall when we look away from Obama's hip-hop stylings and into the functions of his rhetoric.

Obama's language is certainly a kairotic response to whatever circumstances arise. Assigning virtue to the president's rhetoric because he occasionally sprinkles a little hip-hop on top, however, is to ignore the peril of totalizing proclamations, celebrating a veneer of Blackness without engaging its more substantive aspects. Obama's easy command of popular slang and pop-culture references, a central feature of his communicative style, provides all the right moves of sounding as though he's speaking candidly to Black folk—even when he is doing nothing of the sort. The trickiness of Obama's rhetorical position often becomes clear when he is talking on behalf of Whiteness to Black folk. For instance, at the unveiling of a youth mentoring initiative by a minority men's coalition group in Washington, DC, at the height of the discontent surrounding the killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, et al., Obama colloquially opened with the greeting, "How you all doing?" Here, he conformed to the convention of AAE copula deletion, but did so in the semiformal register of AAE through a hypercorrected variation on the non-contraction form of "y'all." His rhetorical affect positively registers Obama as an educated, broadly relatable Black professional. One young man at the event...
questioned Obama about how he copes with being judged based on his outer appearance. Addressing in only very sideways fashion the unprecedented and racist disparagement he has received as a sitting president, Obama answered with a trope on the African American idea of the North Star being his moral guide. Obama suggested not listening to people calling you a “buster” (a Black slang term for poser or coward) and maintained a critical distance from his slang as he ‘g’-droppingly quipped:

One of the things, as you grow up you start trying to figure out, is who gives you constructive criticism because they’re invested in the same things you are but maybe can see some things you can’t, versus folks who are just—what did somebody say—hatin’? Somebody just hatin’, just haters—I won’t go there. (“President Obama”)

President Obama wrapped up his answer, which said next to nothing about race directly, with a small bit of advice about using constructive criticism to advance a goal.

President Obama’s AAE/LWC meshing allows for ethically ambiguous moves. Both in his greeting and throughout his exchange with the young men, there are a few things to note about Obama’s language. When he alluded to the North Star, Obama conjured up the legacy of moral suasion, of nonviolent emancipation from racial structures, imploring African American men to navigate their own paths to freedom. Note how *hatin’* is held at a White distance (“what did somebody say...?”)—and rather than discussing racial profiling, police brutality, and unfair sentencing, he relied on semiformal AAE speech patterns to attenuate threat for White media watchers and simultaneously establish community with his immediate Black audience. Here, his entire focus was on the *same ol’, same ol’* “work-hard-and-walk-yourself-across-that-bridge-to-success” rhetoric that has long placed the burden of African American equality on Blacks alone while absolving White structures of racism. It is no surprise that Obama then spoke about providing federal waivers to unaccountable private schools and handing out cash incentives to private consultants and curriculum template firms. For Obama, African American rhetoric is multidirectional bricolage. His speeches are recitational constructions of all-American, democratic aspirations, which both militate against the linguistic logics of White racist political structures and serve as communicative decoy. On this latter front, by avoiding discussion of the dominant racial structures, Obama’s rhetoric contributes to the maintenance of White supremacy.
Of course, this is not to paint Obama as some sort of closeted racist. Depictions of White supremacists as white-robed cross burners are insufficient—at times almost comically so—for the task of directly addressing the violent conditions confronting Black people. White supremacy runs far deeper. For instance, we teach writing and study rhetoric and composition today against the ever-present backdrop of a philosophical tradition that quietly asserts that White Europeans are the most culturally and technologically significant contributors to society in all of human history. Our very structures of thought about language posit White folk as culturally superior to everyone else. White control and domination over the rest of humanity, therefore, is naturalized as the only legitimate arrangement for social governance. If such notions are ever to be overturned and transformative change is to occur, nothing short of mass-movement politics and radical policy reforms will do. Unseating the racist status quo will require complete structural overhauls.

Without impressing upon his audience the necessity of dismantling structural impediments to the African American struggle to transcend poverty and social despair, Obama merely co-articulates the hegemony of White privilege. If his messages about race are not aimed at achieving emancipatory ideals, Obama’s Blackness counts as little more than symbolic diversity. We in rhetoric and composition have a duty to note this fact, but also to maintain awareness of the linguistic spaces opened by Obama’s AAE. Too often in his role as national leader, Obama’s rhetoric lends credence to charges that his policies make Black residence in the White House but a “short-term lease”—insofar as he refuses to initiate any “structural renovations” on issues of race (Bonilla-Silva, par. 8). Similar, more provocative claims arise in moments of Black political dissent when Black public intellectuals call Obama out personally: for being a “vacuous opportunist,” a “black mascot of Wall Street” who perpetuates “white supremacy in blackface” (Reed par. 1; Hedges par. 3; Bonilla-Silva par. 8). While the cultural-left Black Studies scholar in me worries that such denunciations ring true, the compositionist in me bristles. It is precisely such \textit{ad hominem} attacks that, because they close down conversation, I work to help students avoid. It is not enough, I emphasize when teaching students to write sound intellectual arguments, simply to condemn. So I cannot agree that Barack Obama’s personal identity is anti-Black—at the same time that I do take issue with an anti-Blackness encouraged by his double-dealing language habits. Unlike more moralistic commentators, I hesitate to question Obama’s self-understanding
as an African American, but I have no qualms with challenging his AAE flow for the way it works at times against Black communities and local African American interests. What to think?

