

THE IMPORTANCE OF CELEBRITIES IN POLITICAL DECISION MAKING:  
A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE BARACK OBAMA PRESIDENTIAL  
CAMPAIGN

BY

SEAN R. RIDLEY

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND  
SCIENCES

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department Of Communication

May 2010

Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Approved By:

Alessandra Beasley Von Burg, Ph.D., Advisor \_\_\_\_\_

Examining Committee:

Allan Loudon, Ph.D. \_\_\_\_\_

David Coates, Ph.D. \_\_\_\_\_

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| TABLE OF CONTENTS.....  | ii  |
| ABSTRACT.....   | iii |
| INTRODUCTION .....  | 1   |
| CHAPTER ONE: .....  | 3   |
| LITERATURE REVIEW .....   | 4   |
| The Relationship between Celebrities and Politics .....                   | 4   |
| Celebrity Receptiveness and the Potential for Political Deliberation..... | 6   |
| The Transfer of Celebrity Values to the Public.....                       | 9   |
| Celebrity Spectacles .....  | 12  |
| METHODOLOGY .....   | 14  |
| CHAPTER TWO: .....  | 19  |
| BARACK OBAMA .....  | 20  |
| OPRAH WINFREY .....   | 23  |
| “Oprah” and Tokenism.....   | 24  |
| Des Moines, Iowa.....   | 27  |
| Cedar Rapids, Iowa.....   | 32  |
| Columbia, South Carolina .....  | 34  |
| Manchester, New Hampshire .....   | 38  |
| Los Angeles, California.....  | 40  |
| WILL.I.AM.....  | 45  |
| Super Tuesday and the Call to Think .....                                 | 48  |
| Will.i.am as Rhetor.....  | 50  |
| Yes We Can.....   | 51  |
| CHAPTER THREE: .....  | 57  |
| Conclusion.....   | 60  |
| WORKS CITED .....   | 63  |

## ABSTRACT

The role of celebrity rhetoric serves as an important area to study campaign messages, how they transfer to the public, and the potential for civic engagement. By analyzing Barack Obama's calls for a new political framework, through the use of structural criticism; I argue that he created the impetus for a renewed valuation of citizenship. Using the work of Dana Cloud, I argue that such a critique is successful because it forces citizens to question how they want to exist politically, as well as what they want out of political decisionmaking. As examples, this thesis explores the rhetorical aspects of Oprah Winfrey and Will.i.am's endorsements and their efforts to impact the audience's reception toward Obama's politics. I conclude that the celebrities not only made the public more receptive to Obama's campaign, but also more willing to embrace his calls for a renewed democratic ethos.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2008, Senator Barack Obama (D-IL) announced his candidacy for the President of the United States. Though only a Junior Senator, Obama had already established himself as an eloquent speaker and contender for the White House in his 2004 Democratic National Convention Address. Yet, due to his lack of experience in public office, he was immediately charged with lacking substance and the adequate knowledge of Washington.

Instead of taking this as a setback, Obama viewed his outsider persona as a means to construct a political framework that challenged the norms of Washington. By arguing for a change in “politics as usual,” Obama became a critic of the same bureaucratic mindset that told him he wasn’t ready to lead. In doing so, Obama began a campaign that challenged the structural limitations of Washington as well as the way it came to make decisions. Through calls for unity and a renewed sense of citizenship, Obama’s political framework became a rallying call for political “hope” and “change.”

In doing so, Obama’s radical vision caught the eye of very high profile celebrities who supported him as a candidate. None of them would be more valuable than Oprah Winfrey. Already viewed as one of the most powerful celebrities in Hollywood (Forbes, 2007), Winfrey’s endorsement sent the political pundits into a frenzy over her potential to swing the election in Obama’s favor. In what became known as the “Oprah Effect,” (Garthwaite and Moore, 2008) everyone wondered if the Queen of marketing could do the same with her first major political endorsement.

Along with Winfrey, entertainer Will.i.am became a notable endorser of Obama through his “Yes we can” YouTube phenomenon. By creating a collage style video that

put an Obama speech to music, the video not only received millions of hits, it also started a wave of citizen responses to Obama's calls for "change."

By analyzing Obama's political framework through its use of structural criticism, I will argue that he created the impetus for a renewed valuation of citizenship. Using the work of Dana Cloud, I will argue that such a critique is successful because it forces citizens to question how they want to exist politically, as well as what they want out of political decisionmaking.

This thesis will explore the rhetorical aspects of Winfrey and Will.i.am's endorsements and their efforts to impact the audience's reception toward Obama's political framework. Through a process of consubstantiation, I will argue that the celebrities not only made the public more receptive to Obama's campaign, but also more willing to embrace his calls for a new American majority.

CHAPTER ONE:  
THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CELEBRITIES AND POLITICS

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As a form of political communication, the celebrity endorsement serves as a means to study both rhetorical ethos, as well as the value congruence (Fraser and Brown, 2009) between the public and the political. In the case of the Obama campaign, celebrities helped to increase his political viability by enhancing his credibility as a rhetor. By helping to defend him against claims of inexperience and idealism, celebrities such as Winfrey and Will.i.am became pivotal for Obama's introduction to the public during the 2008 Democratic Primaries. As I argue, this rhetorical credibility became an asset as Obama proposed radically new conceptions of American politics, which opened up new avenues for civic engagement.

I will begin by outlining the relationship of politicians and celebrities in order to analyze how entertainers have become embedded into the political sphere. Next, I will present a series of studies on the receptiveness of celebrity messages by the public. Finally, I will explore the potential of celebrity values, and how they transfer to the public, in order to establish their efficacy as rhetors.

### The Relationship between Celebrities and Politics

Grant McCracken defines a celebrity endorsement as "any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement" (McCracken, 1989). Though this definition is admittedly broad, it still has applicability to the political sphere and how celebrities use recognition in order to attract audience towards particular ends.

This constant struggle for recognition is a common thread for both celebrities and politicians. In his book *Celebrity-in-Chief*, Alan Schroeder discusses how both have to be concerned with popularity and staying relevant to their audience. Therefore, as their job

descriptions have become similar, so has their affiliation. Specifically he argues that, “As presidents and entertainers lock themselves into an ever tighter embrace, the common ground between politics and show business is expanding. These once disparate communities find themselves thrown together in the fraternity of fame...Citizens come to “know” their presidents just as fans come to “know” movie stars” (Schroeder, 2004). This process of “knowing” became particularly important for Barack Obama because he was relatively unknown entering the 2008 Democratic Primary Elections. Hillary Clinton was well established as a democratic hopeful and was presumably the favorite for the nomination. Through the use of celebrity endorsements, Obama was able to enter this “fraternity of fame” and establish himself as a serious contender for the campaign.

Using mobilization efforts such as Rock the Vote, Declare Yourself, and Vote or Die as case studies, (Burgess et al., 2000; Orr and Hoover, 2005), scholars have observed an inextricable link between entertainment and politics. According to Cloonan and Street, politicians and celebrities share the need for authenticity and recognition in order to survive in their respective fields. Thus, their communication strategies are not only similar, but at times require co-branding. By marketing each other, they lend credibility to their personas. Specifically, Cloonan and Street claim that:

It is hard to escape the fact that politics feeds on popular culture, if only because of their common concern with notions of popularity and authenticity, and their shared desire for publicity. Their closeness is the legacy of the way in which all forms of communication are, in Thompson's word (1990), 'mediatized'. To this extent, Rock The Vote is not just part of a trend in party politics but of political communication generally. (Cloonan and Street, 1998)

Especially with the Obama campaign, celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey were incorporated in order to give authenticity to his discourse. With questions of Obama's political experience constantly proliferating, the Obama campaign needed outside sources of legitimacy. Therefore, because Winfrey already had such a large audience that trusted her marketing abilities, she immediately made an impact on his popularity and credibility with the public. Thus, a study of celebrity endorsements is important for political communication because celebrities help to shape how candidates are viewed by the public. Though they may not be the decisive framing, celebrities help to increase the receptiveness of candidates with the electorate.

#### Celebrity Receptiveness and the Potential for Political Deliberation

As celebrities have become more involved in the political process, the literature focuses on their potential efficacy for civic engagement. Traditionally, marketing campaigns have used celebrities because the public views them as sources for lifestyle choices and cultural meanings (McCracken, 1989). Therefore, scholars have discussed the potential of these endorsements to frame "citizenship" as a lifestyle choice whereby the public incorporates it into their daily personas (Jones, 2004). This redefinition of the "citizen" and "America" was a key hallmark of the Obama campaign, and was enhanced by celebrities who reinforced Obama's message. Particularly with Will.i.am and his usage of YouTube, the public was given an example of ways in which they could interact in the political process and make themselves heard outside of the one-time act of voting. As a result, millions of similar videos emerged as citizens began to express their concerns about Washington, which became a significant effort towards a revitalized democratic ethos.

Because of their ability to re-package the political product, celebrities have been studied for their ability to challenge public complacency. In their study of the “Oprah Effect,” Garthwaite and Moore (2008) concluded that not only did she increase votes for Obama, Winfrey’s endorsement increased the overall voting population. Thus, as celebrities increase the exposure of the public to the political process, they also create the conditions for increased involvement. According to a Washington State project on voting behavior during the 2004 Presidential Election, celebrities decreased levels of apathy in voters and made them more willing to engage political messages. The authors concluded that, “the celebrity-endorsed promotions appeared to have positively affected self-efficacy through two different routes, according to the results of this study. First, receptivity to these promotions was found to directly predict higher self-efficacy levels in potential voters. Second, receptivity to promotions was found to predict lower levels of complacency, which in turn predicted higher levels of both involvement and self-efficacy” (Austin, Van de Vord, Pinkleton, and Epstein, 2008).

These results become more interesting once the literature on disenfranchised and apathetic voters is considered. According to Fraser and Brown, “those disenfranchised and marginalized economically or socially, those who feel they do not have a voice, those who feel a loss or diminished sense of identity, and those who feel powerless to deal with fragmenting social structures... are all especially vulnerable to the influence of celebrities” (Fraser and Brown, 2009). In the Obama campaign, his focus on challenging the “smallness of our politics” becomes this form of structural critique. By addressing not only the issues, but also the way we envision politics as a whole, he presented a vision of himself as the candidate who could transform the way Washington operates. Therefore,

the incorporation of celebrity endorsements not only legitimized this shift in political rhetoric, it also helped to increase the involvement of those least interested in the political process. This becomes important to my argument about the efficacy of celebrity endorsements because the more the Obama campaign focused on the macro political framework, the more likely Obama's discourse could translate into civic engagement.

However, even though scholars have shown that the public is receptive to these endorsements, it doesn't mean they have to respond positively. Particularly with the 2008 Presidential Election, multiple sources claimed the public was very hesitant to vote according to celebrity endorsements because they didn't want to seem uninformed or led by Hollywood (Rao, 2008). According to a 2007 USA Today/Gallup Poll, more than six in ten adults said that celebrity endorsements weren't that important for deciding the president, and ten percent claimed that Oprah Winfrey's support made them less likely to support Barack Obama (Moore, 2007). Particularly with first time voters, Natalie Wood and Kenneth Herbst (2007) found that they attributed their families and significant others with the greatest influence on their voting behavior rather than celebrities.

