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New Forms of Exclusion and Manifestations of Racism in Barack Obama’s Rhetoric of Immigration Reform

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NEW FORMS OF EXCLUSION AND MANIFESTATIONS OF RACISM IN BARACK
OBAMA’S RHETORIC OF IMMIGRATION REFORM

by

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New Forms of Exclusion and Manifestations of Racism in Barack Obama’s Rhetoric of Immigration Reform
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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
New Forms of Exclusion and Manifestations of Racism in Barack Obama’s Rhetoric of Immigration Reform

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Lisa A. Flores

Abstract: In this master’s thesis I situate President Barack Obama’s 2011 speech on comprehensive immigration reform as representative of a larger body of immigration reform rhetoric and driving force behind current efforts to pass new legislation. My analysis exposes rhetorically significant aspects of the speech that are of interest to immigration and race scholars. I argue that the President’s rhetoric served to conceal a commitment to protect the economic interests of hegemonic whiteness that dominate in contemporary U.S. American society. In the different chapters of this thesis I interrogate rhetorical strategies that served to silence questions of racial segregation, racisms, and even race altogether. I examine and challenge President Obama’s ideological subscription to neoliberal principles and the language of late-capitalism that tend to portray immigrants as either economic commodities or threats. This reductionist approach of Obama’s rhetoric concealed established societal feelings of xenophobia, racism, and general exclusion of the un-American. Despite a seemingly race-neutral language, President Obama defined the limits of national belonging as products of a public ideology dominated by whiteness, neoliberal politics, and enchantment with protecting national sovereignty and borders.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In times of economic turmoil social issues often remain neglected in the shadows of political debates. Such was the case in 2012 during the 57th quadrennial presidential election race in the United States of America. The presidency of the country was going to be determined around several focal issues affecting the nation. A poll by Gallup found that the dominant issues for Americans that would influence their voting decisions were the economy, unemployment, and the national deficit (Gallup, 2012). The issue of immigration was recognized as important by a mere two percent of Americans. Often ignored and categorized as secondary or tangential, the issue of U.S. immigration has been a long-standing point of rhetorical contention. It occupies an ambiguous middle ground between competing narratives of nationalism, economic need, and human equality. The American nation is torn apart by a desire to hold on to an idealized but incongruous image of the past and a world of globalized society that wants to move forward. In this battle of competing narratives, the issue of immigration reform took the political and social spotlight in recent years. In particular, during the 2012 presidential race the issue was framed in economic terms, and was lauded as a potential solution to the country’s economic troubles.

With the current master’s thesis, I examine modern immigration reform rhetoric as exemplified by President Barack Obama. Situating the study around a public address by the President, I unpack and reveal issues of race, nationhood, and belonging within his rhetoric. Through a rhetorical criticism of the address, I inform readers about inconsistencies in Obama’s vision of comprehensive immigration reform that allegedly reflected the values of the United
States as a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants. Several areas of interest emerge as a result of unpacking the President’s rhetoric of immigration. Nationhood as a historical concept is central to understanding the American identity and what it means to be an American. Related are the concepts of belonging and exclusion, which historically have been largely dependent on politics of race and ethnicity, dictated by age-old idiosyncrasies involving racist and neo-racist ideologies and rhetorical moves. Additionally, over the past several decades the politics and principles of neoliberalism have influenced immigration rhetorics to privilege immigrants’ economic worth and capacity to contribute in determining their inclusion in national space and publics. Such tensions underpin we vs. they dichotomies between citizens and immigrants, as well as a socially pervasive trend of xenophobia justified by the desire to protect national identity and national sovereignty. Furthermore, the concept of space becomes problematized as a result of the U.S./Mexico border fence construction, serving as both as a material boundary and as a symbol protecting national space. Borders in the context of the 21st century are not so much stable, material places, but they are instead permeable, and shifting, both in function as well as representation. They regulate who is allowed and who is not allowed in the United States of America, but as such they are primarily symbolic and as DeChaine (2012) argued, borders are “products of human symbolic action, created by human agents through particular and often complex rhetorical practices” (p. 3).

