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The Roots and Form of Obama's Rhetorical Pragmatism

Journalists and political pundits have described Barack Obama's beliefs and political style with the label pragmatism. This essay answers the following questions: What is the meaning of this label? What specific strands of the pragmatist tradition resonate through Obama's presidency? What effect does the label have on Obama's rhetorical practices? To answer these questions, this essay argues that Obama's rhetoric extends Jane Addams's political philosophy and Alain Locke's philosophy of race and that Addams and Locke are important resources for understanding Obama's pragmatism. Moreover, Obama develops a rhetorical pragmatism embodied in the form and style of his speeches.

By many accounts, American pragmatism seems alive and well. Intellectuals and academics from many different fields of study carry out work in the pragmatist tradition.¹ Rhetorical studies is no exception to this trend (Bergman; Mailloux; Langsdorf and Smith; Crick). In this essay I make the broad claim that advancing the pragmatist tradition requires a scholarly engagement with rhetorical practices. The intent of such an engagement is the improvement of democratic life. This has long been one of the central goals of pragmatist thought from John Dewey to Richard Rorty. In order to advance this claim, I argue that Barack Obama makes specific innovations within the pragmatist tradition and that these innovations are one way of analyzing the important relationship between rhetorical practice and democratic life. I claim that Obama's style of public address as a form of rhetorical pragmatism is, on the one hand, a unique and important development of pragmatism broadly. On the other hand, I claim that Obama's pragmatism highlights an important set of rhetorical practices for life in large-scale, multicultural

democracies that extend beyond rhetoric's traditional focus on deliberation as argumentation. In order to accomplish these two goals, this essay is divided into three parts: First, I demonstrate how Jane Addams's work at Hull-House provides an initial intellectual orientation for Obama's campaign for the presidency and how Obama's rhetorical style extends the values first articulated by Addams through offering collective narratives of reconciliation. Second, I demonstrate how Alain Locke's philosophy of values provides another key intellectual orientation for Obama's early life and how Obama's rhetorical style attempts to embody the characteristics of reconciliation and transvaluation articulated by Locke. Third, I outline the main characteristics of Obama's rhetorical pragmatism and explain its larger significance for the pragmatist tradition.

But before pursuing these lines of thinking, one important question must be asked: Is Barack Obama a pragmatist? Journalists, political pundits, even Obama himself, have all described his beliefs and political style using this label.² But as Peter Simonson notes, pragmatism is "a many splendored thing" (1). Identifying Obama as a pragmatist begs a set of basic questions: What does the label mean? What specific strands of the pragmatist tradition resonate through Obama's presidency? Any answer ought to begin, as James Kloppenberg does, by discovering connections between Obama's speeches, books, and so forth, and the historical tradition of pragmatism, with its recurring themes and roots in the late nineteenth century. In addition, any response to these questions must also demonstrate what Obama might add to this tradition. Pragmatism is not a philosophy in the traditional sense, by which I mean that it does not have a set of first principles. Instead, it is a kind of orientation to the world informed by beliefs, values, and historical circumstances (Menand). In Obama's case we do not see the mature philosophy of John Dewey or William James, but instead we see the residue of Jane Addams's understanding of political deliberation and Alain Locke's perspective on race. Scholars like Koppenberg have missed the connections between Obama, Locke, and Addams. Moreover, we see a pragmatist political philosophy transformed into a form of rhetorical practice.

In this essay I argue that Obama deploys a rhetorical pragmatism necessarily different in kind than any preceding philosophical strand of pragmatism. In other words, Addams's and Locke's work provide an initiating intellectual orientation for Obama (a point missed in current assessments of Obama's pragmatism), but he develops that work by crafting a specific style of public address responsive to contemporary democratic life (another point missed in current assessments of Obama's pragmatism). This is unusual in the pragmatist tradition. John Dewey's *Public and Its Problems* laid out a justification for democratic deliberation through community discussion.³ If it can be said that Dewey advanced a rhetorical pragmatism, it was practiced through local, face-to-face discussion and not

through public address. By necessity, however, Obama's rhetorical pragmatism must be practiced as public address, but it must also remain faithful to the intellectual orientation of the pragmatist tradition. Obama is able to do both in his major speeches through the invention and practice of, what I call below, "collective narratives of reconciliation." These collective narratives of reconciliation become the key form of his rhetorical pragmatism. In addition, his style of public address shows how a pragmatist politics might be practiced from the presidential pulpit. Almost every earlier version of pragmatist politics is practiced through community deliberation (Addams's politics are perhaps the foremost example of this). Given the positions advanced by Dewey, James, Addams, and other earlier pragmatists, one may even ask: Is it possible to be a pragmatist and a president at the same time? The purpose of this essay is not to assess Obama's success as a rhetor or policymaker.⁴ Instead, my purpose is to use Obama's public statements and career trajectory to understand the relationship between pragmatism and rhetoric. If Obama offers us a rhetorical pragmatism, we must understand the context that informs it and the style with which it is practiced. Moreover, rhetorical scholars miss something important if they read Obama's rhetoric without attention to the pragmatist tradition.⁵

Chicago Pragmatism

John Dewey worked at the University of Chicago from 1894–1905, and while there he met Jane Addams and lectured frequently at Hull-House. The connection between Hull-House and the University of Chicago is one of many examples of the tradition of political reform that has characterized that university. Dewey and Addams may stand at the beginning of that tradition, but it has extended through the twentieth century to include figures like Paul Douglas, Saul Alinsky, and Cass Sunstein (Schultz 4–13). The most important feature of this tradition is its search for habits of democratic life that could enhance practices of deliberation and transform political activity so as to foster a richer democracy (Westbrook).⁶ The parallels between Addams's work at Hull-House and Obama's community organizing are one place to begin the task of unpacking this prescription.

