

Post-race? Nation, Inheritance and the Contradictory Performativity of Race in Barack Obama's 'A More Perfect Union' Speech

Bridget Byrne

Introduction

[S]ome people have a hard time taking me at face value. When people who don't know me well, black or white, discover my background (and it usually is a discovery, for I ceased to advertise my mother's race at the age of 12 or 13, when I began to suspect that by doing so I was ingratiating myself to whites), I see the split-second adjustment they have to make, the searching of my eyes for some tell-tale sign. They no longer know who I am. (Obama, *Dreams from my Father* xv).

It's not likely that there are too many people left who do not know who Barack Obama is, or that he is the product of a 'brief union' as he puts it, between 'a black man and a white woman, an African and an American' (Obama, *Dreams from my Father* xv). Nonetheless, Obama's racial identity remains a source of fascination. The website democraticunderground.com hosted a discussion thread in March 2008 prompted by the question 'What ethnicity is Obama'.¹ The original questioner was interested in exploring 'his white half's ethnicity'.² One of the respondents to this thread provides links to a website publishing Obama's family tree and writes 'it is amazing to see just how 'white' his mother and grandparents are'. The same respondent also provides a picture from Obama's mother's high school yearbook to demonstrate her 'amazing' whiteness as well as one of Obama with his white grandparents. The thread continues with a string of photos of different members of his family (including his half-Indonesian sister's 'Oriental husband who came from Canada'). This is just one example of the fascination that Obama's racial positioning prompts in supporters and detractors alike and suggests that for many, it takes more than a 'split-second' adjustment to reconcile themselves to complex ideas of family, heritage and racialized identities.

This paper will explore a particular moment in the racialized positioning of Obama and his own self-positioning as an example of the performativity of race or possibly of 'post-race'. The paper will take a key instance when Obama put his own racial positioning on the stage, in response to a particular set of political events. Through an examination of his 'A more perfect union' speech in Philadelphia during his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination (18th March 2008), I want to consider the extent to which we can 'trouble race' in the same way that Judith Butler has argued for the troubling of gender. The campaign election of Barack Obama has inserted the concept of 'post-race' into popular discourse in a forceful way.³ This article will

question what the theoretical literature, which might regard race to be ‘under-erasure’ rather than ‘overcome,’ can offer to an analysis of the positioning of Obama. This is important because, despite longstanding academic and activist insistence that ‘race’ is a social construction devoid of any inherent or essential meaning, the ontological status of ‘race’ remains in question. As the reaction to Barack Obama shows, race⁴ is something that we still appear to need to ‘know’ about each other (and perhaps particularly about those who are not ‘white’). Yet, as I will argue, the racialized performativity offered by Obama is far from clear-cut and suggests that a more complex analysis is required. This paper will first explore the ideas of being ‘beyond’ or ‘post’ race and then consider how the notion of gender performativity might be productively extended to race performativity. Then it will return to the speech given by Barack Obama in the course of his nomination campaign to explore both the impossibility for some figures to step outside of race, but also the potential scope to re-fashion concepts of race and inheritance, and particularly their relation to the nation.

Barack Obama and post-race

It might be argued that there were several different usages of the term post-race at play in relation to Barack Obama. For some, Barack Obama was considered post-race because he sought to rise above the divisions of race in America (which might in turn provoke accusations of cynicism or ‘acting white’). Or for others, his election victory meant that race was no longer a division in US politics and possibly even that racism no longer existed. Mohammed Ali Salih, a journalist based in Washington posted the following exchange with his son on a *USA Today* blog during the run up to the US elections:

I asked my son, a twenty-something Democrat and Obama supporter, two questions. “Why do you favor Obama?” With his mother and two sisters listening, he offered the usual arguments about “change,” “unity,” and that Obama didn’t vote for the Iraq war. Then I asked: “Are you supporting Obama because he is biracial like you?” His angry response: “I knew you were going to ask about race. [...] And I understand that, because of your age (I am in my 60s) and your background (an immigrant from Sudan). But, Dad, you need to wake up to the new thinking about race in America.” He added, “It is not about being racial; it is not about being biracial; it is about being post-racial.”

Salih concludes his blog reflecting that “the new ‘post-race’ thinking could be equivalent to ‘no race’ – A country without racial divisions. What a concept”.

In his famous speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, which had perhaps first brought him to national attention, Obama said: “There is not a black America, a white America, a Latino America and an Asian America – there’s a United States of America.”⁵ However, in 2007 Obama resisted the notion of post-race:

Still, when I hear commentators interpreting my speech to mean that we have arrived at a ‘postracial politics’ or that we already live in a color-blind society, I have to offer a word of caution. To say that we are one people is not to suggest that race no longer matters – that the fight for equality has been won, or that the problems that minorities face in this country today are largely self-inflicted. We know the statistics: On almost every single socioeconomic indicator, from infant mortality to life expectancy to employment to home ownership, black and Latino Americans in particular continue to lag far behind their white counterparts’ (*Audacity of Hope* 232).

