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North American Studies Program, University of Bonn

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“The Poetics of Presidency, or: Reading Barack Obama”

No one, I guess, would have been bold enough to suggest, in January 1986, when - after almost 20 years of propositioning by prominent and less prominent people and institutions, including Jimmy Carter, the labor unions, and Stevie Wonder - remember Wonder’s “Happy Birthday”? (see Power Point Presentation [PPP], fig. 2) -, Martin Luther King Day was celebrated for the first time, no one but utopians would have ‘dreamt up’ that less than a generation later, MLK Day would precede the inauguration of the first African American president by just a day (see PPP, fig. 3). The temporal proximity of this day of commemoration and the inauguration of the 44th President of the United States of America bears the whole brunt of what we perceive of as a change of historical proportions (see PPP, fig. 4). This shift or transformation, as Obama himself put it in his “Acceptance Speech,” has “been a long time coming,” and there are few documents as forceful as Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream Speech,” delivered on 28 August 1963 at Lincoln Memorial in D. C. to the hundred thousands that had marched on Washington (see PPP, fig. 4), few events that make plain evident how far we have travelled in the last 50 years. Thus let us first commemorate this moment and recall King’s famous speech:

Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends.

And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of "interposition" and "nullification" - one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."¹

This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with.

That reverend King's address moves us until this very day is remarkable and its power is not simply due to the fact that Martin Luther King was a charismatic man with a gift for rhetoric, as is Barack Hussein Obama. The reasons why this speech still makes us shiver are certainly too complex to account for here. Also, those goose pimples may not go down everybody's skin: I recently encountered an educated young man from India with political interest who had never even heard of Martin Luther King - a fact that left me both flabbergasted and wondering about who's dreaming what on which side of the planet. At least in part we are moved, because King's address transforms possibility - "I have a dream" - into a utopia rhetorically achieved at the end of his speech.

And this will be the day - this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning:

"My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing.

Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrim's pride,

From every mountainside, let freedom ring!"

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.

And so let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire.

Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York.

Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania.

Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado.

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California.

But not only that:

Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia.

Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.

Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi.

From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

And when this happens, when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when *all* of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:

“Free at last! Free at last!

Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”²

Evidently, King did not dream of a black US president, as many commentators seemed to suggest, headlining, as *DIE ZEIT* did on 6 November 2008, that “the dream comes true”: “Der Traum wird wahr” (Joffe) – only to follow up, a week later, with what sounded like second thoughts. Juxtapositions of “the dream” and “its reality” which soon circulated in fact misleadingly suggest that dreams, hopes, wishes, and desires have no reality. Dreams are very real. And King’s dream was monumental, in fact, mountainous. He envisioned a change of attitude in Georgia as well as in New York, Colorado, and California. Yet he also went way beyond national borders: “From every mountainside, let freedom ring!” This is no political proposal, of course. It is an imperative build as much on religious beliefs and “the audacity of hope” (Obama) as on a blend of traditions of Puritan rhetoric, on the one hand, and African American discourse, on the other. The fact that King’s speech is both a paradigmatic moment in US-American civil religion, while at the same time projecting African Americans as major freedom fighters underlines how

much race matters had become part of US-American self-conceptions while “the negro” as a political subject certainly had not.

Obama echoes and honors this tradition, to a considerable degree (see PPP, fig. 6). Indeed, part of his success derives from his ‘rootedness’ – accomplished by a highly gifted speech writer – in a nationally specific US-American rhetoric that has been handed down from Puritans like John Winthrop across the Constitution to Abraham Lincoln on to John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and now beyond this most evangelically inspired US-American president so far. In fact, as we all know it is not so much Obama’s politics (of which we ain’t seen nothing yet), but the manner in which he fashions the poetics of his presidency that has made his campaign and presidential race successful on an “epic” scale.³ And while in this poetics, despite the many disclaimers, race has mattered much, I am also convinced that Barack Obama succeeded in part because he is *not* a descendent of slaves. That he is now being hailed as a president of “post-racist” times (Heffe 30) may certainly be somewhat premature. However, since terms and concepts, even misleading ones, may hasten history, the term “post-racism” does have some momentum: After all, we could easily raise the question why, as the son of a man from Kenia and a white US-American woman, Obama would project himself as an African American in the first place? Given the current insights into the nature of the human genome, this may easily read as a persistence of the so-called “one-drop rule.” For even though we now know that race is *not* a property of particular bodies, contemporary cultures, and US American cultures in particular, keep celebrating racial difference. “Instead of trying to treat people as if their race didn’t matter,” writes American studies scholar Walter Benn Michaels in his book *The Trouble with Diversity: Why We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (2006, see PPP, fig. 7), “we would not only recognize but celebrate racial identity” (5) and make race (and ethnicity) into “a good thing” (5). And this is, as Benn Michaels argues, highly problematical. For after all, he writes, “we love race – we love identity – because we don’t love class” (6): “We rather get rid of racism than get rid of poverty. And we would much rather celebrate cultural diversity than seek to establish economic equality” (12).

