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## REMEMBERING THE REVEREND: AN ANALYSIS OF OBAMA'S SPEECHES COMMEMORATING MARTIN LUTHER KING

### 1. Introduction

There are places, and moments in America  
where this nation's destiny has been decided. (...)  
Selma is such a place.<sup>1</sup>

In the wake of the 50th anniversary of the Selma-Montgomery marches, the memory of Martin Luther King and his struggles for equality still survives in the minds of American citizens. The echo of his actions and his words persists in Obama's rhetoric and in the construction of his narrative. A connection was drawn between the two when Obama became a serious contender for the nomination as a Democratic candidate in early 2007, due to their shared ethnicity as African-Americans and to the historical significance of having a strong African-American candidate running for the presidency. Obama himself has always shown awareness of this connection, mindful that his candidacy and his election would have never been possible prior to the conquests of the Civil Rights Movement that King had led.

This study investigates how metaphors and myths are employed in Martin Luther King's and Obama's rhetoric. As the analysis will show, both politicians use metaphors to convey positive representations of themselves that contribute to the creation of a narrative feeding back into an ideology of equity and equality and positioning King and Obama as trustworthy leaders and reliable guides for their supporters, who are asked to take action according to a shared belief system. Specifically, we'll see how Obama, in remembering and celebrating the historical figure of Martin Luther King, builds and expands on the ideas and myths employed by the Reverend in his own speeches to create support for himself as a dependable and rightful leader for America, both before and after his election to office.

### 2. Persuasion, metaphors and myths

"Persuasion refers generally to the use of language by one party to encourage another to accept a point of view" (Charteris-Black 2011, 13). Persuasion is a core concept in politics, as language is used by politicians to convince the audience of a point of view or of a course of action to take. Verbal and non-verbal strategies are employed by politicians delivering speeches in order to persuade their audience of the truth of their words. Charteris-Black (14; 2014) has theorized five means of persuasion that contribute to influencing an audience. The first three are establishing ethical integrity, or "having the right intentions;" communicating political arguments, or "thinking right;" heightening emotional impact, or "sounding right." These persuasive devices are based directly on Aristotle's artistic proofs, respectively ethos, logos and pathos. Ethos constitutes an appeal to credibility: the orator establishes a relationship with the audience by showing that he is trustworthy and that he's working for the interest of the collectivity (Charteris-Black 2014, 8-9); logos is an appeal to reason and it is applied to provide objective arguments to support the speaker's stance (11); finally, pathos appeals to the emotions of the audience in order to influence their thoughts (14). The proofs are three core elements of classic rhetoric that are still valid today. There are two other elements to persuasion: "looking right," which involves non-verbal elements of the speech, and "telling the right story," indicating that the speaker provides the audience with mental representations, that is, a set of frames and schemata "that make political actions and agents intelligible by providing an explanation that fits with the audience's previous experience and assumptions about how the world works" (Charteris-Black 2011, 15). These mental representations may be created through the use, on the politician's part, of multiple rhetorical

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<sup>1</sup> Remarks by the President at the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery Marches. March 7, 2015.



strategies, including metaphors. Such figures of speech may be effective rhetorical devices as they provide a frame for the audience to understand complex concepts more easily. Metaphors can activate connections in the mind of the listeners that relate to their pre-existing knowledge of concepts and experiences, therefore facilitating their understanding of such concepts via analogical cognitive processes. Telling the right story is connected to two notions that are related to politics and to each other: ideology and myth. An “ideology is a coherent set of ideas and beliefs adhered to by a group of people that provides an organized and systematic representation of the world about which they can agree” (Charteris-Black 2011, 21-22). By these ideas, “ends and means of organized social action, and specifically political action” (Seliger 14) are explained and justified. Ideology consists in a “set of intentions” that a group of people who share the same values thinks are right; it involves multiple elements that can contribute to persuading an audience. Related to the concept of ideology is that of myth. Myth is used to convey ideology, as it concretizes the ideas and beliefs of ideology, drawing a link between them and the audience’s experience of reality. Myth, unlike ideology, doesn’t necessarily originate in language, but when it does, figurative and evocative language is favored, as it creates emotions in the audience. It is often used in political communication to create specific representations, either positive or negative (Charteris-Black 2011, 22-24).