In answering this question, I am obviously of mixed minds (and language codes) and lean toward the final encompassing view: the Blacker Obama talk, the Whiter he sound. Obama’s English indexes competing audience interpretations of American national identity and explodes meaning for contemporary listeners who can perceive the president as someone who either reinforces or releases us from America’s longstanding problems with race and racism—or both. The issue of Barack Obama’s rhetoric once more returns questions born of frustration with the ostensibly neutral force of rhetoric as a tool without political consequences (Berlin 493). All rhetoric has ethical and political ramifications. To recognize Obama’s rhetoric as being of mixed value because of ambiguity inherent in rhetoric itself is to accept the need for a reinvigorated negotiation of our own ambiguities, our own imbrications with all aspects of Western philosophical traditions and taxonomies: the good, the bad, and (yes!) the rhetorically ugly. Barack Obama’s significance for rhetoric and composition, then, should play out in new conversations regarding the ongoing effects of—and our field’s responsibility for dismantling—White supremacy.

Note
1. See Seale, epigraph. Senator Ben “Pitchfork” Tillman of South Carolina reacted to Booker T. Washington’s dinner invitation by publicly declaring, “Entertaining that nigger will necessitate our killing a thousand niggers in the South before they will learn their place again.” The South, and all of America, has tried her best to make good on Tillman’s promise.

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Obama’s Feminine Discourse: A Rhetorical Necessity of Black Male Leadership

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Collaborative, intuitive, soft, attractive, persuasive—these attributes of the “feminine style” are perfect descriptors of Barack Obama’s relation to the world, or at least to those parts of the world that are not Republican or Israeli. . . . Barack Obama has as much of a claim as the next girl to being the first woman president.

—Matthew Continetti, National Review Online

Journalists like Matthew Continetti represent a specific opinion from the American punditry about Barack Obama’s rhetorical style. In either a tongue-in-cheek jab or an accusation of ineptitude, these pundits have dubbed Obama “the first female president” in prominent periodicals. Although Nicole Ashanti McFarlane identifies Obama’s tendency to speak in ways that mesh African American vernacular with more mainstream English dialects as the salient and strategic aspect of his rhetoric, I believe such occasional meshing to be a novel subcategory of a more ubiquitous style. Specifically, my claim is that Obama is, most saliently, “feminine” in his rhetorical style—and necessarily so. Obama’s rhetoric does seem to counter stereotypically masculine modes of communication (Mutua Loc. 145), but pundits like Continetti, who share the privilege of being White in America, do not speculate as to why the President would choose a feminine style. Although feminine rhetoric’s efficacy is unquestioned in many academic contexts—even if used by men—its use by powerful men, especially the president of the United States, is seen by many as a failing.

When assessing Obama’s gender-coded rhetoric, pundits have been remiss to neglect its racial significance. Those who call Obama the first female president (rifling on Toni Morrison’s characterization of Bill Clinton as the first Black president) seem to ignore the rhetorical context of race relations in contemporary America. In what some capriciously deem a post-race society or, more accurately, what author and public intellectual Touré has dubbed a “post-black” society, a Black presidency is possible yet difficult to maintain. Behavior deemed normal and masculine in White men may be deemed intimidating, aggressive, and pathological in Black men (Touré 182). To be elected and reelected, Barack Obama could not perform the masculinity typically available to the US president. In a move dictated by a rhetorical situation involving a Black presidential candidate, an expectation and fear of discussing race rela-
tions, and a lingering racism that many refuse to acknowledge, Obama’s only option was a feminine discourse. This should not be seen as a mere constraint, however. Indeed, based on much scholarship in rhetoric and communication, rhetoric deemed feminine may well be the best means of persuasion for contemporary race relations.

For the remainder of this essay, I highlight the importance of identity by using the term *Discourse* rather than only *rhetoric*—abiding by James Paul Gee’s definition of the term, which he purposefully capitalizes. Gee’s “identity kit” analogy speaks well to the communication and behavior of Barack Obama, especially within his first term and during both campaigns. Gee writes,

> Discourses are ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes. . . . A Discourse is a sort of “identity kit” which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize. (142)

Crucial here is that identity kits create social legibility, recognizable roles. According to journalist Kathleen Parker—one of the few to dub Obama “feminine” with only moderate ridicule—women and men do, indeed, communicate differently. Parker describes a distinctly feminine “identity kit”: “Women tend to be coalition builders rather than mavericks (with the occasional rogue exception). While men seek ways to measure themselves against others . . . women form circles and talk it out” (Parker). Understood in terms of Gee’s Discourse, which considers the verbal and the nonverbal, Obama has created several occasions where Parker’s description gets at what he is doing. Obama seems to work at being both orally and aesthetically appealing, relational, and all-inclusive while emanating an air of humble congeniality. His is a Discourse of feminine, perhaps even feminist, rhetoric.