Accordingly, I think, Obama could not have succeeded had he *not* made race an issue at a crucial moment late in his campaign: "race is an issue," he insisted in his "A More Perfect Union Address" on March 18, 2008, "that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now." And yet, we also see emerge with Obama a poetics of presidency that takes the rhetoric of race, ethnicity, and religion into new directions, tracing a history that, instead of highlighting division and difference - as historiography and politics have frequently done (a fact African American Michael Ray Charles's art work ironically evokes, see PPP, fig. 8) - aims at treading common ground, "perfecting" the union of people across ethnic backgrounds and races.

This is where we are right now. It's a racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years. Contrary to the claims of some of my critics, black and white, I have never been so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy - particularly a candidacy as imperfect as my own.

But I have asserted a firm conviction - a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people - that working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice is we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union. (Obama, "A More Perfect Union Address," 18 March 2008)

Whether the politics that results from this poetics of "a more perfect union" will also cross class boundaries remains to be seen.

Now just as Obama himself "was never," as he put it in his "Acceptance Speech" on November 5, "the likeliest candidate for this office," poetics and politics do not seem to mate easily. Like the fields of law and literature (which Obama somehow 'embodies', holding a PhD from Harvard Law while being hailed as "the most literary president-elect of recent years" [Flood]) the spaces mapped by poetics and presidency - or lyrics and leadership - find their common ground in language or, to be more precise, in rhetoric. Yet whereas law and literature have entered into transdisciplinary conversations over matters of interpretation, poetics and presidency converge because both busy themselves with styles of enunciation, inflection, with throwing a voice, and - even more important - with being heard. In fact, the term voice is central for debates about political representation and poetry alike. And whereas Percy Bysshe Shelley, in his "Defense of Poetry" (ed. 1840), still considered poets the "unacknowledged legislators of the world," the world has meanwhile in fact seen poets who, like Vaclav Havel, became presidents

and presidents, like John F. Kennedy, who, in retrospect, came to be considered poets.

In this talk I will shed more light on this seemingly paradoxical proximity between poetics, poetry, and presidency, exploring what I chose to call the “poetics of presidency.” Now, poetics is a term which is as complex as its history is long - and we’ll make do with the short version here: In its more traditional sense, poetics refers to the study of poetry, to theories of its aesthetics, and to the practice of poetic composition. More recently, though, the term has gained new currency when New Historicist scholars began to speak of a “cultural poetics” by which we now understand the interplay and mutual impact of discourses from seemingly disparate registers such as law and literature, or lyrics and leadership. In this particular context I employ the term in order to acknowledge, as does New Historicism, that, first, texts are also events and vice versa (which became quite evident, for instance, when Obama, last June, spoke to more than 200 000 people at the Siegessäule in Berlin (see PPP, fig. 9-11), that is to as many people as Martin Luther King did in 1963; and that, secondly, all cultural self-conceptions rely on a nationally specific rhetoric which is constantly being reiterated, yet also transformed in the process - in other words: on repetition with variation. And this is why, rhetoric is not “only words,” but does significant cultural work.

My own argument will work on these two levels of the meanings of the term poetics. It is, in part, more narrowly focused on poetics as it pertains to poetry, as both literary genre and cultural trope, and the particular cultural work it achieved in the primaries. After taking a brief step back in time to recall how John F. Kennedy was resurrected as a poet (a dead one, for that matter), I will take two steps forward and focus on the ways in which poetry (as a trope) has inspired the dramatic race for the new US-American presidency. On the trail to office Barack Obama has not only been hailed another Kennedy, and a black one for that matter; he has also been dismissed by Hillary Clinton as poeteer, performer, and poser (see PPP, fig. 12) who may never deliver the vision he versifies while Clinton herself seemed to prefer going down in history as the “queen of prose.” Yet what do poetry and prose have to do with presidency anyway? And why would the first woman ever to come close to becoming the world’s most important man be so

allergic to the canonical lyrics of leadership? While on one level, my talk revolves around matters of poetry, politics, and gender, on another it capitalizes on the poetics of presidency as it plays out in public addresses, and more particularly, as it pertains to matters of race. After all, as Obama, in his public addresses, reiterates a culture that imagined, transformed, and reinvented itself by way of sermons, exhortations, poems, fiction, photographs, moving pictures, and presidential rhetoric, he also raises the question how much change US American culture is willing to execute. To reflect on this will be my fourth and final step.

