Reexamining the "Obama Effect": How Barack Obama's Rhetoric Spread Optimistic Colorblindness in an Age of Inequality

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This article takes as its point of departure the paradox between increased optimism among Black Americans and continued socioeconomic stagnation among the same group. A 2010 poll conducted by Pew Research Center revealed that Blacks were more optimistic about their opportunities and progress as a group than socioeconomic data warrant. Black optimism has been attributed to the "Obama effect," the view that the election of President Barack Obama in 2008 provided Black Americans with a sense that success is possible for Blacks in America. As recent as 2015 this optimism was as reported by The Atlantic *and Brookings Institute as still in effect. In this article, I argue that the Obama effect is insufficient to explain paradoxical Black optimism. To explore the effect of Obama's rhetoric on public opinion and Black optimism, especially among young Americans, I use critical discourse analysis to explore rhetorical messages of colorblindness and individualism in three of Obama's speeches from 2008, 2012, and 2013. I conclude that the phenomenon of paradoxical Black optimism is correlated with elite Black discourse, as exemplified in Obama's rhetoric during the three addresses.*

Keywords: African Americans, Barack Obama, Black Americans, Black Optimism, Critical Discourse Analysis, Elite Discourse, Socioeconomic Inequality

In the United States, there remains a significant gap in economic prosperity between Blacks and Whites. Two key indicators of Black socioeconomic well-being are unemployment and wealth. In these two areas, Blacks fare poorly relative to Whites. Since 1972, when the Bureau of Labor Statistics began collecting information on labor force characteristics by demographics, including race and ethnicity, the population of unemployed Blacks has been twice that of unemployed Whites.[1] In 2011, the White employment reached 8%, which was considered a national crisis. By contrast, the Black unemployment rate has consistently been above 8% for decades, suggesting that Black are "in a perpetual state of unemployment crisis."[2]

In terms of wealth, since the annual Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) began in 1984, Whites have never had less than seven times the wealth of Blacks. Since 1984, the ratio remained for two decades between 10:1 and 12:1, Whites to Blacks. But the last time the gap was in that range was in 2004. In 2009, the White to Black wealth gap hit a high of 19:1. As of 2011,

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[1] William Darity, Jr. and Darrick Hamilton, "Bold Policies for Economic Justice," *The Review of Black Political Economy* 39, no. 1 (2012): 79-85.
[2] Darity and Hamilton, "Bold Policies for Economic Justice," 80.

for every one dollar of wealth Whites had, Blacks only had six cents.[3] Yet, despite these inequalities, Blacks have never been more optimistic about their relative socioeconomic standing.

A report by the Pew Research Center in 2010 found that Blacks' assessment of their own economic progress in America had improved more dramatically between 2007 and 2009 than at any other time during the previous 25 years. The report noted that Black ebullience coincided neatly with the election of Barack Obama, "despite a deep recession and jobless recovery that have hit blacks especially hard."[4] Indeed, the study found that 39% of Blacks in 2009 believed that they were "better off than they were in the previous five years," whereas only 20% of Blacks believed this in 2007. It also reported that a majority of Blacks (56%) said that the standard-of-living gap between Whites and Blacks narrowed in the past decade.[5] As recent as 2015 this optimism was reported by *The Atlantic* and Brookings Institute as still in effect.[6]

This discordance between Black optimism and socioeconomic stagnation has been attributed to the "Obama effect."[7] On this view, the mere fact of having a Black man in the highest political office in the nation has raised Blacks' hopes for their own future. This view, however, cannot account for the paradoxical belief in Black progress in the face of socioeconomic counterevidence. Additionally, to understand the effect that Obama's presidency has had on Blacks' outlook and on racial relations in the United States generally, a more nuanced approach is required. If it can be assumed that Black Americans' opinions are, in part, shaped by the discourse of Black leaders, and especially by a Black president, then one must investigate the content of Black elite discourse in order to fully understand the source of Black optimism. In particular, it is appropriate to reflect on how Obama's eight years in office have shaped the generation that came of age under his influence, since Blacks under 35 may account for a significant shift in Black public opinion.[8] Therefore, I sought to explore the following questions: *How has President Barack Obama represented issues of race and inequality to young Americans? How might these representations have contributed to Black optimism?*

To address these questions, I use the framework of critical discourse analysis, stressing its intimate connection to rhetorical theory, to review three of Barack Obama's speeches. In 2012 and 2013, Barack Obama delivered commencement addresses at Barnard College and Morehouse College, respectively. I take these addresses to exemplify President Obama's discursive stance toward young Americans, particularly since commencement addresses traditionally take up themes of the attitudes and approaches needed for future success. Because the audiences of the Barnard and Morehouse addresses consisted of, respectively, White females and Black males, the comparison of the two is especially fruitful for uncovering President Obama's specific attitude toward young

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[3] Rebecca Marie Tippett, Avis Jones-DeWeever, Maya Rockeymoore, Darrick Hamilton, and William A. Darity, *Beyond Broke: Why Closing the Racial Wealth Gap is a Priority for National Economic Security* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

[4] "Blacks Upbeat About Black Progress, Prospects," Pew Research Center, 2010, http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/01/12/blacks-upbeat-about-black-progress-prospects/

[5] "Blacks Upbeat About Black Progress, Prospects."