In order to systematically show how these issues intersect within the larger discourses of immigration rhetoric, I have chosen as a primary text of analysis the speech President Barack Obama’s delivered in 2011 in El Paso, Texas on the topic of comprehensively reforming the United States’ outdated immigration system. As a central theme in the speech I identify the President’s rhetorical strategy to conceptualize the United States as both a “nation of
immigrants” and a “nation of laws.” In recent years the two terms have appeared numerous times in other President Obama’s speeches and as such exemplify his general rhetorical strategy toward the topic of immigration reform. For instance, he used the terms back in 2007 when he was first running for the presidential post at an interview held at the University of California at Davis, where he advocated that “we are a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants” (Obama, 2007). He then used the terms again during a 2008 debate with his opponent for the presidency, John McCain, noting that “we must assert our values and reconcile our principles as a nation of immigrants and a nation of laws” (Obama, 2008). In fact, Obama continues to use the nation of laws/nation of immigrants parallel to this day, most recently seen in his 2013 speech in Las Vegas, Nevada when he announced his official plan for immigration reform.

It is important to recognize these competing terms of “nation of immigrants” and “nation of laws” as loaded terms, in which the three words that constitute them - nation, immigrants and laws - possess rhetorical significance of their own. In order to fully realize the rhetoric of President Obama’s speech, I dig into the rhetorical history of these terms in the context of immigration in the United States of America. Several historical paths emerge and intersect here: 1) the formation of nation, nationhood, and nationalistic culture in the United States; 2) past and current laws and policies that have relied on racial politics to define citizenship and belonging, as well as to regulate who is allowed in the country and who is forbidden access; 3) the continuous binary of xenophilia/xenophobia (see Honig, 2001) that positions immigrants as either beneficial and economically imperative, or sees them as foreign, economically burdensome, often racialized bodies who seek to destroy the purity and progress of the American nation; and finally 4) the ways that borders have functioned historically and rhetorically as measures of immigration control and law enforcement. Throughout this master’s thesis I outline the rhetorical significance
of the intersection of the four paths in the rhetoric of President Obama. Ultimately, I argue that the President’s rhetoric masked and obscured the intersection of these paths through a language of dominant whiteness and neoliberal politics. The President largely dismissed racisms as problems of the past and silenced their present manifestations through his allegedly race-neutral language. Through his racially color-blind approach, Obama replaced the role of race, and instead emphasized economic worth and ability to contribute as primary criteria for establishing national belonging and citizenship. Even though his purpose in the speech was to define a middle ground between the terms “nation of immigrants” and “nation of laws,” his rhetoric revealed the insurmountable divide between the two in current immigration reform discourses (both pro- and anti-immigrant). Within his rhetorical strategy, Obama situated the two terms “nation of immigrants” and “nation of laws” as collaboratively working to shape modern American society, yet his rhetoric revealed ideological oppositions between the two, caused by age-old unresolved problems of nationalism and racism in United States society.

Central issues in the study are the concepts of race and racism, and their impacts on the topics of immigration and national belonging. Interestingly, the concept of race did not appear explicitly throughout the President’s speech, yet race occupied a hidden role that was rhetorically silenced. Specifically, the proximity and materiality of the border, along with the predominant majority of Hispanics in the audience, positioned racialized immigrants as the Third Persona – the group that was excluded from the discourse (Wander, 1984).