Though these studies show mixed results of celebrities, the negative indicators shouldn't be used to categorically reject the value of the endorsements. Though the public may reject some influence of celebrity, they still use them to help shape political decisions. In terms of viability, which is the perception that a candidate will win, Brewer and Pease (2008) found that celebrity exposure made candidates seem more successful, which positively influenced voting. Consequently, Matthew Baum (2006), in his study of "soft news sources" found that even if the public doesn't trust celebrities as much as political analysts, the cues they receive from these alternative news sources still serve as

markers which help to make citizens more aware to the process itself. Therefore, even though Winfrey is just a talk show host, and Will.i.am is just an entertainer, their involvement with Obama forces the public to question why *he* was chosen. And though these cues aren't definitive for the process of political deliberation, they at very least facilitate it.

Ultimately, these studies point to the need for credibility within the celebrities themselves. Trusting a stage persona may be acceptable for general marketing, but it's hard to take these constructed personas seriously when it comes to electing a president (McCracken, 1989). Similarly, some celebrities come with negative connotations, which can lead to potential public backlash (see the McCain ad where he likens Obama to Paris Hilton). The Obama campaign took a calculated risk when it decided to incorporate such a wide variety of celebrity personas. It had to balance the receptiveness that celebrities bring to the campaign with the potential of seeming too close to Hollywood. Therefore, the rhetorical legitimacy of the celebrities becomes important because if they are perceived as lacking sufficient political awareness, they can further debilitate efforts at public engagement. I will return to these questions of celebrity ethos and the connotations of associating with tokenized identities later in my thesis. However, now I would like to focus on the process of value transferal between celebrities and the public.

### The Transfer of Celebrity Values to the Public

With the argument about receptiveness established, the question now becomes how celebrity values are transferred to the public and the most successful strategies for politicians to represent the values of those endorsements. In Will.i.am's case, the lyrics of "Yes We Can" came directly from Obama's New Hampshire concession speech. However, the way that the video was presented, and its emphasis on grassroots efforts,

was an implicit translation of Obama's call for a "new majority." Therefore, the process of value formation has to be apparent as the public comes to identify with the candidate and the celebrity. Disassociations can be devastating especially when candidates such as Obama are challenging the entirety of our political ideology.

Borrowing from Kenneth Burke, cultural studies theorists have claimed this value formation happens through a process of identification and consubstantiation. Through identification, the audience comes to understand the values being expressed by the rhetor. However, a consubstantial relationship can only be developed when people begin to associate with the rhetor and take those beliefs as their own. In doing so, Burke believes that subjects and the rhetor begin to develop "common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them consubstantial" (Burke, 1969).

Taken to the level of celebrities, their credibility as cultural icons is transferred to politicians, and subsequently the values of both are shared with the public. Particularly with Oprah Winfrey, her years as a social icon gave credence to the Obama campaign, and their collective values formed the basis for congruence with the electorate. Specifically, Fraser and Brown (2009) claim that, "one powerful representation of value congruence and behavioral adaptation is the practice of impersonation, which is primarily a communication phenomenon. People adopt the values and behaviors of celebrities with whom they develop perceived relationships, whether interpersonal or through media." Thus, the more people believe that they share a pre-arranged relationship with stars such as Winfrey, the more likely it seems they will begin to impersonate the values of her endorsement.

By adopting the lens of consubstantiality and the value formation between audience and rhetor, Grant McCracken (1989) developed meaning transfer theory as a model to study the relationship between celebrities, the products they endorse, and the willingness of the consumer. Once the audience believes that they want those properties in a candidate and ultimately in a political narrative, they will support them through deliberation, voting, mobilization, etc. Specifically, McCracken claims that consumers don't just purchase these celebrity-endorsed goods; they also incorporate them into their lifestyles, and ultimately use them to shape their behavior.

This fashioning of the self is indispensable for the project of challenging voter apathy because it means that citizens can develop new political identities and use them to challenge normative conceptions of their reality. This creates the impetus for Obama's "new majority" because it means that celebrities can serve as a vital lynchpin for how people understand themselves as well as their relationship to the political process.

By using popular sports figures like Wayne Gretzky and teen idols such as Avril Lavigne to challenge the predispositions of young voters in Canada, David Jackson and Thomas Darrow (2005) concluded that celebrities can be indispensable for the creation of a citizen's political identity. Regardless of the platform or the previous work of the politician, celebrities can temper extremist views and reintroduce deliberation. Accordingly, Jackson and Darrow conclude that,

Causes and candidates would be advised to use celebrities to strengthen support among their followers, mobilize voters, and raise funds. The research also shows that there may be some persuasive power of celebrities to make unpopular causes, candidates, or ideas slightly more palatable... Therefore, a candidate facing an

uphill battle might wish to bring out some star power to improve his position. An unpopular cause (e.g., implementation of the Kyoto Protocol in Alberta, amending the Canada Health Act to allow more private care options, and so on) might benefit slightly from an endorsement by a top-notch celebrity. (Jackson and Darrow, 2005)

And though the results aren't conclusive, they do exemplify that celebrities have a place in the construction of political narratives. The more accessible and familiar that politics appears, the more likely that citizens will be receptive to its messages.

### Celebrity Spectacles

In this race to create more receptiveness and maximize audience awareness, celebrity culture has been criticized for its proliferation of spectacles. From Joe the Plumber to the “birther” controversy, the construction of spectacles serves as a unique site to study the public's receptiveness to 2008 Presidential Election (Kellner, 2009). Douglass Kellner (2009) argues that these spectacles create political narratives that garner popular attention and potentially help to maximize the congruence between celebrities and the public. Therefore, as spectacles multiplied during the 2008 election, the Obama campaign not only had to skillfully navigate through them in order to survive, they also had to utilize them in order to be properly received by the public.

Consequently, the existence of political spectacles forces the public to consider the process and how it operates (Payne, Hanlon, and Twomey, 2007). In his study of the 2000 Presidential Election, Tim Barney argues that the controversy over the results created its own spectacle, which helped to determine the perceived credibility of the candidates as well as the legitimacy of the election itself. He concludes by arguing that “celebrity and spectacle is a mystification and mythification of sound, image, and

symbolism, and, more than ever, it is a creator and destroyer of the destiny of our public figures” (Barney, 2001).

Building on this literature about the ability for celebrities to influence civic values, my thesis rhetorically analyzes the endorsements of Oprah Winfrey and Will.i.am during the 2008 Presidential Election. I argue that not only did they give credibility to Barack Obama as a candidate, their endorsements also helped to form a value congruence between his demands to challenge the “smallness of our politics” and the electorate. Through this congruence, I argue that the public was invited to rediscover how they interpreted the political process.

## METHODOLOGY

This thesis has two goals: first, arguing that the Obama campaign's vision for a new America was established using structural criticisms of class based antagonism and secondly, analyzing his celebrity endorsements in order to contextualize the ability of this framework to translate to the public. In order to achieve these goals, I use the work of Dana Cloud because her Marxist conceptions of structural inequality serve as a nexus for both the theoretical foundations of Obama's framework, and how celebrity rhetoric can become tokenized in society (which would destroy their oppositional potential).

Starting first with her arguments on celebrity tokenism, Cloud claims that celebrity personas can become a medium of exchange that transfers dominant meanings to the public. She argues that when celebrities legitimize mythologies of success that ignore structural oppression, they lose their liberatory potential and further cycles of apathy. Describing the situation with stars such as Bill Cosby, Cloud claims that:

Recent communication scholarship on Bill Cosby and the Cosby Show has suggested that popular discourse about black family life often deploys assumptions of liberalism that interpret poverty and hardship as individual or family failures, and success exclusively as individual triumph (Gray, 1989; Jhallv and Lewis, 1992). This work argues that Cosby perpetuates self-blame among African-Americans for failure and complacency in the dominant culture regarding the fight against racism. (Cloud, 1996)

Therefore, we must not take celebrity endorsements at face value. Just because they increase political receptiveness doesn't mean that their narratives are always positive. By

rhetorically affirming hegemonic myths about society, celebrities have the potential to further dissuade people from political deliberation.

Particularly with the rhetoric of “choice,” Cloud (1997) believes that though liberalism may offer the public more options and greater accessibility, it can do so in a way that perpetuates exploitation. Using the example of abortion, she claims that these “choices” may increase natal care for some, but for the vast majority of people who don’t have the resources to use them, they only serve as a veil for hegemonic interests. Thus, even seemingly liberatory discourse has to be questioned and critiqued because of its potential to sustain disempowering narratives.

Coming from a Marxist tradition of political communication, Cloud uses a materialist dialectic as her framework for understanding cultural change as well as the organization of the social sphere. She defines the materialist dialectic as “a theory of how people and all their ideas and activities get things done in the world, not merely a theory of how the world is. It is grounded in materiality and seeks to understand how concrete relations of economic distribution and labor are real and exploitative; how ordinary people and their bosses have divergent real interests, consciousness of which may generate struggle against immediate harms and, in some instances, against the class society as a whole system” (Cloud, 2006).

Therefore, by focusing on the structural elements of economic constraints as well as the need for class based analysis, Cloud believes that celebrity rhetoric must oppose liberal individualism in order to be successful. Thus, the role of the critic is to examine rhetorical choices in order to unveil their potential to justify exploitation. Specifically, she argues that:

The issue is whether one's purposes in performing criticism are to critique a system fundamentally based on exploitation and oppression and to expose the limits of its justificatory rhetorics, or to settle for the limited personal agency, tokenist representation, and consumer choice market capitalism will allow...For this reason, I reserve Gramsci's concept of hegemony, a product of class struggle and anti-capitalist critique, for a critical project emphasizing the continuing salience of concepts of structure, domination, and class antagonism. (Cloud, 1997)

In order to delegitimize these “justificatory rhetorics,” Cloud’s methodology focuses on systems of class and universal attempts at liberation. In her discussions on difference, she argues that though distinctions such as race and gender are important, they are inherently limited in their ability to restructure systems of oppression. Fundamentally, class antagonism is her largest concern because those divisions exist across all identity groups. This isn’t to say that race and gender shouldn’t be considered, just that they only represent a fragment of the material constraints hindering society. Thus, Cloud believes that the focus of political rhetoric should be to move away from concepts of identity, and into the means of challenging material modes of production (Cloud, 1997).

In light of these theories, I will analyze the Obama campaign’s political ideology as an extension of Cloud’s class based antagonism. The focus on unity over difference and the necessity to challenge the “smallness of our politics” derive from her conceptions of structural criticism. Therefore, Obama’s political narrative can be read as a delegitimization of the justificatory rhetoric of modern liberalism. The endorsements of Will.i.am and Winfrey can be understood as a rupture in celebrity tokenism in order to

create the conditions for new social mythologies, which allow for a transformation in the civic discourse.

As Robert Asen (2004) argues, this transformation can only occur once the public actively begins to de-mythologize their political coordinates. Instead of quantifying civic engagement as isolated acts of resistance, he views the deliberative process as a communicative mode of being that is guided by a democratic ethos. As such, he claims that “democracy rests on faith in human potentiality, human judgment, and the capacity of people to work together, which cannot be limited by race, sex, class, or cultural background. To renounce this faith is to renounce faith in the possibility of democracy.” By using a similar language as Cloud, Asen’s democratic ethos seems possible only once commonality is found amongst difference. However, as Asen concedes, there is no point to this process, if citizens don’t have the material resources to participate. Thus, the use of structural criticism is necessary in order to revitalize how we view the political as well as our relationship to it.