### 3. Conceptual metaphor theory

As mentioned before, metaphor is used by politicians as a strategy to create myths and tell the right story, as metaphors activate “unconscious emotional associations” (Charteris-Black 2011, 28). Metaphor use in political communication can contribute to influencing the audience by allowing them access to the abstract ideas that make up political myths and the underlying ideology.

“Metaphor is a figure of speech that is typically used in persuasive political myths and arguments; this is because it represents a certain mental representation that reflects a shared system of belief as to what the world is and culture-specific beliefs about mankind’s place in it” (Charteris-Black 2011, 44). It is an important skill for a politician to be able to use metaphors in a creative and appropriate way, finding the right elements to evoke frames and ideas to articulate a narration that is consistent with his or her social and political values to persuade an audience to take a specific political action.

The role of the metaphor is to draw a connection between two elements that would not be normally related, using language to convey thoughts and ideas that are “rooted in cultural and historical knowledge” (Charteris-Black 2014, 160).

In order to understand how metaphors may be used as rhetorical devices in political communication, the concepts of metaphor and of cognitive metaphor theory should first be illustrated. Using the framework of cognitive linguistics, Lakoff and Johnson, in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By*, argued that metaphors seem to underlie our conceptual life to a significant degree, influencing and shaping our perceptions of the world. Understanding abstract notions often entails the creation of a connection with what is already a part of the human experience: indeed, “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff and Johnson 5). In order to illustrate the idea of metaphorical concept, the linguists used the common conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR, which occurs in everyday language, as per the expressions “he *attacked every weak point* in my argument” and “I *demolished* his argument (Lakoff and Johnson 4, emphasis in original). The core issue is that conceptual metaphors are not only related to language, but they inform our actions and our understanding of the concepts involved in the metaphor. To go briefly back to the concept of ARGUMENT, “we talk about arguments that way because we conceive of them that way – and we act according to the way we conceive of things” (Lakoff and Johnson 5). As put forward by Kövecses (7), conceptual metaphors are unidirectional, that is, the meaning shift occurs from the concrete to the abstract, and not vice versa, as comprehension of abstract notions is activated through the association with experiences in the physical domain. Systematic metaphorical correspondences, or mapping (Grady 190), indicate how the target domain of the metaphor can be understood via linguistic elements pertaining to the source domain. Blending theory, as theorized by Fauconnier and Turner (1994, 1998), takes a step further than conceptual metaphor theory, involving four distinct cognitive spaces rather than two domains, allowing for the complete analysis of more complex metaphors involving multiple sets of associations (Charteris-Black 2011): the four spaces involved are two



separate input spaces, a generic space drawing an association between the two inputs, and a blended space resulting from the combination of the three other spaces.

By providing the audience with associations through the use of metaphors, politicians not only aid comprehension of abstract concepts, but they frame and simplify them. This, according to Mio (1997, 21), contributes to persuasion, as aiding comprehension and providing access to the unintelligible “can be rewarding for (the) recipients and therefore persuasive.”

Politicians often use recurring conventional metaphors that are articulated differently by different politicians and in different situations. Indeed, politicians do not often strive to create new metaphors and introduce new concepts, but, on the contrary, decide which metaphors can best persuade their audience of the validity of the course of action they want them to undertake, and use these metaphors recurrently in their speeches, or across multiple speeches (cf. Edelman 1964). This will be seen in Obama’s speeches, which both draw on conventional metaphors and echo Martin Luther King’s own use of metaphors as to create a continuing narrative supporting and expanding on the social values and political actions highlighted by the Reverend 30 years prior.

#### **4. Martin Luther King and Obama: rhetorical continuities.**

Martin Luther King is undoubtedly remembered for his preeminent role as a leader of the African-American Civil Rights Movement and his significant contribution to the struggle for racial equality in the 1960’s, culminating in the ratification of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. In addition to his role as an activist, he is also remembered as one of the greatest American orators thanks to the iconic speeches he delivered over the years.