Thus the distinction needs to be made between those who use the term post-race to mean that race is now an irrelevancy, with the implication that racism and structural disadvantage based on race no longer exist, and the call for post-race thinking which argues for new ways of conceptualising processes of racialisation and the operations of racism.

Post-race?

In his 2000 book, *Between Camps*, Gilroy argues that we have entered a period where race and raciology are in crisis and ripe for abolition. He suggests that new ways of thinking about and of seeing the body and humanity mean that racial ideologies no longer hold such power, even whilst they may remain potent in popular thinking and, more problematically, within anti-racist activism. For Gilroy, this crisis offers the possibility of developing a radical ‘nonracial humanism’ which is also ‘wilfully ungendered’ (16). Gilroy calls for fundamental changes in the way in which the body is viewed and functions as a source of identification. He argues that technology and science are part of this process, as they offer new ways of imaging and imagining the body: Gilroy points to the dependence of raciology on ‘a distinctive visual and optical imagery’ (35), arguing that these perceptual practices are being superseded:

Now that the microscopic has yielded so comprehensively to the molecular, I want to ask whether these outmoded representational and observational conventions have been left behind. This would mean that much of the contemporary discourse animating “races” and producing racialized consciousness is an anachronistic, even a vestigial phenomenon. Screens rather than lenses now mediate the pursuit of bodily truths. This is a potent sign that “race” should be approached as an afterimage - a lingering effect of looking too casually into the damaging glare emanating from colonial conflicts at home and abroad.(Gilroy, *Between Camps* 37).

Much of Gilroy’s persuasion is directed at those who have embraced racial identity as a means to contest the subordinated position which they have been allocated in racial hierarchies or processes of racialization. This has provoked concern in the works of authors such as Brett St Louis about the political implications of rejecting

race as a concept, particularly as a rejection which is often framed in “obfuscatory theoretical and conceptual vocabulary” which “sequesters intellectual production from political engagement”(654). In addition, whilst Gilroy makes a timely call for the need to radically question race, there are possible problems with a reliance on the logics of “commonsense credibility”. The problems are particularly in the dependence on new medical/technical models of perceiving the body to free us from racial ideologies. The technological developments which Gilroy hails are still only emerging and it could be argued that their impact on perceptual practices is as yet minimal. In addition, there is no guarantee that they will have the effect that Gilroy predicts. For instance, the relationship between race and genetic science is far from conclusive. The idea of genetics itself depends on a visualisation of the body and identity, as genetics are often understood through apprehensible characteristics.⁶ Thus, whilst it is possible that new ways of seeing and conceptualising the body will leave raciology redundant, it is also possible that racial thinking will adapt in a way which incorporates these new visions. For Sara Ahmed, the call to move beyond race is premature:

for me we cannot do away with race, unless racism is ‘done away’. Racism works to produce race as if it were a property of bodies (biological essentialism) or cultures (cultural essentialism) [...] Thinking beyond race in a world that is deeply racist is at best a form of utopianism, at worse a form of neo-liberalism: it imagines we could get beyond race, supporting the illusion that social hierarchies are undone once we have ‘seen through them’. [...] race, like sex, is sticky; it sticks to us, or we become ‘us’ as an effect of how it sticks, even when we think we are beyond it. Beginning to live with that stickiness, to think it, feel it, do it, is about creating a space to deal with the effects of racism. We need to deal with the effects of racism in a way that is better (48).

Despite these hesitations, Gilroy’s work raises important questions for those who seek to analyse processes of racialisation. Do we lack, as he argues in *After Empire*, the ‘capacity to imagine [race’s] unmaking, its deconstruction or even the possibility of its eventual descent into irrelevance’? (59) Gilroy leaves us with the challenge of explaining why we continue to utilise a concept which we profess to no longer believe in. This is the heart of the post-race conundrum.

The assertion that “*there is no such thing as race*” is for Anoop Nayak “as tiresome as it is pivotal” (411). Nonetheless he, much like Gilroy, argues that the mere dismissal of race as a social construct, but its continued use as a ‘proper object’ of study or ontological category through which we know social actors is deeply problematic. Rather than calling for a declaration that “race ends here”, Nayak calls for a post-race thinking that “maintain[s] an anti-foundational commitment to the insight that racial identity is an incomplete project, forever in the process of becoming” (414) . For Nayak, “race is a fiction only ever given substance to through the illusion of performance, action and utterance, where repetition makes it appear as-

if-real” (416) . Equally for Suki Ali, a post-race position does not mean that race is irrelevant, but that we need to take a deconstructive, performative approach to racialized identities.