By exploring these structural tropes in Obama’s political framework, I am able to evaluate the rhetorical choices of Winfrey and Will.i.am. Therefore, in chapter two, I will briefly analyze Obama’s presidential exploration committee and presidential candidacy announcement speeches in order to argue that they utilized Cloud’s methodology of de-justification in order to promote a democratic ethos.

I then move into my case studies of Oprah Winfrey and Will.i.am. For both, I argue that they gave rhetorical legitimacy to the Obama campaign in two distinct ways. Because Winfrey was chosen by the campaign, I argue that her persona as social icon was utilized specifically to help give credibility to Obama’s new political narrative. Through a

rhetorical analysis of her stump speeches in Iowa, South Carolina, New Hampshire and California, I argue that Winfrey's endorsement utilized the same structural values in order to create congruence between herself, Obama, and the public.

Will.i.am's endorsement, however, was more of an inspired response to Obama's calls for a new political framework. Therefore, I frame his "Yes We Can" video as an exemplar of Obama's vision and claim that it instilled notions of an "ideal self" within the electorate. By framing himself as a "regular guy" who worked outside of the constraints of the music industry, I argue that the video gave the public not only a motto, but also a belief in a new way of acting politically.

Finally, in chapter three I analyze the ways these endorsements changed the discourse around the Obama campaign's strategies in terms of Oprah and Will.i.am's ability to create the impetus for a shift in civic values. I conclude by offering my thoughts on where the research for celebrity rhetoric must go in order to truly evaluate their success.

CHAPTER TWO:  
CHALLENGING “THE SMALLNESS OF OUR POLITICS”

## BARACK OBAMA

On January 16, 2007, Barack Obama announced that he had established an exploratory committee for his potential presidential candidacy. Immediately, he framed the decision around the people and the need for a “different kind of politics.” Using the policies of Washington during the George W. Bush era as his exigence (Bitzer, 1968), his announcement framed the country in a “precarious place” and stressed an overhaul of our political decisionmaking (Obama, 2007a).

However, instead of blaming our precarious situation on particular policy initiatives, Obama opted to focus on the ideologies of Washington as a whole and how they came to be. As he explains, “it's not the magnitude of our problems that concerns me the most. It's the smallness of our politics. America's faced big problems before. But today, our leaders in Washington seem incapable of working together in a practical, common sense way” (Obama, 2007a). By downplaying the significance of both the recession and the healthcare crisis, Obama saw the need for an even larger agenda, one that had to challenge the entire political framework. Through his call to reconfigure the “smallness of our politics” Obama began what Cloud (2006) calls the process of the dialectic, whereby “contradictory ideological rendering pose opportunities for rhetorical, political intervention.”

Therefore, on February 10, 2007 in the historic site where Lincoln gave his “House Divided” speech, Barack Obama announced his candidacy. He framed 2008 as a “calling” whereby our generation had to decide how they wanted to exist politically. Thus, Obama used Lincoln as an exemplar of the needs for commonality and a “new” America. Specifically, he recalls, “It was here, in Springfield, where North, South, East, and West

come together that I was reminded of the essential decency of the American people -- where I came to believe that through this decency, we can build a more hopeful America. And that is why, in the shadow of the Old State Capitol, where Lincoln once called on a house divided to stand together, where common hopes and common dreams still live, I stand before you today to announce my candidacy for President of the United States of America” (Obama, 2007b).

This call for common hopes and common dreams becomes important for Obama’s political ideology because it reinscribes collective notions of “the people” where everyone shares a universal purpose. Likewise, instead of viewing American problems as local and isolated, Obama found that the problem was more structural. As he recounts, “I saw that the problems people faced weren't simply local in nature, that the decisions to close a steel mill was made by distant executives, that the lack of textbooks and computers in a school could be traced to skewed priorities of politicians a thousand miles away” (Obama, 2007b). Here, not only has Obama begun the process of dialectic, but his structural critique also serves as a materialist reconfiguration of politics.

However, identifying these conditions isn’t enough. In order to truly challenge them, Obama had to rally the public around his call. Therefore, instead of framing his campaign as the endpoint of that transformation, Obama claimed that he was only a vehicle for this dialectic change. Obama put the responsibility on the public and insisted that they be willing to fight for this new America. Specifically he argued that, “This campaign must be the occasion, the vehicle, of your hopes, and your dreams. It will take your time, your energy, and your advice to push us forward... This campaign has to be about reclaiming the meaning of citizenship, restoring our sense of common purpose, and

realizing that few obstacles can withstand the power of millions of voices calling for change” (Obama, 2007b). As McGee (1975) argues, these visions of collective life are necessary rhetorically in order to challenge our ideological and objective realities because they represent “a movement of ideas (and of “the people”) from one “world” of attitudes and conditions to another.” For Obama, this transformation from one world to another required more than just votes, instead the purpose of his candidacy required a new generational ethic that insisted on “a better America.”

In order to achieve this new political climate and win the presidency, Obama needed help. Though his words were rhetorically powerful and presented the necessary structural elements, they would mean nothing without votes. His lack of experience coupled with the idealism of his politics, meant that the American people needed something to give credence to Obama’s call for class based antagonism. As well as rhetorical ethos, Obama needed to create value congruence between his messages of a restructured citizenship and the actual citizenry.

Therefore, in the next two sections I argue that this ethos was significantly provided by two particular celebrity endorsements, Oprah Winfrey and Will.i.am. Though both of these endorsements occurred during the early stages of the democratic primary season, I argue that they created the necessary receptiveness to the Obama campaign in order to propel it to victory. Likewise, I argue that because of their roles as celebrities, the ideals that they endorsed through Obama were made more accessible to the public, creating the impetus for a renewed valuation of citizenship.

## OPRAH WINFREY

In early 2007, talk show host Oprah Winfrey endorsed Senator Barack Obama for the 2008 Presidential Election. Though Obama was her first official political endorsement, Winfrey made an immediate impact on the campaign. Her first major contribution came in the form of celebrity charity event where she raised an estimated \$3 million (Bosman, 2007). Though, as Winfrey said in a Larry King interview, “my money isn’t going to make any difference to him, I think that my value to him, my support of him, is probably worth more than any check” (Zeleny, 2007). This worth was soon tested when Winfrey scheduled herself for four stump appearances that would affect early primary voting. In a two day span, Winfrey spoke at two Iowa rallies, as well as one in South Carolina and another in New Hampshire, with each drawing large crowds for Obama. She would then travel to Los Angeles two months later to attend a fifth rally, where she addressed Obama’s critics prior to Super Tuesday.

Almost immediately after giving her support to Obama, political pundits debated the extent of the “Oprah Effect.” Because of her successful track record as a promoter, Winfrey’s endorsement of Obama was seen as another test of her marketing skills. In order to convey Winfrey’s success as a celebrity endorser, Alexandra Marks and Stacey Smith report that, “Ms. Winfrey is more than a celebrity: She's a social icon, an earth mother, a television priestess of sorts whose predominantly female flock takes her words to heart...she's one of the great marketing machines in history" (Marks and Smith, 2007). Therefore, to say that Winfrey was like other celebrities endorsers in the campaign would be a huge understatement. Her success as a promoter of not only herself, but others has been decisively settled. She is the only person to be on *Time Magazine*'s list of the 100

most influential people in the world six times (Sawyer, 2009). According to *Business Week* (2005), her ability to promote a book is 20 to 100 times more than any other media figure. And most impressively, when Barack Obama first appeared on her show as an unknown Senator from her home state, his internet searches increased more than 350 percent (McGevna, 2010).

With her marketing potential and icon status well known in the American public, Oprah's endorsement of Obama served as a game changer for his campaign. Without even speaking, her persona gave the campaign much needed legitimacy. However, as Dana Cloud argues, there were still elements of this persona that needed to be rectified in order to truly challenge the "smallness of our politics."

#### "Oprah" and Tokenism

In her discussion of celebrity tokenism, Dana Cloud argues that Winfrey's persona served to legitimize social mythology that is debilitating to those suffering from structural inequality. Though Oprah builds schools in Africa and gets Americans to read, the ideology surrounding her is one of liberal individualism whereby material conditions are blamed on private citizens and not exploitative means of production.

Cloud traces this persona through Winfrey's biographies and claims that though she is not totally responsible; her story of overcoming has been appropriated in order to maintain hegemonic social narratives. Specifically, Cloud finds two major themes in the construction of the 'Oprah' persona. The first is the rags-to-riches tale, where Winfrey is framed as a liberal hero who survived poverty in Mississippi in order to become one of the most influential people of her time. For example, in Robert Waldron's autobiography of Winfrey, he writes:

Here's the COMPLETE story of the life of the incredible Oprah Winfrey...a woman who beat the traumas of a downtrodden childhood and the racial barriers put up by society- a woman who has gone on to become a gifted and acclaimed actress, and a TV personality whose bonds of trust and warmth with her guests and her audience have made her one of the nation's most beloved personalities (Waldron, 1987 cited in Cloud, 1996)

Here Winfrey's persona is given mythic proportions. Not only can she survive 'traumas' and being 'downtrodden,' there is seemingly no transition between that period in her life and her current lifestyle. It frames Winfrey as the ultimate individual and makes 'racial barriers' during the 50s and 60s seem extraordinarily manageable.

The second theme that Cloud finds troubling is 'Oprah's' refusal to take any interest in the civil rights movement. Though Winfrey has amassed a large fan base of women and ethnic minorities, her biographies portray her as ambivalent during one of the most tumultuous eras for the struggle. As George Mair recounts, "when she was in college, she worked in broadcasting during the burgeoning civil rights movement and didn't have either time or sympathy for black militants on campus. To Oprah this was an enormous waste of time and it still is. She thinks you have to make it on your own and be answerable for you own success or failure" (Mair, 1994 cited in Cloud, 1996). Similar to Waldron, this narrative of ignoring the conditions of the civil rights movement in the name of individual triumph is troubling because it glorifies exceptions in order to mask collective exploitation.

Through these thematic frames, Cloud believes that the 'Oprah' persona has been tokenized in order to rhetorically perpetuate these conditions. By using 'Oprah' as the

exemplar for social elevation, her fans are sold a false hope and systems of power are further legitimized. As she writes, “The concordance established in the rhetoric of tokenism obviously benefits a class based, racist social order dependent upon the ideals of meritocracy. Further in the context of bipartisan attacks on the American social safety net, narratives of "Oprah"'s heroic life story lend persuasive weight to those who wish to accelerate the erosion of social services like welfare and indigent health care. Biographies like the ones of "Oprah" acknowledge difference, giving the appearance of negotiation and compromise. But the implications of those narratives is that because there are no structural barriers to individual advancement, blacks (and other oppressed groups) must blame themselves for failure to thrive” (Cloud, 1996).

Therefore, through the process of tokenism, the ‘Oprah’ persona serves as a rhetorical grounding for the exact same politics that the Obama campaign critiqued. By de-justifying the need for collective action or political accountability towards structural conditions, the ‘Oprah’ mythology ironically serves as the exigence for Oprah Winfrey’s endorsements.

## Des Moines, Iowa

In preparation for the first major caucus of the 2008 Democratic Presidential Primaries, Oprah Winfrey announced that she would speak with Barack Obama at two events in Iowa. The first, in Des Moines, was held on December 8, 2007 and drew an audience of 15,000 attendees (Zeleny, 2007).