To be clear, when discussing feminine rhetoric, I draw primarily on Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s definition. Campbell calls feminine rhetoric an enactment of “cultural norms of femininity” (*Man* 2) and describes it thus:

> In rhetorical terms, performing or enacting femininity has meant adopting a personal or self-disclosing tone (signifying nurturance, intimacy, and domesticity) and assuming a feminine persona, e.g., mother, or an ungendered persona, e.g., mediator or prophet, while speaking. It has meant preferring anecdotal evidence (reflecting women’s experiential learning in contrast to men’s expertise), developing ideas inductively (so the audience thinks that it, not this presumptuous woman, drew the conclusions) . . . and avoiding such “macho” strategies as tough
language, confrontation or direct refutation, and any appearance of debating one's opponents. (“Discursive Performance” 5)

In her introduction to volume one of *Man Cannot Speak for Her*, Campbell further describes the role of audience in feminine rhetoric. When someone uses feminine rhetoric, “audience members will be addressed as peers, with recognition of authority based on experience . . . and efforts will be made to create identification with the experiences of the audience and those described by the speaker” (13). That is, the goal is to empower one's audience as well as enhance the proper ethos for oneself. Feminine rhetoric assumes capable, agential audiences.

Pundits have deemed Obama’s Discourse both womanly and, in some instances, ineffective for a world leader. However, Obama’s use of such Discourse is not at all unprecedented. Past presidents embraced the idea of teamwork without being deemed feminine (Campbell, “Discursive Performance” 5). So, why is Obama being targeted and derogatorily labelled a female president? Societal stereotypes about what it means to be a Black male cloud the judgment of the predominately White pundits who call Obama “the first female president.”

Even powerful Black politicians like Obama have to cater to racial expectations today: “You still must make [Whites] think you’re personally comfortable living within their expectations of a Black person” (Touré 187). Stereotypical Black masculinity, which I discuss further below, is not really an option for Obama’s Discourse. The femininity of his Discourse is more pronounced because he has to make White audiences feel comfortable, unthreatened, even powerful themselves.

Obama exudes what Mutua calls “progressive masculinity,” which seeks to reorient contemporary masculinity away from “ideal masculinity, which, by definition, requires the domination of women, children, and, yes, other subordinate, or ‘weaker’ men” (Loc. 720). Indeed, Obama, by being Black and male, suffers from “gendered racism,” Mutua’s term for a double oppression that involves the confluence of racial and gender stereotypes. “Ideal masculinity,” when performed by Black men, threatens many White audiences. Obama, then, is a “female” president because he does not exude stereotypical masculinity; he isn’t allowed to. As a Black man, such behavior may be too intimidating for White audiences.

Helan Page describes this issue bluntly:

The absence of this national equality of tolerance is proof, they say, that an African American man is never relieved, no matter the extent of his success, from the
constant possibility and incessant fear that he might one day become the focus of surveillance and rigorously portrayed as unembraceable—regarded, in the end, as some kind of good-for-nothing nigger. (107)

According to many, Black men do not sound intelligent; they are not good listeners; they do not value civility, empathy, and cooperation; they do not work hard; and they generally are not successful (Lapchick). That is, they are not what Page calls “embraceable.” Being embraceable by a predominately White American audience means a Black man must exude fewer hegemonically masculine traits. Regarding the options left to Black leaders seeking approval from predominately White audiences, especially voters, Page hits on a sad but apparent point: to be accepted and embraceable, a Black man must be a comedian, a musician, or an athlete (102). Exuding power in any other way is threatening. Because Obama could hardly hit the campaign trail or serve as president as a comedian, a musician, or an athlete, his only remaining option was a rhetorical style coded feminine.

Based on a lingering racism that perpetuates a particular definition of Black masculinity, Obama really had no choice. The kairos—Black man running for the United States presidency in the very early twenty-first century—dictated his apparently nonthreatening Discourse. In order to be a Black man deemed safe, he could not act too much like the hegemonic ideal of man. In fact, according to Malcolm Gladwell, Obama purposely donned “mommy jeans” in an attempt to come off less macho and more domestic (qtd. in Touré 183). Feminine Discourse was the rhetorical strategy available to a Black man wishing to enter the political good graces of White America.

Let me be clear that I respect and favor a feminine rhetoric and its centralization in rhetoric and composition. However, coming from Barack Obama, a Black man with immense global power, a predominately White punditry has found such rhetoric to be out of place and even unnatural. The catch-22 of this situation lies in the fact that if Obama had not adopted a feminine rhetoric, if he had not embraced a discourse deemed laughable by media pundits, he may not have been elected. To be a Black leader of Whites is to adopt a softer rhetoric than is thought traditionally masculine. Many of Obama’s critics failed to see this. Many still do not recognize the powerful potentials of a feminine rhetoric, for males and females alike.

Obama’s feminine Discourse was a political necessity but also an effective strategy regarding American race relations. Moreover, it was and is a Discourse with certain real virtues. Any other Discourse may have presented Obama as
“unembraceable.” The fact that a White man has more access to hegemonic masculinity, whereas a Black man must embrace a traditionally female rhetoric if he wants to succeed, bespeaks an insidious racism unacknowledged by those enjoying White privilege. Even if media pundits see Obama as part of the group, as sufficiently successful in “Anglo-conformity” (Feagin and Feagin 30), they miss the fact that such conformity is based on certain behavior, specifically coded female, that alleviates White anxieties. Again, though, this was a move not only of necessity but also of strength.

