

INTERTEXTUALITY, INTERDISCURSIVITY AND IDENTIFICATION IN THE 2008 OBAMA CAMPAIGN

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***Abstract:** This study argues that a key factor in Barack Obama's ability to mobilise support for his successful 2008 presidential campaign was his use of multicultural intertextual references in a hybrid discourse with which different ethnic audiences could identify. Obama's rhetoric drew on two discursive traditions in particular: that of Abraham Lincoln and the Founding Fathers on the one hand, and that of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights movement on the other. By combining explicit and implicit references to both traditions in his speeches, and by interweaving the white myth of an America founded in freedom and equality with the black narrative of a journey towards freedom and equality, Obama was able to persuasively present a unifying metanarrative that embodied an inclusive rewriting of the American story and the American Dream, offering Americans a common future that connected with their various pasts. In addition to examining Obama's "Yes We Can" and victory speeches, the study illustrates how he created a dialogical relationship with diverse audiences by referring to examples of the many YouTube videos – some themselves hybrid creations which combined music and images with samples from his speeches – that he inspired during the course of his campaign.*

***Keywords:** Obama; hybridity; identity/identification; intertextuality; interdiscursivity; rhetoric.*

This study addresses two of the themes of the conference, identity and hybridity, or rather identification and hybridization. Specifically, it examines how Barack Obama managed to persuade a variety of ethnic audiences to identify with his 2008 presidential campaign through the use of intertextual references (some musical) and by combining or hybridizing two discourses: the discourse of Abraham Lincoln and the Founding Fathers of the United States on the one hand, and the discourse of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights movement on the other. I will focus on three things: first on the slogan "Yes We Can" and its multicultural associations; then on the story which Obama built around it in the January 2008 speech which first brought the slogan to attention; and finally his victory speech in November that year.

To begin with, however, I will briefly mention a substantial academic study of Obama's rhetoric which has been published on the Internet. Adopting a multi-dimensional corpus-linguistics approach, Noah Bubenhofer, Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth (2008) have used a wide

range of parameters to compare and contrast the campaign speeches and televised debates of Obama and his Republican opponent, John McCain. Two of the study's findings (summarized in Bubenhofer et al 2009) are particularly relevant here. The first is that:

Obama's political rhetoric [...] was focused from the beginning on dialogue, collectivity and the future. When compared to McCain, Obama used pronouns such as "we," "you" (plural) and "us" far more frequently, thus creating a strong feeling of community and identification between himself and his audience.

The second is that:

Obama's rhetoric [...] remained consistent with his [...] emphasis on the collective efforts that lie ahead. Accordingly, his campaign created a story about America, its struggles and hopes and the direction it should take in the future as one nation. It is with this inspiring message and appeal to unity that Obama won the presidential election.

Although Bubenhofer and his colleagues' conclusion that Obama's rhetoric was the decisive factor in his victory is over-stated, I would not disagree with the other assessments they make here. I would, however, make three points. First, that their study is based on a purely textual analysis, without reference to any context other than the speeches of Obama's opponent, John McCain. Second, that it does not take any account of the audience and their response, other than the election result itself. And third, that Bubenhofer and his colleagues do not expand on their observation about the story of America that the Obama campaign created, which they relate to the future without connecting it to the past. It is these gaps that I hope to fill in this study.

Yes We Can

If you asked most people what they remembered most from the 2008 US presidential campaign, they would probably reply "Yes We Can". Obama first used "Yes We Can" as a slogan in his 2004 campaign for the US Senate, and there has been much speculation about its origin.¹ As Bista (2008, p. 10) notes, a number of books have used the phrase in their title, while other possibilities that have been suggested range from the motivational chant of a 1970s Philadelphia baseball team to part of a catchphrase in the popular

¹ See Bista 2008, pp. 10-14. (This, it should be noted, is a self-published study by a Ph.D. student.) In the conclusion to his 2004 US Senate election-night speech (Obama 2004b), Obama himself referred to his use of "Yes We Can" as a slogan during his campaign on that occasion.

children's television programme *Bob the Builder* (Tilove 2008). From a purely linguistic viewpoint, "Yes We Can" had at least three things in its favour as a slogan: it showed a positive, "can-do" attitude ("Yes" and "Can"); it was inclusive ("We"); and it had a rhetorically effective triadic or three-part structure ("Yes We Can"). It could also be seen as implicitly dialogical – as a confidently affirmative reply to a question about a challenge or a problem – and thus as implying a miniature story with a happy ending.