The message of her speech began with the identification of her television persona and the potential contradictions of her endorsement. Through an address to her critics, Winfrey tells the audience, "So much has been said about what my jumping into this arena, does or does not bring to the table of politics. I really don't know. I'm going to leave that all up to the pundits, who all say ... "Will this be the same influence as her book club? Will it be like the Favorite Things Show?" I don't know about all of that. Despite all of the talk, the speculation, and the hype, ...I understand the difference between that and this critical moment in our nation's history" (Winfrey, 2007a). This differentiation between her show and politics is important for Winfrey to address because it showed that she was conscious of the mythological framing of her persona. Instead of becoming a caricature of herself, Winfrey had to establish that there was substance to her endorsement as well as Obama's political ideologies. She recognized that if she blindly endorsed him without any consideration of her 'Oprah' persona, that Obama could be viewed as just another "favorite thing." Therefore, by separating herself from that identity she gave the audience an authentic source of ethos. As McCracken (1989) argues, audiences find it troubling to give legitimacy to a stage persona; instead they need to know the beliefs of the actual person in order to establish value formations.

By echoing Obama's sentiments for a "critical moment," Winfrey too framed the 2008 Election as a crossroads. As such, she conceded that she could no longer stay on the

sidelines, and had to enter into the political discourse. She claims that “for the very first time in my life, I feel compelled to stand up and to speak out for the man, who I believe has a new vision for America” (Winfrey, 2007a). Therefore, Winfrey framed her role in the election as an acceptance of the challenge that Obama set out for the American public. Likewise, she gave the crowd in Iowa a similar goal. In a call for civic deliberation, Winfrey told the audience that “I am not here to tell you what to think. I am here to ask you to think, seriously” (Winfrey, 2007a). This call for thinking seriously is pivotal because it requires reflexivity about current political narratives and the role that each citizen has in their construction. Therefore, instead of trying to push a tokenized mythology on the public, Winfrey gave them the space to decide what they wanted out of the election and out of politics as a whole.

This questioning of how politics operates also serves as the basis for the structural critique in Obama’s framework. Winfrey argued that there were threats to the American people that existed outside of war and terrorism. As she described, these issues “extend to problems that we all know about, problems with our healthcare, problems with education, and problems with our economy” (Winfrey, 2007a). Interestingly, her use of the phrase “problems that we all know about” constructs the situation as both universal and structural. Healthcare, education and the economy are issues that affect everyone, no matter their identity group, and if they aren’t properly addressed, can become material impediments to one’s existence. Thus, Winfrey’s continuation of this form of critique serves not only as a delegitimization of previous political ideology, but it also helps to increase her own ethos by disrupting notions of tokenism. Again, as Cloud argues, the rhetoric of tokenism exists through the denial of these collective struggles. Therefore,

Winfrey's move towards the redefinition of her persona allows the space for a new understanding of "this critical moment."

Winfrey continues her legitimization of this collective motif through her and Obama's notions of a singular America (see Obama, 2004; Frank and McPhail, 2005; Rowland and Jones, 2007; Darsey, 2009). By using notions of common purpose, Winfrey claims that her endorsement wasn't because of partisan beliefs. Instead she claims that she endorsed Obama because he has the ability to revive "American" as the unifier amongst everyone's differences. As she explains, "I am here because of my personal conviction about Barack Obama and what I know he can do about America. That America is represented on each of the faces that I see here today. Because when you strip us all down, when you take away our race, our color, our ethnicity, our background, our sex, when you strip us all down, we are American at our core" (Winfrey, 2007a). This "stripping down" and refusal of difference is important because it destroys the basis for liberal individualism, therefore creating the impetus for collective action. In doing so, it also decodes Winfrey's previous persona and allows for a new rhetorical environment, free of previous exploitative mythologies. As Cloud argues, "the role of rhetorical catalyst is played by the political party or organization, which, emerging out of the working class itself, proceeds to recruit members, circulate ideas, and win adherence to a particular worldview and course of action (see Gramsci, 1971). The rhetorical mediation of real interests enables the formation of potentially instrumental political collectivities" (Cloud, 2006). Therefore, Winfrey's endorsement became not only an ethos boost for Obama, it also lent credence to the possibilities of the public.

This call for a renewed civic agency becomes important as Winfrey calls for the people to respond to Obama's "call." By continuing the logic that the campaign is only a vehicle for this change, Winfrey challenges the audience to become active participants in this redefining process. She concedes that Obama isn't the sole savior of America and that he too needs help for the dialectic transformation to occur. Thus, she admits to them that, "he knows he cannot do that alone. This is not time for any of us to shrink away from a new bold path for our country. We can all look around us, and as you look around you, you can be sure that we just don't want to reinvent the same reality that we are now all experiencing. We have to stand strong and united for the potential, the potential within us and the potential that lies before us" (Winfrey, 2007a). This demand to address their potential and not to shrink away from Obama's bold calling serves as both a challenge and an affirmation from Winfrey. It is a challenge because it tells the audience that they shouldn't be afraid of a radically new political narrative and that they can redefine these coordinates as they wish. In doing so, it affirms Obama's idealism and makes his lack of 'Washington experience' an advantage because he becomes an outsider to the system.

This experience question becomes the final theme of Winfrey's endorsement. Again, she was brought into the election because she had already established a firm relationship with the American public and is a promotional machine. Likewise, Obama needed whatever help he could in order to legitimize himself as a viable candidate. Winfrey confronted the task of proving his viability by claiming that, "experience in the hallways of government, isn't as important to me as experience on the pathway of life. So, I challenge you, I challenge you, I challenge you to see through those people who try to convince you that experience with politics as usual is more valuable than wisdom, from

years of serving people outside the walls of Washington DC. I challenge you to think about that. Because Barack Obama's early training in the trenches of community organizing, working in the poor neighborhoods to change the pallet of poverty and crime and unemployment gave him a lot of experience in relieving the burdens of those beleaguered" (Winfrey, 2007a). Again using the rhetoric of a challenge, Winfrey forced the audience to reconsider how they evaluate candidates. By conceding that Obama lacked knowledge of "politics as usual" she proved his viability in two ways.

First, by calling Obama an outsider to Washington, she framed his ideology as fresh and able to reconfigure the stalemates of the previous ideology. Instead of being caught in the political maze, she affirmed his outside view as one that could see the totality of the situation in order to promote change. As Conley (2008) argues, Obama's approach is "what sets him apart as a "virtual candidate"-virtual not in the sense of fake or false or unreal but, rather, in the sense of one who embodies the prospects of an alternative future. Obama's appeal is to have made a political virtue of the unknown." Therefore, by not being "politics as usual," Obama's inexperience becomes an asset because he can separate himself from past political failures. As such, he gains rhetorical ethos even though his platform is still relatively obscure.

The second way that Winfrey gave viability to the campaign was arguing that Obama had life experience which made him not only wise, but also able to understand the structural nature of exploitation. Therefore, his community service shifted from weakness to strength. If "politics as usual" meant the mythologies of liberal individualism that Cloud described, then Obama's place as an outsider who had come to understand material suffering would be an asset to the process of transformation.

From this initial endorsement, Winfrey provided the Obama campaign with rhetorical ethos. By focusing on the structural needs of the population and challenging them to reconsider their political coordinates as a whole, she began to shed her tokenized persona. In her next stump speech, Winfrey created a sense of urgency within the electorate. Though she wanted them to deliberate, she knew that she had to accent the importance of the upcoming election. By using a much more direct tone, Winfrey's Cedar Rapids speech continued the momentum of her first endorsement while also justifying the 2008 election as the site for change.

#### Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Just hours after delivering a speech in Des Moines, Iowa, Winfrey traveled in the snow to Cedar Rapids in order to address an estimated crowd of 7,000 attendees (Zeleny, 2007). As such, her second address contained a majority of the same messages and challenges as the first. She stressed that her relationship to the campaign was personal, that Obama was the leader to bridge America's divides, and that Iowans should seriously think about their political situation. In doing so, the crucial difference in the speeches lied in Winfrey's call to live one's "best life" and to seize their moment of opportunity. As she tells the crowd, "The moment is now. You may not have four more years, you may not have tomorrow, you must seize this moment now" (Winfrey, 2007b). Though they still needed to be reflexive about their political situation, Winfrey stressed that they didn't have time wait for Obama to gain more experience or for the economy to recover. If they were serious about this new political ideology, they had to act with urgency. Therefore, with a much more direct tone than her first endorsement, Winfrey stressed the importance of realizing their collective potential during the upcoming election.

As such, Winfrey's call for a renewed political purpose began immediately in the speech. Using the snowy conditions as her introduction instead of the line about the pundits and her "favorite things," Winfrey jokingly claims that she didn't believe that anyone would actually show up and that she would be home in her pajamas instead of at a political rally. Therefore, she took their attendance as a sign of the momentum already building in the campaign and the possibility of value congruence. As she tells the audience, "I know that you are here because you believe as I believe" and that she decided to endorse Obama because he "knows who we are and knows even better who we can be as a country" (Winfrey, 2007b). Though nebulous, this call for what America could be continues the definition of the 2008 election as a unique historical epoch. By framing it as such, Winfrey is arguing that the people have to choose what kinds of political narratives they wanted to adhere to. They could either continue to do themselves a disservice by affirming liberal individualism, or they could actualize their potential through universalism. This affirmation of the dialectic process becomes important because, as Cloud (2006) argues, change can only happen when the people decide they want it. If they continue to live under debilitating mythologies without any conception of their structural conditions, they will continue to be exploited. Thus, they have to be willing to challenge their political coordinates and de-justify them in order to create civic momentum.

Though she used similar phrasing in her first speech, Winfrey described Obama's vote against the War in Iraq as a decision utilizing clarity and conviction. Thus, Winfrey constructed Obama again as an outsider to "politics as usual." Instead of seeing him as brainwashed by Washington's bureaucratic mindset, she sarcastically said that she was

looking for someone “who has a conscience” (Winfrey, 2007b). This call for conscientious decision-makers not only paints Obama as transformative, but also as experienced in ways that the other candidates were not. Again, by turning his weakness into strength, Winfrey depicted Obama as having the common sense lacking in politics. Then in her most direct line to the audience Winfrey exclaimed, “that’s what you want, you want somebody who has a conscience and has sense enough to consult his own conscience, and then proceed with moral authority to do what is right. That's what you want” (Winfrey, 2007b). Though presumptive, Winfrey’s demand resonated with her larger messages of political potential. By making the election less about the issues and more about the kinds of people we want to lead this new political framework, Winfrey gave Obama a unique niche in the election that would be difficult for the other candidates to fulfill.

In just two rallies, Winfrey creates a new persona for herself under Obama’s political framework and helps to legitimize his calls for structural change through common purpose. However, as she moved South, her audience radically changed and the first test of Obama’s calls for universalism would take place.

#### Columbia, South Carolina

In front of a crowd that was predominantly African American and twice the size of her Des Moines audience (Seelye, 2007), Winfrey gave her most strikingly different endorsement of the weekend. By recognizing her Southern heritage and rationalizing the existence of apathy in the African American community, while also tying their struggle to more universal demands, she was forced to sell Obama’s framework to people who had seen structural inequity first hand. As such, she had to tailor their unique situation to larger messages of social unity in order to properly promote Obama.