[6] Russell Berman, "As White Americans Give Up on the American Dream, Blacks and Hispanics Embrace It," *The Atlantic,* September 4, 2015, http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/the-surprising-optimism-of-african-americans-and-latinos/401054/; Carol Graham, "The Surprising Optimism of Black Americans," *Brookings Social Mobility Memos*, The Brookings Institute, September 25, 2015, http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/social-mobility-memos/posts/2015/09/25-surprising-optimism-black-americans-graham.

[7] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Victor Ray, "When Whites Love a Black Leader: Race Matters in Obamerica," *Journal of African American Studies* 13, no. 2 (2009): 176-183; Graham, "The Surprising Optimism of Black Americans."

[8] Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

Black Americans, in contradistinction to women as a marginalized group. Next, I contrast the commencement addresses with then-Senator Obama's 2008 address to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Thus, I compare the commencement addresses, wherein Obama had the opportunity to influence public opinion and outlook, with an NAACP audience whose outlook on racial issues could be taken as pre-established. This enables me to draw conclusions about Barack Obama's contribution to the change in public opinion among Black Americans.

Colorblind Ideology and Individualism

Herein, I use the terms *individualist* and *collectivist* to refer to the belief that Blacks' own hard work and responsibility result in their socioeconomic gains and the belief that Black gains are the result of a group or collective effort, respectively. Colorblindness is the notion that race should no longer matter in everyday American life. The premise of color-blindness is that justice, and all laws, should ignore skin color, treating all individuals equally. In the United States, this ideology evolved from the passage of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution, and from the 1896 Supreme Court Case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, in which the court found that "separate but equal" laws violated these amendments. Equal treatment, it was found, required consideration of individuals regardless of skin color or race. The idea of equality regardless of race has been transmogrified, in everyday parlance, from race should not matter, into the idea that race does not matter.[9] Therefore, de jure non-discrimination has devolved into de facto denial of racial issues altogether.

The recognition, during the Civil Rights Era, of continued inequalities led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which removed barriers to voting for Blacks and other minority groups. Ironically, the Voting Rights Act may have served to shift Blacks' political orientation from collectivism to individualism. Piven and Cloward argue that electoral politics restrain group politics.[10] That is, group consciousness can be undercut by the individualism inherent in the act of voting; moreover, suffrage may have undermined the perceived necessity of protest and collective action. Thus, despite the hope generated by the passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Blacks' political gains did not transform socioeconomic conditions for Blacks at the lowest reaches of society.

Today, socioeconomic inequality is alive and well, in part thanks to colorblind ideologies. Bonilla-Silva argued that colorblind discourse is detrimental to racial harmony in that it disallows the discussion of race. It also allows people to tacitly hold racist or biased views while espousing a colorblind ethos. Colorblindness normalizes the racial disparity in accumulated socioeconomic disadvantages experienced by Blacks as a Black problem, the failure of Blacks to work hard and be responsible for their success, rather than framing the disparity as an indication of structural racism.[11] Acceptance of the concept of colorblindness influences Blacks to orient their attitudes toward an individualistic posture that rationalizes disparate outcomes as the result of Blacks' own lack of effort and responsibility.

Colorblindness is closely related to the concept of laissez-faire racism. Laissez-faire racism is the view that Blacks are the cause of their own economic stagnation because they refuse to engage

[9] Sheri A. Castro Atwater, "Waking Up to Difference: Teachers, Color-Blindness, and the Effects on Students of Color," *Journal of Instructional Psychology* 35, no. 3 (2008): 246-253.

[10] Frances Fox Piven, and Richard A. Cloward, *Why Americans Don't Vote*, (New York, NY: Pantheon Press, 1988).

[11] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and Racial Inequality in Contemporary America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

in the equal opportunities that they have been afforded and are therefore undeserving of special government support.[12] Again, such a concept reinforces a focus on individualism among Blacks, discouraging any emphasis on structural racism and making socioeconomic disparities a micro-level (individual), rather than macro-level (social), problem.