From a broader perspective, however, another reason why "Yes We Can" was such an effective slogan was because of the associations it triggered for specific sections of the American population: for the Hispanic community, for the black community and for popular music fans in general. As many commentators noted, "Yes We Can" is a common translation of *Si se puede* (literally "Yes, it can be done"), a slogan associated with the labour-rights activist César Chávez (1927–1993), the leader of the predominantly Hispanic United Farm Workers union. In 1972, when a law was passed outlawing strikes by farm-workers during harvest time, Chávez himself went on hunger strike as part of a campaign to reverse the legislation. The story goes that when people told him he was wasting his time – *No se puede* ("No, it can't be done") – his fellow union-leader Dolores Huerta replied *Si! Si se puede* ("Yes it can!"), a phrase which Chávez then took up as a rallying cry (Frank 2009).

The slogan was subsequently widely adopted by other trade unions and civil rights organizations, and passed into the wider culture. In 2002, for instance, the author Diana Cohn used *Sí, Se Puede!/Yes We Can!* as the title of an award-winning bilingual illustrated book, aimed at children but also used in adult education classes, about a Chicano janitors' strike in Los Angeles (Cohn and Delgado 2002). In 2005, Carmen Bernier-Grand and David Diaz produced another award-winning children's book, this time on Chávez himself, entitled *César: ¡Sí, Se Puede!/Yes We Can!* (Bernier-Grand and Diaz 2005). Most significantly in this context, the former black presidential candidate Rev. Jesse Jackson wrote an article in 2006 for *In Motion Magazine* on the protest movement against proposals to increase the penalties for illegal immigrants – proposals which particularly affected Mexicans. In an obvious attempt to enlist the support of non-Hispanic readers for what was primarily a Hispanic cause, Jackson wrote: "The earth is shaking as immigrants rise up around the country with their voices singing 'Si se puede' – Yes, we can. This uprising is in the best tradition of the American Dream and the civil rights struggle for freedom" (Jackson 2006).

As a search on Google Images confirms, the slogan *Si se puede* was widely used on posters, stickers and T-shirts during the Obama campaign.

The connection with “Yes we can”, meanwhile, was reinforced when the Latino singer-songwriter Andrés Useche recorded a Spanish-language pro-Obama song called “Si se puede cambiar” (literally “Yes, it can be changed”). In the accompanying music video (Useche 2008), which has gained over 390,000 YouTube views to date, archive clips of César Chávez and Bobby Kennedy were included alongside footage of Obama. The English subtitles translated the refrain *Si se puede* as “Yes we can”, while Obama himself was shown declaring *Si se puede* at a public meeting (at 3:54). Useche was subsequently invited to perform at Obama’s inauguration gala.

As a slogan, then, “Yes We Can” had a special resonance for the Hispanic community. What commentators seem to have overlooked, however, is that “Yes We Can” was also the title of a well-known popular song, written by the black New Orleans musician and record producer Allen Toussaint. It was first recorded by the black pop/R&B singer Lee Dorsey for a single and album of the same name in 1970, when the single reached no. 46 in the US charts; then by the black female group The Pointer Sisters as “Yes We Can Can” in 1973 (no. 11 US), becoming the title-track of two greatest hits albums by the group (MCA, 1991; Hip-O, 1997). Following the Hurricane Katrina disaster, Toussaint recorded his own version, which became the first track on the various-artists compilation *Our New Orleans: A Benefit Album for the Gulf Coast* (Nonesuch, 2005). Finally, a direct connection with the Obama campaign was established in July 2008, when the folk-blues singer Maria Muldaur – best known for her 1974 no. 6 hit “Midnight at the Oasis” – released a music video (Muldaur 2008) of her rendition of the song to promote her mainly anti-war-themed album of the same name (*Yes We Can!*, Telarc). Described as a “tribute to Obama” and beginning with a shot of his campaign logo, the video included images of Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, César Chávez, Bobby Kennedy, Nelson Mandela and of course Obama himself. As if this were not enough, Muldaur – who is herself of Hispanic origin – can clearly be heard declaring *Si se puede* at the end of the song.

