

# “Yes, ‘Who’ Can?”: Who “We” Are In American Liberal Discourse

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*Since the beginning of the nation, white Americans have suffered from a deep inner uncertainty as to who they really are. One of the ways that has been used to simplify the answer has been to seize upon the presence of black Americans and use them as a marker, a symbol of limits, a metaphor for the ‘outsider.’ Many whites could look at the social position of blacks and feel that color forms an easily and reliable gauge for determining to what extent one was or was not American. Perhaps that is why one of the first epithets that many European immigrants learned when they got off the boat was the term ‘nigger’—it made them feel instantly American. But this is tricky magic. Despite his racial difference and social status, something indisputably American about Negroes not only raised doubts about the white man’s value system but aroused the troubling suspicion that whatever else the true American is, he is also somehow black. Ralph Ellison, “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks” (1970)*

*Class, race, sexuality, gender and all other categories by which we categorize and dismiss each other need to be excavated from the inside. Dorothy Allison, author of *Bastard Out Of Carolina*.<sup>1</sup>*

## **Introduction: “Yes, We Can,” Obama and the Discourse of American Liberalism**

Notions of American egalitarianism have been deployed throughout American history to support a conception of a unique American identity based on freedom and democracy. Although we can trace this notion back to the philosophies of the Enlightenment, its sustaining power in the American context is tied to the opening lines of the Constitution: “*We the People* of the United States.” The terms of collectivity I highlight evoke the ground-breaking ethos of equality that set the U.S. apart from the rest of the world. Specifically, the evocation of “we” as a promise of popular government and shared power provides the constitutive moment of unity in the American national imagination. With this statement in the name of all people, the framers of the Constitution attempted to define American identity as an exception to the rule of oppression then present under the monarchies of Europe. The identity established in this statement “We the people,” though mundane to us today, was revolutionary at the end of the eighteenth century, because it presented a populist approach to government that, if successful, could prove contagious and a threat to systems of hierarchy. The emphasis on the communal, the focus on the formation of unity, and the provisions for the common defence and general welfare of citizens stipulated in the remainder of the opening: “in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish

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<sup>1</sup> Qtd. In Deborah T. Meem, Michelle Gibson, Johnathan T. Alexander, Michelle A. Gibson, eds. *Finding Out: An Introduction to LGBT Studies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2010. 306.

Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity,” suggest a social investment in government power. Even more, for the purposes of this paper, this opening “we” fixed the ideology of a unique American collectivity within the discourse of American citizenship.

However revolutionary the Constitution was to the world of the eighteenth century, we know that in practice the U.S. was divided by race, gender and social class. Rights were inherited on the basis of property and the right to own property was determined on the basis of race and gender, creating a legacy of institutional discrimination and disenfranchisement. Furthermore and perhaps needless to mention, African Americans suffered under the oppression of slavery for the next one hundred years after Constitution became law and women had to wait until the turn of the twentieth century to be granted the right to vote. “We” in the opening lines of the Constitution then performed the rhetorical function of disguising discriminatory practices in order to establish the American exception.

Yet, the “we” who ascribed to the conception of an American collectivity could maintain principles of equality while sustaining systems of inequality because they were operating on assumptions about selfhood and rights that discriminated by gender and race but operated on a pretence of blindness. The collective “we,” evoked in political discourse then produced an imaginary relationship that did not exist in practice. But the idea of an equal collectivity went unchallenged and continues to support a discourse of unqualified equality linked to American identity.

However, according to Stanley Fish’s theory of interpretive communities, the individual is not self-realizing in the way the framers of the Constitution may have envisioned. Rather, readers and writers are created within their texts by operations wholly outside of the text, their “interpretive communities” (Fish in Vesser 335). Fish argues that when different readers glean different interpretations from a text, they do so because they read from different communities with different assumptions and values. Thus, what might read as self-evident – for example, the simple denotation of the words on the page – following Fish, is rather the result of readers’ value systems informing the ways in which they interpret the text. Implicit in this formulation, then, is the unacknowledged assumptions of interpretive communities.

While it might be argued that the framers of the Constitution did not intend to create an egalitarian society, today’s discourse of ‘American-ness’ carries the weight of universal freedom and equality idealized in the Constitution, creating, if not a reality of equality, at least an imagined American identity tied to this ideal. According to Benedict Anderson, national identities are constructed along perceived or imagined commonalities found between members within limited geographical areas. In the American context, the notions of freedom and equality have served as uniting features of American national identity, whatever the reality of those ideals, bringing Americans together imaginatively and distinguishing them from other nations.