In July 1881 Jane Addams had the honor of delivering the valedictory address to her graduating class at Rockford Seminary. In that speech she chose to talk about Cassandra, the Trojan prophetess, who had tried, and failed, to convince the Trojans that the Greeks would destroy Troy. The reason that Cassandra failed, according to Addams, was that she lacked "auctoritas [sic], the right of the speaker to make themselves [sic] heard" (*Addams Reader* 11). Addams's intention was to imply that American women, in a similar fashion, lacked a voice in political affairs. She also implied that rhetorical authority was important for effective

participation in politics and that too many women, even if they had a voice, lacked the added power to convince or persuade embodied in the notion of *auctoritas*. Eight years later Addams founded Hull-House as her attempt to invent the methods and the means by which women and immigrants could obtain rhetorical authority within the American political system. From Hull-House she engaged in a wide range of activities as a sociologist, social democrat, progressive reformer, and humanitarian.

Perhaps the most remarkable characteristic of her attempt to develop rhetorical authority for those underrepresented in Chicago was her attention to the complexities of deliberation within large-scale, multicultural, and multilingual democracies. In Chicago at the turn of the twentieth century, a plurality of cultures and languages coexisted and expanded in size and diversity.⁷ Fundamental issues of understanding and communication were difficult in such circumstances, and political participation could seem impossible. To supplement traditional connections between rhetoric and politics, embodied in notions of deliberation as public address, Addams had to emphasize methods of bridging distances, identifying similarities, and demonstrating unity. Instead of an agonistic rhetoric, which uses argument and debate to decide on a course of action, Addams practiced a cooperative rhetoric that sought the common ground to bring diverse peoples together. Obama's postpartisanship campaign rhetoric and his post election attempt to practice such a rhetoric is the latest instantiation of this kind of cooperative rhetoric. But for Addams cooperative rhetoric as public address was not a real possibility. As a woman, she had little to no opportunities to make public speeches and even given those opportunities, those public speeches would not have been likely to make much of a difference. The purpose, for Addams, of a cooperative rhetoric is to establish what she called a "social democracy"—it is this concept that stands at the beginning of much of Chicago pragmatism (*Addams Reader* 51). The search for a "social democracy" led Addams to believe that it was necessary to think about participation in politics as an issue of communality, social ethics, and institutional cooperation.

Hull-House was Addams's organizational attempt to develop a "social ethic" for American democracy because she believed that it could provide a structure through which many people could participate in political affairs. Her essay "The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements" outlines the major function of Hull-House: "to make social intercourse express the growing sense of economic unity of society. . . . It was opened on the theory that the dependence of classes on each other is reciprocal" (*Addams Reader* 14). The political abuses of her historical moment meant that rights alone were not sufficient for securing a democratic life. Addams made a distinction between the "first phase of democracy," in which "French Philosophers" identified the need for political equality and natural rights,

and the “second phase of democracy,” which required the social realization of the French philosophical goals and ideals (*Addams Reader* 15). Social organizations in the second phase must do the following: demonstrate the interdependence of all types of people, disseminate and interpret information openly and fairly to all citizens, offer all citizens an education, and foster a higher civic life through common social intercourse. This almost reads like a list from Obama’s campaign material. Generating these kinds of social conditions required a specific set of rhetorical practices.

Instead of relying on politicians to represent citizens or on constitutional rights for protection, Addams advocated the development of social structures and organizations capable of supporting economic and social unity. Citizens could then work within those social organizations to begin to exercise their voice in political deliberation. In such circumstances listening and empathy are rhetorical practices equally as important as public address and argument because those practices are capable of producing interpersonal bonds. That meant that learning the basic habits of agonistic argument was less important than learning the basic habits of mutual identification with others. This is why Addams insisted on social institutions as a prerequisite for effective democratic deliberation. Hull-House aimed to “develop whatever social life its neighborhood may afford, to focus and give form to that life, to bring to bear upon it the results of cultivation and training; but it [Hull-House] received in exchange for the music of isolated voices the volume and strength of the chorus” (*Twenty Years* 80). The metaphor of the chorus is central to Addams’s pragmatism because it illustrates the importance of thinking about political deliberation as an issue of identification and cooperation. In order to produce a “social democracy,” “the Settlement recognizes the need of cooperation, both with the radical and conservative, and from the very nature of the case the Settlement cannot limit its friends to any one political party or economic school” (*Twenty Years* 295). Participation, then, required a rhetorical education that could produce the volume necessary to have a collective voice heard in deliberations on a local, national, or international scale.