A key focus of my analysis in the study is to locate the material realities of race in the context of immigration and the significance of their strategic omission in the President’s address. Considering the fact that the history of immigration in the United States is littered with incidents and policies grounded in racial segregation and prejudice based on ethnicity, a cursory look at
the President’s speech begs the question - were these just problems of the past? Had political rhetoric of U.S. immigration finally become racially neutral? Had Barack Obama transcended racial politics? On the surface, the President’s speech suggested that race, ethnicity and nationality were no longer factors in immigration rhetoric, and that belonging and nationhood depended on the embodiment of the ideal that “in embracing America, you can become American” (Obama, 2011). Through my analysis, I unmask the hidden elements of racial segregation and exclusion that underlie the President’s speech. I argue that in the speech President Obama neglected a history of racism and exclusion as foundations for contemporary U.S. immigration and foreign policies. I interrogate Obama’s vision of comprehensive immigration reform, which he presented as racially neutral, inclusive of all, and reflexive of “our values as a nation of law and a nation of immigrants” (Obama, 2011). I argue that the proposed immigration reform was far from comprehensive, but instead it only served to redefine the limits of national inclusion. Despite Obama’s allegedly race-neutral language, the new limits were still products of a public ideology dominated by whiteness, neoliberal politics, and enchantment with protecting national sovereignty and borders. Through my argument, I situate the President’s rhetoric in the larger pool of discourses about immigration, immigrants, and immigration reform, and ultimately aim to contribute to the rhetorical scholarship on race and immigration.

My academic interest in studying immigration rhetoric stems partly from personal interest in the issue and the ways it has affected my own life. As someone who has spent his entire adult life in the United States, all the while following federal and state rules and regulations, I find it baffling that according to current immigration laws I am no closer to establishing citizenship than if I had just arrived in the country. Abroad I am considered an American, but in the United States I continue to be perceived as not-quite-American. For all
intents and purposes, current policies of the U.S. immigration system situate me outside the narrowly defined limits of inclusion. It seems incongruous that the United States, a country established on the principles of freedom and equal opportunity, would continue to uphold a system of immigration that is among the most restrictive and draconian in western civilization. With this thesis I examine the President’s rhetoric surrounding the long-awaited, always postponed, immigration reform, and shed light on its function to maintain restrictions of the current immigration system. My choice of primary text of analysis is guided primarily by the ethos of President Barack Obama as an agent of political and social change. The proposed United States immigration policy reform has been in the political sphere for decades but ever since his initial rise to political fame, President Obama has been touted as an immigration advocate, equal rights proponent, and the person that can lead the nation into a new age of post-racial America (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). The President’s rhetoric is therefore an important and significant object of analysis in terms of immigration rhetoric.

In this master’s thesis I situate President Obama’s speech on the proposed immigration reform as representative of a larger body of immigration reform rhetoric and driving force behind current efforts to pass new legislation. My analysis exposes rhetorically significant aspects of the speech that are of interest to immigration and race scholars. As such, I engage existing studies on the history of immigration, immigration rhetoric and discourses in the United States which I overview briefly in the following sections. I begin with an overview of my methodological frame for studying President Obama’s 2011 El Paso speech on immigration reform.

Methods of analysis

The primary method applied throughout this thesis is rhetorical criticism, which provides an avenue for a structured and detailed analysis, interpretation and criticism of the persuasive
functions of public discourses and political actions (Campbell & Burkholder, 1997, p. 2). Immigration rhetoric is an important area of rhetorical criticism because it speaks directly to contemporary political and social concerns in the United States. It needs to be recognized that in its very nature rhetoric is fundamentally public (Lucaites & Condit, 1999) and pragmatic and is designed to address problems (Campbell & Burkholder, 1997). My methods of criticism and analysis depend on an understanding that rhetoric is not simply designed to transmit information, but to persuade and motivate people to act. The abilities to persuade and be persuaded are integral parts of human nature and depend on the idea that human beings are symbol-using and symbol-misusing animals (Burke, 1945). Language has a rhetorical dimension through which people learn to cohabitate and communicate through the practices of naming, labeling, ordering and identifying. As a result, the definition of national belonging depends on the ability of the American public to (mis)identify with and label potential immigrants through xenophilic or xenophobic lenses. According to McGee (1982), language, and discourse specifically, has to be characterized as material rather than merely representational of mental and empirical phenomena, but more importantly he suggested that language is “a medium, a bridge among human beings” (p. 25-27). Such a conception grants agency to language, it makes language rhetorical and material. Therefore, national identity is not a solid or essential characteristic, but instead it is a continuously modified and redefined material product of language.