Step One. "Of Poetry and Power," or: Remembering John F. Kennedy as Poet

In 1964, a year after the haunting incidents in downtown Dallas, Erwin A. Glikes and Paul Schwaber published a volume of poems occasioned by the presidency and the death of John F. Kennedy and entitled *Of Poetry and Power*, including texts by Robert Frost, Cynthia Ozick, Gwendolyn Brooks, Allen Ginsberg, Donald Hall, A. R. Ammons, John Berryman, May Swenson, Richard Eberhart, W. H. Auden, Gregory Corso, and Louis Zukofsky, among many others. In his foreword, historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (see PPP, fig. 13), who had joined Kennedy's campaign as a speechwriter in 1960 and in 1961 was appointed Special Assistant to the President, a post he held until 1964 - emphasized the significance of poetry for the 35th president of the United States.

[...] poetry had a prominent place in President Kennedy's own vision of America. He saw his country as not just a political establishment or an economic system or a web of legal relationships. All these were for him aspects of a larger conception - America as a civilized society. He believed that the arts were the source and sign of a serious civilization, and one of his constant concerns while in the White House was to accord artists a nation's belated recognition of their vital role. And he considered the arts essential, not only for their own sake, but for the health of the state; for, among other things, art could provide a necessary check on and criticism of authority. (v)

Or as Kennedy himself put it in his address at the dedication of the Robert Frost Library, Amherst College on 26 October 1963, not even a month before his untimely death:

The men who create power make an indispensable contribution to the nation's greatness. But the men who question power make a contribution just as

indispensable, especially when that questioning is disinterested. [...] When the power leads man toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses. (135, 135-36)

However, Schlesinger holds, the "recognition of the place of the artist" (v), "his royal role as a patron of the arts" (vi), was a lesser reason for the appropriateness of a volume of poetry honouring Kennedy. "The greater reason," Schlesinger underlines, "lies in the fact that President Kennedy himself shared so much of the vision of life which has animated the greatest poetry. He once described himself as an 'idealist without illusions.' He understood both the potentialities of humanity and the precariousness of the human condition" (v). In other words, Kennedy himself was a poet which, for Schlesinger, explains why so many of the contributors to the volume

identify themselves with him [...] and do so because they perceived in him, not just another American president, but *mon semblable, mon frère*, who as much as the poets themselves, felt the terror of the age and, in striving to master both terror and himself, challenged the self-pitying notion so cherished in our nuclear epoch of the abjectness of the individual in the face of history. (vii)

As scholars of US-American literature and culture we cannot help but hear the booming echoes of a new critical - and very Matthew Arnoldian - agenda in both Kennedy's sense of art and in Schlesinger's account of what Kennedy supposedly deemed the social function of the poet and the cultural value of poetry. And as scholars of American media cultures we certainly note that the first president who employed the "new language of Television" (Chamberline) with much political effect (see PPP, fig. 14, 15), that Kennedy is retrospectively being remediated in terms of an older print culture and an even older oral tradition which Kennedy undoubtedly honored by his "evident pleasure in using words skilfully" (Gliks and Schwaber 3). This remediation reaffirms a supposed brotherhood of poets and readers in general, and of the president of the United States and the American people, in particular, an identity that Schlesinger manifests by quoting from the famous last line of Baudelaire's poem "Au lecteur" ("To the Reader").

Accordingly, like poets who, as T. S. Eliot argued, write themselves into a pre-existing tradition of poetry, thereby creating a "simultaneous order" (14), US-American presidents have echoed the style and performance of their predecessors.