Addams stands at the origins of Chicago pragmatism, and her work exemplifies much of what can be found in John Dewey’s writings on democracy. Dewey, in many ways, spent much of his intellectual career working through his experiences in Chicago and at Hull-House. His focus on the importance of deliberation, experience, communication, and social inquiry provided the grounds for the most basic characteristics of pragmatism and all emerged in Chicago alongside Addams’s Hull-House. The question, then, concerns the extent to which Obama has embodied the tradition initiated by Addams and Dewey. The connection between Addams’s work and Obama is perhaps most apparent in the organization of the Obama campaign. Marshall Ganz, a sociologist from Harvard

University, an organizer with SNCC in the civil rights movement, and a key architect of the United Farmworkers's early success, was an integral figure in running what was called "Camp Obama." These camps were training sessions for campaign volunteers, and they were founded on certain assumptions about the process of organizing social movements. Obama campaign volunteers were trained to tell potential voters their own stories, to listen to the stories of others, and ultimately to build a relationship with others based on common interests. They were taught that relationships were more important than, for example, signing a petition. A relationship required an exchange between people and led to a commitment. Thus Obama volunteers spent a great deal of their time at camp learning relationship-building skills because, as Ganz taught them, relationships of interdependence were the keys to the process of persuasion (and ultimately to the formation of a social movement). These camps also gave volunteers information about specific policies and local rules governing individual state caucuses or primaries, but the central focus was squarely on the development of interdependent relationships between the volunteers and the potential voters. No modern presidential campaign has ever emphasized this aspect of organization as clearly and extensively as Obama's.

Historians, as Peter Dreier notes in *Dissent*, "trace modern community organizing to Jane Addams" (n. pag.). The line between Ganz and Addams is fairly short, and one can easily read *Twenty Years at Hull-House* as the first handbook on community organizing. Ganz in fact uses Addams's book in his courses on organizing at Harvard (Harvard University n. pag.). Addams explicitly talks about identity as a process of sharing your story with others and the importance of those acts of story-telling for the formation of communities and ultimately of activist political organizations. If Hull-House was to be a place of "civic education," then it had to serve as a "vehicle for the creation of community and the sustaining of identities. Indeed the central role that Hull-House played in generating identity is the hallmark of its mission" (qtd. in Bethke 152–53). For Addams the formation of identity is bound together with the fostering of community.

Marshall Ganz, in his scholarship and his work at "Camp Obama," formalized this intertwined commitment to identity and community into a set of procedures for persuasion ("Camp Obama" n. pag.). From Ganz's perspective this process involves weaving together three interrelated stories, a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now, to form a "public narrative" useful for moving people to action (Ganz n. pag.). We tell a story of "self" (and each of the volunteers at "Camp Obama" participated in such exercises and were taught to tell their own story to others) to reveal the kind of person we are so that others can identify with us. Furthermore, all "self stories" are "nested" in that they include fragments of other stories from our culture. This means that leaders must

connect the “self story” to others by inventing an “us” and deciding who belongs to that category. This requires identifying “choice points” in a collective journey. Finally, this collective journey leads to the present. “Stories of now” link the past, present, and future, as well as the self and an “us,” to form a narrative in which “we” are the protagonists. Most important, these stories call on “us” to act. These three stories form a public narrative essential for persuasion, and that larger public narrative presents a challenge and a choice that require action. The final aspect, then, of Ganz’s approach to organization involves moving people from an identification of feelings and values within the three stories to a specific course of action. The feelings and values that are most likely to lead to action, according to Ganz, are: Hope (instead of fear), anger (instead of apathy), self-confidence (instead of self-doubt), and solidarity (instead of isolation). Anytime a public narrative can emphasize these feelings and values that narrative is more likely to lead to action. Furthermore, that narrative is shared through relationships of interdependence forged in organization-building.

In 1985 the Developing Communities Project, a coalition of churches on Chicago’s South Side, hired Obama to empower residents to win improved playgrounds, after-school programs, job training, housing, and other concerns. He knocked on doors and talked to people in their kitchens, living rooms, and churches about the problems they faced and why they needed to get involved to change things. As an organizer, Obama learned the skills of motivating and mobilizing people who had little faith in their ability to make politicians, corporations, and other powerful institutions accountable. He taught low-income people how to analyze power relations, gain confidence in their own leadership abilities, and work together. Obama was, in a way, living a parallel life to Addams’s life almost one hundred years earlier. The stories of his community work make up the heart of *Dreams from My Father*, and while in Chicago he clearly learned some of the basic tenets of this work as Ganz had formalized it. The pragmatist tradition has long insisted that it is this kind of work that is essential for the development of American democracy. Obama, during his early time in Chicago, certainly learned to motivate people by employing a similar scheme to the one that Ganz taught the volunteers at “Camp Obama.” But what for Ganz is simply a method of building organizations, for Addams’s version of pragmatism building organizations is *the* central task for large-scale multicultural democracies. Organization-building and the voice of a “chorus” were necessary for the formation of a “social democracy” suitable to our moment. The philosophical commitments that spin out from this initial insight are many, but for Obama this insight presented both a challenge and an opportunity. How does one turn the insights of community-building into a viable rhetorical structure that could win an election and govern a country?

Addams's work at Hull-House and Obama's early career as a community organizer highlight a central problem in the development of a rhetorical pragmatism: If pragmatism is to recommend communicative practices for guiding deliberation and enriching democratic life, then those practices must embody the social ethic outlined by Addams and be responsive to the pluralism of contemporary America. From Addams's perspective no form of public address could accomplish both ends because she did not have opportunities to engage in acts of public address with the potential to generate political change. This meant that organization-building through face-to-face communication was the only other viable option for creating a chorus out of such a polyglot population. If Addams (and Ganz) deploys a rhetorical pragmatism, it is one that emphasizes interpersonal practices of cooperation instead of public address or argument. Obviously, the values orienting Addams's pragmatism are the same for Obama, but the question that he continues to face concerns the ways in which a rhetorical pragmatism can be practiced as public address.