This understanding is supported by the idea that rhetoric has a dynamic quality of an architectonic art which has the potential and agency to create new rhetorics (McKeon, 1994). Ultimately, rhetoric creates. Rhetoric creates understanding or disagreement. Historically it has helped create images of immigrants and borders that have become embedded deeply into popular ideology. Rhetoric has the ability to create borders – between nations, between races, between
classes, between cultures, and between opinions. Thus, rhetoric becomes infinitely bounded to ideology. In the words of McGee (1979):

Rhetoric is capable of generating social reality, a mass "consciousness" or "ideology" which is false" only because it is a creature of faith and commitment and thus beyond or prior to both empirical verification and the criticism of logically coordinated inferences. Once created, an ideology becomes the primary inventional source for future rhetorics, future persuasive surgeries upon the mass consciousness. (p. 69)

I argue that this relationship between rhetoric and ideology has been central to the formation, development, and criticism of immigration rhetoric over the years. Rhetorical criticism of immigration rhetoric has the goal to challenge normative ideologies and hegemonic narratives, exposing and demystifying problems of social inequality and injustice. The principle of unpacking and critiquing anti-immigrant, exclusionist rhetorics fits directly within the scope of rhetorical criticism in my current project.

The chapters in this thesis are products of my rhetorical criticism of President Obama’s speech on immigration reform. In conducting this study, I followed the guidelines for rhetorical criticism established by Campbell & Burkholder (1997). I first completed the pre-criticism stages of close intrinsic analysis of the President’s speech, followed by an extrinsic analysis of the context and rhetorical situation. After combining the two I looked for points of intersection that led me to the actual stage of rhetorical criticism presented in this master’s thesis. In following this general framework, I focused on locating the President’s rhetorical position as a political leader capable of influencing social change and affecting the course of immigration reform
discourses. I traced we/they binaries within his speech, as a way to examine the rhetorical position of immigrants as either included or excluded from the American national body.

My analysis focuses on emerging narratives of inclusion/exclusion in President Obama’s speech based around the themes of “nation of laws” and “nation of immigrants.” Flores (2003) noted that “particularly compelling in studies of narrative are accounts of its seductiveness” (p. 366). In the context of President Obama’s immigration reform speech, the idyllic narrative of combining “nation of immigrants” and “nation of laws” in a way that would reflect foundational American ideals and precepts, such as embracing America and pursuing the American dream, is particularly evocative and persuasive. Flores (2003) additionally noted, interpreting Jasinski’s (1993) work, that “the narrative, whether it emerges as a discrete whole or is comprised of cultural fragments, invites participation in its vision of the social world” (p. 366). Ultimately, narrative studies focus on story-telling as a key rhetorical form (Bennett & Edelman, 1985; Fisher, 1984; Flores, 2003; McGee & Nelson, 1985; White, 1987).