The lyrics of “Yes We Can (Can)” chimed perfectly with the optimistic, unifying themes of the Obama campaign, saying that it was time for “all good men to [...] iron out their problems”, “try to live as brothers” and “make this land a better land”. “I know we can make it”, the singer(s) affirmed, with the chorus repeating “yes we can can”, before emphasizing the need to take care of the world’s children, because they are “our strongest hope for the future”. During the presidential campaign, Obama supporters demonstrated that they had made a connection with

Toussaint's song by posting home-made music videos or "mash-ups"² on YouTube of both Lee Dorsey's and The Pointer Sisters' recordings. All of these used images of Obama and two sampled the speech which first brought the slogan to attention.³

Obama's "Yes We Can" Story

"Yes We Can", then, was a slogan which triggered specific cultural associations for different segments of the population. But Obama also managed to turn "Yes We Can" into a story, which, like the slogan, appealed to different constituencies. In his presidential campaign, Obama first used the slogan "Yes we can" in a speech he gave on 8 January 2008 (Obama 2008a), ironically after losing the New Hampshire primary election to his rival Hillary Clinton. Obama's speech attracted considerable media attention, but its impact was prolonged and multiplied many times over by a striking split-screen music video – directly inspired by the speech and also called "Yes We Can" – featuring will.i.am of the multi-ethnic hip-hop group Black Eyed Peas (will.i.am 2008 [video]).⁴ This combined footage from the speech with a similarly multi-ethnic cast of young actors, musicians and other individuals repeating or singing Obama's words as he spoke them.⁵ At the time of writing, according to the website www.viralvideochart.com, the video has been viewed over 28 million times since its release on 2 February 2008.

How Obama turned the "Yes We Can" slogan into a story can be seen from the section of his speech that will.i.am chose to use for the start of his video:

It was a creed written into the founding documents that declared the destiny of a nation. Yes we can.
It was whispered by slaves and abolitionists as they blazed a trail toward freedom. Yes we can.

² "A digital mashup is a digital media file containing any or all of text, graphics, audio, video and animation drawn from pre-existing sources, to create a new derivative work" (Hill and Dudley, 2006).

³ See *Yes We Can (Can) Obama mash-ups* (2009), a YouTube playlist compiled by the author.

⁴ One remarkable aspect of the Obama campaign was the number of songs it inspired. In an article published a month before the US presidential elections, Elliot Van Buskirk (2008) noted that eight hundred songs had been listed on a dedicated "Obama Songs" YouTube channel (<http://www.youtube.com/user/ObamaSongs>).

⁵ As Neil McCormick (2008) noted in the British *Daily Telegraph*, the video also showed the actor Adam Rodriguez (from the popular TV series *CSI: Miami*) declaring "Si, se puede!" (at 1:56).

It was sung by immigrants as they struck out from distant shores and pioneers who pushed westward against an unforgiving wilderness. Yes we can.

It was the call of workers who organized; women who reached for the ballots; a President [Kennedy] who chose the moon as our new frontier; and a [Martin Luther] King who took us to the mountaintop and pointed the way to the Promised Land. (Obama 2008a)⁶

What Obama did here was to interweave elements of American history to construct a metanarrative linked by a common theme. That theme was one of different kinds of Americans at different times – slaves and abolitionists, immigrants, pioneers, workers, women – inspired by the promise held out in the nation’s founding documents and by visionary leaders such as Kennedy and King, and successfully rising to the different challenges that they faced. The implicit message was that Obama was a leader in the tradition of Kennedy and King,⁷ and that just as his predecessors had done in the past, he could lead people to overcome the challenges that faced them today.

Obama’s metanarrative was, of course, deliberately selective. In referring to “a creed written into the founding documents that declared the destiny of a nation”, what he was evoking above all was the US Declaration of Independence, which famously proclaimed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” As Obama put it in his book *The Audacity of Hope*: “Those simple words are our starting point as Americans; they describe not only the foundation of our government but the substance of our common creed” (Obama 2006, p. 53). When those words were written in 1776, however, they were a lie. They were a lie in the sense that, as Obama himself put it in his book, “[the] spirit of liberty did not extend, in the minds of the Founders, to the slaves who worked their fields, made their beds, and nursed their children” (Obama 2006, p. 95).