Ganz's procedures for organizing became a template for many of Obama's major speeches and his rhetorical style. In many of his speeches, Obama uses a collective narrative of reconciliation. This means that a story of self is always matched with a story of us and a story of now. This tripartite structure is in place as early as his Keynote Address to the Democratic National Convention in 2004.⁸ That speech begins with references to his family history: a father from a small village in Kenya who came to study in a "magical place" and a mother from Kansas whose parents had struggled through the Depression. Then the speech performs an immediate pivot to a story of us. Obama's family history is not so unique after all because his story is not possible in any other country. Obama is not special, "we" Americans are:

And I stand here today, grateful for the diversity of my heritage, aware that my parents' dreams live on in my two precious daughters. I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that, in no other country on earth, is my story even possible. Tonight, we gather to affirm the greatness of our Nation. (*Keynote Address* n. pag.)

From there Obama can now weave together a story of America in relationship to his story of self that emphasizes the same set of values, and his story (with his values) becomes our story (with our values). This is accomplished with a move from the authorial "I" to the "we" voice, and the telling of a short anecdote about the "true genius of America."

From this story of us, a second pivot is made to a story of now: “This year, in this election we are called to reaffirm our values and our commitments, to hold them against the hard reality and see how we’re measuring up to the legacy of our forebears and the promise of future generations. And fellow Americans . . . I say to you tonight: We have more work to do” (*Keynote Address* n. pg.). From that point on, the speech addresses the challenges and the choices that “we” face. Ganz himself reveals to the students at “Camp Obama” that this is the rhetorical structure of the speech and that it is founded on a basic approach to organization-building that has its roots in Chicago pragmatism.⁹ It is also a form that has become common for many of Obama’s speeches. The only difference, however, is that he is now able to reference his story of self far more subtly and with far less frequency—his early oratorical successes, the success of *Dreams from My Father*, and a long, historic presidential primary all helped solidify his story of self. In his inaugural address, for example, he makes a passing reference to his father:

This is the meaning of our liberty and our creed—why men and women and children of every race and every faith can join in celebration across this magnificent Mall, and why 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. (*Inaugural Address* n. pag.)

Here, the story of self has been completely collapsed into the story of us—his story is our story. Even his speech at Cairo University uses this structure (again with subtle references to the story of self). Obama’s task in that speech is to weave together a collective story that all can agree upon and use that common resource to confront a series of present problems. He begins with references to his “personal story” and his experience with Islam on “three continents” and then transitions in an attempt to “recognize our common humanity.” Finally, he takes up the task of outlining our present challenges and choices. As the speech takes up this larger task, Obama moves entirely from the authorial “I” to the “we” voice to make it clear that the “we” identified in the story of “us” are confronting these problems together.

These collective narratives of reconciliation become the basic rhetorical form of Obama’s speeches (as they are in Ganz’s organizational strategy). The use of these kinds of narratives is not necessarily unique in American presidential rhetoric, but this rhetorical form is connected to Obama’s pragmatism in important ways (see Beasley and Stuckey). To assess the relationship between these narratives and pragmatism, one must acknowledge that there is a great difference between a community-organizing strategy that uses a specific rhetorical form and

a presidential rhetoric that uses the same rhetorical form. Ganz's training and the work at "Camp Obama" were designed for face-to-face, community-centered movement-building. This is what also resonates most clearly with the pragmatist tradition. Democracy, for Addams and Dewey, was a form of governance that ought to be lived and felt in the streets between neighbors to solve local problems and build local communities. Habits of democratic life were forms of commitment to community and other, but those commitments were always carried out within the context of the hurly-burly of local, ordinary circumstances. Pragmatism sought the means to bring more and more people into the collective decision-making procedures of governance through forms of social inquiry and other kinds of participation in civic life. Community-organizing is the politics that Addams and Dewey privilege because of its ability to do this. The problem of scale is always present for Obama, to move a local strategy for community-organizing to a national (and later international) scale runs the risk of sacrificing the very characteristics that make the strategy a useful and important part of the pragmatist tradition. In order to confront the problem of scale and remain faithful to the pragmatist orientation to the world, Obama must make sure that his speeches embody the rhetoric of cooperation that Addams sought. In addition, he must see himself as the carrier of the larger voice of the chorus. To practice a rhetorical pragmatism of cooperation, as Addams tried to do, from the presidential pulpit requires two abilities. First, it requires the ability to inspire others to participate in collective social inquiry, community-building, and democratic deliberation over local problems. Second, it requires the ability to give the chorus its voice and make others feel as if they are a part of that chorus and the public narrative that underpins it.