Colorblind ideology persists into contemporary discourse and scholarship. For example, Orlando Patterson, William Julius Wilson, and Eugene Robinson have all argued that class is more significant than race as a way of understanding Blacks' chances in life or quality of life.[13] As another example, John McWhorter, a leading linguist and public intellectual, is well known for implicating common fate and collective action in the demise of socioeconomic opportunities for Blacks and instead extolling the virtues of individualism. In *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*, McWhorter blamed Blacks themselves for their marginalization, citing cults of victimology, separatism, and anti-intellectualism.[14] "Defeatist thought patterns," he stated, make up "the bedrock of black identity" and constitute Black self-sabotage.[15] Instead, as McWhorter argued in *Winning the Race: Beyond the Crisis in Black America*, Blacks ought to process the obstacles they face in ways that are appropriate to the new post-racial world, using their own initiative to obtain education and achieve success.[16] McWhorter's calls for some macro-level changes, namely higher educational standards for Blacks and new Black leadership who will not focus on racism and discrimination are epitomic examples of the colorblind ideology and individualism that today pervade public thought in America.[17] McWhorter's rhetoric does not align with the structural impediments of Black stagnated progress.

There have been many critical and theoretical attempts to counter the ideology of colorblindness, a comprehensive summary of which is outside the scope of the present article. However, in light of the paradoxical nature of contemporary rhetoric around Black individualism, the role of individualism in Black identity is worth mentioning briefly. Ronald Jackson II, who is well known for his work on Black masculinity, has suggested that Black males' identity can be characterized by five factors, among which are the two opposing factors of independence and community.[18] Within Black communities, independence serves as a sign of success, implying that, for Black males, independence and community can never be fully separated. Thus, colorblind ideology contributes to the Black male's internal struggle by suggesting that Blacks can and should view themselves independently of their communities. This struggle could manifest itself in a multitude of complex and contradictory ways as Blacks attempt to navigate their positions within their communities while simultaneously feeling they should be somehow independent of those same communities. Such a view makes evident the fraught effect colorblind ideology, when spread via rhetoric at the level of elite discourse, can have at the individual level.

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[12] Lawrence Bobo, James R. Kluegel, and Ryan A. Smith, "Laissez-Faire Racism: The Crystallization of a Kinder, Gentler, Antiblack Ideology," in *Racial Attitudes in the 1990s: Continuity and Change*, ed. Steven A. Tuch and Jack K. Martin (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1997).

[13] Orlando Patterson, *The Ordeal of Integration* (Washington, DC: Civitas/Counterpoint, 1997); Eugene Robinson, *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America* (New York: Anchor Books, 2011); William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[14] John H. McWhorter, *Losing the Race: Self-sabotage in Black America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

[15] McWhorter, *Losing the Race*, xiv.

[16] John H. McWhorter, *Winning the Race: Beyond the Crisis in Black America* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

[17] McWhorter, *Winning the Race*.

[18] Ronald L. Jackson II, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media* (New York: SUNY Press, 2006).

In this era of colorblindness, the question remains whether Black political attitudes reflect Black group interests, or whether they are now based on class needs or the concerns of individuals, leading to a paradoxical belief in a nonexistent Black progress. The following analysis is an attempt to take a step toward answering this question.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Rhetorical Criticism

Barack Obama is a Black elite instructing Black Americans from an unprecedented position of power. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) examines the way written and spoken words covertly and overtly support abuses of power, dominations, and social inequalities; it formulates ways in which speech and texts may resist such structures.[19] This focus on texts has made CDA a natural method for use in the field of rhetorical criticism. As McKerrow noted, critical rhetoric is a transformative practice, rather than a method in itself.[20] Eisenhart and Johnstone suggested that CDA can be brought to bear as a method on the broader practice of critical rhetoric.[21]

A key point of contact between rhetorical criticism and CDA revolves around the idea of power. In McKerrow's words, "the initial task of a critical rhetoric is … constructing an argument that identifies the integration of power and knowledge and delineates the role of power/knowledge in structuring social practices."[22] It should be noted that knowledge, in this context, refers to the function of symbols in society (*doxa*), rather than their inherent truth or falsity (*episteme*). Thus, at issue in rhetorical criticism is the power of language to constitute and reinforces social subjects and the relations between them.