Deconstructing, de-essentialising and troubling race

Nadine Ehlers might agree with Gilroy that there is a crisis of race, but she contends that crisis is inherent in the concept of race. Ehlers argues that “race is predicated on crisis”, a crisis which is marked by the “endless necessity to consolidate the phantasy of racial ontology, raced boundaries and norms” (152-3). Moments of ‘passing’ or mixed race identities are examples of “category crisis” which, for Ehlers, threaten racial ontology and require re-adjustment and re-iteration of racial norms. They ‘trouble’ race in a similar way to which Judith Butler argues that gender can be troubled. Thus, drawing on the work of Butler, I want to argue that race is performatively produced through the re-enactment of a range of perceptual as well as discursive practices. It is critical to the kind of post-race thinking I am suggesting to identify the processes through which race is produced in repetition and re-enactment. The potential outcome is that we will then be able to identify where race might be unmade or at least disrupted. Butler’s Foucault-influenced response to hitherto assumed foundational categories of gender and sexuality is to call for a genealogy which will expose them as the “effects of a specific formulation of power” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* ix). She is concerned with the ways in which the body (and therefore the experience of the body) are discursively constructed. Butler grants neither sex nor gender a material ‘reality’ (which is not to say that there is no material body, only that it is not experienced prior to or outside of discourse). The construction of gender (and hence the establishment of the norms of sexual difference) is achieved through the continual reiteration and ‘performance’ of particular discourses:

gender proves to be performative - that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed [...] There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender ... gender is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ which are said to be its results (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 24-25).

What is the impact of racialising this formulation? Can we do so without reserving primacy for sexual difference? Butler points out that assuming the primacy of sexual difference is what marks psychoanalytic feminism as white “for the assumption here is not only that sexual difference is more fundamental, but that there is a relationship called ‘sexual difference’ that is itself unmarked by race” (*Bodies that Matter* 181). The question then becomes one of tracing how ‘white’, ‘black’, or ‘brown’ bodies and identities are produced and how are they produced as gendered.⁷ Butler’s formulation on gender would thus likely read “there is no racial identity behind the expressions of race [...] race is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ which are said

to be its results”. Butler herself certainly believes that her concepts can and should be applied to race and opposes those who grant a primacy to sexual identification above other (and in particular, racial) identifications. She argues that:

though there are clearly good historical reasons for keeping race and ‘sexuality’ and ‘sexual difference’ as separate analytic spheres. There are also quite pressing and significant historical reasons for asking how and where we might read not only their convergence, but the sites at which one cannot be constituted save through the other (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 168).

So, how can we understand racialized and sexed bodies and identifications? Butler contends that bodies are materialised as ‘sexed’ through a normative process. For Butler, ‘sex’ is “one of the norms by which the ‘one’ becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility”. (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 2) This embodiment, through a normative process, is inextricably linked to subjecthood. This is not merely a matter of social inscription, but involves psychic processes which circumscribe what she calls the “domain of livable sociality” (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* 21) . Without occupying the site of the subject, the individual has no means by which to speak or be spoken about. Yet at the same time this production of a subject is a violation, it involves loss and repression which in turn impacts on the psyche: this viable and intelligible being, this subject is always produced at a cost (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* 86).

The operation of the psychic involves powerful forces of desire and repulsion. Subjects develop passionate attachments to their positionality, even though it inevitably involves foreclosure and the loss of other possibilities and ways of being. It is normative discourses which shape the kinds of subjects which emerge and the identifications that they make. However, is race also a norm through which bodies, and subjects, are rendered culturally intelligible? This would raise questions about how subjects are constructed, not just through the reiteration of gendered norms, but also racialized ones. Butler discusses the ways in which a foetus and baby are “girled” (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 7) . But, just as one cannot be a person without being a girl or a boy, one cannot be a person without having a (similarly embodied) racial identity. Indeed one is a white/black/Asian/mixed-race girl or boy and the gendering is racialized as the racing is gendered. The fact that there are numerous possible descriptions of race - rather than the neat duality of male/female does not mean that it is somehow less obligatory or coerced. If one’s race is not obvious, it will be searched out and different definitions will be applied across different cultural and temporal contexts (just as gender is understood differently across time and cultures). The story of Obama and the reactions to his racialized identity serve as a classic example both of this need to fix others’ identity and also the different ways in which race is understood in different cultural and political contexts.⁸