And it was first and foremost William J. Clinton, “the man from Hope” (Provan), who reiterated the poetics of John F. Kennedy’s presidency, both literally and in a more figurative sense. Kennedy was the first president to invite a poet to speak truth to power read at his inauguration (see PPP, fig. 16); the 86 years old Robert Frost was to read his inaugural poem “Dedication,” yet blinded by the sun on the snow he recited “The Gift Outright,” written in 1942 which opens with the self-reflexive line “The land was ours before we were the land’s” (see PPP, fig. 17). James Dickey read for Jimmy Carter in 1977 (see PPP, fig. 18), Clinton had Maya Angelou read in 1993 (see PPP, fig. 19) and Miller Williams in 1997 (see PPP, fig. 20); and Elisabeth Alexander, a poet whose work “explore[s] the history of slavery, civil rights and women’s rights” (Neil Astley qtd. in Flood) and professor of African American studies at Yale University (see PPP, fig. 21), will perform alongside Aretha Franklin, Itzak Perlman and Yo-Yo Ma, among others, tomorrow (see PPP, fig. 22). “What we have seen is a man,” Alexander told *The Guardian*, “who understands that words bring power, who understands the power of language, the integrity of language, that it’s not just idle” (qtd. in Flood). So it’s no longer: power corrupts and poetry cleanses, as Kennedy had it. Instead we’ve become highly aware that it’s the power of language, its poetics or poetry that works politics in the first place. In the light of both this insight and the ‘poetic affiliation’ between Kennedy and Bill Clinton it may seem particularly ironical that in the very moment Barack Obama was hailed as Kennedy reincarnate, Hillary Clinton launched what Alexander Provan calls her “poetry challenge” (see PPP, fig. 23 and 24).

Step Two. Is Barack Obama to Hillary Clinton as Poetry is to Prose? Or: Lessons in Literary Genre

In early January 2008, Hillary Clinton criticized “the oratorical sensibilities” of Barack Obama, citing a one liner of former New York State governor Mario Cuomo (and I quote): “You campaign in poetry, but you govern in prose.” About a month later, Provan remembers, “Robert F. Kennedy Jr. warned the electorate that Republicans ‘aren’t going to respond to poetry or lofty language.’” And Cuomo himself found such advice highly apt today, “because the nation is hungrier than usual for political poetry” (Freeland). Obviously, “political poetry” does not mean

the work of Allan Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, or Amiri Baraka here. Nor are Clinton, Kennedy, and Cuomo talking about the two poems that Obama had published in 1981 and that were dug up early last year.⁴ Rather, in this context poetry spells “lofty language” which may smooth out the campaign trail, yet, according to Clinton and her supporters, are of little effect in Washington. “[P]oetry and governance,” as Provan puts it, “make for pour bedfellows.” “For poetry,” as W. H. Auden famously wrote in an often quoted and mostly misread passage of his poem “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” (1939), “[poetry] makes nothing happen: it survives / In the valley of its making, where executives / Would never want to temper” (65).

Still poets, readers of poetry, ghost writers, and American Studies experts alike, may wonder why rhetoric would be considered ineffective in D. C.? Hasn't rhetoric always worked miracles in politics - or made nightmares come true? Wasn't the whole enterprise 'America' and the nation that evolved from it built on rhetoric - or poetry, if you like -, as American studies scholar (and one of the first New Historians) Sacvan Bercovitch has argued so convincingly?⁵ Isn't the very claim that the life of a politician of high calibre, is not “poetry in motion,” but a stream of prosy procedures that need to be managed with great expertise, as Hillary Clinton knows from decades of experience, also part of the poetry? After all, who gets to see the prose anyway? And isn't politics “poetry in motion” indeed, since we get we get to see our candidates perform on TV and Youtube before we actually sit down and read their “poems”?

Of course, the binarism between poetry and prose is as untenable as the supposedly fundamental difference between the presidency of Hillary Clinton (that as of now, was not to be) and that of Barack Obama. “I dwell in Possibility -,” the poet Emily Dickinson wrote, “A fairer House than Prose -” (J. 657; see PPP, fig. 25). Poetry, for Dickinson, spells the potential “to gather paradise,” to delineate phenomena that resist representation. Likewise, Henry James's “house of fiction” offers vistas by opening “not one,” but “a million” carefully crafted windows - and out goes the binarism of poetry and prose! Authors and critics have used these terms interchangeably for a long time; what Gertrude Stein considers her poetry actually looks like prose while sounding quite lyrical indeed. Marianne Moore's

poems look poetic, yet sound prosy, and this comes as no surprise: After all, “genuine” poetry, as Moore suggests in her poem “Poetry” of 1919, should not “discriminate against schoolbooks and business documents” (266, 267).

Now Hillary Clinton, by contrast, finds little value in “all this fiddle” (Moore 266). Dismissing poetry or fiction and embracing prose or truth, she sides with Plato (who had no knack for poetry, see PPP, fig. 26) while at the same time dissociating herself from an art form that, like the poetics of presidency, has traditionally been reserved for men. And yet, separating poetry from prose, she may have failed to see that there is “no poetry [of campaigning] without [some] prose [of governance]” (Freeland). Asked how he was going to run the economy without executive experience, Obama replied that his campaign and the way he runs it demonstrates what kind of management and governance he is capable of (cf. Gregory). And we all hope he is.

