Barack Obama and the Myth of the American Dream

11.1 Introduction

To understand the appeal of Barack Obama it is necessary to consider his symbolic significance as much as the language through which he persuades. This is because he is the living embodiment of the policies he advocates as much as he provides their expressive medium. As a mixed race African American he symbolises the hopes of those who previously struggled to realise the goals of that ‘young preacher from Georgia’ he referred to when accepting the nomination as Democratic Party candidate. As the child of a single mother, supported by her parents, he has also come to embody how vulnerability arising from family break-up can be overcome by education and perseverance, and how personal hardship can be transformed into a source of strength in political self-representation. As a grass-roots political campaigner who engaged with those in Chicago experiencing socio-economic deprivation, he symbolised the underlying Christian values of self-sacrifice and empathy. It is this combination of who he is with who he has become that enabled his version of the American Dream to sound as if he was telling the right story. The American Dream was a credible narrative for Obama because his life symbolised it; his life story evoked a response and when myth becomes reality the gods have truly descended to earth.

In this chapter I propose that Obama’s rhetorical achievement has been to unify the messianic myth of Martin Luther King – the faith of an oppressed (‘black’) people in a leader who would take followers out of the biblical land of oppression – with a closely related ‘white’
myth of the descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers who also sought freedom from religious, political and colonial oppression. Since his ethnic identity and political affiliations were African American, it was vital that he could integrate a ‘white’ with a ‘black’ myth. I will first demonstrate how he blends black and white narratives through a detailed analysis of his interpretation of the American Dream myth. I then examine the influence of classical rhetoric in his figures of speech; I will analyse the diversity of these figures and then his creative use of metaphor and its role in structuring speeches. Finally, I will illustrate how the blending of black and white rhetorical features and myths systematically contributed to his ability to sound right.

11.2 Obama and the American Dream

The myth of the American Dream that drives his rhetoric is that most ‘American’ of all myths, a myth that links individual purpose with the origins of a group identity because it is a story that has appealed to generations of immigrants escaping intolerance, religious, political and economic persecution. What, then, we may ask, is the American Dream? Though it is different for every individual – as Studs Terkel demonstrated in his journey through the USA in the 1970s – their interpretations share certain elements: the American Dream is oriented to future states since the metaphor refers to a state of affairs that does not yet exist and combines personal ambition, arising from past experience, with social aspiration. The American Dream is the belief that life can be better than it has been previously and is now; it is the belief that much human suffering is inflicted by other humans and can be eliminated through struggling to achieve ambitions. Above all, the American Dream relates personal and social identity because the dream implies that any motivated individual can reach any social position, irrespective of their personal, ethnic or social background, including that of the highest office in the land. It is the unifying potential of the American Dream – the merging of the personal narratives with a social story – that makes Obama’s rhetoric persuasive.

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1 Studs Terkel was an American writer, broadcaster and founding father of oral history. During the 1970s he spent three years travelling around the USA interviewing more than 300 people on their interpretations of ‘The American Dream’. He was a strong supporter of Barack Obama though died before his election as President.