Specifically, evocations of American collectivity recall the Constitutional moment of American exceptionalism and revolutionary democracy as something essential to “who we are.”

Furthermore, following Anderson, cultural artifacts, such as national literatures or foundational documents, anchor national identities to key historical moments and ideologies. Here, the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights provide the organizing principles of American national identity and belonging. In other words, the *discourse* of rights, freedom and equality established in these early American documents protects the *imagination* of these ideals, whatever their reality.

This paper, however, asks to what extent the imagination of an all inclusive American “we” as first articulated by the framers is not, in fact, exclusionary and ideological. In other words, when inflected by questions of race, gender and social class, this paper interrogates how American identity is constructed when it is evoked as a collectivity in political discourse. Specifically, does Obama’s campaign slogan “Yes, We Can” renew the promise of national unity or does it sustain dominant American notions of the identity. In order to analyze the discourse of American constructions of identity, interpretation must attend to the cultural histories of the range of factors that impact how we understand identity. Does Obama’s promise “Yes, we can” begin to overcome the divisions within the American consciousness created by historic practices of discrimination? Finally, what difference does it make that it is now spoken by someone who exceeds the traditional margins of national identity? This paper is concerned with this mode of identification in the production of American liberal discourse.

I try to show that the “we” in the early American political discourse referred to white, propertied men and that this is the legacy upon which even Obama draws. While this collective “we” has since been invoked by men and women of various identities, I argue that it still carries the weight of uneven power because of the interpretive assumptions of its original authors and audience. The thrust of the imagined “we,” I argue, lies in its historic usage as a term for collective *individuality*. In other words, part of American identity is not only a notion of citizenship in the nation, but also a sense of belonging to the nation by virtue of the freedom to belong solely to oneself. I try to show that the implicit universality in the imagination of the “we” in American liberalism disguises the ways that race and gender have functioned as the limits against which “we” is constructed. I try to show that the experience of participation and/or exclusion within the framework of what it means to be an American citizen in the fullest sense of the term – that is, to not only *be able* to respond to the call of “we” when it is made, but, more importantly from the standpoint of this paper, *to feel that one is called* in the first place – is a limited commodity. I will hone in on those discourses that operate to blot color and gender out of the national imagination of the collective. Rather than approach the discourse from the outside by looking solely at the speaker, I also ask the question from the point of view of the subjective identity of those to whom it is spoken. My analysis will focus on the expressions of different aspects of identity represented through race and gender and in relation to the discourses of what

it means to part of the national collective. In other words, I do not attempt ‘know’ what and how subjects think and/or feel on the basis of either racial or gender essentialism, but rather posit this argument from the standpoint of discourse and social practice. Who, from this standpoint, are “we” in American liberal discourse?

### **“Yes, We Can” and Imaginations of “We”**

According to Michael Omi and Howard Winant, race is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, and explanation of racial dynamics. Furthermore, projects which focus on race connect what race means in a particular discourse and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized. (56). With this said, the history of exclusion and oppression endured by the majority of American blacks forms the foundations of black experience in an America dominated by white males. The double-consciousness identified by W.E.B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, for example, demonstrates the ways in which language helps to shape black second-citizenship and black subjectivity. In other words, the question of how one imagines him or herself in the discourse of American collectivity plays an important part of how one ‘fits in’ with the collective.

Similarly, Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* distinguishes between biology and culture in the ways that gender is constructed. Rather than either biological sex or cultural constructions being determinative of gender, Butler argues that gender lies in performance, the everyday practice of doing gender, and that it is through readings and interpretations of the body that gender is interpreted. Thus, like race, gender is shaped by the language and culture of its performance as well as the language and culture of its reception. As Laura Mulvey shows in her definition of the male gaze, western culture has traditionally viewed itself and the other through the eye of the white, heterosexual male. Mulvey outlines the way film “reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference,” which controls ways of looking at bodies (57).