Step Three. “The Ode Less Travelled,” or: The Rhetoric of Change, the Gender of Presidency, and the Embodiment of “Post-Racism”

Even though she dwelt in possibility most of her life, Dickinson was well aware that the concepts of woman and poet do not mate. Emerson’s paradigmatic poet was a new Adam, a prophet, a “liberating God” (33), “a cosmos” like 19th-century poet Walt Whitman (see PPP, fig. 27), who has inspired generations of poets (and presidents), Barack Obama included. Voicing his “belief in the American people,” projecting a “message of unity” (that allows Americans to face problems “that confront us all,” ranging from climate change to terrorism) and aiming to “build a more perfect union,” a “coalition of African Americans and white Americans,” Obama honors Whitman.

At the same time, Obama acts as a story teller who repeatedly calls on others (mostly women) whose life story he relates, thereby reinscribing a tradition of autobiographical narratives while also turning himself into an exemplum: “my story,” he claims in his “A More Perfect Union Address,” is the American story,” which “in no other country on Earth is [...] even possible;” “I’m fighting for the

American dream." Recounting his upbringing as "son of a teenage mother" whose "father left when [he] was two," he reiterates the common lore of "dysfunctional black families" (even as his family is not just 'black') who, against all odds, manage to send their kids off to the best schools. Claiming that he comes across as either "too black, or not black enough," he acknowledges his hybrid cultural background. Speaking of the American people's obligation to love one another, he calls on John Winthrop's model of Christian charity. What this amounts to is a sonnet, a love poem dedicated to America, which affirms the primacy of the lover as much as of the beloved. And like Whitman, Obama caresses his audience. "This campaign is about you, about us," for "You and I together will change that country," reiterating the buzz word that echoes from Kennedy to Clinton and beyond. The serial return of the term change - "change we can believe in" (see PPP, fig. 28) - underlines the inseparability of repetition and difference. Or as Bill Clinton put it: "There is nothing wrong with America," he claimed in his "Inaugural Address" of 1993, "that cannot be cured by what is right with America" (qtd. in Hurm 150).

Rhetorically as well as historically, this is far off from King whose main concern was still the emancipation of "the negro," as he underlines from the very beginning of his "I Have a Dream Speech":

I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. And so we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men,

would be guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.

King made freedom and citizenship rights both the center and the frame of his speech. Projecting the March on Washington, in his very first sentence, as an event "that will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation," he also implies that freedom is possible in the United States while, in his final words, enchanting his audience with the prospect of freedom all over the world. The exclamation "free at last!" not only reiterates a black tradition of negro spirituals, it also reiterates the echoes of that tradition as they sound, for instance, in Harriet Ann Jacobs's 1861 slave narrative whose final chapter is entitled "Free at Last." In accordance with this focus on liberty, King's major historical reference, before turning to the Constitution, is Abraham Lincoln (see PPP, fig. 29) who, in 1862 and 1863 respectively, signed the two executive orders of the Emancipation Proclamation and whose "Gettysburg Address" is inscribed into the Lincoln Memorial and echoed by King.

While Lincoln spoke of a "new birth of freedom," King can merely account that "one hundred years later" (and two years before President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the National Voting Rights Act), "the Negro still is [neither] free" nor endowed with the rights of a full political subject. Moreover, we may also recall that the Constitution guaranteed "all men" "the 'unalienable Rights' of 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,'" yet left little doubt that slaves were not considered men. In terms of taxes, we can read in Article 1, Section 2, Clause 3 (see PPP, fig. 30), they counted but "three fifths of all other Persons" - "insufficient funds" indeed! Moreover, as the African American artist Kara Walker reminds us (with an unmistakable side-kick to the Clinton-Levinsky affair): some of the founding fathers were themselves slave-holders who, as in the case of George Washington, is also deemed to have fathered slaves with his enslaved housekeeper Sally Hemings (see PPP, fig. 31).

Even if, for Obama who faces mountains of collateral damage and debts, King's monetary metaphor ("insufficient funds") certainly rings a particular truth today, he takes a different turn on American and African American history, capitalizing on and transforming the concept of the union so central to both the Constitution and his predecessor Lincoln who did not fight the Civil War to end slavery but to preserve the union. Let's listen to the man himself, as he opens his "A More Perfect Union Address":

"We the people, in order to form a more perfect union."

Two hundred and twenty one years ago, in a hall that still stands across the street, a group of men gathered and, with these simple words, launched America's improbable experiment in democracy. Farmers and scholars; statesmen and patriots who had traveled across an ocean to escape tyranny and persecution finally made real their declaration of independence at a Philadelphia convention that lasted through the spring of 1787.