In fact, this is where some theories of code switching get it wrong. Vern-shawn Young suggests that code-switching—moving from a Black vernacular to a White vernacular—is performed by African American men to ensure acceptance in White contexts. Thus, for a Black man, moving from Black speak to White speak is metonymic to moving from male speak to female speak (“Straight Black Queer” 467). I, however, see Obama’s status as more race-based than gender-based on a physical level, but more gender-based than race-based on a rhetorical level. That is, even if Obama expressed himself in ways coded masculine for a White male, he would still be deemed too masculine for many White audiences. Acting male, period—not just acting like a Black male, specifically—is anathema for Obama and many Black men in positions of power. That is, in many situations, an obviously Black man (physically) cannot safely wield any kind of masculine expression (rhetorically), be it coded Black or White.

If African American leadership is to continue beyond Barack Obama’s tenure, Black male leaders should recognize the feminine Discourse movement as an efficacious one. Many already do. And I by no means think this a bad thing, beyond the racist implications of pundits. This feminine Discourse works to alleviate anxieties by transcending agonism and hierarchy. The Discourse forced upon Obama is one that has been rightly lauded by rhetoricians. In fact, a true deliberative democracy would do well to adopt it. After all, feminine rhetoric is the rhetoric of powerful audiences. Tim Wise, in “Membership Has Its Privileges,” provides an interesting analogy for the way race affects Discourse: “The virtual invisibility that whiteness affords those of us who have it is like psychological money in the bank, the proceeds of which we cash in every day while others are in a state of perpetual overdraft” (134). In order to get out of debt, so to speak, Black leaders must put forth a nonthreatening persona that does not smack of hegemonic masculinity. President Barack Obama is no exception, and indeed is exemplary in this regard.
Note
1. The confines of this symposium preclude a detailed rhetorical analysis of Obama's speeches. Readers might encourage their students to test the theories of this essay on various speeches during Obama's campaigns and presidency (especially his first term and speeches pertaining to race throughout his political career), and to compare these with candidates' speeches in the current election cycle. One can also argue that Obama's rhetoric has leaned more toward the masculine in his second term. Comparing Obama's second-term rhetoric, after winning voter support was no longer a concern, to the rhetoric of his first term and election campaigns is an interesting topic for further research.

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Is Barack Obama the First Feminist President?

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Erec Smith's essay in this symposium, “Obama's Feminine Discourse: A Rhetorical Necessity of Black Male Leadership,” explores the complexities of the claim that Barack Obama is the first female president. Smith sees feminine discourse as Obama's only option and the best means of persuasion for Black leaders—given contemporary race relations. As a Black male, Obama can't alienate his majority White audience by appearing to be threatening, i.e., by employing masculine discourse, hence he aims to appear orally and aesthetically appealing, relational, and all-inclusive while “emanating an air of humble congeniality.” Here, I explore a related but somewhat different issue: the possibility that Obama is the United States' first feminist president. A case can be made that he is, though it can hardly be said that his feminist stance is especially radical or critical. He casts the women's issues he explores primarily in liberal feminist terms, emphasizing the accomplishments of individual women and endorsing liberal solutions to women's problems, such as equal pay for equal work. In considering the question of Obama's feminism, the 2014 State of the
Union address is an especially good locus since it emphasizes women's strengths and challenges in ways that the 2015 address, for instance, does not. This essay concludes that Obama's address should indeed be considered liberal feminist but also attends to some criticism of it from more radical sectors. First, though, I discuss three sources of feminist tradition that, together and by contrast with one another, help elucidate what it means to be a liberal feminist.

In *Feminism beyond Modernism*, I identify three feminist traditions—liberal or modern feminism, radical feminism or antimodern feminism, and postmodern feminism—though I also emphasize that these traditions are not always easily distinguishable, nor are they discrete historical periods. Liberal feminism, I suggest, arises out of Enlightenment commitments to concepts such as equality, rationalism, and democracy and, as such, has strong ties to the ideological underpinnings of the American Revolution and the French Revolution, movements designed to achieve freedom from oppressive social and political structures. The rights of individuals, including property rights, are emphasized in our Constitution and in the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*. The latter attended, as well, to the rights of women and of slaves. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (written in 1792) was an outgrowth of this commitment to women’s equality with men, emphasizing equal access to education. Unfortunately, liberalism, and sometimes liberal or modern feminism, is also associated with colonialist expansion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and with American and European beliefs in progress and the cultural superiority of those with elite professional training, especially in the sciences and the social sciences. In other words, liberal feminism suffers from implication in a racist and colonial culture that, while giving us many ideals we still hold dear, has also been deeply harmful.

Radical or antimodern feminism, I argue, derives from nineteenth-century Romanticism, with its repudiation of Enlightenment rationality and scientific ways of knowing. Emphasized instead are emotion, spirituality, and irrationality. Romanticism does not share the Enlightenment’s optimism and modernist belief in progress, finding that too often commitments to the uneducated and the underprivileged go unrealized. Romantic poetry is replete with appreciative descriptions of common men and women who do agricultural or other forms of noble work. Radical or antimodern feminism is oppositional in that it repudiates the assimilationist tendency of modern feminism. It often sees patriarchal oppression as the problem and the overthrow of patriarchal struc-
tures as the solution. It also valorizes women's different ways of thinking and being, although it has not always been attuned to intersecting problems of race, sexuality, ability status, or species membership.