For Butler, regulatory schemas function as ‘historically revisable criteria or intelligibility which produce and vanquish bodies that matter’ (*Bodies that Matter* 14). They achieve their power through citation: “the norm of sex takes hold to the extent to which it is ‘cited’ as such a norm, but it also derives its power through the citations that it compels” (*Bodies that Matter* 134) . This repeated, compulsive citation of the norm is what Butler terms performativity. The terminology here is awkward. By performativity, Butler does not refer to a voluntaristic, self-conscious acting, but practices which serve to enact and reinforce sets of regulatory norms.⁹ She defines performativity - as “not the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (*Bodies that Matter* 2). Through performativity, subjects repeatedly re-enact the discourses through which they are constructed.¹⁰

The question here is not about whether Barack Obama is denied subjecthood, but about the extent to which he can control the terms of that subjecthood, and in particular, claim it outside of race. The early stages of his campaign were consistent in his attempt not to be racialized. His supporters would chant “race doesn’t matter”. There was an attempt to take a position, not in the denial of race, but its repudiation – to make race an irrelevancy. Barack Obama has never tried to ‘hide’ his racial heritage - in fact his first autobiography (*Dreams from My Father*) is a frank discussion of his developing sense of his own racialized position as a child and young adult. It also discusses the changing racialized positioning of his parents and grandparents and their changing approaches to the idea of race and difference. Indeed, Obama is clear of the compelled nature of racialized positioning. He writes of at time when he ‘was too young to know that I needed a race’ (*Audacity of Hope* 27). In his second book (*Audacity of Hope*) which is more clearly along the lines of a political manifesto) Obama devotes a chapter to the subject of race.

Therefore it is not that Obama did not *know* he had a race, or that he was seeking to be seen as white or without an identity. He was rather making a claim to a position beyond race, to say that he can represent something more than just being ‘a black man’. This was undoubtedly a political necessity for someone trying to be elected President of the United States, but it could also be read as a genuine attempt to mark out a sense of a future beyond racism and the categories of race. Nonetheless, Butler’s theorisation of gender performativity, if extended to race, might suggest some of the reasons why this is particularly difficult. There is, to say the least, an “unhappy performative” (Ahmed 2) in the supporters’ chants of “race doesn’t matter”. Once you have raised the subject, it is almost impossible to dismiss it. (After all, race must matter if you need to shout about it.) Thus Obama was seen as raced by many, and his actions were interpreted within that discursive and perceptual framework. Whatever his attempt to move beyond (or at least to sidestep) race, with the rising controversy around his relationship with the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Obama was compelled to performatively recite discourses of race.

A More Perfect Union

Obama chose to confront these issues directly in a speech. One particularly interesting issue raised by this speech was the extent to which he was able to recite discourses of race to a different purpose. Was he able to perform the “difficult labour of deriving agency” (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 136)¹¹ creating, in his phrase, a “teachable moment”? Here we get to the crux of the issue of performativity. Not that one can avoid one’s own subject positioning or the discourses that produce it, but the possibility for subjects to also play a role in reshaping the discursive field. However, there are always potential pitfalls. By attempting to ‘move beyond’ a discourse, there is a risk that this discourse is unwittingly shored up in another way.

Obama chose to make this speech on the 18th of March 2008 in Philadelphia. In the months before Obama delivered this speech, controversy had arisen around speeches which had made by the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the pastor at Obama’s church in Chicago, in the wake of the attacks of 9/11 and during the wars in Iraq. Filmed portions of Reverend Wright’s speeches had become an Internet phenomenon and were damaging the political campaign for Obama’s nomination. These speeches were criticised for being unpatriotic in their criticism of America. In one of them, for instance, Reverend Wright said “God damn America” for racism and the murder of innocent people. Obama had distanced himself from the pastor (for instance by removing him from his campaign’s African American Religious Leadership Committee and condemning his remarks), but this had failed to stem the tide of criticism of his relationship with Wright.

Thus, Obama’s racialized position, his blackness, was brought into particular focus through his membership in a black church. This is particularly interesting since, as has been mentioned above, in no way was Barack Obama attempting to appear white. However, his performance of self was of a particular classed and gendered nature that would not fit in to many white (and perhaps also into black and other) stereotypes of African-American blackness. The senator and former university lecturer was, for example, noted throughout his campaign for his serious and controlled emotions and for his muted appearance (Obama most often dressed in the understated dark suits of the professional politician.) Even in casual dress, he wore a narrow range of unremarkable shirts and trousers, signifying more strongly a middle classed than a racialized positioning.¹² His masculinity was also highly classed. Ironically, for some, he at times appeared ‘not black enough’ or perhaps not black in the ‘right’ way. Bonnie Greer, an African American writer living in Britain but raised in Chicago where Obama was based, writes about her first reaction to the idea that this former president of the *Harvard Law Review* was going to run for president:

Come on, the guy looked super-vain, hardly ‘regular’; hardly ‘down’ more like some Abercrombie and Fitch ad. Ralph Lauren, I decided, must be after

him. In other words, this was not someone who could be seriously considered for the Presidency. This was NOT the first BLACK President (29).

