



# “Structural differentiation and the poetics of violence shaping Barack Obama’s presidency: a study in personhood, literacy, and the improvisation of African–American publics”



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## ABSTRACT

This paper follows the social role of the United States’ logocratic history of citizenship and literacy through education brought to bear as an ideological scaffolding of ‘patriotism’ in the service of a new, growing, and overt racial poetics of violence against President Barack Obama and, as consequence, the constraints and possibilities to political black publics. This semiotic circulates beyond the ‘fringe’ and into the interaction of today’s politicians, conservative think tanks, mass media pundits, and their consortia of elite special interest groups, lobbies, and markets. Its uptake and recirculation, particularly as massive mediated everyday language, has brought into relief a narrating register of racial belonging hearkening from the social, political, and legal history of structural subjugation to minorities and black people in the United States since the founding words of its inception. Following the slurs and other tropes of racist talk, images, and memes, the study then examines how these structural histories inform and are used to naturalize an exclusionary rhetoric of violence in an immutable master narrative structuring a shared moral and democratic order. And, it looks to the descriptive violence as well as calls for action, all targeted at President Barack Obama’s rupture to this moral order, limiting any arrangements of black collective political agency into improvisational contexts, at best. It follows such differentiation and regulation at two structuring levels: 1) the institutionalization of citizenship; and, 2) civic literacy through formal education of African–Americans.

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## 1. Introduction

‘O’Reilly went on to predict that Romney would lose the election if he lost Ohio.

“How do you think we got to that point?” host Megyn Kelly wondered.

“Because it’s a changing country.... The white establishment is now the minority.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Bill O’ Reilly, ‘Talking Points Memo. Bill O’Reilly: Americans who want free stuff from the government. Staff published online, Nov. 6, 2012. [accessed: July 18, 2014].

During the 2008 campaign and with the two-term win of Barack Obama to the United States presidency, emotions and rationales about race and the tropes of differentiation masking a basic racism of unmarked—that is, naturalized—white supremacy beyond the usual behind-closed-door slur has accumulated and mass-mediated into everyday public language. This poetics of violence today persists from high literary texts to language in every sort of mass media to everyday talk and text produced by ordinary people: ideas, stereotypes, emotions, and inclinations to discriminate (Hill, 2008:4). Slurs are common against any president in history, but many say this is different, and is ‘the elephant in the room’. MSNBC anchor, Chris Hayes succinctly reports,

President Obama is the first ever African–American to hold the Nation’s highest office, and now he is the first president to be openly heckled during an address in a joint session of Congress. He has been compared to Hitler at town hall meetings where many people have showed up with loaded guns; Conservative radio/TV hosts call him a racist with a deep-seeded hatred for white people, his birth and nationality has been contested; he has been called anything from a socialist to a fascist. Every president faces scathing criticism from the fanatical fringe, but this ... feels different. Even officials in the Secret Service acknowledged that threats to President Obama’s life have been coming in at four times as often as they were for George W. Bush.<sup>2</sup>

This poetic of violence accumulates in what is often referred to as *slurs*, a trope of derogatory terms, stereotypes, and other forms of differentiation targeting individuals and groups of individuals on the basis of race, nationality, religion, gender or sexual orientation (Bianchi, 2014). In this case, they are meant to cut, to wound, to threat, sometimes as hate speech in a call for action (Croom, 2014; Hom, 2010; Hornsby, 2001; Jackson, 2013b). Consider the 2014 report from People for the American Way’s ‘Right Wing Watch’, a watchdog project dedicated to monitoring and exposing the activities of the right-wing movement. In it, the report cites a speech to local Tea Party members by Stephen Steinlight of the Center for Immigration Studies in Sebring, Florida, in which Steinlight calls for the impeachment and public execution of the president:

We all know, if there ever was a president that deserved to be impeached, it’s this guy, alright? And I wouldn’t stop. I would think being hung, drawn, and quartered is probably too good for him.<sup>3</sup>

Slurs, and in the case of Steinlight and many others, violent calls for action reliant on a political institutional process of impeachment and execution are quite complex in what they have to say about their saliency depends on socio-cultural and historical contexts while also informing its memory—from the scaffoldings of past logocratic structures to the everyday institutionalized practices in which these slurs may circulate (Croom, 2010, 2013, 2014; Hill, 2008; Hom, 2008; Jackson, 2013b). Today, racial slurs brew still within ‘a persistent culture of white racism’ in the US organized by standard practices in white-dominated institutions—schools, property ownership, due process, voting; and it has been set since the earliest stages of law by whites in the New World alongside the everyday communicative practices among individuals and institutions (Hill, 2008:5). Too, this growing and overt racial poetics of violence in the US today circulates beyond the ‘fringe’ and into the interaction of today’s politicians, mass media pundits, and their consortia of elite special interests, lobbies, and markets. Its uptake and recirculation, particularly as massive mediatized everyday language, has brought into relief a narrating register of racial belonging hearkening from the social, political, and legal history of structural subjugation to minorities and black people in the United States since the founding words of its inception. This article looks to two of these structuring institutional artifacts: 1) the role of citizenship through birthright and the civic participation it allows; and, 2) civic literacy through access or denial to formal, public education. Specifically, it follows the ways in which this cultural project has been targeted at the president himself and the constraints and possibilities it has on political black publics.

As a black man standing at the podium of a broadcasted microphone to the national polity and with the command as chief to that polity, President Barack Obama may stand in representation of these great United States. However, to more than a few, he embodies a broader threat to the dominant social imaginary in which the face of American politics and law is historically literate white citizens. His blackness to them, despite the *Constitutions’* eventual celebration of agreement and disagreement, sameness and difference, oneness and diversity, freedom and security, is represented as a threat to the written sanctity of that document and for whom it stands. In everyday, mass-mediated language from the Founding documents has been hearkened to the present, and ‘enregistered’ (Agha, 2005) as handmaiden for the sanctity of a white national identity, ‘the white establishment’, as Bill O’Reilly describes in the opening of this paper. The history-making of an exclusive polity of ‘We, the People’ has been built and socialized into various enduring racializing registers—that is, claims and rejections of membership to the nation (Hill, 2008:21)—informed by the ideals of a logocratic system crafted over two centuries ago as the Founding Fathers of the US vested the authority of the nation into the written word, from the *Federalist Papers* (US 1787) to the *Declaration of Independence* (US 1776) and *The Constitution of the United States* (US 1781). These institutional legacies, brought in dialogic interaction with current rhetorics of belonging, serve as a ‘hermeneutic of legitimization’ (Taylor, 2004:7) to the ideological providence shaping a prescriptive standard of John Jay’s proclamation in the *Federalist Papers* (1787): ‘Providence

<sup>2</sup> See, Chris Hayes. ‘All In with Chris Hayes’. MSNBC. September 11, 2013. [accessed: July 16, 2014].

<sup>3</sup> See Stephen D Foster, Jr. 2014. ‘Conservative “Christian” Says President Obama’s Execution Should Be Worse Than Being Drawn And Quartered’. July 21, 2014 8:05 pm. <http://www.addictinginfo.org/2014/07/21/conservative-christian-says-president-obamas-execution-should-be-worse-than-being-drawn-and-quartered-video/> [accessed: July 23, 2014].

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