Postmodern feminism, I argue in *Feminism beyond Modernism*, is not anti-modern. It does not repudiate modernist commitments to equality, rationality, and the development of scientific knowledge. Rather, it critiques modernism, emphasizing its limitations and its failures in areas such as equality for the poor and underrepresented minorities and colonial subjects, and in blind acceptance of the accumulated power of professional scientists and social scientists, governmental leaders, and others in positions of authority. Postmodern feminists often expand considerations of rights to include not only women but also those who are gay or transgender as well as animals and the environment. Modernist feminism's linear models of power as originating at the top and moving downward are replaced by more complicated ones that see power as circulating and multidimensional.

In suggesting, then, that Obama's feminism, as represented in his 2014 State of the Union address, is primarily liberal or modern feminist, I am suggesting that it is not primarily radical or antimodern feminist or postmodern feminist—and thus falls short in key regards. Perhaps, though, liberal feminism was the best he could do considering the rhetorical constraints imposed by an audience that would no doubt be largely unreceptive to anything more radical or critical.

At the most basic level, the speech is feminist in that it is attentive to women. In an examination of State of the Union addresses from 1900 to 2014, “History through the President’s Words,” Kennedy Elliott, Richard Johnson, and Ted Mellnik, in consultation with Mark Lieberman of the University of Pennsylvania and Wayne Fields of Washington University, document that over time, the prevalence of the word *man* in the addresses is slowly being reduced and that Obama used the words *man* and *woman* equally in his 2014 address, fifty times each. No other president had used the word *woman* so often. Audience reaction confirms that women’s issues were central to the address. A study by the Pew Research Center of keywords used in publicly available Twitter responses to the talk found that the word *woman* was used more often than any other word: 82,852 times, with *education* second at 68,466 mentions (Hitlin and Vogt). There were twenty-nine additional search terms. The study also found, however, that overall, 57 percent of the Twitter responses to the address were negative while only 43 percent were positive.
What were the liberal feminist issues that Obama considered in the address? He focused primarily on women in the workplace: pay equity, discrimination, sick leave, health care, and pre-K education within the larger context of income inequality for women and men. He addressed the pay equity issue head-on about halfway through the speech, resoundingly: “You know, today, women make up about half our workforce, but they still make 77 cents for every dollar a man earns. That is wrong, and in 2014, it’s an embarrassment.” He followed with the equally resounding: “Women deserve equal pay for equal work.” And he continued by mentioning the importance of adequate maternity leave policies and sick child or sick parent policies:

You know, she deserves to have a baby without sacrificing her job. A mother deserves a day off to care for a sick child or sick parent without running into hardship. And you know what, a father does too. It is time to do away with workplace policies that belong in a “Mad Men” episode. This year let’s all come together, Congress, the White House, businesses from Wall Street to Main Street, to give every woman the opportunity she deserves, because I believe when women succeed, America succeeds.

Still clearly in the vein of liberal feminism, Obama went on to discuss stagnant wages that result in employees, often women, working full-time yet remaining in poverty:

Now, women hold a majority of lower-wage jobs, but they’re not the only ones stifled by stagnant wages. Americans understand that some people will earn more money than others, and we don’t resent those who, by virtue of their efforts, achieve incredible success. That’s what America’s all about. But Americans overwhelmingly agree that no one who works full-time should ever have to raise a family in poverty.

He then recommended that the minimum wage be raised to $10.10 an hour and said he will see to it that this minimum be applied to all federal employees. These exhortations regarding the workplace and income were followed by one regarding health care: “No woman can be charged more because she is a woman.”

Obama knows how to stir an audience. Each passage quoted above was followed by enthusiastic applause. He combined facts with emotional appeals, indignation at the unfairness of women making less money than men for the same work, rejection of the injustice of working full-time and yet remaining in poverty. At stake is women’s equality, as seen in conventionally modernist terms of property and wages and in workplaces that support women as well as they do men. The speech is liberal feminist, too, in that, throughout, he
provided vivid illustrations of individual women who have been successful on the job or who face challenges as a result of job loss, loss of unemployment insurance, or sickness, examples designed to elicit identification. He began the address with two examples of women, not named, whose successes typified for him the larger success of his own presidency. First, he spoke of a teacher who spent extra time with a student who needed it and thereby did her part to lift America’s graduation rate to its highest levels in more than three decades. Then he spoke of an entrepreneur who flipped on the lights in her tech startup and thus did her part to add to the more than 8 million new jobs created over the past four years. The next time he focused attention on a specific woman was in mentioning Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move! partnership with schools, businesses, and local leaders, which he sees as having helped bring down childhood obesity rates for the first time in thirty years—an achievement that will improve lives and reduce health care costs for decades to come. The point is that, from this liberal feminist stance, when women are given equal access to basic goods and positions, they do their part to help people flourish socially and economically in a way that benefits all citizens.