Instead of her normal introduction about how she believed in Obama and why she had to enter into the campaign, Winfrey began her Columbia speech by immediately connecting herself with Southern tradition. Specifically, Winfrey recounted her time in church and her account of the civil rights era in order to garner legitimacy. As she tells the audience, “it is amazing grace that brought me here. I was born and raised just a couple of states over, born in Mississippi, raised between Mississippi and Tennessee, so I know something about growing up in the South. And know about what it means to come from the South and be born in 1954” (Winfrey, 2007c). Knowing what it means to come from the South becomes important here as an act of value congruence. For Winfrey’s Columbia speech to succeed she had to not only connect with their needs, but also prove to them that Obama was the candidate to transform the less glorious aspects of Southern tradition.

She continued this process in her discussion of changing pews. In her previous speeches, while discussing her entrance into the political arena she briefly describes it as “changing pews” but never elaborates on her particular word choice. However, in South Carolina, where a majority of the crowd understood the church culture, her change of pews became an opportunity to further establish rhetorical ethos. As she explains, “For me, its stepping out of my pew, I saw some of you today, looking like you just came from church, so you know what its like to sit in the same pew. I was raised in the church, got baptized when I was 8years old and I used to go to church and sit in the same pew middle aisle, second row, right hand side, everyday, every Sunday. I didn’t want to move out of that pew. And I’ve been in the pew of television for what seems like a long time. And so this is stepping out of my pew. I’ve never done this before” (Winfrey, 2007c).

By emphasizing the need to become flexible and willing to take political risks, Winfrey simultaneously rationalized the potential apathy in the crowd as well as created the space to critique it. Continuing with her justification of why she changed pews, Winfrey claims that, “in the past I’ve had an apathetic attitude, I’ve had a little apathy going on when it came to politics, but what I realize is that apathy is the attitude that disappointment is normal. And what I know is, disappointment doesn’t have to be normal anymore. For the first time, I’m stepping out of my pew because I’ve been inspired. I’ve been inspired to believe that a new vision is possible for America” (Winfrey, 2007c). By framing apathy and disappointment as archaic, Winfrey legitimized Obama as the way out. Through his “new vision,” she was able to argue that Obama served as the rally point for a new political horizon, one where everyone should be hopeful again about their political potential.

In order to continue this process of liberation, Winfrey once again used the civil rights era as an example. By referencing Martin Luther King, Winfrey claimed that we no longer have to dream and that we could put his messages into reality. As such, she challenged the audience to take the 2008 Election as a call to arms where they could affirm a new vision of the country by electing Obama. As she explains, “Each one of us has a calling and a potential here on earth to do the good and the great thing. He knows that. And knows that with all of our races, and our religions, and our languages, together we can come and make a better America.” (Winfrey, 2007c). This process of coming together despite our many differences not only continues to hark back to the messages of Dr. King, but it also continues the unification motif within “A House Divided.” By

furthering this rhetoric, Winfrey was able to re-install a singular purpose amongst the electorate, even though she was speaking to a much different demographic.

Winfrey ended her speech in Columbia by calling for evolution and a “greater America.” As she recounts her worries over America, she claims, “I know the reason that we’re all here, is so that we with all of our races and ethnicities and all of our colors and languages, we’re all here to come together, to appreciate our uniqueness and to treasure our diversity, and we are here to evolve to a higher plane. And the reason I love Barack Obama is because he is an evolved leader who can bring evolved leadership to this country” (Winfrey, 2007c).

By both appreciating difference and calling for an evolution in how we view it, Winfrey is able to remain credible as an African American woman while also creating the groundwork for a new definition of America. This call for a “higher plane” becomes especially interesting considering the progression of Winfrey’s endorsement. She begins by remembering her past and acknowledging the uniqueness of Southern traditions in a crowd of mostly African Americans. Then through a demand for evolution, she instructs the crowd not to let issues such as race stop them from finding commonalities amongst the rest of the population. Though it seems somewhat contradictory, Winfrey’s acknowledgement of difference, framed through structural critique, allows for what Cloud deems as a more cohesive movement. By finding the roots of oppression latent within structures of domination, she believes that we are able to de-justify their exploitative nature and produce material change through larger collectives. Thus, by affirming notions of collective responsibility and universal evolution instead of the rhetoric of individualism, Winfrey continues to assuage her tokenist persona.

### Manchester, New Hampshire

In her final stump speech of the weekend, Winfrey addressed 8,500 attendees (Balz, 2007) in Manchester, New Hampshire. Unlike the other states where Obama had momentum going into the caucuses, New Hampshire was firmly in the Hillary Clinton column. Therefore, Winfrey's endorsement, more than the others, had to emphasize the need to vote as well as had to justify the momentum the campaign was attracting.

After her introduction to the audience, Winfrey immediately began to justify her own as well as Obama's place in the election. Again, if she was going to motivate the base to challenge Clinton's support, she had to prove that she wasn't just another celebrity endorser, and that she was serious about his chances. As she explains, "I have done my homework, I wouldn't be stepping out here for somebody I didn't know who I was talking about, I'm not going to step out here and take this risk for somebody who is going disappoint me later on" (Winfrey, 2007d). By claiming that she had done her homework and that she refused to be disappointed, Winfrey refused charges of idealism and political naivety. In doing so, she acknowledges the risk that she is taking on his behalf in order to help establish the authenticity of the campaign. Again, Obama had to be viewed as a credible candidate and not just another one of Winfrey's marketing ploys. Thus, by claiming she was putting her own, heavily touted persona on the line for him, she quickly dismissed these charges.

In doing so, Winfrey framed her endorsement as part of a collective responsibility that all Americans shared. By claiming that she was "called" to the Obama campaign, Winfrey yet again demanded that the electorate realize their potential and thus, challenged them to question how they wanted to exist politically. She explains her place in this collective calling by saying that, "this is why I feel for the first time the

responsibility for this moment in time to do what I can. I believe that everybody has a calling and everyone in this room has been called...I have a calling, I just have a bigger voice, and so I feel a responsibility at this moment in time” (Winfrey, 2007d). Though her voice is “bigger,” Winfrey exemplifies that everyone has a singular purpose, which can be affirmed only through Obama. Likewise, Winfrey gains credibility by no longer speaking in a place of authority. Instead, she is seen as one of the many Obama supporters and on equal footing with everyone else in attendance. In doing so, she further sheds her larger-than-life status and instead becomes part of Obama’s “new majority.”

Continuing with these notions of a political transformation, Winfrey moves into her arguments about evolution. Though already mentioned in her other speeches, Winfrey takes it in another direction for New Hampshire. After claiming that everyone has the need to evolve in unique ways, she moves into discussions of race. As she tells the crowd, [Obama] is the one person running for the presidency who can talk about it, he’s not afraid to talk about what race means to this country, not afraid to talk about it. He understands that and wants us all to come together” (Winfrey, 2007d). Interestingly, Oprah did not present the argument about Obama being the only candidate who can speak about race in South Carolina speech, though it would seem to be more pertinent to the mostly African American audience. Regardless, Winfrey’s argument about the ability to discuss issues of race even under a universalist framework becomes important because those discussions are part of the process of evolution.

Finally, in an attempt to attract more voters to the Obama campaign, Winfrey discusses her feelings on political disappointment. Though she had started this line of argumentation in South Carolina, she contextualizes her views on apathy with the process

of voting. According to Winfrey, “for many years, I voted, yes I voted because that's what you're supposed to do, you're supposed to vote, but I was apathetic, and being apathetic, apathy I know is believing that disappointment is normal, and what Barack Obama has taught me is that disappointment doesn't have to be normal. There's a new day, there's a new day coming and we can vote Martin Luther King's dream into reality” (Winfrey, 2007d). Here Winfrey is making an interesting move that furthers the idea that voting and one-time participatory acts aren't enough. As she understands it, voting can be done without any consideration of the larger political narratives. Thus true citizenship occurs through our continued efforts as a public. By conversing about the political process or at least considering one's coordinates amongst the political, we create the impetus for democracy. As Asen claims, “Democracy's heart does not beat in the halls of Congress or in the voting booth, but in everyday enactments of citizenship. To situate democracy in this way invests democracy dramatically in ordinary folk, not leaders or elected or appointed officials. This makes democracy realizable as something other than a grandiose dream of sudden revolutionary social change or a waiting until one's allies are “in power” to enact democracy. Realization of democracy through human interaction highlights the role of communication in this process. Through communication, democracy appears as the instantiation of community” (Asen, 2004).

Thus, Winfrey's demand that we end the process of apathy can only be actualized once we create a sense of everydayness with our politics. Therefore, instead of continuing to normalize the simple act of voting, Winfrey is affirming a sense of new realities and new ways to approach politics.

Los Angeles, California

Oprah Winfrey makes her last appearance for the Obama campaign on February 8, 2008 in Los Angeles California in front of an audience of 6,000 (Milligan, 2008). Two months have passed since her initial stump speeches, and Winfrey has seen the success of her previous endorsements. Consequently, Winfrey is also in a position to answer the critics of her other speeches. In a rally featuring other female icons such as Caroline Kennedy, Maria Shriver and Michelle Obama, Winfrey is brought in to help rally the female vote. According to a local poll taken before the California Primary, Clinton had a 2% lead in the votes and a remarkable 13% lead amongst women (KCBS, 2008). Therefore, instead of a speech about the reasons why she entered into the campaign and why Obama was “the one,” Winfrey had a very particular goal for her Los Angeles rally.

Her exigence shifts towards a realization that we are now free to make whatever decision we feel and don't have to be handcuffed to issues such as gender. Understandably a vote for Clinton would mark a drastic change in the political coordinates, but the question became how the citizens came to such a decision. Specifically, Winfrey had to address the voters that were voting for Hillary Clinton purely because she was a female. As she recounts, “I've run into a lot of women who say they've already made up their mind before this race started. They say, I'm a woman; I have to vote for a woman. I say that's one way to go, but as free women you have the right to change your mind, that's in this election and in all things. ..You're not a traitor because you believe and see a better way” (Winfrey, 2008).

In order to provide the basis for this “better way,” Winfrey first acknowledged the successes that the Obama campaign had already collected by exclaiming that “I believe that change has already come” (Oprah, 2008). The fact that they had survived the long

campaign season and had a legitimate chance at winning meant that they were no longer idealists and Winfrey was no longer just another celebrity endorser. Instead, they were challengers that deserved respect and at least some thought outside of the gender dichotomy. Winfrey continues this discussion of momentum and the energy of the campaign when she argues:

For the first time, just like you in our voting lives, we are moved to think about politics and the power of its possibility in a different kind of way. Because when is the last time anybody in here was at a campaign rally? When's the last time that happened to you? We're all energized, we're excited and we're fired up for the change that has already come...He has already changed the way we see ourselves, and the way we see each other. Iowa and South Carolina proved that. And with your help California, he can change the way the rest of the world sees us (Winfrey, 2008).

By claiming that the 2008 Election was a site for the possibility of a new kind of politics and a new way to view ourselves in relation to the political, Winfrey continues the process of structural critique. As such, Winfrey becomes an embodiment of this radical restructuring because she exemplifies the change in her own persona. Thus, with a similar tone as South Carolina with notions of evolution, Winfrey shows the audience that they no longer need static conceptions of reality.