King understood the power of the spoken language, and he expertly used his rhetorical ability to support his positions on racial equality. He tapped into the traditions of the African-American community and into his own experience as a Baptist minister, creating a style that Charteris-Black defined as ‘African-American liturgical’ (2014: 31). He understood that liturgy, “through communal singing and an emotive, interactive style of preaching, prepared ordinary people to do extraordinary things” (Ling 2015: 12), and he adopted this style in his political activity, using call-and-response exchanges involving familiar quotes from hymns or the Bible (Charteris-Black 2014: 31) that urged the audience to participate actively. He also had the ability to draw on the shared cultural and historical experience of slavery upon which a common African-American identity is constructed, taking inspiration from the “rich traditions of slave preachers whose discourse had sustained black people during their time of suffering” (Charteris-Black 2011: 79) in order to create a common social purpose to give meaning to the political actions he was advocating for. King’s skills as an orator are almost paralleled by those of President Barack Obama, whose own speeches have repeatedly shown his rhetorical abilities. The use he made of language in his campaign speeches, Degani states, “seemed to prove an innate disposition for crafting messages that can speak to and inspire many different Americans” (Degani 2015, 2), his communication skills making him “(stand) out as a virtuoso of rhetoric” (ivi, 3).

Still, Obama is no stranger to alluding to great historical figures and politicians in his speeches. Obama’s rhetoric has been influenced by previous presidents and statesmen; to give but a few examples, he frequently quotes Franklin D. Roosevelt and John Kennedy as well as echo the ideas expressed by Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Luther King himself (Mieder 2009).

The latter has strongly influenced Obama’s rhetoric on multiple accounts, as will be seen in the following sections. Obama does not restrain? restrain from quoting Martin Luther King directly or indirectly in his own speeches, as may be seen in the examples below:

King inspired with words not of anger, but of an urgency, a fierce urgency that still speaks to us today. ‘Unity’, he said, ‘is the great need of the hour.’ ‘Unity is the great need of the hour.’ Unity is how we shall overcome.” (Obama 2008a)

(America) was there for the buses in Montgomery, the hoses in Birmingham, a bridge in Selma, and a preacher from Atlanta who told a people that ‘We Shall Overcome’. Yes we can. (Obama 2008b)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Barack Obama election victory speech, November 4 2008.



The position of all working Americans, regardless of color, has eroded, making the dream Dr. King described even more elusive. (Obama 2013)

The hyper-themes of the Declaration of Independence<sup>3</sup> and of the US Constitution<sup>4</sup> are core elements common to both King's and Obama's rhetoric (Boyd 2009). King believed that the Declaration of Independence and the Preamble to the Constitution were a promise to every American citizen, as stated in his iconic "I have a Dream" speech (Sundquist 2011).

In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.<sup>5</sup>

While the allusion to these words comes originally from Lincoln's Gettysburg address (1863), they were however filtered "through the image and language of King" (Sundquist 2011, 31). Obama draws heavily from the image of the two founding texts of the United States of America, remarking, just like King, that so far America has fallen short of the ideal of equality that is clearly stated in them. In a 2008 speech, Obama adopts the same financial metaphor King used in his speech during his 2008 address at Ebenezer Baptist Church - where King had been a pastor - remarking that "we can't celebrate Dr. King's dream, and yet still have insufficient funds to cash that promissory note that was promised at the beginning of this nation." Obama goes as far as comparing the two texts to religious texts, and the message they deliver as a creed that should be followed in order to reach the equality that King strived for and that has not yet been reached even at the end of an African-American president's second mandate.

That's why Selma is not some outlier in the American experience. That's why it's not a museum or static monument to behold from a distance. It is instead the manifestation of a creed written into our founding documents (Obama 2015).

The idea of equality that was one of the main driving forces behind the Selma to Montgomery marches may be related to the value of unity, which is one of the main political principles identified in Obama's presidential campaign (Degani 194-5) and beyond, and which may in turn be related to the myth of the American Creed, as put forward by Hammer:

Obama tells the story of the American nation as orientated towards the fulfillment of the promise of the American Creed. The loyalty of the American public is thus concentrated onto the American Creed and upon Barack Obama as the candidate who will lead the nation towards its own destiny. (279)

Obama, through an expert use of rhetoric and of his communication skills, tells the right story by creating for himself an image of the perfect leader of the United States, the only one that could guide American citizens to follow the creed and contribute to the fulfillment of the statements of equality found in the founding documents of the nation. The echo of Martin Luther King's own rhetoric and myths in his speeches contributes to the construction of Obama's image and to persuading the audience to take specific political actions

## 5. Methodology

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<sup>3</sup> "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." U.S Declaration of Independence, 1776.