Like any rhetoric, the purpose of Obama's rhetorical form is to persuade, and he does so by using emotions, values, and narratives to make people feel a deep commitment to one another so that those people are willing to act. This is a fairly traditional strategy in American presidential rhetoric (see Campbell and Jamieson), and it is also the goal of persuasion in any given social movement or organization, from Addams's Hull-House to Ganz's work with the United Farmworkers, and Obama has not invented some new technique. His presidential rhetoric, through such narratives, seeks to establish the conditions for the practice of cooperation and reconciliation. Pragmatists have, beginning with William James, been relentlessly concerned with the problem of pluralism entailed in large-scale democracies, and this has been a preoccupation for Obama since his earliest recognition that he was the product of a biracial relationship. In such circumstances, Obama's rhetorical pragmatism becomes a form of coping with conditions of plurality and constantly weaving together a public narrative that can provide enough common ground to lead to progressive social change. The

constant references to his personal narrative alongside a collective, American story are a rhetorical form for the generation of consensus out of plurality—just the drive that motivated Addams’s Hull-House. Can this rhetorical form, however, do the work that Hull-House did? In other words, can consensus be generated from the presidential pulpit instead of in the streets of the community? The answer to this question remains unclear for the time being.

Race and Cosmopolitanism

In order to produce a social democracy and practice a cooperative rhetoric that reconciles the plurality of the population, any political actor must confront the realities of racism that have plagued US history. Louis Menand goes so far as to claim that the basic orientation to the world embodied in pragmatism emerged in response to the violence of the Civil War. First-generation pragmatists, so Menand claims, searched for ways to make people less likely to be driven to violence based on their beliefs. US race relations are perhaps the most obvious place to recognize the pattern of absolutistic beliefs leading directly to violence and discord. Alain Locke, philosophy professor and art critic, is the pragmatist who dealt with these issues most directly. In Locke’s case William James was the primary inspiration for his version of pragmatism. Ross Posnock argues, “Locke continued to find James’s work a fruitful way to rethink the relation between color and culture” (184). In 1942 Locke summarized his commitment to James’s legacy:

When William James inaugurated his all-out campaign against intellectual absolutism, though radical empiricism and pragmatism were his shield and buckler, his trusty right-arm sword, we should remember, was pluralism. . . . Today, in our present culture crisis, it is both timely to recall this, and important . . . to ponder over it. (*The Philosophy* 53)

Much of Locke’s philosophy is devoted to working through the implications of a pluralistic value theory.

Locke attended James’s Hibbert Lectures at Oxford in 1908, which were later published as *A Pluralistic Universe*. He interpreted these lectures as “an indictment of philosophical thought that is grounded in the logic of difference/identity. Such thinking not only breeds separatism but is destructive of democratic equality” (Posnock 192). In other words, conceptual thought, as James had treated it in his lectures, was a mechanism for excluding and segregating. James’s position animated Locke’s introductory essay for *The New Negro*. In that essay Locke argues that the practices of separatism underlying the American conception of the

"Negro" are untenable. In fact, he claims that it is a "delusion" to believe that the "trend of Negro advance is wholly separatist, and that the effect of its operation will be to encyst the Negro as a benign foreign body in the body politic. This cannot be—even if it were desirable" (12). It is impossible to separate the fate or well-being of one group from that of others in American culture. Throughout many of his philosophical essays, Locke argues that interethnic violence stems from the fact that people are motivated by conflicting, universalized value imperatives. In response to this situation, Locke challenges notions of value absolutism by focusing on the philosophical mistake of categorizing values as products of universal reason (the Kantian position) instead of group-influenced personal feelings. His challenge is supported by the belief that cultural uniformity about values is undesirable and impossible. Leonard Harris claims that in Locke's view "cultural diversity was inherently desirable" and a "multitude of ways of valuing is characteristic of our being and not a temporary phase of human history" (qtd. in Locke, *The Philosophy* 17).

Based on his theory of values and his cultural pluralism, Locke believes that his perspective gives rise to "three working principles" that underscore the flexible norms of tolerance and reciprocity. First, the principle of "cultural equivalence" demands that we search for "functional similarities in our analysis and comparisons of human cultures" and not differences. Second, the principle of "cultural reciprocity" demands that we recognize the "reciprocal character of all contacts between cultures" (*The Philosophy* 73). In other words, exchanges between value systems are an integral part of a plural democracy like the one in the US. Third, the principle of "limited cultural convertibility" suggests that there are limits to the scope of cross-cultural exchange that we must respect so as to avoid domination. These three "working principles" point to the process of negotiation implicated in cross-cultural exchanges, and the recognition of both functional value commonalities and valued diversity as twin aspects of democratic decision-making and collaborative action. Locke suggests that we best develop our practical capacity to engage in cross-cultural conversation, collaboration, and negotiation so as to make a pluralist democracy possible.

Locke's perspective was grounded in his earlier work, *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations*, which rejected biological and political racism. In effect, these lectures, along with *The New Negro*, outline the intellectual conditions for, and the practical realization of, a rhetoric of reciprocity and exchange. *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations* was first delivered as a series of lectures at Howard University in March and April 1916. The purpose of the lectures was to analyze and evaluate the different meanings of the term *race*, and "to discriminate among them and to perpetuate [only] those meanings—those concepts—which are promising and really sound" (*Race Contacts* 1). The result of this task is an

analysis of race as a concept with three distinct meanings. The first, “theoretical” meaning, refers to biological and physical interpretations of race. The second, “practical” meaning, refers to a political-economic interpretation of race as a construct of imperialist domination. And the third, “social” meaning, points to modern forms of solidarity. Locke evaluates each meaning for its promise, distinguishing between those meanings that can and should be “redeemed” from those that should be eliminated.