Greer also quotes a piece she wrote in *The Guardian* at the beginning of Obama's campaign which demonstrates the complex intersection of class, generation, as well as race in the positioning of Obama:

The truth is that I just can't warm to Obama. Maybe I'm just too working-class, too old-school, to trust black people who look that slick, outside of show business or the church. Maybe I distrust someone who allows others to compare him to JFK or even MLK. I was around when they were alive. He's not them (ii).¹³

It was perhaps his membership in an African American church, which was a major institution within Chicago's African-American community and placed firmly in the Gospel tradition,¹⁴ that positioned Obama as African American most clearly, particularly to a white audience. Obama's response to the controversy surrounding Reverend Wright was to speak directly both to questions of race and nation and to reference a mixture of discursive productions of race. This is a potentially contradictory process and shows some of the pitfalls apparent in speaking directly about race. As will be shown below, in some respects, Obama uses discourses which characterise race as something that is in the blood, and somehow innate and natural. These discourses are highly problematic (although very common in public discourse about race) since he is reciting familiar productions of race as biological and therefore merely reciting, rather than reshaping accounts of race. However, I would argue that he does performatively shift some of the discursive terrain of race through the ways in which he makes race and the experience of slavery central to the national story of the US, as well as by shining a spotlight on white racialized positioning. Whilst he has not escaped fully from the problem of making race an issue that is both biological and does matter, it is almost as if he is saying, "well if I must be raced, then so must white people, and we need to accept that we have these things in common," rather than asserting that race is relevant for those who are not white.

Judith Butler, in a published "conversation" with Gayatri Spivak on the question of the nation-state and nationalism, considers the significance of illegal immigrants protesting in the street and singing the US national anthem in Spanish in Los Angeles. Butler argues that "the nation is being reiterated in ways that are not authorized – or not yet" (*Who Sings the Nation?* 60). This is undoubtedly a contradictory move – it might be an expression of a new nationalism and yet at the same time it has the potential to re-order or re-write the nation: does this speech act "not install the task of translation at the heart of the nation?"(61). I want to ask whether Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech does not also contain a similar performative contradiction with radical potential, even while it may at times also appear to shore up normative notions of race and nation. It reinstates race as something that matters, but re-narrates the ways in which it should matter to the American nation. This is a different speaking of

race than the kind discussed by Toni Morrison in her work *Playing in the Dark*. Morrison is concerned with the “Africanist presence” in American literature – the way a black character in a novel is used to tell us something about the white characters (90). In contrast, in Obama’s speech, the experience of African Americans is placed at the centre of the national story.

Obama’s speech opens with reference to the signing of the US constitution and Declaration of the Union of 1787. This is perhaps unsurprising for a person wanting to run for president. Yet, Obama makes slavery – the economic system based on race and racism – fundamental to the American nation: “The document they produced was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation’s original sin of slavery” (*A More Perfect Union*). Slavery and the legacy of slavery becomes perhaps *the* defining feature of the nation. The story of the United States becomes one which is untellable without a retelling of the crimes of slavery thereby making black people and their experience central to the narration of nation.¹⁵

This is perhaps not a unique re-writing of the nation to place black experience at the heart of it the United States of America, but it is, nonetheless, a potentially radical and certainly unsettling one for the white majority. Yet there is a contradictory performativity in the reliance on religious language to express that history. Barack Obama is placing his campaign at the heart of the redemption of the nation, as having the potential to cleanse it of that ‘original sin’.¹⁶ Whilst it would be problematic to see Obama as some kind of redeemer, it could be argued that, in this telling, African Americans become agents in rather than subjects of the story of the nation.

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. (*A More Perfect Union*)

This attempt to put the question of slavery and then civil rights at the centre of the nation also reconstitutes the ‘we’ of nation. Obama places himself at the centre of this account: “I chose to run for the presidency at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together” (*A More Perfect Union*). The “we” in “We the people” has now been reconfigured. This is not necessarily an easy position for Obama to take successfully. There are many reasons (some of which were rehearsed in opponents’ accounts during both the campaign for democratic nomination and the eventual campaign for presidency) why he could be seen as outside the story of the nation. He was the son of a non-US

national, who was also a Muslim and he had spent some of his childhood in Indonesia. However, in the speech Obama attempts to *re-write* the terms of inclusion:

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave-owners - an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible. It's a story that hasn't made me the most conventional candidate. But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts - that out of many, we are truly one. (*A More Perfect Union*)