<sup>4</sup> "We the people, in order to make a more perfect union" U.S Constitution Preamble, 1787.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkhaveadream.htm>. Last visited September 2, 2016.



The aim of this paper is to identify the main recurring themes and rhetorical strategies employed by Barack Obama when remembering and commemorating the iconic figure of Martin Luther King and the events that marked the struggle for civil rights in the mid-sixties. Specifically, the analysis focuses on the study of conceptual metaphors and the myths expressed by such metaphors for persuasive purposes that appear to be drawn from King's rhetoric and employed, or expanded upon, by Obama for the construction of his own narrative as a leader worthy of the trust of the American people.

Seven speeches delivered by Obama between 2006 and 2015 were selected for this purpose. The speeches analyzed span a period that see Obama as a senator first and during both his mandates as the President of the United States later.

As already mentioned, the speeches commemorated either the figure of Martin Luther King or events related to his role as leader of the Civil Rights Movement, as specified in the list of speeches below.

1. 13 Nov 2006. M Luther King Jr. National Memorial Groundbreaking, Washington D.C.<sup>6</sup>
2. 4 March 2007. Remarks at the Selma Voting Rights March Commemoration in Selma, Alabama<sup>7</sup>
3. January 20, 2008a. Address at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, GA (King had been a pastor there with his father from 1959 to his assassination)<sup>8</sup>
4. 17 January 2010. Remarks by the President in Remembrance of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. <sup>9</sup>
5. 16 October 2011. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Dedication<sup>10</sup>
6. 28 August 2013. Remarks by the President at the "Let Freedom Ring" Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington.<sup>11</sup>
7. 07 March 2015. Remarks by the President at the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery Marches.<sup>12</sup>

The speeches are analyzed following a mixed approach that integrates conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) and critical discourse analysis. Conceptual metaphor theory is therefore applied to the persuasive genre of political speeches, as the analysis aims at identifying significant recurrent metaphors in the selected texts and determining which can be ascribed to overarching cognitive metaphors playing a persuasive purpose in the texts. In order to understand why certain metaphors were selected in certain speech circumstances, it is necessary to go beyond the co-text of the metaphor and take into account, in addition to other rhetorical strategies that may be employed in the speeches, also "the broader social and political context" (Charteris-Black 2014, 176). While specific metaphors may pertain specifically to a single speech and provide insights into the style of a politician (local system), by analyzing a wider sample of texts that include allusions to other speakers, metaphors pertaining to discourse systems may be identified. Allusions and intertextuality are not uncommon in political discourse, as politicians continuously refer to metaphors pronounced by both their allies and their opponents, in the latter case to refute their argument or to discredit them. In our case, intertextuality is a core element, as the analysis of Obama's speeches aims at finding echoes and elaborations on the metaphors already used by Martin Luther King. Allusions to metaphors used by other orators "also arouses stronger emotions by transferring the emotions aroused by the historical memory of admired and loved past leaders" (Charteris-Black 2011, 207), contributing to the persuasive effect of the words of the speaker.

<sup>6</sup><https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/10/16/president-obama-martin-luther-king-jr-memorial-dedication-we-will-overcome>. Last visited September 2, 2016.

<sup>7</sup><http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobama/barackobamabrownchapel.htm>. Last visited September 2, 2016.

<sup>8</sup><http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobama/barackobamaebenezerbaptist.htm>. Last visited September 2, 2016.

<sup>9</sup><https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-remembrance-dr-martin-luther-king-jr>. Last visited September 2, 2016.

<sup>10</sup><http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobama/barackobamamlkmemorialdedication.htm>. Last visited September 2, 2016.

<sup>11</sup><https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/28/remarks-president-let-freedom-ring-ceremony-commemorating-50th-anniversa>. Last visited September 2, 2016.

<sup>12</sup><https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/07/remarks-president-50th-anniversary-selma-montgomery-marches>. Last visited September 2, 2016.



Metaphors, and the myths they contribute to construct, can be used as both legitimization and delegitimization strategies (Chilton 2004). In this paper, the metaphors that are looked at contribute to legitimization; the metaphorical elements are used in speeches to provide a positive representation of the people or actions involved, namely, King and Obama themselves as they create for themselves identities as valid leaders.