The document they produced was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least twenty more years, and to leave any final resolution to future generations.

Of course, the answer to the slavery question was already embedded within our Constitution - a Constitution that had at its very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty, and justice, and a union that could be and should be perfected over time.

And yet words on a parchment would not be enough to deliver slaves from bondage, or provide men and women of every color and creed their full rights and obligations as citizens of the United States. What would be needed were Americans in successive generations who were willing to do their part - through protests and struggle, on the streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience and always at great risk - to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time.

Whereas King's errand, aimed at "cashing a cheque," employs a rather secular trope, Obama's address does not shy away from strong religious language. Citing the opening of the Constitution and remembering that the ideal of "a more perfect union" "was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery," Obama acknowledges both the fundamental contradiction on which the United States build and the "successive generations who were willing to do their part - through protests and struggle, on the streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience and always at great risk - to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time." Minding the gap between American ideals and US

American realities, Obama does not present the US as home of the free and the brave, as Kennedy did. Thirty-eight years ago tomorrow, Kennedy, in the very first sentence of his "Inaugural Address," claimed that "[w]e observe today not a victory of party, but a celebration of freedom;" and "we shall pay any price," he added, "bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty" - not only in America, but all over the globe. In fact, as he heeds "the command of Isaiah - to 'undo the heavy burdens ... and to let the oppressed go free," Kennedy hints that the oppressed populate any other place on this earth but America and invites his "fellow citizens of the world, ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man." While Kennedy inflects the voice of the cold warrior, Obama sounds more like a cultural studies scholar: We started an "improbable experiment in democracy," he admits, we have set up ideals, we're still trying to live up to, yet we're not giving up or giving in, but trying to narrow and eventually close "that gap." And this gap narrows significantly the very moment Obama utters this sentence, foregrounding that the "we" who aim at narrowing the gap now are a significantly different crowd than those who left it gaping. Because unlike either Kennedy or Clinton, Obama materializes, in fact embodies the idea of change.

"We criticize Americans for not being able either to analyse or conceptualize," Jean Baudrillard wrote his book on America in 1986.

But this is a wrong-headed critique. It is we who imagine that everything culminates in transcendence, and that nothing exists which has not been conceptualized. Not only do [Americans] care little for such view, but their perspective is the very opposite: it is not conceptualizing reality, but realizing concepts and materializing ideas, that interests them. The ideas of the religion and enlightened morality of the eighteenth century certainly, but also dreams, scientific values, and sexual perversions. Materializing freedom, but also the unconscious. (84)

Or as Walter Benn Michaels has it:

The "change we can believe" in is not ideological, it's cultural. And at the heart of that cultural change is the fact that it cannot be proclaimed. It must be embodied, and only a black person can embody it. We can elect white people who say that race shouldn't matter, but only the election of a black person can establish that it really doesn't. ("Mind").

And this is another reason why Hillary Clinton would not do. Let us recall how Obama opened his "Acceptance Speech" on 5 November 2008:

If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.

It's the answer told by lines that stretched around schools and churches in numbers this nation has never seen; by people who waited three hours and four hours, many for the very first time in their lives, because they believed that this time must be different; that their voice could be that difference.

It's the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Latino, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled - Americans who sent a message to the world that we have never been a collection of Red States and Blue States: we are, and always will be, the United States of America.

It's the answer that led those who have been told for so long by so many to be cynical, and fearful, and doubtful of what we can achieve to put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day.

It's been a long time coming, but tonight, because of what we did on this day, in this election, at this defining moment, change has come to America.

Obama clearly writes himself into an established tradition of presidential rhetoric that has reiterated a demand for change - change being a gesture on which the very enterprise America is based and which therefore gets repeated with variation, in seriality: "[w]e observe today," Kennedy claimed, "[...] celebration of freedom - symbolizing an end, as well as a beginning - signifying renewal, as well as change." Hillary Clinton, by contrast, was perhaps both too much of the same and too much difference, too much of a change. Lacking appropriate models, Clinton could not help but break with traditions and highlight the potency of her individual talent, challenge Kennedy's cult of youth that 46-old Obama references and reinstate experience, supposedly "synonymous with being an old fuddy-duddy" (Rees-Mogg), as central asset of leadership. Suggesting that governance is a prosy affair her competitor knows too little of, Clinton brushed aside a whole heritage of - black and white - traditions of well-versed oratory and their legacy of "new frontiers." Talk is cheap, she suggests, especially when students and activists open their purse while the Clintons got much of their mileage from their own hard-earned millions. "For all of Hillary's jabs at Obama's lack of experience," William Rees-Mogg notes, "many Democrats would rather have a president who fits the JFK mold of an 'existential hero' (per Norman Mailer) than one who is a student par excellence of the intricacies of governance."