With this said, one of the most salient characteristics of those who easily fall into the “we” of American liberal discourse is the ability to pass unnoticed, as a sort of neutral presence. In the deployment of language as a means of self creation, the invocation of the collective provides the individual with a certain degree of invisibility. Because the collective assumes the privileges of a white middle class, subsumed under the umbrella of American ‘citizenship,’ what the racialized, gendered self sees when she looks out through other eyes, is different from the collective. Following Fredric Jameson, the opposition between two terms forces an apprehension in which one of the two terms is positively defined as “‘having a certain feature while the other is apprehended as deprived of the feature in question’” (qtd. In Gates 88). However, in the case of

contemporary American liberalism, the trope is reversed: imaginations of the collective assume the absence of particular features. Whiteness primarily, but also masculinity, as well as signs of social class, operate as the baseline against which ‘everything else’ is defined. Although in the Hegelian dialectic the “master” – here imagined as the collective social body – is accorded a definite presence by brutalizing his slave, in American liberal discourse, the structure, though reversed, is repeated imaginatively. Invocations of the collective allow the master to apprehend himself by simply ignoring the slave. Blackness is envisioned against the American collective rather than in or through it. Similarly, understandings of gender occur in relationship to masculine difference. In the American context, as in many others, these are relationships of unequal power.

The assumptions underlying imaginations of who “we” are, then, not only inform who we are imaginatively when this national collective is invoked, it also informs what we think is important and thus what we do. The way in which the national collective is structured thus creates the perception that the persistent problems associated with poverty disproportionately impacting marginalized communities are unique to those communities. Solutions to the problems faced by the poor then are only mentioned as add-ons to the priorities of the collective and the realities of racial and gender inequality remain largely confined to the discourses of specific communities concerned about ensuring equal rights. If addressed on the national stage, the facts of unequal educational, job and housing opportunities are often treated as problems of the individual rather than institutional problems and then only after ‘national’ problems are mentioned, such as the national deficit and the ‘war on terror.’ This is not to say that these problems do not impact poor communities, but rather to highlight the ways in which the contemporary discourse fails to recognize that the ways in which we imagine the nation has shaped the way it is materially constructed, creating a system of discourse, initiative and policy that reproduces the same problems. The collective disavowal race and gender is implied when the collective “we” is invoked.

But now that the figure who calls on the national collective identifies as a black American, borrowing the slogan “Yes, we can!” from the United Farm Workers (“Si, se puede!”), and has been elected president, many have asserted that the assumptions undergirding traditional liberalism no longer apply. Furthermore, because so many men and women from various communities have rallied to Obama’s call, some have argued that the nation’s historic divisions have been finally bridged. The national collective formed by Obama’s inspiring call to action, supporters contend, transcends questions of race or ethnicity and gender, and suggests that we have truly become a nation united by universal freedom and equality. Similarly, the power of Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign caused many to reevaluate how important the question of the proverbial ‘glass ceiling’ is in women’s progress toward equal professional and political representation. But by tracing the shifts in Obama’s campaign speeches and presidential policy,

it is possible to see how even the “we” who form Obama’s collective carries the weight of its historic invocation of national identity. When this “we” is called, only a few can respond.

## The Campaign

Before Obama became a national phenomenon, the possibility of his presidency was remote. His youth, his lack of political experience and, perhaps most importantly from the standpoint of this argument, his racial identity, were all factors working against him. These odds gave rise to the slogan “Yes, We Can” (Plouffe 147). According to David Plouffe, Obama’s presidential campaign manager, there was little chance that a black man, much less a black man named Barak Hussein Obama, would be elected president: “Obama was given zero chance of winning the political establishment” (7). The obstacles in the way of an Obama presidency were compounded by the unequal weight of the competitive field. Senator Hillary Clinton not only had instant name recognition but was also the favourite of virtually every voting demographic important to Democrats, including African Americans. These two factors were important not just in garnering votes for nomination, but also in generating campaign funds for both the primary race and, if he got that far, the presidential race (Plouffe 7).

Thus, Obama had to develop a persona that did not seem self-counterfeiting to either white or black audiences *or* either condescending or bullying to female audiences. His mood, reactions and operating style were focal points in the day-to-day operations of the campaign and had to be carefully choreographed. The impression Obama left on audiences, the image he cut on the television screen was as important – if not at times more important than – his policy statements.

The Obama campaign actively researched audience expectations in order to shape his persona. While this is not unusual for presidential campaigns, it reveals how he was able to construct a universal identity that would appeal to the “we” of American liberal discourse. The questions of race and gender had to become non-questions in front of mass audiences.

The campaign strategy was to win the early primary states and thereby create enough momentum to become competitive in the national election (Plouffe 7). After spending a great deal of time targeting Iowa voters, a heavily white voting demographic, Obama began to lose African American support. This ultimately prompted the decision to launch campaign ads directed to African American audiences and address the then prominent controversy of racial bias in the case of the Jena Six, in which six black teens were charged with attempted murder after a schoolyard fight with white classmates. While Iowa seemed to be a big gamble, the Obama campaign hoped that it could depend on African-American voters in other early states so as to gain national popularity. In the logic of political discourse, then, referring to race became a positive factor in how Obama would create himself for African-American voters (Plouffe 99).