## 6. Discussion of findings

Three conceptual metaphors that were found to characterize King's speeches in Charteris-Black's 2011 study were alluded to and employed repeatedly in Obama's speeches, as he merged King's voice with his own and employed those metaphors and built on the myth that King had created through his rhetoric. He built his own narrative on an established base, using familiar myths that his audience were already familiar with, articulating his argument for the end of inequalities between segments of the American population.

### 6.1 Metaphor of the Journey.

Unsurprisingly, Obama used the journey metaphor, which is one of the most common metaphorical vehicles in political speeches, as it allows historical and political experience to be described through the physical experience of movement. According to Charteris-Black (2011, 47), the journey metaphor is appealing to politicians especially because they can invest themselves with the role of guides, leading the audience to a shared political goal. Through the use of the same metaphor, politicians can represent their audience and supporters as fellow travelers, enhancing an idea of cooperation and of collective actions that are often expressed in political speeches through the systematic use of the inclusive pronoun 'we'. In his speeches, Obama adopts the metaphor of the journey as used by Martin Luther King, but he builds on it by shifting back and forth between the metaphorical meaning and the literal meaning, including the actual Selma marches into the wider metaphorical journey to racial and social equality. Journey metaphors are particularly relevant in King's oratory, as "marching was the most effective protest method employed by the civil rights movement" (Charteris Black 2011, 88), and Obama draws on the juxtaposition, rather than the subsuming, of the source domain into the target domain.

As put forward by Charteris-Black, in Martin Luther King's speeches, "the whole of human history is likened to a journey in which human intellectual, aesthetic and social progress can be represented by a conceptual metaphor" (Charteris-Black 2011, 73) that can be defined as THE HISTORIC STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM IS A JOURNEY. The destination of this journey is the Promised Land, which leads us to another conceptual metaphor recurring in Martin Luther King's speeches that exists alongside the metaphor of the journey: THE SECULAR PRESENT IS THE SACRED PAST. Events and characters of the Old Testament are mirrored in contemporary history. Martin Luther King's promised land is not a place as much as it represents an American society where all men are considered equal and have granted the same rights. King merges «biblical time with present time» (Charteris-Black 2011, 61). We will come back to this metaphor and the myth it conveys in the following section.

Obama's use of the journey metaphor may be related to the hyper-theme of the founding documents of the United States, which contributes to persuading his audience that his political position is the right one. By referencing the words of the founding fathers, he is stimulating positive associations with previous leaders and appealing to emotion. There is an element of circularity in that the words in the Declaration of Independence and Preamble of the Constitution are both the starting point of American's history and the destination of King's and Obama's metaphorical journey.

These are not just words. They are a living thing, a call to action, a roadmap for citizenship and an insistence in the capacity of free men and women to shape our own destiny. For founders like Franklin and Jefferson, for leaders like Lincoln and FDR, the success of our experiment in self-government rested on engaging all our citizens in this work. That's what we celebrate here in Selma. That's what this movement was all about, one leg in our long journey toward freedom. (Obama 2015)



The words of the founding fathers are likened to a creed, exploiting the religious theme. These words are likened to a roadmap; they provide the direction American citizens should follow in order to reach complete equality. In the religious metaphor, these words have almost a divine element to them, and they point the way to the destination, that is, the promised land. In the speech commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery marches, Obama highlights the civil rights movement and the marches as a crucial step in the historical struggle for equality. Both metaphors are exploited by Obama, who “makes use of the forward-looking tropes in Judeo-Christianity to evoke a journey of collective moral striving that leads to a Promised Land” (Ferrara 133).

Be strong and have courage and let us cross over that Promised Land together (Obama 2007).