Locke’s first lecture, “The Theoretical and Scientific Conception of Race,” critically interrogates and demystifies the physical and biological racial theories of scientists. By exposing the epistemological deficiencies of such theories, he reduces racist biology to a pseudo-science. By appealing to static, fixed racial types, these theories miss the dynamic development of human culture and biology—overlooking the process Darwin described in *The Origin of the Species*. In his second lecture, Locke turns to the “political and practical conception of race.” In doing so, he shifts his analysis from “the modern race creed” to the “modern race practice”—which he calls “imperialism.” The central idea in this lecture is that race is a result of the practices of power. Refuting the prevailing view that white superiority is the basis for white supremacy, Locke argues that political supremacy spawns the idea of superiority (*Race Contacts* 22–23). He argues that the belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority was institutionalized in Jim Crow laws and imperiled the social standing of colonial subjects living as minorities. In his final lecture, “Racial Progress and Race Adjustment,” Locke argues that something potentially useful remains about the idea of race, and thus race should be “revised” and “redeemed.” Any social conception of race would require a new sense of group belonging and solidarity appropriate for the exigencies of the moment and unimpeded by the desire for imperial domination or segregation based on biological theory or political practice. From Locke’s perspective formulating such a notion of solidarity requires the development of the “civilization type” (*Race Contacts* 97). The civilization type is the product of assimilation made possible by interactions between ethnic groups.

It is in the light of this pragmatist take on race that we can evaluate Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” speech on March 18, 2008 and his comments on race in *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*. A rhetoric of reconciliation and cooperation, in a pragmatist key, would never seek to eliminate pluralism but use pluralism as a resource for change and transvaluation. Thus any act of community-building is not an act of producing homogeneity, an impossible task anyway, but instead it is an act of preserving plurality. Communities that preserve plurality must find ways to soften absolute value claims. This was the philosophical task before Locke, and it is the rhetorical task before Obama. The March 18th speech begins with Obama’s standard, Ganz-inspired, rhetorical form: a story

of self and a story of us. What is unique, however, is that Obama intertwines the two stories with a genetic metaphor: "It's a story [Obama's upbringing] that hasn't made me the most conventional candidate. But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts—that out of many we are truly one" ("More Perfect Union" n. pag.). It is as if he is suggesting that his body, in its DNA, carries a rhetoric of reconciliation and cooperation in the face of pluralism and that he embodies the outcome of an effective rhetoric of reconciliation and cooperation. His genetic makeup ensures that his story is our story. The speech moves on to condemn Reverend Jeremiah Wright's incendiary sermons that had been circulating through the media. The ground for the condemnation was that Wright's language was "divisive" and that such agonistic rhetoric was not helpful. This is another way of accusing Wright of not being positively pragmatic. Divisive words are not useful at a time that calls for unity and reciprocity. But he then proceeds to defend Wright because "he contains within him the contradictions—the good and the bad—of the community that he has served diligently for so many years" ("More Perfect Union" n. pag.) Here Obama claims that Wright's story of self is nested and that his identity is tied so closely to the community that it is impossible to separate the two. Then Obama performs the work of telling the story of us, of which Wright's story is a part, as a nation afflicted by the pain of past racial injustices.

These stories constitute the challenges that we face and produce the conditions in which we can make the following choice:

For the African-American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. . . . But it also means binding our particular grievances—for better health care, and better schools, and better jobs—to the larger aspirations of all Americans—the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man [who's] been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family. ("More Perfect Union" n. pag.)

The first sentence reiterates Locke's position in his early lectures on race by suggesting we redeem what is useful in the past and discard what is not. The second sentence is a prescription for the kind of race contacts that Locke thought necessary for change and transvaluation. The rest of the speech tells a story of us that includes African-Americans and white Americans. This narrative rests on the assumption "that America can change" and that Wright's mistake was that he understood society as "static." Locke's pragmatism suggests that change is an inevitable outcome of race contacts. In other words, given the intellectual

and practical conditions for the practice of rhetorics of reciprocity and cooperation, change, or transvaluation as Locke puts it, will be the outcome. This is a pragmatist article of faith—that once one broadens and enhances community life to include more pluralism, progress will follow. Obama shares this pragmatist faith even surrounding issues of race—he must give his genetic makeup.

The final anecdote in the speech is a story of a “young, twenty-three year old white woman named Ashley Baia” who was part of the campaign in South Carolina. She had been working in a mostly African-American community and was sitting with members of that community exchanging stories about why they were there. Ashley told her own story of self and then asked others to share their stories, including an elderly African-American:

And he does not bring up a single issue. He does not say healthcare or the economy. He does not say education or war. He does not say that he was there for Barack Obama. He simply says to everyone in the room, “I am here because of Ashley.” . . . By itself, that single moment of recognition between the young white girl and that old black man is not enough. It is not enough to give healthcare to the sick, or jobs to the jobless, or education to our children. But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger. (“More Perfect Union” n. pag.)

Of course Ashley was trained to do this by Marshall Ganz, and this is exactly the kind of reaction Ganz is after. Once a personal commitment is in place, and a relationship established, persuasion and action become possible. It is also what Jane Addams sought at Hull-House, in terms of the sharing of identities for the formation of community, and what Locke envisions in terms of cross-cultural exchanges. This is an example of the rhetoric of reciprocity and reconciliation that Obama practices as public address and embodies genetically. And it is part of a pragmatist orientation to the world that change and progress emerge from those kinds of relationships. What is unique about Obama’s rhetorical pragmatism is that as public address, it must embody and represent reconciliation instead of practicing it on an interpersonal basis—a difficult task.