Again, we have both the call to nation and patriotism – “in no other country on Earth is my story even possible” - and also to a notion of blood carrying important markers of racial inheritance. Here we return to some of the potential costs of renarrating the nation in this way. For a start it risks a dangerous nationalism – it is not clear why this story is not possible in any other country. And we again return to a deeply problematic notion of genetics and race. What does it mean to carry the blood of slaves or slave-owners in your veins?¹⁷ Of course, historically it has meant a lot – to carry one drop of slave or ‘black’ blood made you legally black (Domínguez). Nonetheless, it would seem there is an attempt to rework the notion of inheritance that this might have formerly implied. It is a reworking which also places the idea of mix at its centre by noting the ‘mixed’ inheritance of his wife as well as himself. Ideas of mix can potentially (although not necessarily, see Ali) destabilize notions of race. Obama points out that not only has he a ‘white’ inheritance, but also that his wife has both slave and slave-owning ancestry. The futility of any search for ‘purity’ in race is highlighted here. Obama is making the claim to represent America from a position of diversity – of diversity of experience which encompasses class difference as well as racialized ones.

In the speech, Obama then goes on to address the question of Reverend Wright and his statements, which he again condemns. He also returns to the question of why he was ever associated with Reverend Wright. Here he makes a different kind of statement about his belonging to African American culture. He describes his attraction to the black church and, through a particular framing of the account of Christianity, makes black experience the central universal norm, replacing a white account of Christianity:

In my first book, *Dreams From My Father*, I described the experience of my first service at Trinity: ‘People began to shout, to rise from their seats and clap and cry out, a forceful wind carrying the reverend’s voice up into the rafters. [...] And in that single note - hope! - I heard something else; at the foot of that cross, inside the thousands of churches across the city, I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians in the lion's den, Ezekiel's field of dry bones. Those stories - of survival, and freedom, and hope - became our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears our tears; until this black church, on this bright day, seemed once more a vessel carrying the story of a people into future generations and into a larger world. Our trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal, black and more than black; in chronicling our journey, the stories and songs gave us a means to reclaim memories that we didn't need to feel shame about.[...] memories that all people might study and cherish - and with which we could start to rebuild. (*A More Perfect Union*).

Here again we are given a notion of inheritance, but it is not one that rests in the blood or notions of genetics. Rather it is a symbolic, cultural inheritance which again places the black community at the centre. However this time it is at the centre, not of the national story, but of the wider religious story. Given the use of Christianity within white supremacist movements and within the discursive foundations of racial thinking, this marks another challenging rewriting of religious symbolism which, although it may be familiar in African American churches is less commonly heard on the national stage. Obama goes on to state of his relationship to the Reverend Wright:

I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother - a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe. These people are part of me. And they are part of America, this country that I love. (*A More Perfect Union*)

In some senses Obama is positioning himself as a mediator for the central problem that America faces, that is, the question of racism and the legacy of slavery. His own mixed race position perhaps gives him an additional claim to that, but it is not presented, as so often is the case of as one of confusion or conflicting claims.¹⁸ Rather his position is presented as one of almost privileged access and understanding of both the black and white racialized positions (although he situates himself as belonging much more clearly in the black community). His position allows him to assert that: “race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now” (*A More Perfect Union*). Obama is clear that there are continuing injustices which arise out of the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow laws in education, employment and lack of

economic opportunity. These are also presented as forms of inheritance. Obama presents an understandable anger and bitterness in the face of continuing discrimination: “the anger is real; it is powerful. And to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races” (*A More Perfect Union*).

Again, we have recourse to a discourse of unproblematic races which appear to have a clear and separable existence. Across this divide, Obama presents himself as the one who can empathize with both positions, and see the anger on both sides:

Most working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race. Their experience is the immigrant experience - as far as they're concerned, no one's handed them anything, they've built it from scratch. They've worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pension dumped after a lifetime of labor. They are anxious about their futures, and feel their dreams slipping away; in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense. So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear that an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed; when they're told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time. Like the anger within the black community, these resentments aren't always expressed in polite company. But they have helped shape the political landscape for at least a generation. (*A More Perfect Union speech*)

Here the ‘white community’ is given some empathy and understanding, but it is resolutely presented as white, rather than as an unmarked norm which does not need to be stated as racialized.¹⁹ The views of white people are represented as a product of their racialized positioning and certain forms of inheritance, just as much as black people. Obama does present a route out of this impasse which involves moving beyond race or at least racial wounds: “working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds” (*A More Perfect Union*). He presents himself as the figure that can help in this process and help find a commonality of interests.

Conclusion

This paper has explored processes of identity and subject construction. While the work of Judith Butler is largely focused on gender identity, I have argued that her elaboration of discursive construction, performativity, and the interplay of the normative and the abject are equally pertinent to understanding race. In particular, it opens up the possibilities of understanding racialized identities as both constructed

but also deeply-felt. And it is this conjunction that Obama's speech "A More Perfect Union" has illustrated. As Vikki Bell argues:

An emphasis on performativity [...] does not mean an assumption of fluid, forever changing identities. Indeed, taking the temporal performative nature of identities as a theoretical premise means that more than ever, one needs to question how identities continue to be produced, embodied and performed, effectively, passionately and with social and political consequence (2).