Like Moses before him, he would never live to see the Promised Land. But from the mountain top, he pointed the way for us –. (Obama 2006)

In his remembrance speech given on Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 2010, Obama quoted the Reverend directly in his use of both metaphors:

(...) understanding, as he said in 1956, that “we can walk and never get weary, because we know there is a great camp meeting in the promised land of freedom and justice.” (Obama 2010)

The literal action of walking in the Selma-Montgomery marches is incorporated into the journey metaphor by Obama. The event of the March is embedded in Obama’s own political narrative and his interpretation of the journey metaphor. The metaphor of the journey intertwines two of the most memorable events that marked the Civil Rights struggle: The March on Washington (1963) and the Selma to Montgomery marches. In his description of the journey towards a more perfect union, Obama often uses a language that creates an association with these events in the audience. A frequency search for the terms *marcher*, *march*, *to march*, and their inflections resulted in 64 occurrences in the corpus. Each of them, in a way, echoes the literal marches of the 1960s.

Fellow marchers, so much has changed in fifty years. (Obama 2015)

That tireless teacher who gets to class early and stays late and dips into her own pocket to buy supplies because she believes that every child is her charge -- she's marching. That successful businessman who doesn't have to, but pays his workers a fair wage and then offers a shot to a man, maybe an ex-con, who's down on his luck -- he's marching. (Obama 2013)

Furthermore, using such a loaded word as the preferred linguistic instantiation of the journey metaphor, highlights the idea of traveling as a collective endeavor. Here, indeed, Obama identifies his supporters as fellow travelers sharing the same social and political purpose, participating directly and actively to promote the change he’s advocating in their daily life. This element may be linked to the value of cooperation, that will be explored later in the paper, and to the conceptual metaphor THE SECULAR PRESENT IS THE SACRED PAST, as the present American context is directly linked to an event that while recent, has become iconic, and, like his leader, has acquired an almost divine halo in the collective imagination.

## **6.2 Moses and Joshua: The secular present is the sacred past.**

In the speeches taken into consideration, Martin Luther King builds a messianic myth for himself that is intertwined with the THE SECULAR PRESENT IS THE SACRED PAST metaphor. King makes multiple references to the Old Testament book of *Exodus*, which tells the story of how the Israelites, guided by Moses, escaped Egyptian slavery and set on their journey towards the land they’d been promised by God. Martin Luther King compares the struggle of the Israelites with that of African-American people in the United States as they fought for civil rights. In his famous “I’ve been to the mountaintop” speech delivered in



Memphis in 1968, the night before he was assassinated, the Reverend took upon himself the role of Moses, leading African-Americans through their journey to end segregation.

I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!<sup>13</sup>

Like Moses, he follows God's will. He is aware that freedom and equality may not be achieved within his lifetime, but his words here have the purpose to reassure and encourage activists to continue in their struggle. In the metaphor identified by Charteris-Black (2011), the secular present is equated to the biblical past, evoking for their struggle a positive outcome that justifies all the struggles and setbacks of the civil rights movement and contributes to creating unity and reinforcing the common purpose.

Obama exploits King's messianic myth in the early days of his campaign to find a place for himself in the narrative of *Exodus*, creating a "formulation of a grand narrative that situated Obama within a familiar and resonant sacred story" (Guterman 2013). Obama frames the Selma-Montgomery marches and the march on Washington as a step, "one leg" in the journey towards freedom and establishes a place for himself in that journey by borrowing and building on Martin Luther King Jr.'s metaphor and the messianic myth emerging from his speeches. Through his words, Obama positions himself as Martin Luther King's successor and the person who can finally guide people into the promised land and, therefore, he invests himself with an almost divine role. His references to religion act as expressions of the metaphor and start building his own metaphorical, biblical counterpart in the sacred past in order to persuade his listeners to support him as a candidate. In 2007, Obama gave a speech at the Selma Voting Rights March Commemoration in Selma, Alabama, in which he adopted Martin Luther King's identification with Moses, including the people that marched with him sharing that same vision.

Like Moses, they challenged Pharaoh, the princes, powers who said that some are atop and others are at the bottom, and that's how it's always going to be. (Obama 2007)

Martin Luther King and his civil rights movement activists are defined as the Moses generation. Obama then builds on the biblical narrative, introducing the biblical figure of Joshua and contrasting Martin Luther King's Moses generation with the contemporary Joshua's generation. In the Book of Numbers, Moses receives orders from God to appoint Joshua as the new leader of the Israelites (Numbers 27, 16-23). It is eventually Joshua who leads the people to the conquest of the promised land of Canaan, finishing the work that Moses had started but knew he couldn't finish. In the excerpt below, Obama reminds his audience that the work of the Moses generation and the sacrifices made by activists during the Selma marches allowed him to have the right, as a black man, to start his campaign for the presidential primaries that lead to his election in 2008. However, the journey to the promised land and to real equality is not yet over, as Obama states in the excerpt below.