Within the framework of CDA, power also means access to and/or control of public discourse.[23] Control of discourse requires social resources such as coercion, wealth, standing, fame, knowledge, information, or means of communication. Therefore, there is a natural connection between rhetorical criticism, which is concerned with the power of language, and CDA, which is concerned of the power of the individuals who use language. Both are ultimately interested in exploring and transforming power differentials through critique.[24]

Indeed, Edwin Black, a key rhetorical critic, insisted that criticism involving clear moral judgments satisfies "our obligation to history"[25] by revealing patterns that may illuminate previously undisclosed social possibilities "and thus extend our very freedom."[26] In the case of Black socioeconomic disparity and paradoxical Black optimism, this approach could be a way forward to the improvements that have, despite public opinion, not been forthcoming. The present article is an attempt to address elite Black discourse from a critical rhetorical standpoint and with a collectivist social justice ideology.

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[19] Teun A. van Dijk, "Critical Discourse Analysis," in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen, and Heidi E. Hamilton (London: Blackwell, 2008).

[20] Raymie E. McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," *Communications Monographs* 56, no. 2 (1989): 91-111.

[21] Christopher Eisenhart and Barbara Johnstone, "Discourse Analysis and Rhetorical Studies," in *Rhetoric in Detail*, ed. Barbara Johnstone and Christopher Eisenhart (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2008).

[22] McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric," 102.

[23] Teun A. van Dijk, "Discourse, Power and Access," in *Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis*, ed. Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard and Malcolm Coulthard (London: Routledge, 1996).

[24] Thomas Huckin, Jennifer Andrus, and Jennifer Clary-Lemon, "Critical Discourse Analysis and Rhetoric and Composition," *College Composition and Communication* 64, no. 1 (2012): 107-129; van Dijk, "Critical Discourse Analysis."

[25] Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56, no. 2 (1970): 110.

[26] Black, "The Second Persona," 109.

Proponents of CDA define *discourse* as a complex communicative act; individuals may exert power with the structure as well as the context of their text and speech. For the purposes of CDA, *context* consists of the mental representations of the social situation that relate to the production or understanding of discourse.[27] Here is a third point of contact with (at least one school of) rhetorical criticism, which takes speakers to enter into dialectical discursive relationships with audiences, such that audiences "are not passive bystanders"[28] but rather play an active role in the constitution of social relations through discourse. According to Black, rhetorical criticism uses context as a way to understand texts, under the belief that rhetorical acts cannot be properly understood in isolation from the environments and situations under which they were produced.[29] Thus, examining the context and content of Obama's speeches allows for a deep understanding of how Obama's discourse represents a use of his elite position to perpetuate the existing ideology of colorblindness and constitute, or at least influence, Black public opinion in so doing.

In CDA, micro-level analysis looks at the way people use language in spoken and written discourse, whereas the macro level examines the relationship between language and social power, dominance, and inequality between groups. For purposes of this study, I will examine President Obama's use of post-racial rhetoric at the micro level to influence Blacks' beliefs about their stagnated outcomes in ways that support macro-level power, dominance and intergroup inequality. I argue that President Obama uses colorblind, individualist rhetoric to encourage Black optimism and obscure actual socioeconomic disparities.

Race in the Era of Obama

Much discussion about America's entrance into a post-racial era has centered on the 2008 election of President Barack Obama. Present day post-racial narratives from prominent Blacks like President Barack Obama counsel Blacks to stop complaining about the past. Leaders say that conditions are much better now in terms of the oppressive burdens of discrimination. Indeed, the Obama presidency coincided with the Black ebullient boom, and much of the discussion about America entering a post-racial era has centered on his 2008 election.[30] Not only has Obama's presidency had unprecedented effects on Black attitudes, but Obama also stands among the powerful Black elite who have produced public discourse on how Blacks interact with society, how they should interact with society, and the likely outcomes of their hard work and responsible behavior. As a Black elite instructing the Black population from an unprecedented position of Black power, Obama's speeches will be crucial to this analysis of paradoxical optimism.

Andra Gillespie and Fredrick Harris have both examined the impact of such messages on Blacks, specifically in terms of their ability to advance political and socioeconomic agendas, making them natural inclusions in a critical discourse analysis related to Black political opinions and actions. Gillespie's work describes the deracialized approach to governance and policy among emerging Black leadership.[31] Harris has espoused a narrative that demonstrates how the election of Barack Obama as the nation's first Black president was simultaneously a defining moment for

[27] Alessandro Duranti and Charles Goodwin, *Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[28] McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric," 102.