Despite the resurgence of biological examinations of race (for example Herrnstein and Murray it is, I would argue, largely accepted that essentialized notions of race have been scientifically, politically and philosophically repudiated within the intellectual arena. Nonetheless, as Paul Gilroy points out, it remains a concept to which academics and anti-racists are deeply attached. Gilroy himself, speaking to academics working on race and ethnicity calls for a "frank confrontation with our own professional interests in the reification of race" (*Race Ends Here* 841). The liberal paradox that David Theo Goldberg describes as "race is irrelevant but all is race" (*Racist Culture* 6) potentially holds sway for intellectuals as much as wider modern society. This paradox also produces the performative contradiction which is present in Barack Obama's speech. On the one hand he relies on, often deeply held, public perceptions of race as a kind of genetic inheritance, as something 'in the blood'. Yet he is also able to retell the story of the US in a way which unseats white normativity and makes black experience of slavery central to national narrations. He traces other kinds of inheritance, cultural, economic and emotional that different racialized groups (including whites) have in the US. This also suggests a potential to move beyond racialized division once the inheritances are recognised and addressed. In this way, the speech illustrates how race is compelled – that subjects can only reach intelligibility through the recitation of certain discourses, including those that produced racialized, classed and gendered positionality. But the speech also allows for the possibility that these discourses might be radically deconstructed and overcome. The initial step in this overcoming of race is the acceptance by those positioned as white that they too have racialized positions (as well as racialized emotions and, at times, anger).

Notes

¹Democratic underground 'What ethnicity is Obama'
[www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php.az=view_all&addresss=132x5054#5055183] (12 May 2008)

² This is interesting because whiteness is frequently seen as having no ethnicity. The respondents claim that Obama has an Irish great grandfather and therefore is of Irish heritage; later respondents add that his mother was of 'Irish/English heritage'.

³ 'Post-race' might arguably be seen as part of the Obama 'Brand'. Naomi Klein, "Naomi Klein on How Corporate Branding Has Taken over America," *The Guardian*, Saturday 16 January 2010. Review Section, page 2

⁴ The term 'race' is frequently put into inverted commas to indicate its constructed nature and deny it an ontological reality. Whilst I clearly agree with the contention that race is constructed and has no biological basis, I have chosen not to use the inverted commas at least in part because many other constructed concepts such as gender or class are not given this particular status.

⁵ Barak Obama Website
[http://www.barackobama.com/2004/07/27/keynote_address_at_the_2004_de_1.php] (14 May 2008).

⁶ An example of this is a recent UK Channel 4 programme 'Is it better to be mixed race?' (broadcast 4/11/09) in which a geneticist Aarathi Prasad argued that there were medical benefits to being of mixed race and yet at the same time shored up a notion of 'race' in her argument.

⁷ See Anne Fortier, "Re-Membering Places and the Performance of Belonging(S)," *Theory, Culture and Society* 16, no. 2 (1999) 41-64 for a discussion of performativity and ethnicity.

⁸ Lee D. Baker writes of the ways in which, in the context of Ghana where rich African American's are often considered white, there has been a process of racialization of Obama with growing understanding of him as both black and African .

⁹ This aspect of Butler's work has often been misunderstood, particularly in response to *Gender Trouble* (1990) which prompted studies embracing the idea of 'stylised' performance and in particular the subversive potential of drag. Sara Ahmed, in noting the later re-emphasis of Butler's work on performativity, and considering the case of racialized 'passing' (where those normally positioned as non-white are able to 'pass' for white), questions discourses that tend 'to position 'passing' as a radical and transgressive practice that serves to destabilise and traverse the system of knowledge and vision upon which subjectivity and identity precariously rests' (Ahmed 88). She goes on to argue that 'I do think that there is a failure to theorise, not the potential for any system to become destabilised, but the means by which relations of power are secured, paradoxically, *through this very process of destabilisation*' (Sara Ahmed "'She'll wake up one of these days and find she's turned into a nigger' Passing through hybridity" *Theory Culture and Society* vol. 16, No. 2 87-106, 89).

¹⁰ For further discussion, see Byrne.

¹¹ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this phrase. For further discussion on Butler and agency, see Lois McNay, "Subject, Psyche and Agency. The Work of Judith Butler," *Theory, Culture and Society* 16, no. 2 (1999) 175-93, Lisa Nelson, "Bodies (and Spaces Do Matter): The Limits of Performativity," *Gender, Place and Culture* 6, no. 4 (1999) 331-53, Bridget Byrne, *White Lives. The Interplay of 'Race', Class and Gender in Everyday Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

¹² The same was not quite true for his wife, Michelle Obama whose dress (and hair) was, and continues to be, scrutinized in a different way from her husband.