In this speech at the Howard University convocation, Obama recognizes the unique status of African Americans in the national context. Here, he situates himself within the African-

American community by remarking on the role of race as a historic mark of inferiority and the ways it continues to operate in this way in the present:

I am not just running to make history. I'm running because I believe that together, we can change history's course. It's not enough just to look back in wonder of how far we've come – I want us to look ahead with a fierce urgency at how far we have left to go. I believe it's time for this generation to make its own mark – to write our own chapter in the American story. After all, those who came before us did not strike a blow against injustice only so that we would allow injustice to fester in our time. (qtd. In Woolley).

The “we” here is distinctly the “we” of race. The “we” implied in those who “can change history’s course,” who have “far left to go” and who will “write their own chapter in the American story,” are distinctly not the same “we who can” of Obama’s national declarations. The “we” evoked here is conditioned by the contingencies of the material realities created by racial discrimination, with which Obama also emphasizes his racial kinship with the audience. In this case, his “we” is pointedly inclusionary of himself as a racialized individual. The injustices highlighted represent a potential threat to him regardless of his actual background and position of privilege for no other reason than that he is a ‘black’ man. Obama’s “we” thus bypasses the question of power that might disrupt the ways that identity is created here. The power differences that separate Obama from this audience are bridged by the assumptions carried by his and the audiences’ shared racial identity.

This is important because differences in material experiences created by race are imagined against the larger “we” of American liberal discourse. The vague invocations of the campaign slogan “Yes, We Can,” with its implied mainstream audience and its directionless action, are notably absent in this speech, because they would undermine the basis of unity Obama establishes with this audience through the qualified use of “we,” which is specifically racial. The singularity of African-American history is set apart from the mainstream as its own chapter. The graduating class Obama addresses will distinguish themselves in two ways: they will be distinguished from their parents and grandparents, who fought the injustices of the past, and they will be distinguished from the mainstream culture, by fighting their own battles against present injustice, such as occurred during the case of the Jena Six. Thus, here the question of who “we” are in the discourse is clear and specific, and regardless of the class and power differences between Obama and the audience – or, perhaps, *because* of those differences – race plays a key role in the way both the audience and the speaker are constructed.

Yet, the issue of varying self representations was an ongoing problem for the campaign because Obama could not fashion himself the same way for a national audience. In other words, the assumptions of shared American identity rooted in sameness does not address race. Whiteness is the implied standard of Americanness in discourses of the nation because of the history of black exclusion. Therefore, the time and resources spent campaigning in states that were heavily white detracted from the time and energy that could be spent attracting black voters because different selves had to be constructed in each case (Plouffe100).

On the national scene, however, the racial question could never be fully countered because to do so would threaten the ways in which “we” are imagined. Obama had to once again return to universalist claims of identity after he effectively won the ‘black vote’ in South Carolina. The phrase “Yes, we can,” became more prominent at this point in the primary, attracting a diverse group of individuals empowered by its invocation because invested in its historic ideology. In other words, the slogan, “Yes, We Can” became popular because the “we” who can, can because they have the privilege of belonging historically. This is important because contemporary discourse masks the ways in which belonging was explicitly contingent upon identity. .

In parts of Obama’s South Carolina primary victory speech we can see the ways in which the figuration of “we” masks the role of race in the dual speaker-audience construction:

When I hear the cynical talk that blacks and whites and Latinos can't join together and work together, I'm reminded of the Latino brothers and sisters I organized with and stood with and fought with side by side for jobs and justice on the streets of Chicago. So don't tell us change can't happen.

When I hear that we'll never overcome the racial divide in our politics, I think about that Republican woman who used to work for Strom Thurmond, who is now devoted to educating inner city-children and who went out into the streets of South Carolina and knocked on doors for this campaign. Don't tell me we can't change.

Yes, we can. Yes, we can change. Yes, we can.