To this extent, Obama’s metanarrative was a deliberate rewriting of the American story, as he himself implied by a phrase he used both in his autobiographical memoir *Dreams from My Father* (Obama 1995, p. 439) and fourteen years later in his inauguration speech, when he talked about

⁶ Obama was alluding here to King’s famous “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech (King 1968), to which he would also refer in his victory speech (see below).

⁷ As will.i.am himself put it later: “That speech made me think of Martin Luther King... Kennedy... and Lincoln... and all the others that have fought for what we have today...” (will.i.am 2008).

“choosing our better history” (Obama 2009, my emphasis). From a rhetorical perspective, however, what Obama’s metanarrative did was to present a unifying, inspirational and ultimately persuasive myth which offered Americans the hope that, together, they could overcome the difficulties which faced them, just as different Americans had overcome the different difficulties that *they* faced in the past. This can be seen from the climax to his speech, which will.i.am sampled for the end of his video:

in the unlikely story that is America, there has never been anything false about hope. [...] we are one people; we are one nation; and together, we will begin the next great chapter in the American story with three words that will ring from coast to coast; from sea to shining sea – Yes. We. Can. (Obama 2008a, my emphasis)

Even this, however, relied partly for its effect on a further instance of intertextuality: the much-quoted phrase “from sea to shining sea” derives from the patriotic song “America the Beautiful” (1910, words by Katharine Lee Bates), which is widely played at major US sporting events such as the Superbowl and whose status as an unofficial US anthem was reinforced after the attacks of 9/11.

Obama’s Victory Speech

I will now examine Obama’s use of intertextuality and interdiscursivity in his victory speech of 4 November 2008 (Obama 2008d; all further references to this speech are to this source). This followed the pattern of many previous speeches in his campaign by drawing on two discourses. The first was the discourse of Abraham Lincoln and the Founding Fathers; the second the discourse of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights movement. What Obama did was to hybridize or combine these two discourses, in order, as he put it, to “reclaim the American Dream”, a phrase which he had used in the subtitle of his 2006 book, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (see also Obama 2008b). On the one hand, he referred to the preamble to the US Constitution, one of the nation’s original mottoes and two of Abraham Lincoln’s most famous speeches. On the other, he evoked a traditional gospel song based on a passage from the Bible, a famous soul song and “a preacher from Atlanta who told a people that ‘We Shall Overcome’” – Martin Luther King, whom he also quoted twice.

Obama began his speech with an emphatic three-part anaphora which invoked the Founding Fathers, the American Dream and a well-known gospel song derived from a passage in the New Testament: “If there

is anyone out there *who still* doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, *who still* wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, *who still* questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer” (my emphasis). Obama’s deliberate use of the phrase “all things are possible” – rather than the more natural “anything is possible” – echoed Mark 9:23, which in the American King James Bible reads: “Jesus said to him, If you can believe, all things are possible to him that believes.” This verse provides the refrain – “All things are possible/If you only believe” – of “All Things Are Possible”, also known as “Only Believe”, a traditional gospel song which has been recorded by black gospel artists such as The Harmonizing Four (Vee Jay, 1957), The Swan Silvertones (Hob, 1968) and Clarence Fountain, lead singer of The Blind Boys of Alabama, as the title-track of his album *All Things Are Possible* (Jewel, 1975). Perhaps the best-known version of the song, however, is by Elvis Presley, who released “Only Believe” as the B-side of a single (“Life”) and on the album *Love Letters from Elvis* (RCA, both 1971). Obama’s seemingly casual phrase, then, would have struck a chord with many listeners, both black and white.

Obama continued: “It’s the answer that led those who’ve been told for so long by so many to be cynical and fearful and doubtful about what we can achieve to put their hands on *the arc of history* and *bend* it once more toward the hope of a better day” (my emphasis). Here Obama alluded to a phrase used by Martin Luther King in a number of speeches he gave in the 1960s, for instance on 25 March 1965 after the third of the famous marches from Selma to Montgomery: “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” (King 1965, quoted by Howe 2009).⁸ King himself, it should be noted, had derived the phrase from a passage in an 1853 sermon, “Justice and the Conscience”, by the white abolitionist Rev. Theodore Parker: “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one [...]. But from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice” (quoted in Zelinsky 2008).