So was it “Yes, we can” versus “Yes, I’m in, and I’m in to win” that did the primary trick? Both mantras nourished particular desires. On the one hand, Obama’s highly elliptical and open statement which metonymically relates to all questions Americans may voice and thus takes care of everybody’s individual concerns. Can America pay for my mortgage? Yes, we can. After all, “[w]e are the change we seek” - a very poetic line indeed. Employing the “Lincolnian principle of gentle inclusion” (Chamberline), Obama’s chant invited (audience) participation and collaboration, called out for response (as does King), and re-created an imaginary community, a “we” called “America,” sung and celebrated by Whitman and many poets and presidents that followed his path. In fact, Obama’s acceptance speech uses the very lists and catalogues Whitman employed in his poem “Song of Myself.”

On the other hand, there was Clinton’s Dickinsonian self-reliance, head-strong, singular, solitary, “in to win.” Hillary did not bother asking Americans what they can do for America - authorized by their vote *she* was going to take care of business (and this may have been one reason why workers and older people were particularly attracted to her). Projecting “politics as a process of hard work and incremental change” (Provan), reasserting the role of reason and intellect in leadership, and leaving no doubt that such intellect can inhabit a woman’s brain, she may have been too much, after all, while offering too little (poetry) to go by. I’m sure as Secretary of State she’ll plenty opportunities for poetic practice! (See PPP, fig. 32 for our “dream team”!)

Step Four. “America Will Be”

Obama, by contrast, nourishes what Winfried Fluck calls “the romance with America,” a romance which enchants even those who are disenchanted with America and demand that the nation live up its ideals right now. Too bad, though, that great romances thrive on paradox, “the promise of [a] happy-ever-after” that “never comes to pass” (Grundman 51). Accordingly, America thrives on a promise that cannot come true as yet. For her last novel *In America* (2000), Susan Sontag chose a line from Langston Hughes’s poem “Let America Be America Again” (1938)

as epigraph. That line reads: "America will be!" Baudrillard was only partly right when he claimed that America was "utopia achieved."

However, if utopias open vistas to new territories and dreams are indeed part of our reality, they also make things happen. They certainly did in this election. Thus in concluding I'd like to briefly return to the polls, the figures, and facts which, as I would like to suggest, are more proximate to the poetics than we may think. Martin Luther King dreamt, in particular, of a change of attitude in Georgia. In this "epic presidential race" (as it was called by *Online Newshour* on 5 November 2008), Georgia still voted predominantly Republican, yet considering that in 2004 58 % voted for Bush and 41 % for Kerry the outcome in 2008 - with 52 % of all votes cast for McCain, 47 % for Obama, marks a clear shift. So may Georgia, as Hans Dieter Laux and Günter Tieme suggest, turn democratic in the not too far future (57)? And on whom - or what - would that depend?

The figures and facts emerging from this last election make plain evident that, indeed, "race is an issue that [...] this nation cannot afford to ignore right now" (3/18/2008). And so is ethnicity. For was not the mobilization of voters that made Obama's day on 4 November 2008: The percentage of people voting⁶ rose from 54,5 % in the year 2000 to about 62 % in 2004 and about 63 % in 2008, so the decisive increase actually occurred in 2004 (see Laux and Thieme 53). Neither did voters under 30 and those who - whether at the age of 18 or 58 - voted for the first time in their lives and who flocked to Obama make the decisive difference. Obama won, because he attracted ethnic minorities who, by casting their vote, changed the geopolitical landscape considerably (see PPP, fig. 33 and 34).⁷ These voters have not only moved in from the margins to the center of the political processes, thereby transforming our sense of the US-American mainstream. All of them are migrants who at some point in their family history, left other, more often than not less prosperous, less democratic, less secure places to live in the United States and who thus contributed to the nation's "cultural evolution," as Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd would have it (36). And, of course, George W. Bush was highly aware of how important - legal or illegal - immigrants may become as potential future voters (see PPP, fig. 35).

While last November ethnic groups tended to migrate into the Democratic camp and states like Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia, due to their economic success and mobilization of black voters, were won over from the Republicans, some white Democrats, living in less prosperous parts of the South, deserted (see PPP, fig. 36): in four traditional Southern states (Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Louisiana) as well as in West Virginia - states that feel pushed to the economic margins -, democrats actually lost votes to the Republicans - a tendency that hints at the problem that remains.