I'm here because somebody marched. I'm here because you all sacrificed for me. I stand on the shoulders of giants. I thank the Moses generation; but we've got to remember, now, that Joshua still had a job to do. As great as Moses was, despite all that he did, leading a people out of bondage, he didn't cross over the river to see the Promised Land. God told him your job is done. You'll see it. You'll be at the mountain top and you can see what I've promised. What I've promised to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. You will see that I've fulfilled that promise but you won't go there.

We're going to leave it to the Joshua generation to make sure it happens. (Obama 2007)

Obama positions himself as the rightful descendant of Martin Luther King. The association with the story in the Bible resonates in the audience's minds and contributes to projecting the idea that Obama has a role to

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/Martin Luther Kinggivebeentothemountaintop.htm](http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/Martin%20Luther%20King%20gives%20to%20the%20mountain%20top.htm). Last visited September 2, 2016.



fulfill in the African-American people's journey to freedom as the legitimate heir to Martin Luther King and his movement. He constructs a similar messianic narrative, where his candidacy appears to be written in fate. He becomes the secular embodiment of the sacred figure of Joshua, with his supporters representing the Joshua generation; he picks up where Martin Luther King could not continue, and he is the only one than can lead his people to the end of their struggle. To vote for Obama means ensuring that the struggle for civil rights may move forward and find its accomplishment under Obama's administration. Through this metaphor, his candidacy acquires legitimacy as well as a sort of divine endorsement. By threading a direct link from Martin Luther King to himself, Obama encourages his audience to think about him and his future actions as president in the same terms as they do of Martin Luther King's accomplishments in the civil rights struggle.

### **6.3 Martin Luther King as Citizen and Messiah: resilience and a call to action.**

Obama's construction of Martin Luther King's figure as Moses, however, takes on a second layer in other speeches among those that were analyzed. While, on the one hand, Martin Luther King was equated to a biblical leader that freed his people from slavery, the messianic myth of Martin Luther King coexists with the description of his ultimately human nature. The messianic dimension exists alongside his human dimension and fulfills different persuasive purposes. Where the messianic myth depicts Martin Luther King as a god-chosen leader as well as Obama's predecessor, giving faith to the people, underlining his humanity serves the purpose of calling citizens to action.

By his own accounts, he was a man frequently racked with doubt, a man not without flaws, a man who, like Moses before him, more than once questioned why he had been chosen for so arduous a task - the task of leading a people to freedom, the task of healing the festering wounds of a nation's original sin. (Obama 2006)

At the 2006 groundbreaking ceremony for the Martin Luther King memorial in Washington, Obama highlighted Martin Luther King's flaws as a human even as he reinforced the messianic myth by drawing a comparison with Moses. He doesn't renounce the divine role of Martin Luther King, but he introduces a human element of imperfection to him. Later, while serving his second term as president, Obama gave a second speech for the inauguration of that memorial. In the two excerpts below, the separation between the representation of Martin Luther King as a human instead of a mythical figure appears to be further enhanced.

a black preacher with no official rank or title who (...) helped make our union more perfect.  
(Obama 2011)

It is precisely because Dr. King was a man of flesh and blood and not a figure of stone that he inspires us so. His life, his story, tells us that change can come if you don't give up. (Obama 2011)

In his second term, Obama no longer needs to rely on the messianic, biblical narrative to represent Martin Luther King and himself as messiah with a specific role handed by God, and indeed Obama drops the comparison with Moses. Rather than a myth, Martin Luther King is described as a human being with doubts and insecurities, as a simple person who, through his courage and his actions, managed to set in motion a movement that resulted in iconic achievement for the segregated African-American community. The Reverend's humanity is strongly emphasized, reminding the audience that while we may consider this man a veritable historical figure and an icon today, at the time he had no idea of the critical impact his activism would have on American society. Before becoming Moses, before being sculpted in stone, Martin Luther King was a man, not unlike many others standing in the crowd listening to Obama's speech. What made him an icon is that he never gave up and never faltered in front of difficulties and threats. His resilience in the face of all odds was what permitted him to change his people's life. Martin Luther King "the human" becomes more relatable than Martin Luther King "the historical icon" or the "biblical character"; showing his human side allows Obama to bring the notion of resilience to the fore, and, as a result, perform a call to action. Each



member of the audience, by following in Martin Luther King's steps, can contribute to "perfecting the Union," as Obama said in his 2008 speech "A More Perfect Union," quoting the Preamble of the Constitution.