Obama’s liberal feminism in this speech foregrounds both individual capacity and the collective good. In illustrating the point that our success should depend not on accident of birth but the strength of our work ethic and the scope of our dreams, he referred to without naming Mary Barra, the factory worker’s daughter who is CEO of General Motors. He also reminded us that he is the president of the greatest nation on earth and was raised by a single mother. In addition, he described a woman, Andrea Rush, who created a successful manufacturing firm, Detroit Manufacturing Systems, which has more than 700 employees. On the other side of the success fence is Misty DeMars, a mother of two young boys who, along with her husband, recently bought a house but then lost her job as a result of budget cuts. Obama asked that we give hard-working, responsible Americans such as DeMars a chance. He illustrated the viability of the Affordable Care Act with the example of physician’s assistant Amanda Shelly, a single mother. Shelly obtained health insurance on January 1 and on January 3 had emergency surgery which was covered under her new insurance but which would have bankrupted her had she not had that insurance. These examples, quite obviously, are emotional appeals designed to invoke the sympathy and empathy of the audience and to make clear that the concerns Obama addresses have a gendered human face.

The difficulty of Obama’s coming out as a feminist president of any description is illustrated by the fairly negative response the address engendered,
however, I’ve already mentioned that the Pew Research Center’s Twitter study found that a majority of tweets were negative rather than positive. That said, there were a number of mostly positive responses by women. An analysis by E. Tammy Kim writing for Al Jazeera America and focusing on women’s issues is also largely appreciative, though she regrets that Obama avoided the controversial areas of abortion and reproductive rights. On the one hand, social pressures against presidential expression of feminism are great. On the other hand, despite some appreciative responses, many more-radical feminists would have difficulty recognizing Obama’s discourse as feminist.

Members of the Occupy Wall Street movement, for instance, were more critical. Some felt that the deepening inequality Obama spoke of was his own doing as his presidency had betrayed the hopes of tens of millions of people who voted for him out of a genuine desire for fundamental change away from corporate politics and war mongering. In “Occupy Wall Street: Retribution against the Financial Elite,” feminist-socialist Seattle politician Kshama Sawant speaks of poverty being at record high numbers. She says fast food workers and low wage workers are demanding a minimum wage of $15, not the $10.10 Obama supported. On the topic of immigration, she notes that he is the president with a record number of deportations. She calls for a break from capitalism. The political system, she says, is completely dysfunctional and broken: “It is drowning in corporate cash.”

We might hope that Obama and presidents to come would publicly espouse a more radical, critical, or timely form of feminism. Equal pay for equal work, after all, was mandated in the Equal Pay Act in 1963. Obama can also be faulted for delivering a State of the Union address that is heavy on emotional appeal and light on information. In his own defense, though, Obama insists: “The President of the United States cannot remake our society, and that’s probably a good thing” (qtd. in Remnick 61). Surely Obama is correct that remaking a society is beyond the powers of any president. Might liberal feminism in the White House be a good enough start?

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**On Obama’s Eloquence as a Disciplinary Dilemma**

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Is rhetoric and composition substantively distinct from marketing, advertising, public relations, and other fields that study both rhetoric and composing? When it comes to presidential eloquence, is what “we” do different from what people in those fields do in ways that extend beyond differing canons, institutional locations, and habits or practices? We all study persuasion or something like it, do we not? Do our various distinctions make a difference? Given the field’s ongoing efforts to define itself, it seems safe to suppose that most scholars of rhetoric and composition would say “yes.” Indeed, as Jacqueline Rhodes and Jonathan Alexander describe us,

> many compositionists now see the teaching of writing as tied profoundly and intimately to inviting students to understand how naming is an ideological act; how narrating experience can both reinforce and challenge the dominant order; how language use both buys into and potentially exceeds normative understanding; and how learning to write can both serve the existing order and help us reimagine it. (484)

Rhetoric and composition, as a discipline, sees itself as owing something to its citizen-subjects, writers who can and will participate in shaping a world that is always in flux. We are concerned with ethics, with the good in persuasion. Indeed, in considering what our field does with presidential rhetoric, each of the essays in this symposium has worked carefully to tease out the possible goods and harms of Obama’s rhetoric.

My aim here is to consider the ethical dilemma President Obama’s eloquence poses for the field. In so doing, I am urging a view of rhetoric and composition as driven along self-consciously ethical lines. Some sense of obligation or responsibility is inescapable for a properly rhetorical view of composition.
Something like concern for “the good” in composing moves us, and that concern springs from rhetoric’s highlighting of the way we are all helplessly both persuading others and being persuaded into being who we are. Such concern is intrinsically political, often but not always framed in terms of the good in politics, and especially of democracy. This is not to say, of course, that rhetoric and composition scholars, personally or in the aggregate, are more ethical than our wealthier cousins in marketing or advertising. Rather, the point is that rhetoric and composition, as a discipline, self-consciously works on the ethical production of something like persuasion and works up knowledge about something like good persuasion (with varying results, no doubt).