Yes, we can heal this nation. Yes, we can seize our future. And as we leave this great state with a new wind at our backs and we take this journey across this great country, a country we love, with the message we carry from the plains of Iowa to the hills of New Hampshire, from the Nevada desert to the South Carolina coast, the same message we had when we were up and when we were down, that out of many, we are one; that while we breathe, we will hope.<sup>2</sup>

Here, although several different and overlapping communities are evoked, the distinctions are superficial. That is, Obama evokes the difference of race and hints at the association of race with class, but does so only to highlight the seeming parity of power individuals have regardless of race. In the first line, Obama says that talk of division is cynical in the face of his witness to Latino brothers and sisters fighting with blacks and whites for change; a Republican assistant to the Senator who notoriously held out against racial integration working with “inner-city kids,” and other changes, which imply that inequality does in fact exist and exists along racial lines.

Yet, even in the names of unity and community, the divisions elided in the imagination of a collective “we” emerge here. The unarticulated assumptions in these few lines suggest that in most instances the unity highlighted here does not in fact exist materially, that what we see here are surprising anecdotal exceptions to the rule. In other words, colour is evoked only to be

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<sup>2</sup> Obama, Barak. Speech. “Yes, We Can Change.” Columbia, SC. 27 January, 2008.



seamlessly reintegrated into the collective; material inequalities are resolved through vague calls for change, without fully recognizing the roles past and present inequalities play as variables in the determination of power and the future. This is not so because falling into a racial category is determinative of ability, but because of the ways racial categories have been used to create reality.

It matters that the “streets” are a different place from which the Republican volunteer resides and it is worth mentioning in this speech because it is out of the ordinary. The “inner-city” in turn emerges as the reified place of poverty and danger. The “woman who used to work for Strom Thurmond,” is presumably white, upper middle-class, unfamiliar with the “streets” and does not live in the “inner city.” She is to be admired, presumably, for her service. The collective image Obama evokes is powerful because it is set against a history saturated with racial fears.

On the other hand, the Obama campaign did, in many ways, bring the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s full circle. Race became a weaker barrier to power than ever before. At the same time, Obama’s cautiousness in evoking race demonstrates that the question of race remains a powerful threat to the national imagination – so much so that it could have undermined Obama’s chances of becoming president. In the contemporary political discourse, it was simply enough that “we” were no longer governed by a white father.

But in some ways the relative silence with which race was dealt in the campaign provokes questions about whether race is now no longer just a question of colour but of performances and discourses entrenched in racial biases. To take a very early example, the old racial slurs for blacks were disguised by new code words when the national imagination was threatened in the 1960s – and, indeed, new political technologies began to be used to exclude blacks and the poor. “Nigger,” “boy,” “coon,” and other racial slurs were replaced by “welfare,” “criminality,” “illegitimacy,” “personal-responsibility.” Attentive to the political inexpediency of overt racism in the post-Civil Rights Era, Republican strategist Lee Atwater put it this way in 1981:

You start out in 1954 by saying “Nigger, nigger, nigger.” By 1968 you can’t say “nigger” – that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states’ rights and all that stuff. You’re getting so abstract now [that] you are talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you’re talking about are totally economic things, and a byproduct of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites [...] And subconsciously maybe that is part of it. I’m not saying that. But I’m saying that if it is getting that abstract, and that coded, that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. You follow me – because obviously sitting around saying, “we want to cut this,” is much more abstract than even the busing thing, *and* a hell of a lot more abstract than “Nigger, nigger.” (qtd. in Piven et. al. 3)

This speech, made on the cusp of Reagan-era cut backs in social programs, reveals the strategic and subtle way that silence on the topic of race can be used to talk about race indirectly. Specifically, the emphasis on abstraction here is used to disguise effects that directly impact African American and then relies on those effects to refer to African Americans. Explicit racism is replaced by key words and vague allusions to refer to programs or services that cater primarily to poor black communities. More recently, we see the deployment of this sort of racial abstraction on the public stage to imply a fundamental social equality that would make programs that would disproportionately help African Americans unnecessary, one of the key arguments used by the Reagan administration to make such cut backs. Rather than equality, however, silence on the questions of race in public discussions of social policy, as in this example, shows that in fact the “we” of American liberal discourse is not everyone.