¹³ Greer became a supporter of Obama through the course of the campaign.

¹⁴ Gospel tradition is here indicating a style of religious practice, most associated with African American communities, which is characterised by gospel singing and call and response preaching.

¹⁵ There is of course a tension in this central positioning of the African American story, which makes the black-white binary critical. It cannot account for the experience of other minorities in America, including First Nations people (who might argue that their decimation was the 'original sin') and of other migrants.

¹⁶ Judith Butler warns against "uncritical exuberance" at the prospect of Barak Obama and the pitfalls of seeking redemption in any individual, particularly one with only limited policy objectives Judith Butler, "Uncritical Exuberance?," (2008) [<http://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2008/11/05/18549195.php>] (12 Jan 2009).

¹⁷ In a similar vein Antony Appiah questions DuBois biological narratives: "[i]f he has fully transcended the scientific notion, what is the role of this talk about 'blood'?" (Cited in St. Louis 633)

¹⁸ See Ali for a discussion of different representations of mixed race.

¹⁹ See Byrne for further discussion.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism." *Borderlands eJournal* 3, no. 2 (2004): 1-59.

Ali, Suki. *Mixed-Race, Post-Race. Gender, New Ethnicities and Cultural Practice*. Oxford: Berg, 2003.

Baker, D. Lee. "Racializing Obama While Creating Diaspora in Ghana." [<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ccbh/souls/forum4.html>] (19 Sept 2008)

Bell, Vikki, "Performativity and Belonging. An Introduction" *Theory, Culture and Society*, 16, no 2 1-10

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, 1990

———. *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. London: Routledge, 1993.

———. *The Psychic Life of Power. Theories in Subjection*. Chicago: Stanford University Press, 1997

———. "Uncritical Exuberance?" [<http://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2008/11/05/18549195.php>] (12 Jan 2009)

Butler, Judith, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging*. London: Seagull Books, 2007.

- Byrne, Bridget. *White Lives. The Interplay of 'Race', Class and Gender in Everyday Life*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Domínguez, V.R. *White by Definition. Social Classification in Creole Louisiana*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986.
- Ehlers, Nadine. "'Black Is' and 'Black Ain't': Performative Revisions of Racial 'Crisis'." *Culture, Theory and Critique* 47, no. 2 (2006): 149-63.
- Fortier, Anne. "Re-Membering Places and the Performance of Belonging(S)." *Theory, Culture and Society* 16, no. 2 (1999): 41-64.
- Fraser, Mariam. "Classing Queer. Politics in Competition." *Theory, Culture and Society* 16, no. 2 (1999): 107-31.
- Gilroy, Paul. *After Empire. Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* Abingdon: Routledge, 2004.
- . "Race Ends Here." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 5 (1998): 838-47.
- Goldberg, David Theo. *Racial Subjects. Writing on Race in America*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- . *Racist Culture. Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning*. Oxford: Blackwells, 1993.
- Greer, Bonnie. *Obama Music. Some Notes from a South Sider Abroad*. London: Legend Press Ltd, 2010.
- Hernstein, Richard J. and Murray Charles, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and class structure in American Life*, New York: Free Press
- Klein, Naomi. "Naomi Klein on How Corporate Branding Has Taken over America." *The Guardian*, Saturday 16 January 2010 2010.
- McNay, Lois. "Subject, Psyche and Agency. The Work of Judith Butler." *Theory, Culture and Society* 16, no. 2 (1999): 175-93.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. London: Picador, 1992.
- Nayak, Anoop. "After Race: Ethnography, Race and Post-Race Theory." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29, no. 3 (2006): 411-30.
- Nelson, Lisa. "Bodies (and Spaces Do Matter): The Limits of Performativity." *Gender, Place and Culture* 6, no. 4 (1999): 331-53.
- Obama, Barack. *The Audacity of Hope. Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2007.
- Obama, Barak. *Dreams from My Father*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd, 2007.

Salih, Mohammad Ali. "A Son's Wisdom." USA Today 22 February 22 2008
[<http://www.usatoday.com>] (15 January 2009)

St Louis, Brett. "Post-Race/Post-Politics? Activist-Intellectualism and the Reification of Race." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25, no. 4 (2002): 625-75.

Winant, Howard. "The Theoretical Status of the Concept of Race." In *Theories of Race and Racism. A Reader*, edited by Les Back and John Solomos, 181-90. London: Routledge, 2000.

Bridget Byrne, "Post-race? Nation, Inheritance and the Contradictory Performativity of Race in Barack Obama's 'A More Perfect Union' Speech" *thirdspace* ?/? (Season Year): p-p. [<http://www.thirdspace.ca/>].