In doing so, Winfrey was able to continue the motif of change already existing. By claiming that both Democratic Primary favorites were minorities, Winfrey concluded that "the struggle" was won to some degree. No longer would the people be forced into certain categories and ideologies, instead the 2008 Election marked the ability to vote

“freely.” As Winfrey told the crowd, “we are free for the first time to be able to take full advantage of all the rights and privileges of American citizenship, we struggled so long to achieve. We are free with the right to vote our minds and our hearts, we are free. We are free to be led by our hearts, we are free from the constrictions of gender and race and for the first time, we can just vote as we believe” (Winfrey, 2008). In a direct attack towards those who blindly voted along gender and race, Winfrey demanded more out of their political understanding. By contextualizing them as free, she wanted those voters to understand that the election was more than a diversity showdown. Instead, it marked a unique moment to consider how we make structure our political decision-making.

Continuing with this notion of freedom in decision-making, Winfrey had to answer her critics who charged her as a traitor to her gender because she didn’t support Hillary Clinton. Again by claiming her freedom, Winfrey replied by arguing that, “every part of me believes in the empowerment of women, but the truth is, I’m a free woman. I’m a free woman, and being free means you get to think for yourself and you get to decide for yourself what to do. So I say, I am not a traitor, no I’m not a traitor, I’m just following my own truth, and that truth has led me to Barack Obama” (Winfrey, 2008). This idea of having one’s own truth and being free to make decisions without pre-existing dimensions is the core of political agency for Winfrey. After spending the entire campaign arguing about new visions for America and asking people to think about their political coordinates, Winfrey had to refuse such simplistic solutions.

As she answers a similar charge that she was only endorsing Obama because he was African American, she replied, “that too is insulting to me, don’t play me small. I’m not that small. I would never vote for anyone based on gender or race, I’m voting for

Barack Obama, not because he's black. I'm voting for Barack Obama because he is brilliant" (Winfrey, 2008). By harkening back to Obama's challenge to the "smallness of our politics," Winfrey viewed the people who voted purely along racial and gender lines as stuck in old modes of thought. Instead, she viewed Obama's brilliance as transcendent of such delineations, and as necessary for true ideological shifts in politics. Just because the possibility of a female President existed didn't mean that the struggle for better modes of thought and decision-making ended. Instead, Winfrey needed those voters to realize the potential of the election and the possibility they had through the Obama campaign.

By looking at this speech and the Columbia speech together, Winfrey's calls for evolution become her means for challenging tokenism as well as the rhetoric of difference. Though she understands the demands of being both a female and an African American, she also frames citizenship as something more than just identity politics. Instead, one must address the political in structural way so that everyone can benefit. Again, by framing the election as a political nexus, Winfrey gave them the choice of either continuing with the same debilitating logic, or to evolve through Obama's new vision.

In the next section I will perform a similar rhetorical analysis of the endorsement of Will.i.am. Unlike Winfrey, whose endorsement was a tactic by the Obama campaign to garner legitimacy, Will.i.am's endorsement was an inspired response to the new vision of politics. Therefore, instead of introducing Obama to the American public, I argue that Will.i.am's endorsement served as validation of what "Yes we can" ought to mean for citizens and the definition of America.

## WILL.I.AM

On February 2, 2008, entertainer Will.i.am released the video “Yes We Can” on Youtube.com and Dipdive.com. The video featured 34 guest celebrities including actress Scarlett Johansson, singer John Legend, and comedian Aisha Tyler. Incorporating Obama’s New Hampshire concession speech as the lyrics for the song, the video became Will.i.am’s attempt to continue the momentum for Obama despite the electoral setback.

Unlike Winfrey, who was purposefully chosen by the campaign, Will.i.am’s endorsements serves as a spontaneous result of Obama’s call for grassroots citizen involvement. As previously argued, Winfrey’s role in the campaign was to help enhance the rhetorical credibility of Obama as a candidate for the election. In order to be successful, she had to discuss a wide array of elements that made him a contender; beginning first with her place in the election, then going through his actual political views, and ending with his calls for change. Will.i.am however only needed to focus on one, Obama’s calls for personal responsibility on the part of the public. As I have shown in Obama’s candidacy announcement, the campaign was intended to be a “vehicle” for change and needed the public to “reclaim the meaning of citizenship” (Obama, 2007b). Thus, the motto “Yes we can”, borrowed from previous labor movements, in Obama’s New Hampshire speech came to represent this calling for personal responsibility. Through his video, I believe Will.i.am provided ethos for the “Yes we can” motto by becoming the epitome of its message.

Returning to Cloud, the rhetoric of tokenism functions by eschewing arguments for collective struggles against dominant forces. By isolating individuals and forcing blame upon them, liberal capitalism is able to justify itself as well as exploitation.

Therefore, counter narratives must stress that the individual is not alone and that through collectivist actions, they can change their conditions. “Yes we can” is precisely this kind of alternative rhetoric because it frames the struggle as collective against universal conditions. Thus, by taking this election as their “moment,” everyone has a chance to challenge the harms of “politics as usual.”

Borrowing from Burke (1969), this Marxist interpretation of succession is particularly persuasive because every action on the part of the individual is framed as part of a totalizing shift in conditions, i.e. if you help yourself, you help everyone. By successfully conveying evolutionary terms to the audience, they become motivated to do their role in challenging universal conditions. Thus, as Burke explains:

Marxism, considered as an ultimate vocabulary, also owes much of its persuasiveness to the way in which its theory of action fits its theory of order. For if any point, or “moment,” in a hierarchic series can be said to represent, in its limited way, the principle of “perfection” of the ultimate design, then each tiny act shares in the absolute meaning of the total act. Thus, the “truth” is not grasped and tested by merely “perceiving” the logic of the entire series. Perception must be grounded in enactment, by participation in some local role, so that the understanding of the total order is reached through this partial involvement. There is perception from without, made possible through nonparticipation. Or there is local participation, which may become so involved in particulars that one never sees beyond them. But there is a third way, the fullest kind of understanding, wherein one gets the immediacy of participation in a local act, yet sees in and through this act an over-all design, sees and *feels* the local act itself as but the

partial expression of the total development. The Marxist persuasion is in the name of this third way.

Cloud's demand for structural criticism becomes the exemplar of this conception of order. Her critiques of difference are premised off of Burke's second form of participation due to their lack of seeing beyond particulars. Therefore, rhetorical ethos and the ability to form value congruence is necessary for "ultimate" orders because the people have to be convinced of their totalizing abilities for change so that they will participate. Therefore, as I will argue, Will.i.am's video as well as his rhetorical persona become the manifestation of this totalizing call to arms through the "Yes we can" motto.

On his webpage Hope.Act.Change, Will.i.am (2008b) claims that during the Democratic Primary he was still confused about which candidate to support and how he could use his celebrity to influence the public. He claimed that in previous election "we supported Kerry with all our might, we performed and performed and performed for the DNC, doing all we could do to get the youth involved," but his efforts weren't enough. Like many other voters, the 2008 Election left him in a political impasse. Instead of having the choice of "Bush and war vs. no Bush and no war" he was torn between the similar platforms of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. He respected both candidates and presumed that they would be excellent leaders, but lacked the inspiration to properly delineate between their politics.

Will.i.am (2008b) claims that the inspiration came during Obama's New Hampshire concession speech. As he recants:

I reflected on my life... and the blessings I have... and the people who fought for me to have these rights and blessings... and I'm not talking about a "black thing"

I'm talking about a "human thing" me as a "person" an American... That speech made me think of Martin Luther King... Kennedy... and Lincoln... and all the others that have fought for what we have today... what America is "supposed" to be... freedom... equality... and truth...

These sentiments resonate directly with Obama's vision for a new political horizon. His acknowledgement of a "human thing" and the disavowal of blackness exemplify the core tenets of Obama's universalism. Under this vision, personhood and citizenship are radically reconfigured in the name of challenging the "smallness of our politics." The allusion to "what America is 'supposed' to be" is a direct call for this framework, it demands that we take our founding promises of freedom seriously and remember why we involve ourselves in politics initially. Specifically, he claims that the speech "inspired [him] to want to change myself to better the world...and take a "leap" towards change...and hope that others become inspired to do the same (Will.i.am, 2008b). Again, the goal isn't any particular political agenda; it's a call for people to want more from themselves and their politicians. Thus, Will.i.am's video serves as an affirmation of the "Yes We Can" slogan in its most foundational form.

#### Super Tuesday and the Call to Think

Before I analyze the efficacy of the Will.i.am video, I have to first discuss the context of Obama's concession speech and the slogan itself. New Hampshire was the only state during Oprah Winfrey's weekend stump tour where Obama didn't win. His campaign had to rally the base and re-gain the momentum that they started in Iowa. The speech was meant to inspire future voters, while also trying to portray New Hampshire not as a failure, but as proof of how far their campaign had come. Therefore, after congratulating Sen. Clinton, Obama expressed hope despite his failure. As he says to the

audience, “You know, a few weeks ago, no one imagined that we'd have accomplished what we did here tonight in New Hampshire. No one could have imagined it. For most of this campaign, we were far behind. We always knew our climb would be steep. But in record numbers, you came out and you spoke up for change” (Obama, 2007c). By taking the 2.6% margin (RealClearPolitics, 2008) as an indicator of his campaign’s potential, the speech denoted momentum and possibility. Obama’s repeated use of the phrase “no one could have imagined” legitimizes his self-proclaimed idealism while also showing that there was substance to his rhetoric. The race was no longer Clinton’s to lose, and the Obama campaign framed it as a “climb” that they could overcome, with enough support.

Will.i.am’s decision to take this speech reinforce it with a collection of celebrities produced a powerful mobilization machine for that effort. Echoing similar sentiments to Oprah’s endorsements, Will.i.am contends that the purpose of the video wasn’t to convince citizens to vote for Obama. Instead, he wanted people to see their potential and “think” about the possibility for a new political landscape. Regardless of his growing popularity, Obama is just one man. Voting for him doesn’t change all race relations and the way politics operates. Instead, to “think” calls forth deliberation and active engagement in the process. As Will.i.am contends, “I’m not trying to convince people to see things how I do... I produced this song to share my new found inspiration and how I’ve been moved... I hope this song will make you feel... love... and think... and be inspired just like the speech inspired me” (Will.i.am, 2008b). By “not trying to convince people” Will.i.am is leaving the power in the hands of the people. Instead of being the celebrity that tells them to vote a certain way, he is showing that they do have the agency

to make their own decisions, which instills a sense of responsibility and urgency in the public.

This calling forth is exactly what the Obama campaign needed going into Super Tuesday. Again, they had to show there was credibility within Obama's idealism and that it wasn't a pipedream. In the last two general elections, Democrats watched hanging chads and the Religious Right trample over their chances and saw the political framework drastically change in front of them. Inspiration had become a scarce commodity in the Democratic electorate and needed credible rhetors to revive it.

### Will.i.am as Rhetor

Will.i.am established his rhetorical ethos for this calling forth through a move that directly resonated with those disillusioned by the two previous elections. He revealed that "the outcome of the last 2 elections has saddened me...on how unfair, backwards, upside down, unbalanced, untruthful, corrupt, and just simply, how wrong the world and "politics" are" (Will.i.am, 2008b). This list of passionate devil terms displayed feelings that politicians can't express. Instead of seeming like someone who is inside the political game or a celebrity only concerned with their status, Will.i.am made apathy seem rational. He understood how people could come to the point of not participating or just voting for the most recognizable Democratic name. His sadness personalized the issue and gave him credibility not only as a celebrity, but also as a concerned advocate. Will.i.am dared to be inspired by Obama's call for a new politics, and it gave him the initial exigence for his endeavor.