Rhetoric and composition orients itself toward the good in composing and in persuasion, and does so with a self-conscious sense of responsibility or obligation that springs from concern with rhetoric’s social power.1 This should be particularly evident in treatments of presidential rhetoric. Unlike colleagues in marketing, scholars in rhetoric and composition want to know not only how Barack Obama persuades, but also whether that persuasion is, in an emergent and loosely defined sense, good (perhaps even good for democracy). Or so one would hope. The aim of this essay is to sound a cautionary note. With Obama in particular and presidential rhetoric in general, our ethical imperative sometimes gets us into a pickle. We admire rhetoric that is effective and in some way beautiful—eloquence is part of goodness in composition—and we feel called to celebrate it. But eloquence alone, though powerful, can be actively harmful, unethical. As Don Paul Abbott notes, following Hobbes, “eloquence is power,” but, unfortunately, “not necessarily a power for good” (387). Something crucial is lost when rhetoric and composition works too hard to make an apolitical virtue of eloquence. Equally often, though, the danger runs in the opposite direction. Searching out eloquence’s goodness in lived rhetorical ecologies, scholars of rhetoric and composition sometimes veer toward political judgments that are, disciplinarily speaking, outside our remit and that hamper our ability to make strong judgments about the good in composing and persuasion. I examine here one response to Obama’s rhetoric that highlights the dilemma, but first consider a little more the ethical stakes of rhetoric and composition.

James Crosswhite’s Deep Rhetoric urges a view of rhetoric as a matter of self-consciously ethical composing. Specifically, Crosswhite argues, we need to focus on “deep rhetoric,” need to understand rhetoric as “a way of being human, a way of educating human beings, a way of nonviolence, a way of reason and freedom, a political way” (29). From this view, rhetoric is “a mode of human
existence to which ethical judgments are always relevant and appropriate” (29).
Indeed, for Crosswhite, what is at stake goes beyond the specific judgments we make about “good” and “bad” rhetoric, and gets to the heart of being rhetorical itself. As rhetorical beings, humans are caught up in ethical dynamics of leading and being led, dynamics of obligation and responsibility that spring from our being susable. From these dynamics, which undergird, enable, and flow through all communication, judgments of “good” and “bad” arise, and arise necessarily. Seen from this angle, rhetoric and composition always has an ethical stake. Its object of study is both formally ethical, in the sense that logos is always a matter of owing one another, and contingently ethical, in the sense that rhetorical studies is concerned with good and bad rhetorical operations and outcomes. All this is to say, unlike those most invested in the profits of persuasion, scholars of rhetoric and composition have a disciplinary commitment to “keeping the controversies in sight, and learning to live with them in a humane and intelligent way” (6). Our orientation to rhetoric is self-consciously ethical, our charge to learn to compose workable lives together.

In what sense, then, does Barack Obama’s eloquence pose a disciplinary dilemma for rhetoric and composition? When he invokes a communal task at the outset of his 2009 Inaugural Address—“My fellow citizens: I stand here today humbled by the task before us, grateful for the trust you have bestowed, mindful of the sacrifices borne by our ancestors” (3)—is Obama being an especially unethical rhetor? A good rhetor but nonetheless a bad rhetor? Or is there after all some judgment we should be making, as rhetoricians and compositionists, about the political virtues or lack thereof of our composer-in-chief? But not so fast. The urge to offer such judgments—to the pro and to the con—highlights the nature of our disciplinary dilemma. We want some ethical stance. The danger is that the urge toward ethical judgment can lead us to falsely treat undemocratic realities as though they were meaningfully democratic. It is in the character of our field to discover and argue judgments about the good in composing, and to frame these judgments relative to the good of communities and polities. But this same desire trips us up when we take a run at presidential rhetoric. We can too readily elide, among other key distinctions, differences we readily recognize elsewhere: between deliberative and epideictic rhetorics, for instance, compositions presented for active decision in a congress of equals and compositions presented as arguments about value, but not action in a shared world; or between real conversations and mass-mediated addresses. Eliding such distinctions means losing sight of the rhetorical ecologies in
which compositions actually emerge and shape collective possibilities. In short, the dilemma posed by an eloquent president like Barack Obama is that of how rhetoric and composition can engage ethically with presidential rhetoric in a non-democratic state such as the United States.2

So, I am offering here neither an ethical nor a political judgment of Barack Obama. I’m not even offering a rhetorical judgment. That is to say, the aim of this brief piece is not to critique Obama’s rhetoric per se; in that, I’m happy to ride the coattails of proponents and detractors alike.3 As Robert Rowland puts it, “President Obama is universally recognized for his rhetorical skill, and his gift for rhetoric is viewed as one of the hallmarks of the 2008 presidential campaign” (17). Or as British Prime Minister Gordon Brown suggested in an especially enthusiastic encomium,

“It was said of Cicero that when people heard him, they turned to one another and said, ‘Great speech’; but when Demosthenes spoke, people turned to one another and said, ‘Let’s march.’ All around the world people are marching with Barack Obama.” (qtd. in Wilson et al. 162)

Likewise, H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman report on their survey of eighteen to twenty-four-year-old students: “In short, Barack Obama was viewed as one helluva gifted orator, quite possibly the most effective and powerful that this generation has witnessed” (5). More ominously, there’s William Safire’s anti-Obama New York Times op-ed from the 2008 election. Safire derides the newly minted Democratic presidential candidate for having no “claim to fame” besides “an ability to move audiences with his words” (WK12). Safire’s condemnation highlights the intensity of the rhetoric/reality divide that Obama’s eloquence opens. It is this divide that I want to consider.