[29] Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

[30] See Michael Tesler and David O. Sears, *Obama's Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[31] Andra Gillespie, *Whose Black Politics? Cases in Post-Racial Black Leadership* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

the U.S. and a moment signaling what may very well be the end of collectivism as a strategy for achieving political and socioeconomic parity for Blacks.[32]

Critical Discourse Analysis of Three Obama Addresses

Barack Obama's presidency coincides with the uplift in Black optimism that strikes such a discordant note with Black socioeconomic stagnation. Here, I am concerned with the discursive stance President Obama has taken toward young Americans. Hence, I explore his 2012 commencement address to Barnard College and his 2013 commencement addresses to Morehouse College. In commencement addresses, speakers address graduating college students, traditionally offering advice for achieving success in their careers and personal lives. Morehouse College is a historically Black liberal arts college that graduates predominately Black males. Barnard is a liberal arts college that graduates predominately White females. Comparing these commencement speeches will enable a determination of the overall content of President Obama's messages to young Americans, as well as a comparison of whether he makes similar demands and offers similar advice to these two demographically disparate student bodies.

Commencement Address to Morehouse College

In his commencement speech at Morehouse College to the class of 2013, President Obama tells the graduating class of their collective responsibilities to the underprivileged: "There are some things as Morehouse Men…you are obliged to do for those still left behind."[33] The underprivileged to whom President Obama refers, include those living "[i]n troubled neighborhoods…many of them heavily African American."[34] The underprivileged "spend their youth not behind a desk in a classroom, but hanging out on the streets brooding behind a jail cell."[35] In this passage, Obama seems to portray young men of color as incidental victims of cultural racism; at the same time, he recognizes that there are structural impediments that take Black men out of educative settings and put them behind bars. President Obama recounts his own experiences with collective responsibility and the "sense of connection and empathy—the special obligation I felt as a black man…to help those who need it most."[36]

President Obama invokes Black history to inspire collective action when he says,

> You now hail from a lineage and legacy of immeasurably strong men – men who bore tremendous burdens and still laid the stones for the path on which we now walk. You wear the mantle of Fredrick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, and Ralph Bunche and Langston Hughes, and George Washington Carver and Ralph Abernathy and Thurgood Marshall, and yes, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.[37]

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[32] Fredrick Harris, *The Price of the Ticket: Barack Obama and Rise and Decline of Black Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[33] Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at Morehouse College Commencement Ceremony," (presentation at the 2013 Commencement of Morehouse College, Atlanta, GA, May 19, 2013), paragraph 25, lines 3-4.

[34] Obama, "Morehouse College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 23, lines 3-5.

[35] Obama, "Morehouse College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 23, lines 8-10.

[36] Obama, "Morehouse College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 49, lines 3-5.

[37] Obama, "Morehouse College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 34, lines 1-6.

In all of these excerpts, President Obama's reminder to the Morehouse graduates is tinged with linked fate and collective responsibility. He states an expectation that the individual example of the Morehouse graduates demonstrate hard work and personal responsibility to catalyze a movement to improve the socioeconomic position of Black men. They have "special insight" resulting from "the sting of discrimination"[38] Morehouse graduates know what it means to "overcome barriers."[39] These individual examples, according to Fredrick Harris, can translate into the uplift, echoing W.E.B. DuBois' notion of the "Talented Tenth," whose role it was to be a moral compass and standard bearer of sorts, to the remaining nine tenths of Blacks.[40]

While emphasizing collective action and common fate, President Obama also blames Black individuals for their own suffering. He states, "Too many young men in [our] community continue to make bad choices,"[41] and then make excuses for those choices. Obama acknowledges "the bitter legacy of slavery and segregation."[42] The Morehouse class of 2013 has "no time for excuses."[43] Moreover, despite the apparent effects of structural racism, Blacks must not blame structural racism for their lower socioeconomic parity "with millions of young people from China and India and Brazil…many of whom started with a whole lot less than [the Morehouse class of 2013] did."[44]

Two paradoxes are evident in these passages: one, the simultaneous blaming and pardoning of structural racism for Black suffering; and two, a superficial addressing of structural problems by means of moral uplift.

While still ambiguous in the above passages, Obama's stance becomes decidedly color-blind in the passages that follow. For instance, President Obama made it clear to Morehouse graduates in 2013 that their struggles were insignificant: "Nobody cares how tough your upbringing was. Nobody cares if you suffered some discrimination. And moreover, you have to remember that whatever you've gone through, it pales in comparison to the hardships previous generations endured – and they overcame them. And if they overcame them, you can overcome them too."[45]

This passage in particular reveals Obama's allegiance to minimization, the frame of color-blind racism that holds that racism no longer exists to a large enough degree to impede Blacks socioeconomically. Despite acknowledging the role racism plays in Blacks' life chances, President Obama tells this group that, no matter what, they cannot point to racism as the reason that they do not have socioeconomic parity. Moreover, Obama invokes a host of successful Blacks who pioneered the struggle for Black interests and charges the Morehouse class of 2013 to follow their example: "These men were many things to many people. And they knew full well the role that racism played in their lives. But when it came to their own accomplishments and sense of purpose, they had no time for excuses."[46]

This passage implies that the Black heroes he mentioned did not complain about structural racism; instead, they simply took action as individuals. He makes this claim despite the fact that

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[38] Obama, "Morehouse College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 48 line 1, paragraph 47 lines 2-3.