Locke’s pragmatism suggests that race contacts are necessary for change and that in those moments the participants must hold their values less dogmatically and be open to reciprocal change. Locke’s hope for the progress of African-Americans rests just as squarely on the building of a community in which this is possible as it does on any particular politics or legislation. Obama, in *The Audacity of Hope*, recounts a story about a stop in Cairo, Illinois, during his campaign for the Senate—a town replete with racial tensions. Obama worked through

the crowd of a couple of hundred people, some African-American but mostly white:

And by the time we left, I felt that a relationship had been established between me and the people I'd met—nothing transformative, but perhaps enough to weaken some of our biases and reinforce some of our better impulses. In other words, a quotient of trust had been built. . . . I also believe that moments like the one in Cairo ripple from their immediate point: that people of all races carry these moments into their homes and places of worship; that such moments shade a conversation with their children or their coworkers and can wear down, in slow, steady waves, the hatred and suspicion that isolation breeds. (238)

Here is the full-blown pragmatist commitment to the productivity of “contact” in plural societies alongside the faith that such contact begins the rhetorical process of change and transvaluation. Moments like this are the antidote to racism for the pragmatist because they provide the context for reciprocity and reconciliation. But this is an interpersonal moment, not a public address. Obama's rhetorical pragmatism is continuously alive to the challenge of embodying the interpersonal in a speech, and that is how he extends the link between pragmatism and rhetoric, by showing that such a move is possible and recommending a rhetorical form through which it can be accomplished.

Rhetorical Pragmatism

Locke and Addams are two important resources within the tradition of American pragmatism who clearly anticipate much of Obama's rhetoric. But it remains difficult to generalize about pragmatism. Oliver Wendell Holmes, for example, certainly belongs to the tradition of pragmatism, but he tends to emphasize agonism instead of cooperation. Thus tying Obama to these early strands of pragmatism should provide some context for the justification of calling him a pragmatist. One other way to understand this label is to consider pragmatism's connection to rhetoric, and this is what many rhetorical scholars miss in their readings of Obama. Pragmatism may not have a set of first principles or clear philosophical dogma, but it does have a detectable rhetoric. In other words, it has a method of talking about social and political problems, seeing and understanding those problems within contexts, and a set of commitments for testing the consequences of potential solutions. Pragmatism's rhetoric has traditionally championed conversation, reciprocity, tolerance, hope, change, fact, inquiry,

antifoundationalism, uncertainty, science, and consequences, all in an attempt to make a more robust, inclusive, socially oriented and responsive democracy. This rhetoric has long been juxtaposed to rhetorics that are dogmatic, certain, univocal, messianic, religious, ideological, and violent. Reading Obama's work as a version of pragmatism's rhetoric can help make sense of how this label functions and what work it does.

Obama's specific innovations within the pragmatist tradition, therefore, ought to be understood as a case study of the sort of rhetorical practice that requires the attention of those that study pragmatism. When I claim that Obama embodies a rhetorical pragmatism, I mean that specific rhetorical practices are more important for him than philosophical presuppositions. This phrase is also meant to suggest that the evasion of epistemology is less important to pragmatism than the search for practices that can improve democratic life. Rhetorical pragmatism puts practices before theoretical considerations. Obama is important to both rhetorical theorists and pragmatists because he offers both a unique rhetoric (a style of public address) and a commitment to identifying and understanding the necessity of rhetoric for democracy. It is in the latter way that he advances the pragmatist tradition.

"Yes we can," Obama's central campaign slogan, was oriented toward hope and change, both central preoccupations of pragmatism. On the one hand, the slogan suggests that we can improve upon current conditions, and, on the other hand, it suggests that hope is a principle ingredient in producing change. Marshall Ganz argues that hope, anger, solidarity, self-confidence, and urgency are the key values that can lead to action while fear, apathy, self-doubt, isolation, and inertia work as action inhibitors. This scheme of values is essential in movement-building because any organization must emphasize the values that move people to act. Obama avoids anger as a motivator, but hope, solidarity, and self-confidence become the key engines of his pragmatic meliorism. "Yes we can" embodies each of these in turn: "yes" activates the value of hope, "we" activates the value of solidarity, and "can" activates the value of self-confidence. The rhetorical strategy here is to use these values as catalysts for progressive reform projects. In other words a rhetoric of cooperation, grounded in a commitment to social democracy, sets the conditions for the progressive political rhetoric that Obama espouses in terms of policies. A commitment to pragmatism is always already a commitment to some kind of progressivism because of its belief in meliorism. But for conservative commentators like Peter Berkowitz, Obama's decisions become indexes of his ideological beliefs, and the pragmatist label is a ruse. This is to identify a philosophical pragmatism instead of a rhetorical pragmatism. Berkowitz goes so far as to claim that Obama's pragmatism is "disrespectful of citizens because it obscures its governing principles" (n. pag.). This takes us to the heart of a

rhetorical pragmatism. What Berkowitz fails to understand is that pragmatism does not have a set of first principles and it abhors the search for such principles. Berkowitz chastises Obama for not stating his liberal ideology and accuses him of “a deceptive form of pragmatism” that pretends to be nonpartisan, but there is no deception in refusing to name principles. Furthermore, the pose of nonpartisanship is not a pose but a basic characteristic of a rhetoric of cooperation and reconciliation. Berkowitz’s cynicism is typical of those who want pragmatism to be just like any other philosophy—an explicit account of metaphysical and ethical principles by which we are supposed to live. But the pragmatist acknowledges that life is too messy, too pluralistic, too marked by contingency for that to be an acceptable philosophy. Dewey demolished this conception of philosophy in *The Quest for Certainty* and *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. These two books tried to show that the search for first principles was a fool’s errand, and that if philosophy were to be made useful, it must turn away from principle and toward practical arts.