Will.i.am continued the legitimation of his rhetorical ethos by challenging the hegemonic traditions of the music industry. Through his construction of a slow, bureaucratic, and profit-hungry process, Will.i.am equates the same problems in the

music industry with those of current politics. Therefore, the success of the video being produced outside of the music industry's special interests lends credibility to the ability of an engaged citizenry to produce change. Specifically, he argues that:

Usually this process would take months... a bunch of record company people figuring out strategies and release dates... interviews... all that stuff... but this time I took it in my own hands... so I called my friends Sarah Pantera, Mike Jurkovic, Fred Goldring, and Jesse Dylan to help make it happen... and they called their friends.. and we did it together in 48 hours... and instead of putting it in the hands of profit we put it in the hands of inspiration...then we put it on the net for the world to feel. (Will.i.am, 2008b).

By taking it in his "own hands" and only working with "friends," he legitimizes the call for grassroots efforts while also framing the video as a tangible byproduct of Obama's idealism. Consequently, by not "putting it in the hands of profit," Will.i.am rhetorically denounces his attachment to the previous ways of thinking so that there is a pure space for people to "feel" and be "inspired." Therefore, through this opening for a new political discourse, his persona is transformed from celebrity to credible rhetor for the Obama vision of politics.

### Yes We Can

Aesthetically, the video is a simple, black and white collage, interweaving entertainment with politics, as scenes of the celebrities performing the song are mixed with footage of Obama giving his concession speech. Difference is completely erased and nothing is privileged. No celebrity, including Will.i.am, is given extra time and their racial differences are reduced to shades of gray. This visual rhetoric helps to construct Obama's collective will through a sense of common purpose. Instead of speaking to their

particular audiences and identity groups, the celebrities came together under the same banner of change.

The song itself begins by alluding to America's founding documents, and claims that "Yes we can" was the motivation for the country's creation. Through calls for justice, equality, opportunity, and prosperity, the song reinforces notions of collective sacrifice in the name of a shared destiny. Therefore, by locating the foundation of our democratic history, the song emphasizes that our no matter the challenge, our response should be the same, "Yes we can." Thus, the song not only serves as a rallying call for a new political horizon, it also serves as a reminder that America has survived growing pains, and will continue to survive as long as we remember this collective motivation. The lyrics about immigration, worker's rights, and civil rights become the epitome of this reminder because though seemingly different, each epoch is described as representing this singular call for change:

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

Yes we can. Yes we can.

It was the call of workers who organized;

women who reached for the ballots;

a President who chose the moon as our new frontier;

and a King who took us to the mountain-top and pointed the way to the Promised Land. (Will.i.am., 2008a)

Through demands for healing and repair, the lyrics serve as a calling for Obama's "new majority." In order to define this new collective, the second verse focuses on the

notions of change and hope. By reminding the audience that “nothing can stand in the way of the power of millions of voices calling for change” (Will.i.am, 2008a), the lyrics become an act of mobilization. In doing so, the song also refutes the critics of the campaign. These critics, who charged the campaign with idealism, are the reason why Will.i.am claimed to involve himself in the campaign. Through his mission of inspiration, he wanted to show that there was no reason to shy away from wanting a different political climate. As Asen (2004) argues, citizenship only happens when we are willing to risk ourselves for the process. Thus, we can’t become disillusioned to our potential as a people. As he claims,

Both cynicism and hubris improperly fix fluid situations and obstruct processes of citizenship. Cynicism fixes by rendering one immobile. Unchecked risk leading to cynicism implies that there is no ground for alternative viewpoints because all grounds are suspect. Hubris fixes by rendering one’s position inflexible.

Unchecked commitment leading to hubris implies that there is no ground for alternative viewpoints because grounds cannot be shared across positions, and one already occupies the secure ground. Neither unchecked risk nor unchecked commitment offer reasons to attend to the perspectives of others. Keeping risk and commitment in tension sustains the movement implicit in regarding citizenship as action. (Asen 2004)

Thus, the selection about cynics becomes important in order to legitimize the Obama campaign:

We have been told we cannot do this by a chorus of cynics who will only grow louder and more dissonant.

We've been asked to pause for a reality check.

We've been warned against offering the people of this nation false hope.

But in the unlikely story that is America, there has never been anything false about hope. We want change! (Will.i.am, 2008a)

The song ends by continuing the motif of America as an unfinished tale and by framing the election as a site for the next chapter. By criticizing the politics of individualism and partisanship, the lyrics reinforce collectivized notions of “the people.” Through this collectivization, the song reminds the audience about the singularity of their purpose, and the need to move beyond the “smallness of our politics.” Therefore, as it reminds the audience:

The hopes of the little girl who goes to a crumbling school in Dillon are the same

as the dreams of the boy who learns on the streets of LA;

we will remember that there is something happening in America;

that we are not as divided as our politics suggests;

that we are one people;

we are one nation;

and together, we will begin the next great chapter in America's story with three

words that will ring from coast to coast;

from sea to shining sea - Yes. We. Can (Will.i.am, 2008a)

The example of the girl in the crumbling school and the boy who learns on the street not only help to exemplify this universalism, they also serve as a point of structural critique. Again, by echoing Obama’s sentiments that local conditions are a product of

Washington's behavior, the song serves as the needs to question how we justify our political narratives.

Though these lyrics are directly taken from the Obama concession speech, the arrangement and particular selections highlight the major themes of the Obama campaign in a way meant to inspire. Through chants and repetition, "Yes we can" embodies not only the spirit of the Obama message; it also becomes an invitation to the public for a new way of involving themselves politically. As Aristotle (1954) explains, goodwill towards the audience (*eunoia*) is effective because it instills notions of reciprocity. Therefore, the "millions calling for change" becomes an opening for the people to act as respondents to Will.i.am's video. It shows the audience that there are ways to involve themselves politically through mediums they are already using, and that their participation can have totalizing effects.

Returning to Burke and Cloud from the beginning of the section, these demands for participation so that universal conditions can improve are persuasive precisely because of their structural nature. By demanding collective purpose through personal responsibility, Will.i.am thus increases his ethos with the audience, while also enhancing the legitimacy of Obama's political framework. Through his previous apathy connected with a call to arms through this "moment," he places the Obama narrative as an evolutionary shift for deliberation and invites them to reconsider their own place in the process. By demanding that they no longer consume politics and instead become active agents within it, he consequently reaffirms Winfrey's calls for responsibility and seizing one's potential. Thus, "Yes we can" becomes not only a piece of rhetoric in that it calls

forth a response by the audience; it also becomes an reminder of what Obama's new America can exemplify.

CHAPTER THREE:  
THE ROLE OF CELEBRITIES IN THE FORMATION OF CIVIC  
VALUES

Though Oprah Winfrey and Will.i.am had differing strategies for their Obama endorsements, the values of the campaign were represented strongly in both. By framing the 2008 Election as a “critical moment,” as well as challenging the public to ascend to their potential under Obama’s “new majority,” the celebrities helped to renew a sense of citizenship. Therefore, in trying to resolve the extent of the “Oprah Effect” one has to look further than just the size of her audiences and the circulation of her magazines. Instead, the real effect of these celebrities came from their belief that civic engagement was more than just isolated acts of voting. Through their transference of “hope” and “change” to the public, they revived everydayness to politics, which is necessary for the continued deliberation of one’s social coordinates. As Robert Asen (2004) argues, “Democracy is not confined to a set of institutions or specific acts, but appears as a guiding spirit that informs human interaction. Democracy asks not for people’s unlimited energy and knowledge, but for their creative participation.”

By utilizing this guiding spirit through Obama’s political narrative, these celebrities invited the public to consider how they existed as citizens as well as what they truly wanted out of politics. Instead of pandering to partisanship or trying to score cheap shots against Obama’s rivals, they asked the people to once again be inspired to think about their political realities. Winfrey did this by assuaging her tokenized persona and “stepping out of her pew” in order to relate to the public. Similarly, Will.i.am shed the conventions of the music industry and made a video with his friends to exemplify the possibilities of the motto “Yes we can.” And though their actual effect is nearly impossible to quantify, their rhetorical attempts epitomize, as Robert Ivie and Oscar Giner (2009) explains, “the political feasibility and pragmatic value— possibly even the

necessity—of cultivating a sensible democratic ethos in a madding era of global implosion.”

In light of this necessity and what Obama deemed as the “urgency of now,” these celebrities used their popularity to challenge the public to become apart of Obama’s redefinition of America. With calls for unification and collective purpose, they created the impetus for political narratives that could allow for radically different trajectories. In his article about notions of duality and unity in Obama’s ‘More Perfect Union’ speech, Robert E. Terrill (2009) argues that issues of race and gender will never be alleviated until we rhetorically construct a doubled consciousness. As such, we need to acknowledge both our uniqueness as individuals well as our common purpose as Americans. As he explains,

Demanding social justice does not negate the need for personal responsibility, and understanding that opportunities and limitations are cultural need not diminish the fact that destiny is personal. Inhabiting an unfamiliar perspective does not require abandoning our own, and while moving forward requires understanding the past, understanding the past does not require stubbornly clinging to it. To move toward a more perfect union, we must then incorporate this interstitial perspective into our speech, talking in ways that constitute and sustain this “whole” public culture. (Terrill 2009)

Both celebrities made it abundantly clear that such a new form of speech would only be possible through the Obama campaign. By stressing that everyone had their own particular calling and responsibilities, they were able to connect with voters from a multitude of backgrounds. In the span of two days, Winfrey gave the same stump speech,

with the same message of evolution in the heart of Middle America, the South, and the Northeast. Likewise, Will.i.am was able not only to bring together a collection of celebrities from different backgrounds for his video, he was also able to get an untold number of response videos made which spanned across ethnic, gender, and religious divides. The fact that both were able to garner such positive receptions despite their radically different audiences, points to Obama's messages of "change" transcending other dominant ideology.

To be clear however, their call for a democratic ethos would be of no importance if their messages were tainted by notions of tokenism or if they couldn't establish proper value congruence. Going back to Cloud, the rhetor has to not only find commonalities; they have to also question the justifications for exploitative structures. Winfrey, whom Cloud first analyzed through the biographies written on the persona of 'Oprah' to argue she was used as a token, did this by calling for political accountability for issues such as healthcare and education. By framing these as "problems that we all know about," she stepped off of her pedestal and became part of the struggle against economic inequality. Will.i.am performed this act of de-justification by decrying that the system had become corrupt, unbalanced and untruthful. Therefore, by demanding these new political horizons, their rhetoric lost the baggage of the tokenism and provided the Obama campaign with much needed receptiveness and legitimacy.

### Conclusion

Much of the current literature on Obama's political ideology only focuses on his messages and ignores the role celebrities played in enhancing his rhetorical ethos (Frank, 2009 and Ivie & Giner, 2009). The studies that followed the "Oprah Effect" (Garthwaite and Moore, 2008; Brewer and Pease, 2008) only focused on her ability to increase the

voting population and not the ways that she formed value congruence with the public. Likewise, the scholars who discuss Will.i.am's video (Kellner, 2009; Kellner and Kim, 2009) focus on the potentials for new media to connect people and create political spectacles, but they never discuss the message or Will.i.am's role. Again, consubstantiation only functions when the people are made to believe that the values they identify in their leaders are also values that they themselves possess. Therefore, the persuasive element is a crucial site of study because it helps to explain *how* Winfrey and Will.i.am endorsed Obama. To say that Winfrey's stump speeches had no significance other than the fact that she was "Oprah" and that Will.i.am's video generated hits is quite reductive and misses key elements of political communication.