[39] Obama, "Morehouse College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 48, line 6.

[40] Harris, *The Price of the Ticket*.

[41] Obama, "Morehouse College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 31, lines 3-4.

[42] Obama, "Morehouse College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 32, lines 3-4.

[43] Obama, "Morehouse College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 32, line 3.

[44] Obama, "Morehouse College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 32 lines 6-8.

[45] Obama, "Morehouse College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 33 lines 1-5.

[46] Obama, "Morehouse College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 34, lines 6-9.

certain of the Black heroes, such as Dr. King did, in fact, speak out about structural problems.[47] In short, Obama's words appear empowering but in fact bespeak his allegiance to the color-blind principle of abstract liberalism; he asserts that freedom, individualism, and egalitarianism have provided such opportunities for Blacks that racism can no longer have a significant effect on Black prospects.

President Obama's colorblindness appears again and again throughout the speech at Morehouse, including in his proclamation that previous generations endured and overcame their hardships. The reality is that previous generations, based on socioeconomic indicators, particularly wealth, did not overcome them. Yet President Obama is ebullient: "And I promise you, what was needed in Dr. Mays's time, that spirit of excellence, and hard work, and dedication, and no excuses is needed now more than ever…But if you stay hungry, if you keep hustling, if you keep on your grind and get other folks to do the same – nobody can stop you."[48]

In President Obama's discourses on Black socioeconomic parity, he presents a notion of Black progress as a steady upward trend—a cause for optimism. In so doing, he appears to subscribe uncritically to the idea of racial progress generally:

> Now, think about it. For black men in the '40s and the '50s, the threat of violence, the constant humiliations, large and small, the uncertainty that you could support a family, the gnawing doubts born of the Jim Crow culture that told you every day that somehow you were inferior, the temptation to shrink from the world, to accept your place, to avoid risks, to be afraid – that temptation was necessarily strong.[49]
>
> And over the last 50 years, …barriers have come tumbling down, and new doors of opportunity have swung open, and laws and hearts and minds have been changed to the point where someone who looks just like you can somehow come to serve as President of these United States of America.
>
> So the history we share should give you hope. The future we share should give you hope. You're graduating into an improving job market.[50] You're living in a time when advances in technology and communication put the world at your fingertips.[51]

In these passages, Obama aims to create optimism in his audience using the frame of colorblindness. Things are not as bad as they once were, he says. The opportunities are there for the taking, he says. Obama thus implies that Blacks are failing to prosper simply because they are not trying—not walking through the doors of opportunity. In sum, Blacks have every reason to believe that things will get better for them; they should be optimistic.

To summarize, in this speech, President Obama at the same time acknowledges the socioeconomic effects of structural racism, discourages Blacks from blaming structural racism for their socioeconomic problems, and charges Blacks with the task of pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps just as he alleges their Black forefathers did.

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[47] King's criticism of the hypocritical policy to give land grants and subsidies to White farmers while denying government support to Blacks could even be viewed as "making excuses" for individuals' failure to achieve economic success.

[48] Obama, "Morehouse College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 36, lines 1-6.

[49] Obama, "Morehouse College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 20, lines 1-6.

[50] As of July, 2016, the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for Black men 20 years and older was 8.4%, as compared to 4.3% for White men in the same age range (Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Table A-2. Employment Status of the Civilian Population by Race, Sex, and Age*. Report for United States Department of Labor, 2016). The reality is, for Blacks in general and Black men particularly, job market opportunities have been consistently bleak, and there has been a persistent 2:1 racial unemployment gap.

[51] Obama, "Morehouse College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 21, lines 3-8 and paragraph 22, lines 1-4.