### **“Yes, We can” and the Subtext of Self-Help**

#### *Clinton and Welfare Reform*

The ethos of individualism in early American political discourse issues a kind of self-help ideology upon individuals who are ‘free’ to either prosper or fail. Because the discourse often operates from unacknowledged positions of power – both politically/economically and subjectively – it has the effect of privileging the white, male and middle class. Thus, although men and women of all racial categories participate in this discourse now, it is important to consider whether or not they do so because the boundaries of the discourse have widened or because those who participate in it conform to its principles. Here I argue that the kind of freedom imagined in the “we” of the Constitution still assumes performances of the race, gender and, by association, social class of the dominant group by showing who is left out: poor women of color who require community support to survive. This perhaps emerges most forcefully in the arguments against government programs for the poor. Heather Bullock, director of the Center for Tolerance, Justice and Community at UC Santa Cruz summarizes the criticisms of welfare as follows: “Among middle-class persons, perceptions of welfare recipients and the welfare system are overwhelmingly negative. Poor people and welfare recipients are typically characterized as dishonest, dependent, lazy, uninterested in education, and promiscuous” (qtd in Carcasson 125).

Today, those who “can,” as I am using the term, fit in with the larger American middle class and express their agency through a culture of “work and play” – the ability to assert agency by spending money. When political discourse is directed to a national audience, it is measured by its impact on those with the widest agency. In the contemporary context this is largely an audience of middle-class individuals. When discussions of policy take place on the national stage, the measure of costs and benefits are often based on the needs and wishes of this group. Those who depend on the actions of the community or the state to get by are consequently marginalized, the disproportionate majority of whom are young women of colour.

For example, in Bill Clinton's 1994 State of the Union address, in which he argued for welfare reform, he evokes a collective American identity to make the case for individual responsibility and self help: "we [must] revolutionize [the] welfare system. It doesn't work. It defies our values as a nation."(qtd in Carcasson 660) Further, later that year, he argued that "for millions and millions of people, the system is broken badly, and it undermines the very values – work, family, and responsibility – that people need to put themselves back on track" ( qtd in Carcasson 660). The "we" who act in Clinton's narrative implies a white, heteronormative and middle class identity, whose values include a strong ethos of individualism while emphasizing family – specifically the nuclear, two-parent family led by the strong male figure. The reference to the values of the nation neutralizes the problem of inequality and difference by collectivizing. Because the implications of who "we" are are assumed, the material and subjective realities that might make Clinton's reforms problematic can be ignored. Indeed, the specifics of the material realities underlying the ways that race and gender are constructed are disguised by the collective value placed on self-reliance by the majority who "can." This argument assumes that "we" all hold these values in equal measure. Indeed, few would argue against such 'values' when they are posited in these terms. Even more, for a figure of power on the national stage, to disavow such values by discriminating between terms would be tantamount to political heresy. Thus the target of this address operates through an implied anathema. Rather than defining who "we" are, the remaining implications construct this social body feature by feature through abhorrence. Perhaps equally implicit in this argument is an anti-poverty discourse that weighs heavily against single mothers and, particularly, single mothers of colour.

In this vein, E. Patrick Johnson highlights the ways in which the typical image of American families reinforces historic prejudices in our national imagination. Referencing the work of anthropologist Phil Hubbard, Johnson shows how inclusion in the American imagination often depends on "the political and social recognition that is granted to those whose behaviour accords with the moral values underpinning the construction of the nation-state" (qtd in Johnson 100). Part of this behaviour, according to Johnson, is the family unit. In contrast, following Johnson, black gay men are produced as noncitizens and with them, in the arguments about welfare, single mothers. When Clinton argued, for example, that "[t]here is no greater gap between mainstream American values and modern government than we find in the welfare system," (Johnson, 100) he was appealing to a largely white and middle-class audience invested in the ethos of work and family.

With this said, formations of the national collective occur only in relationship to difference, and in the American imagination the first line of difference has been race. The "we" who "can" *can* because they affirm white, middle-class normativity, they adhere to that part of consciousness that DuBois placed within mainstream acceptability. Here, we see that when Clinton argues that government programs undermine the work ethic and create of a mentality of

dependence, he is making an argument about the role of government in private life, with the implication that those who depend on government help for survival undermine all American values, including the culture of family and work. When the narrative is cast as one of a collective of discrete individuals acting in their own self-interest, those who fail to meet the standards of 'our' narrative have only themselves to blame. Finally, when the criticism levelled against the poor often recycles the stereotypes of black pathology, perhaps we can see more clearly exactly who is left out. The black self, set off from the figure of the white family, then, is the figure against which the "we" who speak for the rest is constructed and, by counter-example, then, that the figure of the "we" becomes exclusive rather than inclusive.