The role of celebrity rhetoric serves as an important area to study campaign messages, how they transfer to the public, and the potential for civic engagement. Through my analysis of Winfrey and Will.i.am, I have provided the basis for further inquiry into the role of celebrity in politics. Further studies should focus on the discourse and the responses to these endorsements from the public. It would be interesting to see the degrees to which values are similar and if the public truly understands the nuances of Obama's campaign narratives. With Will.i.am especially, the countless YouTube videos that were made as a response to "Yes we can," serve as artifacts for the process of civil deliberation in the age of new media.

In conclusion, Will.i.am and Oprah Winfrey present unique cases for how we interpret celebrity rhetoric and the relationships they form with politicians. Though other notable celebrities contributed to the campaign, they became the most notable because they stressed how they felt compelled, "interpellated" (Charland, 1987) by Obama's

through their rationalization of previous apathy. In doing so, Winfrey entered into her first campaign and Will.i.am stepped outside of the bounds of the music industry because of the values they saw in Obama. His calls for “hope” and changing the “smallness of our politics” created a new understanding of how people viewed politics as well as themselves. Consequently, they used their celebrity status both to embody these values and to invite the public into the process of deliberation. Their efforts not only helped to enhance Obama’s ethos as a political leader, they also helped to form a congruency between his values and those of the voters.

This is important rhetorically because the connection between the audience’s previous values and those of the rhetor have to come in conjunction for there to be persuasion (Aristotle, 1954). Celebrities help to serve this linkage by enhancing the creation and recognition of the narratives presented by politicians. Therefore, we must continue to study their evolving role in the art of political communication.

## WORKS CITED

- Aristotle, Roberts, W. R., Bywater, I., & Solmsen, F. (1954). *Rhetoric*. New York: Modern Library.
- Asen, R. (2004). A discourse theory of citizenship. *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 90(2) 189-211.
- Austin, E.W., Van de Vord, R., Pinkleton, B. E., & Epstein, E. (2008). Celebrity endorsements and their potential to motivate young voters. *Mass Communication and Society*, 11, 420-436.
- Balz, D. (2007). Our moment is now. *Washington Post*.  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2007/12/09/AR2007120901417.html?sid=ST2007120901471>
- Baum, M (2006). The Oprah effect: how soft news helps inattentive citizens vote consistently. *The Journal of Politics*, 68(4). 946-959.
- Barney, T. (2001). Celebrity, spectacle, and the conspiracy culture of election 2000. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 44, 2331-2337.
- Bosman, J (2007) The Oprah factor and Obama. *New York Times*.  
<http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/09/10/the-oprah-factor-and-obama/>
- Brewer, A & Pease, P.R. (2008). The Oprah factor: the effects of a celebrity endorsement in a presidential primary campaign. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*. 13; 386-400.
- Burgess, D., Haney, B., Snyder, M., Sullivan, J.L., & Transue, J.E. (2000). Rocking the vote: using personalized messages to motivate voting among young adults. *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 64, 29-52.
- Burke, K. (1969). *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Business Week. (2005). Why Oprah opens readers' wallets  
[http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/05\\_41/b3954059.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/05_41/b3954059.htm)
- Charland, M. (1987). Constitutive rhetoric: the case of the People Quebecois. *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*. 73(2). 133-150.
- Cloonan, M. and Street, J. (1998). Rock the vote: popular culture and politics. *Politics*, 18(1), 33-38.
- Cloud, D.L. (1996). Hegemony or concordance? the rhetoric of tokenism in 'Oprah' Winfrey's rags-to-riches biography. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 13,

115-137.

- Cloud, D.L. (1997). Capitalism, concordance, and conservatism: rejoinder to Condit. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 14,193-200.
- Cloud, D.L. (2006). Change happens: materialist dialectics and communication studies. In L. Artz, S. Macek, & D.L. Cloud (Eds.), *Marxism and Communication Studies* (pp. 53-71). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Conley, D.S. (2008). Virtuoso. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*. 5(3). 307-311.
- Darsey, J. (2009). Barack Obama and America's journey. *Southern Communication Journal*. 74(1). 88-103.
- Frank, D.A. & McPhail, M.L. (2005). Barack Obama's address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention: trauma, compromise, consilience, and the (im)possibility of racial reconciliation. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*. 8(4). 571-593.
- Frank, D. (2009). The prophetic voice and the face of the other in Barack Obama's "a more perfect union" address, march 18, 2008 *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*. 12(2), 167-194.
- Fraser, B. P. & Brown, W. J. (2009). Media, celebrities, and social influence: identification with Elvis Presley. *Mass Communication and Society*. 5(2). 183-206.
- Garthwaite, C. & Moore, T. J. (2008). The role of celebrity endorsements in politics: Oprah, Obama, and the 2008 Democratic Primary. [www.econ.umd.edu/~garthwaite/celebrityendorsements\\_garthwaitemoore.pdf](http://www.econ.umd.edu/~garthwaite/celebrityendorsements_garthwaitemoore.pdf).
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding and decoding in the television discourse. *Culture, Media, Language*. London, UK: Hutchinson.
- Hoover, M. H. & Orr, S. E., (2005). Youth political engagement: why rock the vote hits the wrong note. *American Political Science Association*.
- Ivie, R.L. & Giner, O. (2009). More good, less evil: contesting the mythos of national insecurity in the 2008 presidential primaries. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 12(2). 279-302.
- Ivie, R.L. & Giner, O. (2009). American exceptionalism in a democratic idiom: transacting the mythos of change in the 2008 presidential campaign. *Communication Studies*, 60(4). 359-375.
- Jackson, D. J. & Darrow, T. I. A. (2005) The influence of celebrity

- endorsements on young adults' political opinions. *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*. 10; 80.
- Jones, J. P. (2004). *Entertaining politics: new political television and civic culture*. New York: Rowman Littlefield.
- KCBS (2008). Celebrities rally for Obama at UCLA. <http://cbs2.com/local/Obama.Oprah.Shriver.2.644867.html>
- Kellner, D. (2009). Barack Obama and Celebrity Spectacle. *International Journal of Communication*. 3. 715-741.
- Kellner, D. & Kim, G. (2009). YouTube, politics and pedagogy: some critical reflections. In R. Hammer & D. Kellner (Eds.), *Media/Cultural studies: Critical Approaches* (pp. 615-635). New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Marks, A & Smith, S.V. (2007) Obama and the 'Oprah effect. *Christian Science Monitor*. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/1210/p01s03-uspo.html>.
- McCracken, Grant. (1989). Who is the celebrity endorser? cultural foundations of the endorsement process. *The Journal of Consumer Research*, 16(3). 310-321.
- McGee, M.C. (1975). In search of 'the people': a rhetorical alternative. *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*. 61(3). 235-249.
- McGevna, A. (2010). Tell-all author claims Oprah's influence led to media blackballing <http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2010/04/13/tell-author-claims-oprahs-influence-led-media-blackballing/>
- Milligan, S. (2008). Maria Shriver gives surprise nod to Obama. *Boston Globe*. [http://www.boston.com/news/politics/politicalintelligence/2008/02/maria\\_shriver\\_g.html](http://www.boston.com/news/politics/politicalintelligence/2008/02/maria_shriver_g.html)
- Moore, M.T. (2007). Oprah becomes test of what an endorsement means. *USA Today*. [http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2007-10-21-endorsements\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2007-10-21-endorsements_N.htm)
- Obama, B. (2004) "2004 Democratic National Convention keynote address". *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*. Accessed 4-8-2010 <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/convention2004/barackobama2004dn.c.htm>
- Obama, B. (2007). "Official announcement of candidacy for President of the United States". *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*. Accessed 4-8-2010

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobamacandidacyforpresident.htm>

Obama, B. (2007) "Announces Presidential exploratory committee". *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*. Accessed 4-8-2010  
<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobamaexploratory.htm>

Obama, B. (2007) "New Hampshire Primary concession speech". *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*. Accessed 4-8-2010  
<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobama/barackobamanewhampshireconcessionspeech.htm>

Pew Research Center For The People & The Press (2007). Oprah boosts Obama's visibility; Republicans applaud Romney speech.  
<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/661/oprah-obama-news-interest>

Payne, J. G., Hanlon, J. P., & Twomey III, D. P. (2007). Celebrity, spectacle influence on young voters in the 2004 presidential campaign: What to expect in 2008. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 50, 1239-1246.

Quintin, H. & Nowell-Smith, G. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. New York, NY: International Publishers.

Rao, V. (2008). The Oprah effect: can celebs sway voters?. *MSNBC Today*.  
[http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/27227264/ns/today-today\\_on\\_the\\_trail/](http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/27227264/ns/today-today_on_the_trail/)

RealClearPolitics.com (2008) New Hampshire Democratic Primary.  
[http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2008/president/nh/new\\_hampshire\\_democratic\\_primary-194.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2008/president/nh/new_hampshire_democratic_primary-194.html)

Rowland, R.C., & Jones, J.M. (2007). Recasting the American dream and American politics: Barack Obama's keynote address to the 2004 democratic national convention. *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*. 93(4). 425-448.

Sawyer, D. (2009). The 2009 Time 100. *Time Magazine*.  
[http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1894410\\_1894289\\_1894286,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1894410_1894289_1894286,00.html)

Schroeder, A. (2004). *Celebrity-in-chief: how show business took over the White House*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Schutz, A. (1995). Entertainers, experts, or public servants? Politicians' self-presentation on television talk shows. *Political Communication*, 12, 211-22.

Seelye, K. Q. (2007). A big draw in South Carolina. *New York Times*.

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9903E2DF1F39F933A25751C1A9619C8B63>

Terrill, R.E. (2009) Unity and duality in Barack Obama's 'a more perfect union. *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95(4). 363-386.

Will.i.am (2008). Yes we can, Video posted to  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsV2O4fCgjk>.

Will.i.am. (2008). Yes we can song. Hope.Act.Change.  
<http://www.hopeactchange.com/creators/song>

Winfrey, O. (2007). Obama introduction: Des Moines, Iowa. Video posted to  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrOpKOrQDsk>.

Winfrey, O (2007). Obama introduction: Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Video posted to  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XaQ3w\\_QSqEw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XaQ3w_QSqEw)

Winfrey, O (2007). Obama introduction: Manchester, New Hampshire. Video posted to  
<http://belowboston.com/showDiary.do?diaryId=1339>

Winfrey, O (2007). Obama introduction: Columbia, South Carolina. Video posted to  
<http://video.nytimes.com/video/2007/12/09/us/politics/1194817108685/oprah-winfrey-in-south-carolina.html>

Winfrey, O (2007). Los Angeles rally. Video posted to  
[http://www.youtube.com/user/BarackObamadotcom#p/search/0/a\\_FJQMriZUg](http://www.youtube.com/user/BarackObamadotcom#p/search/0/a_FJQMriZUg)

Zeleny, J (2007). Oprah endorses Obama. *New York Times*.  
<http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/05/03/oprah-endorses-obama-2/>

Zeleny, J. (2007). Celebrity meets politics as Winfrey stumps for Obama. *New York Times* [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/09/us/politics/09oprah.html?\\_r=1&fta=y](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/09/us/politics/09oprah.html?_r=1&fta=y)