Commencement Address to Barnard College

In President Obama's 2012 commencement speech at Barnard, he invokes the concept of linked fate in his advice to "never underestimate the power of your example."[52] He continues as follows:

> The very fact that you are graduating, let alone that more women now graduate from college than men, is only possible because earlier generations of women – your mothers, your grandmothers, your aunts—shattered the myth that you couldn't or shouldn't be here you are.[53]
> This diploma opens up new possibilities, so reach back, convince a young girl to earn one, too. If you earned your degree in areas where we need more women—like computer science or engineering—reach back and persuade another student to study it too…Be a mentor. Be a role model.[54]
> Until a girl can imagine herself, can picture herself as a computer programmer, or a combatant commander, she won't become one. Until there are women who tell her…focus instead on studying and inventing and competing and leading.[55]

As in his speech at Morehouse, President Obama's call for collective action in the Barnard speech is tempered by individualism and personal responsibility to the point that individual action alone is what makes socioeconomic parity possible. As he did at Morehouse, President Obama told this group of predominately White females that they will have to be responsible and work hard for what they want. These short excerpts make this point clear: "…that will be up to you…You've got to want it…It will not be handed to you."[56] "Now that new doors have been opened for you, you've got an obligation to seize those opportunities."[57]

A call for optimism is also manifest in President Obama's speech to the graduating class of Barnard in 2012. He tells these White women that despite "a steady stream of sensationalism and scandal and stories…that suggest change isn't possible,"[58] they should be optimistic. Obama is "convinced [that they, the women] are tougher."[59] In other words, (White) women should be ebullient on account of their individual ability to counteract systemic difficulties. The question, continues Obama, "is not whether things will get better—they always do."[60]

This is optimism in its purest form; it predicts inevitable improvement. "Now more than ever…if you… persevere in what you decide to do with your life, I have every faith not only that you will succeed, but that, through you, our nation will continue to be a beacon of light."[61] It seems from Obama's discourse that White women have no reason *not* to be optimistic about improving their socioeconomic parity on an individual level; he suggests that their hard work will inevitably be rewarded.

Unlike his speech at Morehouse, in which Obama tells the Black men that nobody cared about what they had to endure, the Barnard speech contained consolation for the women: "It's up to you to hold the system accountable and sometimes upend it entirely. It's up to you to stand up and to

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[52] Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony," (presentation at the 2012 Commencement of Barnard College, New York, NY, May 14, 2012), paragraph 33, lines 1-2.
[53] Obama, "Barnard College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 33, lines 2-5.
[54] Obama, "Barnard College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 36, lines 1-6.
[55] Obama, "Barnard College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 37, lines 1-5.
[56] Obama, "Barnard College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 23, line 2.
[57] Obama, "Barnard College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 27, lines 2-3.
[58] Obama, "Barnard College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 14, lines 3-4.
[59] Obama, "Barnard College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 15, line 2.
[60] Obama, "Barnard College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 17, line 1.
[61] Obama, "Barnard College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 56, lines 1-6.

be heard, to write and to lobby, to march, to organize, to vote."[62] These are clear calls to collective action. Obama tells the Barnard Class of 2012 to work for social change through *both* individual responsibility and organized movements. Although he emphasizes individualism, Obama also acknowledges that the system may need to change. There is no such acknowledgement in the Morehouse speech, where Obama suggests that a collectivist focus on systemic reasons for their lack of success would be inappropriate, and that individualism is the clear way forward. For White women, it is time to "upend" the system; for Black men, it is time to stop making excuses.

Address to the 99th Annual Convention of the NAACP

I turn now to an address given by then-Senator Barack Obama in 2008, just before his election to the presidency. The address to the 99th Annual Convention of the NAACP, made several years before the commencement addresses examined above, serves as a contrast with the starkly post-racial discourse of the Morehouse College address. In the latter, Obama addressed a group of young, Black men, whose attitudes toward race and success he was in a privileged position to influence in the direction of individualism. By contrast, the earlier NAACP address was delivered to an audience of individuals in whose minds the importance of the collectivity of Black Americans, in contradistinction to the individualist view, had already been established, hence their membership in the NAACP.

In his address to the NAACP, Senator Obama emphasizes common fate. He points to the collective action of generations past and its role in the socioeconomic gains experienced by Blacks in general and the elevation of Obama himself as the Democratic nominee. "It is a powerful reminder of the debt we all owe to those who marched for us and fought for us."[63] At the same time, Obama's speech reveals that he values individual responsibility to promote the common good; he remembers "all those whose names never made it into the history books…who had the courage to remake the world as it should be."[64]

He tells the gathered that if he were elected President, he would continue to fight to correct the "barriers of prejudice" as earlier generations stood up for him.[65] In this narrative, Obama calls for collective action as a way to gain socioeconomic parity for Blacks. Referencing Dr. King and Roy Wilkins, Obama claims that "social justice is not enough,"[66] and states that he has been working his "entire adult life to help build an America where social justice is being served and economic justice is being served, an America where we all have an equal chance to make it if we try."[67] "Our work is not over."[68]