"The problem of the twentieth century," social reformer and philosopher W. E. B. Du Bois - the first African American to graduate, in 1892, with a PhD from Harvard University - claimed quite prophetically, "is the color line." For Obama (who received his PhD at Harvard in 1991) the 21st century may no longer be the century of the color line. Yet even though one year ago, black and white voters on the night of Obama's victory in South Carolina shouted "race does not matter," Obama's campaign, as Benn Michaels argues, "has [...] been all about race, and especially about anti-racism as progressive politics" ("Mind"). This politics, though, Benn Michaels insists, "has not made American society more open or equal;" in fact, as the so-called Gini coefficient suggests, American society is less equal today than in was in 1947. Rather, for Michaels, it has led to a neo-liberal political economy" the "hallmark" of which is "rising sensitivity about differences of identity - cultural, ethnic, sometimes religious - and rising tolerance for differences of wealth and income" ("Mind").

So "it's" not simply "the economy, stupid!" as Clinton had it, it's economic inequality. After all, as we celebrate the dream come true and commemorate Martin Luther King in the process, we tend to minimize our dreamscape. After all, the true legacy of the 1960s is the (utopian) belief in difference without hierarchy. And this is why Benn Michaels urges us to "mind the income gap." More than that, though, he also reminds us that Martin Luther King was not merely "a great civil rights leader." King also insisted that the questions he raised are "questions about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth." The way the so-called "financial crisis" is being handled right now suggest that wealth keeps being distributed through increasingly narrow channels, and the chant "Let equality ring

from every mountain" remains to be sung. This is how Obama put it in his "Acceptance Speech":

The road ahead will be long. Our climb will be steep. We may not get there in one year or even one term, but America - I have never been more hopeful than I am tonight that we will get there. I promise you - we as a people will get there.

There will be setbacks and false starts. There are many who won't agree with every decision or policy I make as President, and we know that government can't solve every problem. But I will always be honest with you about the challenges we face. I will listen to you, especially when we disagree. And above all, I will ask you join in the work of remaking this nation the only way it's been done in America for two-hundred and twenty-one years - block by block, brick by brick, calloused hand by calloused hand.

What began twenty-one months ago in the depths of winter must not end on this autumn night. This victory alone is not the change we seek - it is only the chance for us to make that change. And that cannot happen if we go back to the way things were. It cannot happen without you.

So let us summon a new spirit of patriotism; of service and responsibility where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves, but each other. Let us remember that if this financial crisis taught us anything, it's that we cannot have a thriving Wall Street while Main Street suffers - in this country, we rise or fall as one nation; as one people.

So America remains a project, a work in progress, fuelled by the powers of poetry and prose alike.

PS: Bill Clinton had a dream, too, on 20 January 2008, when he fell asleep at Harlem's Convent Avenue Baptist Church in Harlem during a Martin Luther King, Jr. event - visit YouTube to share his dream!

I thank you for your interest and for retaining your composure!

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¹ Amos 5:24 (The American Standard Version of the Holy Bible).

² Isaiah 40: 4-5 (King James Version of the Holy Bible).

³ The *Online Newshour* spoke of an "epic presidential race" on 5 November 2008. <<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/vote2008/>>.

⁴ Harold Bloom who was consulted in the matter, claimed that he was "not unimpressed" with Obama's efforts: "At eighteen [...] he was already a much better poet than our former Secretary of Defence William Cohen, who keeps publishing terrible poetry," said Bloom who considers Jimmy Carter "literally the worst poet in the United States." Still he thinks that "Obama has chosen the right career, at least if it comes to a tossup between politico and poet" (Bloom qtd. in Mead).

⁵ As Sacvan Bercovitch put it: "[The Puritans] were a community that invented its identity ex verbo, by the word, and continued to assert that identity through the seventeenth century, expanding, modifying, and revising it in a procession of sermons, exhortations, and declarations, statements and restatements of that purpose - a stream of rhetorical self-definition unequalled by any other community of its kind (and proportionately, perhaps of any kind)" (34).

⁶ Since there is no official count of the eligible voters these figures are estimations based on census data of the year 2000 and the American Community Survey. I thank Hans Dieter Laux for providing me with his data, images, and an early version of the essay "Die Erfüllung des amerikanischen Traums?" he co-authored with Günter Tieme.

⁷ Whereas 90 % of McCain's voters were Caucasian, only 60 % who voted for Obama were white. Among the 10,43 Mio. voters that the Democratic Party managed to win over, 7,34 Mio. were non-whites, of which 4,35 Mio. were African Americans. Obama succeeded in states with a high percentage of Hispanics (New Mexico) just as in states with a high degree of educated voters (such as Colorado) (cf. Laux and Tieme 54).