A rhetorical pragmatism has the following characteristics: First, it is committed to uncertainty and the processes of persuasion that are inevitable in an uncertain world. Second, it is committed to and seeks change that marks an improvement on current circumstances. If the world is uncertain and contingent, then we can change it, and we must remain open to change so that we can improve our circumstances. Third, if change and improvement are not guided by a foundational ideology, then they are the outcome of conversation and social inquiry. In other words they are outcomes of collective decision-making procedures that require rhetorics of cooperation and reconciliation. Such conversations ask us to find common ground with others, to hold our beliefs less dogmatically, and to listen. Fourth, rhetorical pragmatism has a deep faith in the ability of community (or social democracy), a faith that if the community works together it can find the best solutions and best methods for improving conditions and solving problems (“best” here is deeply related to what works collectively). Hope is always located in solidarity with the other. Fifth, this means that a central rhetorical task in a large-scale multicultural democracy is reconciling unmitigated plurality without producing homogeneity. Plurality is an engine and resource for change, but the rhetorical task is weaving together a common, public narrative out of the many. These features of rhetorical pragmatism have been around for over a hundred years, and these values orient Obama’s style of public address. What is unique about Obama is that these values are transformed into a rhetorical form for public address. First-generation pragmatists like Jane Addams and John Dewey seemed, at the least, skeptical that such a transformation was possible (that is why they emphasized the face-to-face so deliberately). Obama uses collective narratives of reconciliation, practiced

through public address, to develop a distinct rhetorical pragmatism oriented by the five themes above and shaped into a particular form fit for his specific position.

Obama's rhetorical pragmatism works as a mode of weaving together collective narratives of reconciliation so as to embody the orienting values of the pragmatist tradition and enrich democratic life. The election-night victory speech at Grant Park nicely demonstrates this form of rhetorical pragmatism. By telling the crowd that the victory "belongs to you," Obama makes the entire speech a celebration of a public narrative, and he uses the story of Ann Nixon Cooper (instead of his own story) to narrate the history that gives "us" common ground. The reiteration of "yes we can" at the end of each moment that Ann Nixon Cooper has seen reminds the audience that "the true genius of America" is that it can change because of the work that "we" do ("Victory Speech" n. pag.). But there is always more work to do, more change to make. "Yes we can" animated past achievements, but we must change our own circumstances. This speech seeks to produce solidarity and hope in those listening. It would not have been odd to hear such rhetoric at Jane Addams's Hull-House one hundred years ago.

Notes

¹I thank *RR* peer reviewers Steven Mailloux and Jeremy Engels for their helpful comments and criticisms on early drafts of this manuscript. This essay was substantially improved because of their efforts.

²See Kloppenberg; Bohan; Hayes; Harshaw; Berkowitz. These are just five sources that take Obama's pragmatism as a major theme. A myriad of popular news sources have labeled Obama a pragmatist in passing reference as well.

³William Keith demonstrates the impact of Dewey's work on Speech Communication departments and the teaching of "discussion" for the purposes of citizenship (see Keith).

⁴Several recent public articles have attempted to explain Obama's success as rhetor and policymaker: Zadie Smith, "Speaking in Tongues," *New York Review of Books*, February 26, 2009; George Lakoff, "The Obama Code," *Huffington Post*, February 24, 2009; and Jonathan Chait, "The Obama Method," *The New Republic*, July 1, 2009.

⁵Robert Terrill, for example, relates Obama's rhetorical style to W. E. B. Du Bois but does not link that style to the pragmatist tradition. Robert Rowland and John Johnson critically interpret Obama's 2004 DNC speech but fail to identify the links between that speech and the pragmatist tradition.

⁶Addams claimed that "every student of [her] time had become more or less a disciple of pragmatism and its great teachers in the United States" (322). Dewey also often remarked on the extent to which Addams influenced the development of his philosophy. And several biographers of Addams have demonstrated the extent to which pragmatism lie at the heart of Addams's endeavors.

⁷*Twenty Years at Hull-House* eloquently attests to this plurality by describing the connections between Polish, Greek, and Italian immigrant communities and showing how Addams's choice of where to place Hull-House geographically was determined by the physical intersections of these cultures.

⁸All of Obama's speeches that I reference were accessed at, Barack Obama, "The Complete Text Transcripts of over 100 of Barack Obama's Speeches," <http://obamaspeeches.com/> (accessed between May 1, 2009–June 10, 2009).

⁹See video of Ganz's explanation of this speech: <http://campobama.blogspot.com/2007/09/4audio-marshall-ganz-explains.html>

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