In my analysis of narratives in the President’s speech, I also utilize Kenneth Burke’s dramatism as a method for analyzing human relationships (Overington, 1977), and also as a way to better understand how the narratives are constructed and how they function. Within my analysis, I apply the theory of dramatism in a twofold manner. First, I apply it to study the complex relationship between U.S. Americans and immigrants in President Obama’s speech. Second, I apply the method of dramatism to examine the relationships between President Obama and other government figures significant to the topic of immigration reform. Key aspects of dramatism as a method are the concepts of identification, the dramatistic pentad and victimage/scapegoating. I apply the concept of identification in this study by problematizing and unpacking we/they binaries in the President’s rhetoric. The second concept of the dramatistic
pentad is guided by the so-called terministic screens “through which humans see the world” (Campbell & Burkholder, 1997, p. 117). As a result, people’s persuasive efforts can be situated through different pentadic ratios, depending on the relationship between act, scene, agent, agency, purpose and an often forgotten sixth – attitude. By determining the controlling ratios and the ordering of pentadic elements, dramatism provides “a method of determining how a speaker views the world” (Ling, 1970, p. 82). Last but not least, dramatism’s third key aspect refers to a rhetor’s ability to attribute or absolve guilt to certain groups, and position others as victims. As a whole, dramatism facilitates the process of making sense of human socialization and organization practices. Identification, pentadic positioning, and victimage/ scapegoating as central tenants of dramatism are also key tools for the study of immigration rhetoric and the narratives that define national belonging by establishing limits of inclusion. The rhetorical power of narratives stems from the appeals and recognizability of their characterizations (Condit, 1987; Flores, 2003; Lewis, 1987), where “characterizations are the labels attached to agents, acts, scenes, agencies, or purposes in the public vocabulary” (Lucaites & Condit, 1990, p. 7). This conception creates a bridge between narrative analysis and the functions of Burke’s theory of dramatism, and the method of (mis)identification specifically.

Additionally, I argue that the role of audience is crucial to my analysis of President Obama’s rhetoric. I engaged the concepts of the Second Persona (Black, 1970) and Third Persona (Wander, 1984), respectively as the implied and excluded auditors of the 2011 El Paso speech on immigration reform. Black (1970) defined the Second Persona, as the audience implied or projected by the discourse, representing what the rhetor would have his/her auditors become. As an extension, Wander (1984) advanced Black’s idea and posited the existence of a Third Persona – an audience that is negated or excluded by the discourse, but nevertheless
The ability of particular audience groups to identify or misidentify as implied or excluded auditors in Obama’s speech was impacted by his rhetorical strategy that silenced the needs, voices, and significance of immigrants, but also promoted an image of the ideal immigrant.

Ultimately, I apply narrative analysis to the rhetoric of President Obama in his El Paso speech, supplemented by the theory of dramatism and the concepts of Second and Third persona, to outline the formation of rhetorical borders of exclusion. Despite President Obama’s alleged promotion of equality and commitment to destabilize borders and racial segregation practices, he rhetorically constructed new borders of exclusion, based around the principles of whiteness and neoliberalism, which reflected contemporary nationalist attitudes of exclusion and xenophobia.

Next, I provide a brief overview of important moments in United States’ history of immigration and entailing exclusionary practices.

**History of Immigration Restrictions in the United States**

While this thesis is not meant to be a historic analysis of immigration, proper understanding and acknowledgement of the past is imperative to grasp the complexity of the problem today and the challenges a comprehensive immigration reform faces. As Flores (2003) argued, the people of the United States “have long struggled with the role of immigration in the nation’s identity and security” (p.362). In his El Paso speech President Obama similarly acknowledged that as a nation “we’ve often wrestled with the politics of who is and who isn’t allowed to come into this country.” Additionally he noted the history of the United States as a “nation of laws,” as well as a “nation of immigrants,” two terms that have been in a constant struggle since the early years of the United States as a sovereign country.
Over the years numerous scholars (Daniels, 2006; Ferrell, 2006; King, 2000; Ngai, 1999) have commented on the fact that in those early years, while the country was generally welcoming of immigrants, certain groups of immigrants were privileged over others. Early immigration policies were explicitly racist and exclusionary such as the 1790 statute which established naturalization as restricted to only “free white persons” (Daniels, 2006, p. 90). This policy not only excluded blacks, but targeted immigrants from Asia, and more specifically Chinese immigrants. As evidence, Daniels (2006) offered the example of President Theodore Roosevelt who “drew a fundamental distinction between Chinese and all other immigrants” (p. 98). Ultimately, the 1924 Immigration Act put an end to legal immigration from Asia without explicitly identifying nationalities but instead referring to people of Asian origin as “aliens ineligible to citizenship” (Daniels, 2006; Ngai, 1999). And even though Native Americans and Chicano/Chicanas had resided in United States geographic space long before the country was founded, people from these racial and ethnic categories were positioned as inferior ever since the period of geographic and national expansion after 1798 (Ferrell, 2006).