This "work" included improvements to education, corporate accountability, elimination of poverty, and growing the middle class; in addition, "It's about the responsibilities we all share for the future we hold in common."[69] Clearly, the audience at the meeting of the NAACP not only has a common fate, but their fate is tied to the effects of racial prejudice, and they are encouraged to act as a collective to overcome those effects. In this same speech, Obama follows demands for

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[62] Obama, "Barnard College Commencement Ceremony," paragraph 31, lines 2-5.
[63] Barack Obama, "Power, Justice, Freedom, Vote," (presentation at the 99th Annual Convention of the NAACP, Washington, DC, July 14, 2008), paragraph 1, line 1.
[64] Obama, "Power, Justice, Freedom, Vote," paragraph 4, lines 1-4.
[65] Obama, "Power, Justice, Freedom, Vote," paragraph 5, line 4.
[66] Obama, "Power, Justice, Freedom, Vote," paragraph 6, line 1.
[67] Obama, "Power, Justice, Freedom, Vote," paragraph 10, lines 1-3.
[68] Obama, "Power, Justice, Freedom, Vote," paragraph 11, line 1.
[69] Obama, "Power, Justice, Freedom, Vote," paragraph 15, lines 1-2.

responsibility on Wall Street and Washington with a demand for Black responsibility. "[I]f we're serious about reclaiming that dream, we have to do more in our own lives, our own families, and our own communities."[70]

Though this parallel has rhetorical value, its factual value is more questionable; Blacks as a group have not been personally irresponsible to the point of capsizing the U.S. economy. In response to remarks such as this, Harris, referencing Cornell Belcher, noted that "Obama became one of the most individualized blacks in this country."[71] The implication here is that changing individual Black behavior will change the social and economic injustice experienced by Blacks.

Despite the radically different audience, a belief in individualism and optimism can still be perceived in Obama's speech to the NAACP in 2008. Today's America, he notes, is the America that the NAACP has been "fighting for over the past 99 years."[72] In this passage Obama recognizes and legitimizes collectivism, which is an important value for the NAACP, while at the same time implying that collectivism is no longer necessary. Therefore, even in Senator Obama's remarks to a historically non-individualistic Black rights group, his push for colorblindness is evident. Five years later, at Morehouse, his individualistic stance had come out in the open in a setting where, one might conclude, his discursive influence on public opinion was at its height.

Discussion and Conclusions

In these three speeches, a double standard is evident when comparing Obama's rhetoric targeting Black people and White women. As is evident from my discussion of the rhetoric of Obama's speech to the women of Barnard in 2012, Obama concedes that systemic injustice has in part caused the socioeconomic disparity between White women and men; in fact, he encourages White women to challenge the system. By contrast, Obama is less willing to allow Black people to blame anyone but themselves for their socioeconomic disparity, and he implores them as individuals to take advantage of their freedoms to make changes in their socioeconomic prospects. In Ronald Jackson's terminology, he delegitimizes community as a component of Black identity. Obama inspires similar ideas of linked fate and collective action among White women and Black people, but his charges to Black people tend to be grounded in questionable interpretations of Black history. Altogether, the discrepancies between Obama's treatment of White issues and Black issues, as well as between his treatment of said issues before and after his election, signal the influence of the frames of color-blindness on his rhetorical representation of reality.

Both rhetorical criticism and CDA emphasize the fact that it is challenging, if not impossible, to establish causality through the analysis of discourse and rhetoric.[73] Therefore, I do not make the claim that the phenomenon of paradoxical Black optimism is caused by elite Black discourse as exemplified here by Obama's speeches. It is, however, worth noting briefly that, before Barack Obama was elected President, no Black American had held such a prominent political position. Blacks may have seen his presidency as evidence that Blacks can succeed in America. However, as I have here demonstrated, the content of Obama's rhetoric has explicitly encouraged Blacks, especially young Black Americans, to view themselves on individualist terms and adopt colorblind attitudes toward race. Given his position of power, unprecedented for a Black American, Obama has had access to rhetorical and discursive resources enabling him to influence the outlook of

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[70] Obama, "Power, Justice, Freedom, Vote," paragraph 26, lines 1-2.
[71] Harris, *The Price of the Ticket*, 153.
[72] Obama, "Power, Justice, Freedom, Vote," paragraph 10, line 4.
[73] van Dijk, "Discourse, Power and Access"; McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric".

everyday Blacks. As McKerrow noted, "Influence is not causality."[74] According to this important principle, we can acknowledge that black elite discourse is connected to, but does not determine, Black optimism. Future research might focus on confirming the insights presented here across a larger sample of Obama's rhetoric.

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[74] McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric," 106.