And in fact, an analysis of the changes to welfare shows that those changes (and the rhetoric behind them) have had a disproportionately negative impact on single mothers, particularly single mothers of colour. Among other things, the new welfare program placed the burden on recipients to both prove the need for assistance and 'earn' such assistance by enrolling in work training. Further, the reforms for the first time imposed time constraints on almost all forms of public assistance (White House). Enforced on a universal basis, the new program did not account for the racial and gender disparity in educational and job skill levels already in place. The reforms then had the ideological effect of isolating single mothers as the perpetual drain on the national economy.

One progeny of the reforms that had a particularly negative impact on poor women was TANF or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, which mandated that recipients enrol in work training so that they could become "self-sufficient" quickly. Although there is nothing wrong with this in theory, because the program operated largely on a uniform basis without recognizing the economic realities created by pre-existing racial and gender inequalities, it had the effect of further marginalizing women of color while entrenching stereotypes about welfare recipients. For example, the new system required all recipients to be working and independent within similar time constraints without consideration for individual differences in job skills, the ability to become employed full-time or other individual life circumstances. Further, the program did not account for the amount of assistance various recipients might need when transitioning from the program to full employment or if training provided under the system would allow recipients to command better salaries once the transition was completed.

And, in fact, the data shows that the reforms did little to improve economic opportunities for the poorest. According to an Urban Institute study completed in 2001, more than forty percent of former TANF recipients still lived in poverty despite being employed. Those with less than a high school diploma were also unlikely to advance in wages even when they maintained steady employment (higher education does not fall under the program's rubric for "training.") The study concludes that one-third of employees once enrolled in TANF were earning less money five years after leaving the program than they were immediately after and that of these, forty percent were single mothers (White House). Finally, with sixty percent of mothers on welfare having

come from abusive marriages, the law might also have the added consequence of forcing them back into these relationships when these programs expire (Kelly 82).

Thus, as a result of Clinton's reforms the number of people enrolled for government assistance has fallen, but the number of people still living in poverty has not changed significantly (White House) and, of these the majority of people still living in poverty are women. According to Margaret Simms, Senior Fellow at the Urban Institute, the chance of being poor is higher if the woman is a single mother, with fifty-nine percent of poor children being raised in female-headed households. Further, it is estimated that the poverty rate for children in these families is forty-three percent. Simms concludes that "when race is factored in, being an African American or Hispanic child living in a female-headed family increases the chances of poverty to one in two" (qtd. in Carcasson, 660-661). But this reality is hidden in the political discourse when the collective is invoked.

### Obama and Healthcare Reform

We see the implications of this discourse in Obama's 2010 State of the Union address when he argues for healthcare reform. The argument behind Obama's bill for healthcare reform – which would disproportionately impact women of colour – reveals the class and racial subtext underpinning benefits and, like Clinton's argument for welfare reform, implies an ideology of individualism and self-help. For example:

Our approach would preserve the right of Americans who have insurance to keep their doctor and their plan. It would reduce costs and premiums for millions of families and businesses. And according to the Congressional Budget Office, the independent organization that both parties have cited as the official scorekeeper for Congress, our approach would bring down the deficit by as much as \$1 trillion over the next two decades.

Still, this is a complex issue, and the longer it was debated, the more skeptical people became. I take my share of the blame for not explaining it more clearly to the American people. And I know that with all the lobbying and horse-trading, the process left most Americans wondering, "What's in it for me?" (Obama qtd in Woolley).

Here, Obama highlights the importance of changing the way health insurance is provided but still emphasizes the importance of the individual. The assumption of prior insurance ownership is in play, as is socio-economic status and race in the direction of traditional American families and businesses, in the very first lines. Those who might object to a legal universalism of a healthcare reform that would provide insurance to the poor are thus called upon as the audience of interest: "Americans who [already] have insurance." Although Obama complements this by referring to reduced costs, which would presumably interest everyone, he balances this statement by referring to the national deficit, one of the rallying points in the heavily white, heavily middle class Republican party and a key argument against Obama's reform. The reference to skepticism

acknowledges the largely white, middle-class critics of the bill. Finally, the question of “most Americans” as to “what’s in [the bill] for me,” suggests an audience of middle-class “haves” for whom a new government program would be of no direct benefit and might represent a cost in the form of new or higher taxes.

Later in the same speech, Obama talks directly the middle-class itself. Here, again, the concerns of the heavily white, traditional middle class family are of most importance:

Starting in 2011, we are prepared to freeze Government spending for 3 years. Spending related to our national security, Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security will not be affected. But all other discretionary Government programs will. Like any cash-strapped family, we will work within a budget to invest in what we need and sacrifice what we don't. And if I have to enforce this discipline by veto, I will.