Perhaps Obama’s most powerful allusion, however, came when he ended the introduction to his speech by declaring: “It’s been a long time coming, but tonight, because of what we did on this date in this election at this defining moment, change has come to America.” In this compelling passage, Obama first created anticipation in his audience with the opening phrase “It’s been a long time coming, but tonight...”, then held them

⁸ See the video *Barack Obama Election Night Speech MLK references* (2009), which juxtaposes speech extracts from Obama and King. Obama quoted King’s phrase directly – adding an apocryphal “as long as we help bend it that way” – at the end of his US Senate election-night speech (Obama 2004b).

momentarily in suspense with an emphatic unifying triad – “because of what *we* did on *this* date in *this* election at *this* defining moment” – and finally triumphantly satisfied their expectations with the closing “change has come to America”.

Anyone with more than a passing knowledge of black American popular music would have immediately recognized the allusion. Unmistakably, Obama was echoing the chorus of “A Change Is Gonna Come”, written and recorded by the soul singer Sam Cooke in December 1963, the year of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech:

It’s been a long
A long time coming
But I know
A change is gonna come
Oh yes it will.⁹

“A Change Is Gonna Come” was first issued as a track on the album *Ain’t That Good News* (RCA, 1964). After Cooke was shot dead at the age of just 33 in a murky motel incident in December that year, however, an edited version was released as the B-side of “Shake”, becoming not only a posthumous hit (reaching no. 9 in the R&B charts and no. 35 in the pop charts in 1965), but also an anthem of the Civil Rights movement. The song was subsequently covered by singers such as Otis Redding and Aretha Franklin, becoming something of a standard, and in 2004 a cross-section of critics, musicians and music industry representatives voted it number 12 in *Rolling Stone* magazine’s “500 Greatest Songs of All Time”.

For those familiar with Cooke’s song, as the present writer can testify, Obama’s allusion carried a huge emotional charge. Even before his victory speech, several Obama-dedicated music videos and mash-ups featuring “A Change is Gonna Come” had been posted on the Internet,¹⁰ suggesting that it had become an unofficial grass-roots theme song of the campaign. (Indeed, it would be performed – as a duet and with lyrics specially adapted for the occasion – by the black soul singer Bettye LaVette and the white rock singer Jon Bon Jovi at Obama’s inauguration concert, on the very steps of the Lincoln Memorial from where Martin Luther King had given his “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963.) Although most if not all of the music videos – mainly made by non-professional singers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds – no doubt contained a strong element of self-

⁹ For the full lyrics and further information about the song, including cover versions, see “A Change Is Gonna come” ([n.d.]).

¹⁰ For examples, enter “Obama change gonna come” into the YouTube search facility.

promotion, the mash-ups which used the original version of Cooke's song emphasized the continuity between Obama's campaign and the Civil Rights struggle.¹¹

In the most powerful and popular of these mash-ups,¹² a young African-American woman, Kia Williams, created a video montage to accompany Cooke's recording of "A Change Is Gonna Come". Among the images that Williams included in her montage were photographs of the mutilated body of the fourteen-year-old Emmet Till, murdered in Mississippi in 1955 after an incident involving a white woman; the four young girls killed when a black church in Birmingham, Alabama, was bombed by members of the Ku Klux Klan in 1963; a lynching - graphically illustrating the song's least veiled reference to racism, "Somebody keep tellin' me/'Don't hang around'" - and, to bring things more up to date, black victims of Hurricane Katrina. On a more positive note, Williams included shots of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela and of course Barack Obama.

Obama's next intertextual reference came when he paid tribute to the millions of American voters who, as he put it, had proved more than two centuries after the founding of the US that "government of the people, by the people and for the people has not perished from this Earth". This was a near-direct quotation of the most famous line from Abraham Lincoln's epochal Gettysburg Address, in which he expressed the resolve "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth" (Lincoln 1863). Once again, however, the original source was Theodore Parker, who in an 1858 sermon - read and noted by Lincoln - defined democracy as "direct self-government, over all the people, for all the people, by all the people" (q. by Booth 1998, pp. 33-4).