I know it's tempting to give up on the political process (...) Progress is possible. Don't give up on voting. Don't give up on advocacy. Don't give up on activism. (Obama 2010)

The antithesis in the excerpt above, followed by the anaphora built on the phrase 'Don't give up on' underlines the need for people to take action to promote change in the United States. His followers need to have the same resilience shown by King and the other "Moseses" who "got us through that first mile" (Obama 2015).

This sentiment, echoed in many of his speeches, may be linked back to one of the main elements of Obama's rhetoric, that is, the notion of cooperation. Degani identifies different metaphors expressing cooperation, of which the most distinctive is COOPERATION AS MOTION TOGETHER ALONG A PATH. The metaphor has various linguistic instantiations in the speeches, most of them introduced by the inclusive pronoun we, as in: "in the struggle for justice and for equality, we cannot walk alone. In the struggle for opportunity and justice, we cannot walk alone (Obama 2008a)" and "when we turn not from each other or on each other but towards one another, and we find that we do not walk alone (Obama 2013)". Cooperation is equated to forward motion that brings positive change, covering ground in American society's journey towards freedom. "To do things together for the country, and hence for the common good, equals moving the country forward" (Degani 191). In order to abolish racial inequalities, Americans need to promote change through their own deeds. Obama once again merges his voice with King's when he encourages his supporters to act:

Dr. King refused to accept what he called the "isness" of today. He kept pushing towards the "oughtness" of tomorrow. (Obama 2011)

Through his words, Obama reiterates the antithesis between standing still – isness – and moving forward – oughtness -, continuing the struggle for civil rights that had been part of King's own rhetoric, as put forward by Charteris-Black: "King again uses the antithesis between positive evaluation of forward movement and negative evaluation of stopping" (Charteris-Black 2011, 73). Obama similarly states that inaction halts the process of fulfillment of the American promise, and pushes people to action. This sentiment may be conceptualized with two companion metaphors, namely FORWARD MOVEMENT IS GOOD and STOPPING IS BAD. Both ideas may be related to the value of cooperation as a force to push America forward in its evolution as well as other two of the main values embedded in Obama's rhetoric, namely unity and opportunity (Degani 2015).

## 7. Conclusion.

The analysis of Obama's speeches carried out in this study has shown that Obama adopts many of the metaphorical concepts that also characterized Martin Luther King's most iconic speeches. In the seven analyzed speeches, Obama honors the memory of King by making multiple references to his words, rhetoric and myth, merging his voice with that of the Reverend (Miller 2013) to build a narrative that sees Obama as the rightful heir to King. Obama constructs a role for himself as the person who can take up his legacy and complete his work. While King saw the Promised Land, but couldn't lead his community to it, Obama's role in the narrative, as implied by the reference to Joshua, will be the one to complete the journey towards freedom and equality.

There is another way in which Obama expands on the narrative set up by King in the '60s. While the struggle of those years was specifically aimed at obtaining civil rights and racial equality for the still segregated African-American community, the scope of the civil rights struggle in Obama's time encompasses the economic crisis, access to healthcare, rights for women, immigrants, LGBT community, disabled Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, as may be read in the following excerpt:



the doors of opportunity swung open not just for African-Americans, but for every American. Women marched through those doors. Latinos marched through those doors. Asian-Americans, gay Americans, and Americans with disabilities came through those doors. (Obama 2015)

Here, the journey metaphor is once again highlighted as well as Martin Luther King's historical role in taking his people through an important part of that journey. However, the positive change brought about by the civil rights movement of the 60's was not limited to the African-American community. In the following years, other minorities have followed in that same path, thanks to the work of an older generation "that (removed) barriers so as to allow free motion forward to the generations to come" (Degani 196). However, as Obama explicitly states in his remarks at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Selma marches, "our work is never done."

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