We will continue to go through the budget, line by line, page by page, to eliminate programs that we can't afford and don't work. We've already identified \$20 billion in savings for next year. To help working families, we'll extend our middle class tax cuts (qtd in Woolley).

Although Obama’s references to the “cash-strapped family” evoke the concerns of the poor, it perhaps harkens more strongly to the ethos of the middle class, with its emphasis on coupledness and parenthood. This is further emphasized by Obama’s commitment in the statement above this one to cut spending in other discretionary programs, which includes the unmentioned cuts to the Fair Housing Activities Program, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Home Investment Partnerships Program, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, and the Department of Health and Human Service, from which poor women of color have most directly benefitted (MLibrary University of Michigan). Furthermore, Obama’s direct address to “working families” and his promise to cut middle class taxes slight the struggles of the working class, single-parent households and non-traditional communities.

Thus, although these are the groups most in need of assistance, they rarely get much attention.

In fact, according to the National Urban League’s most recent data on the effects of the 2008-current economic recession, African Americans have done 71% as well as whites on such measures as employment, education, and healthcare. While the national average for unemployment stands roughly at 10%, African-American unemployment is at 16%. Where the annual household income for whites averages at just over \$52,000, the annual household income for blacks is about \$34,000. Furthermore, the gaps in wealth between white and black families does not account for the discrepancy in the numbers of single-parent households. Finally and most importantly with regards to health care reform, the Urban League finds that African Americans were almost twice as likely to be uninsured as whites in 2004 and two and a half times as likely to receive healthcare through the government ( Urban League). Thus, the question of how one imagines him or herself in the discourse of American collectivity is as important as

material reality. The two go hand-in-hand. The campaign slogan, “Yes, We Can,” is thus perhaps clearer than it first seems. The historic “we” of American liberal discourse are those with power.

## Conclusion

To consider an individual within the larger collective of a totalizing “we,” such as those called in Obama’s slogan, we must imagine not only an equality of agency of this “freedom,” but also a subjectivity in which one *feels* free, is actuated by this call. The representation of this subjectivity of the “we” who “can” must be problematized by an interrogation of the ability of those whom it marginalizes to conform to its organizing principles. From the margins, “Yes, We Can” can intensify the feeling of subjection of those who, because of their life circumstances, actually *can’t*. Such terms as will, consent and freedom mask the reality of difference and inequality created by the history of having denied the willpower, consent and freedom of particular groups. Perhaps this is nowhere more true than in the situation of black women.

But as Foucault pointed out there cannot be relations of power unless subjects are free. In order to exercise a relation of power, there must be a certain degree of freedom on both sides of the discursive field. This is perhaps where the *fact* of American liberal discourse in this instance becomes most important, because it is spoken by a black man and does indeed call many black men and women. However, here the agency of the both Obama and other is circumscribed by the power of the majority in the “we” implied in discourse. In other words, Obama’s call means adhering to the subjectivity of the collective, which, as envisioned in this snapshot, is determined by the majority. Paradoxically, the state of this emerging private, internal self is read almost exclusively by outward signs – performances of what have been traditionally *associated* with middle-class, male whiteness, regardless of one’s actual phenotype. This is a question of typicality, of what is and what is not ‘mainstream’ and easily assimilable into the American imagination.

Thus, when we ask the question, who “we” are, this is a question of power, which in the American context is both racialized and gendered. This is not an essentialist argument about the nature of blacks or women, but an attempt to look at the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow and gender inequalities in present material reality. Because the evocation of “we” has historically been a call to whiteness, to the middle-class and to the male, it continues to call performances that adhere to the principles of this hegemony. To belong to this collective, one must on some level invest in an American identity that embodies these notions. This then has the effect of excluding difference in the national narrative while perpetuating systems of inequality.

All of this is not to say that individuals are not responsible for their own actions, but rather it is to recognize that American liberal discourse nurtures inequalities that may have a negative

impact on more groups than on others and that may impact how we all behave. It is also to call attention to the question of where “we” are now that the first politician with African heritage has been elected president of the United States. There is, I feel, a danger that this landmark moment in American history may obscure the intricacies of racism and inequality still extant. We do not live in a post-racial America simply because a “black” man was elected president. However, perhaps we can begin to move in a direction of greater opportunity for everyone by explicitly addressing the enduring problems of racism, poverty and gender inequality. We cannot begin to do this, however, until we deconstruct the myths of American liberal discourse upon which national identity is based.



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