Obama went on to tell his audience:

The road ahead will be long. Our climb will be steep. *We may not get there* in one year or even in one term. But, America, I have never been more hopeful than I am tonight that we will get there.

I promise you, *we as a people will get there.* (my emphasis)

Here Obama was echoing the final words of "I've Been to the Mountaintop", the speech that Martin Luther King gave in Memphis on 3 April 1968, the day before he was assassinated. Alluding to Deuteronomy 34: 1-4 and casting himself in the role of a black Moses leading his people

¹¹ See, for instance, *Barack Obama - Change Is Gonna Come* and *Barack Obama - A Change is Gonna Come* (both 2008), which begins with a sample from King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

¹² *Sam Cooke - Change Gon' Come [VOTE 2008]* (2008), over 150,000 views to date.

out of bondage, King declared:

I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. *I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land.* (King 1968, my emphasis)¹³

Whereas King's "we" here referred to African-Americans, however, Obama's more inclusive "we" was addressed to *all* Americans, regardless of their origin or the colour of their skin.

Obama made another intertextual reference when he metaphorically stretched out a conciliatory hand to his Republican opponents. Reminding his Illinois audience that the first Republican president of the United States (Abraham Lincoln) came from that state, and that the values of self-reliance, individual liberty and national unity on which, according to Obama, the Republican Party was founded, were values that "we all share", he expressed a collective determination to "heal the divides that have held back our progress": "As Lincoln said to a nation far more divided than ours, we are not enemies but friends. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection." Here Obama was quoting from Lincoln's first inaugural address on 4 March 1861, given as the Civil War was breaking out. Referring to his Confederate opponents, Lincoln declared: "We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection" (Lincoln 1861). Once again, Obama's words expressed an inclusive vision by echoing what past leaders had said at decisive moments in American history.

Taking his election itself as confirmation of what he called "the true genius of America: that America can change", Obama went on to declare: "Our union can be perfected."¹⁴ Here he was adapting the preamble to the US Constitution (1787, emphasis added):

We the people of the United States, in order to form *a more perfect union*, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

¹³ Again, see the video *Barack Obama Election Night Speech MLK references* (2009).

¹⁴ As the context makes clear, Obama was using "perfect" here in a relative, rather than an absolute sense.

Obama referred to this phrase a number of times in the course of his campaign, most notably to begin his crucial speech on race following the Jeremiah Wright controversy, "A More Perfect Union" (Obama 2008c). As with his invocations of the Declaration of Independence, Obama's allusion to one of the nation's founding documents served as a reminder of what might nowadays be termed the "mission statement" of the United States, an implicit promise that he would remain faithful to it as President and – in this case – a reinforcement of his own message of unity and hope.

At this point, Obama used a rhetorical technique that he had frequently employed in his campaign speeches: he told a story to make his message more concrete, to demonstrate his concern for people rather than abstract issues and to encourage audience identification. Summing up what his campaign had been all about, he cited the example of Ann Nixon Cooper, a black woman of 106 who had been born "just a generation past slavery; [...] when someone like her couldn't vote for two reasons – because she was a woman and because of the color of her skin". Throughout her life in America, Obama suggested, Cooper had seen both heartache and hope, struggle and progress, "the times we were told that we can't, and the people who pressed on with that American creed: Yes we can". And as he had done in his "Yes We Can" speech, he retold the American story in terms of different Americans at different times adopting a positive attitude and overcoming the challenges that faced them, from the fight for women's suffrage to the Great Depression, from Pearl Harbor and World War 2 to the Civil Rights Movement and the collapse of Communism:

At a time when women's voices were silenced and their hopes dismissed, she lived to see them stand up and speak out and reach for the ballot. Yes we can.

When there was despair in the dust bowl and depression across the land, she saw a nation conquer fear itself with a New Deal, new jobs, a new sense of common purpose. Yes we can.

When the bombs fell on our harbor and tyranny threatened the world, she was there to witness a generation rise to greatness and a democracy was saved. Yes we can.

She was there for the buses in Montgomery, the hoses in Birmingham, a bridge in Selma, and a preacher from Atlanta who told a people that "We Shall Overcome". Yes we can.