Because what is at stake here is not just one president, but the question of relations between rhetorical studies and presidential rhetoric. For starters, presidential rhetoric in the US is not deliberative rhetoric when it reaches us, the great unwashed, on the screens and through the speakers of our computers and televisions. Obama’s Discourse may well have the impacts and significances described by McFarlane, Smith, and Flynn in this symposium. That is to say, Obama may open space for deeper engagement of AAE in rhetoric and composition and public discourse at large, and he may offer a crucial template for black rhetorical leadership, and he may bring important liberal feminist concerns to the bargaining table. But we should not kid ourselves that we, the audience of Obama’s eloquence, are meaningfully part of the decision-making
processes at stake in national politics. As political scientist Larry Bartels has compellingly demonstrated (and this is hardly news), the United States functions not as a democracy, but as an oligarchy, where “elected officials are utterly unresponsive to the policy preferences of millions of low-income citizens” (2) and only marginally responsive to the preferences of the middle class. In an oligarchy, the president’s relation to a populace cannot be an invitation to shared decision-making. At best, presidential rhetoric in an oligarchy is epideictic, not deliberative. But the difficulty goes beyond a confusion of rhetoric’s genres—it goes to the very core of rhetoric’s historical formation as a field of thought. Eloquent presidents are effective rhetors at once charged with shaping our shared reality and severely constrained by nondemocratic factors that make their very eloquence possible. In this, presidential eloquence amplifies one of the deepest-running dissociations in Western culture: a divide between rhetoric and reality. Rhetorical power springs, as Susan Miller has shown, from networks of trust that obscure the very social inequalities that have made their own emergence possible (Miller, Trust in Texts, esp. 146–51). This dissociation between rhetoric and reality, especially where rulership is concerned, is one that rhetoric and composition must constantly renegotiate.

So, as rhetor-in-chief, and as chief executive officer of the unwieldy corporate entity that is American oligarchy, any US president widely hailed as eloquent poses a dilemma for rhetorical studies. Or, that is, he or she should pose such a dilemma. On the whole, however, rhetoric and composition scholars have long found little in President Obama’s eloquence that gives us pause. To the contrary, especially in the fervor of the hope-and-change years, many celebrated his rhetorical effectivity, even holding him up as an exemplar of ethical deliberation. Consider the characterization Marilyn Cooper offers in “Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted.” For Cooper, responsible rhetoric is defined by a recognition of “both speakers and listeners as agents in persuasion, as people who are free to change their minds” (441). She finds in candidate Obama a paradigmatic case of responsible rhetorical agency. Praising the campaign speech in which Obama responded to criticisms of his pastor, Jeremiah Wright, Cooper suggests that “both Obama and members of his audience are agents in the activity in the sense that they actively respond to each other’s acts of meaning” (438). As she has it, this was ethical discourse because Obama “was confident that he could explain why Wright made such comments and that he could turn the possible debacle into a teaching moment, an opportunity to mediate seemingly irreconcilable racial tensions and misunderstandings” (431). Obama was engaged with the personhood of his audience, in Cooper’s vision.
But this is simply not how presidential rhetoric works. We do not live in a democracy, where all have some voice and an equal share in the discursive commons. Nor are Obama and his listeners partners in a conversation. When we treat presidential rhetoric as though it could be directly ethical—could be a matter of deliberation among persons rather than of mass-mediation—we risk furthering what Bartels describes as “the remarkable insulation of America’s comfortable class from the realities of economic inequality” (297). We risk, in other words, giving weight to the oldest charge against rhetoric and rhetoricians: that we make the worse part seem the better, that rhetoric in some way obscures reality. As a discipline, rhetoric and composition is concerned with the good in eloquence—private, public, or otherwise. Since failing to note where rhetoric may indeed obscure reality strikes at the very core of what we are and do, we are especially on the hook when we approach presidential compositions. And yet, and yet. We also do really care about eloquence “as such,” about the powerful force of symbols in motion. Where presidents in only nominally democratic polities are particularly eloquent, a dilemma that may well be foundational for rhetoric and composition is intensified. We need to find the good in eloquence without losing sight of deep constraints on the rhetorical ecologies from which rhetoric’s power emerges. Resolutions to this dilemma remain ever still to be invented.

Notes
1. I address questions of rhetoric and social power, especially in light of contemporary democracy’s failure to be such, more fully in “Troubled Freedom, Rhetorical Personhood, and Democracy’s Ongoing Constitution.”

2. That the United States is not only practically, but also formally undemocratic is strongly argued in Robert Dahl’s How Democratic Is the American Constitution? Empirical evidence of non-democracy abounds in recent political science on oligarchy and US public policy.

2. For a critical examination of Obama’s electioneering, see Kate Kenski, Bruce Hardy, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson’s The Obama Victory. For a rosier, if not positively starry-eyed, view, see Jeffrey Alexander and Bernadette Jaworsky’s Obama Power. Finally, for a blow-by-blow of Obama’s rhetorical career, see Mark Ferrara’s Barack Obama and the Rhetoric of Hope.

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Works Cited


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