A man touched down on the moon, a wall came down in Berlin, a world was connected by our own science and imagination. And this year, in this election, she touched her finger to a screen, and cast her vote, because after 106 years in America, through the best of times and the darkest of hours,

she knows how America can change. Yes we can.¹⁵

As Obama had put it earlier in his speech, “What we’ve already achieved gives us hope for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.”

In his conclusion, Obama evoked both the ethos of the American Dream and the translation of one of the original Latin mottoes of the United States, before returning once more to his mantra (emphasis added):

This is our time, to put our people back to work and open doors of opportunity for our kids; to restore prosperity and promote the cause of peace; to *reclaim the American dream* and reaffirm that fundamental truth, that *out of many, we are one*; that while we breathe, we hope. And where we are met with cynicism and doubts and those who tell us that we can’t, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes We Can.

“Out of many, one” is the translation of the Latin motto *E pluribus unum*, which was inscribed on the Seal of the United States in 1776 and which is still found on various US state seals, passports and coins. Once again, Obama reinforced his message of unity by invoking words associated with the nation’s origins. The phrase “the American Dream”, on the other hand, was first used by the historian and writer James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book *The Epic of America. The American Dream*, wrote Adams, is

that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. [...] It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.¹⁶

As Adams described it, the American Dream is one of a classless society based on meritocratic principles, a society founded on the ideal of equality of opportunity. By electing as president a man whose Kenyan father – as Obama himself frequently emphasized – had grown up herding goats and gone to school in a tin-roof shack, Americans were, in a sense, voting for a

¹⁵ Minus the “Yes we can” refrain – to which he nevertheless referred in his conclusion – Obama had used the example of another black centenarian, the 104-year-old Margaret Lewis, to tell essentially the same story in his 2004 Senate election-night speech (Obama 2004b).

¹⁶ New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1931, p. 404.

man who embodied the American Dream,¹⁷ and with whom (in theory at least) everyone who believed in that dream could identify. As Obama himself had put it in his landmark address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention, stressing the improbability of someone from such a background speaking to such an audience: "I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, [...] and that in no other country on earth is my story even possible" (Obama 2004a).

A Dream Fulfilled?

On 28 August 1963, Martin Luther King gave his historic "I Have a Dream" speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. In that speech, quoting from the Declaration of Independence, King famously declared:

[...] I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." (King 1963)

This, said King, would be the day when *all* of God's children would be able to sing with new meaning:

My country 'tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty,
Of thee I sing.
Land where my fathers died,
Land of the pilgrims' pride,
From every mountainside,
Let freedom ring!

The song from which King quoted was "My Country 'tis of Thee", which until the adoption of "The Star Spangled Banner" had been a de facto US national anthem.

On 20 January 2009, Barack Hussein Obama was sworn in as the forty-fourth President of the United States, the first African-American to occupy that position. The ceremony took place on the west steps of the US

¹⁷ See Darsey 2009, p. 94 and Toal 2009, pp. 379–80. The point had already been made, however, by the pastor of Martin Luther King's church in Atlanta, Georgia, who declared, introducing a speech Obama made there on 20 January 2008: "He is the embodiment of the American Dream" (*Barack Obama Speaks at Dr. King's Church* 2008). See also Obama 2008b, which carried the same implicit message.

Capitol, at the opposite end of the National Mall from the Lincoln Memorial, where King had given his speech forty-six years earlier. Among the musicians Obama chose to perform at his inauguration was the legendary 68-year-old soul singer Aretha Franklin, who had not only known King, but also sung at his funeral in 1968. The song that she sang – into which she inserted references to “I Have a Dream” – was “My Country ‘tis of Thee”.¹⁸

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¹⁸ See *Aretha Franklin My Country ‘Tis of Thee Inauguration Day 2009* (2009). Where King had famously declared “I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood” and urged “Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania”, Aretha called for freedom to ring “from the red clay of Georgia, all the way to the Allegheny Mountains” (1:55–2:05). See Mattingly 2009.

¹⁹ All Internet addresses were accessed in May–June 2009.

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²⁰ Except where indicated, the videos cited have been collected - in the order of their citation in the text - at http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=EFD3F026EA588A91.