What’s more, Ngai (1999) importantly pointed out that in the nineteenth century the concepts of race and nationality were loosely conflated. In those days white people of certain nationalities were the target of exclusion through policies that favored immigrants from Northern Europe as “better quality” and capable of being better assimilated than immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe (Ferrell, 2006; King, 2000). Quotas were established based on census numbers from 1890, “a time when immigrants still mostly were from Northern Europe” (Ferrell, 2006, p. 145). Not only were the census numbers outdated, but they were also unrepresentative, due to the so called Quota Board manipulating the data that established the quotas. The board created an inaccurate image of the United States population by excluding the
entire populations of Hawaii, Puerto Rico and Alaska, all blacks and mulattoes as “descendants of slave immigrants”, and all Asians as persons “ineligible to citizenship” (Ngai, 1999). The manipulation constructed an image of the United States as a nation of exclusively white people from Northern European descent. The consequently established policies reflected this image in designating immigration quotas that restricted access to U.S. space and publics for certain groups of individuals.

The rhetoric of such exclusionary policies exemplified belief in the unassimilability and undesirability of immigrants of specific race, mental competence, literacy, and criminality, which primarily affected immigrants from southern and Eastern Europe, Asia, and Mexico (King, 2000). The attributed unassimilability established a position of permanent foreignness and inability to ever become American. Rhetoric of the 1920s took a position in which, “illiterate, diseased, or morally suspect, these southern and eastern Europeans threatened to pollute and dilute the homogenous stock of America” (Flores, 2003, p. 368). The policies of the time were a direct result of what was undoubtedly “the most racist and nationalistic era in all American history (Ferrell, 2006, p. 146). King (2000) argued that in addition to privileging an “Anglo-Saxon conception of U.S. identity,” immigration policies in the 1920s “helped solidify the second-class position of nonwhites” in society (p. 3). Within this context, the concept of whiteness was extended beyond arguments about biological race, and was “defined in opposition to nonwhite, an opposition that also marked a boundary between privilege and its opposite” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 77). In those days, non-white, racialized bodies were judicially, socially and politically disadvantaged, especially when they threatened the privileges of whiteness or the American identity (King, 2000; Smith, 1997).
Explicitly racialized immigration laws and policies introduced and maintained between 1790 and 1952 required that immigrants be legally recognized as white to be eligible for citizenship (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Flores, 2003; Lopez, 1996). After passing the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 immigration law moved away from excluding immigrants based on race and instead began exclusion based on an immigrant’s ability to be assimilated into U.S. economic, social, and political structures. Historian Russell Kazal (1995) argued that by the 1960s assimilation was primarily understood as a process “occurring within a society made up of groups clustered around an Anglo-American core” (p. 437). While race was no longer an explicit reason for exclusion, its role remained implicit in rhetoric of the time. An example of this came from a statement by the sponsor of the act, Senator Pat McCarran, who said:

I believe that this nation is the last hope of Western civilization and if this oasis of the world shall be overrun, perverted, contaminated or destroyed, then the last flickering light of humanity will be extinguished. I take no issue with those who would praise the contributions which have been made to our society by people of many races, of varied creeds and colors.... However, we have in the United States today hard-core, indigestible blocs which have not become integrated into the American way of life, but which, on the contrary are its deadly enemies. Today, as never before, untold millions are storming our gates for admission and those gates are cracking under the strain. (McCarran, 1953, p. 1518)

McCarran’s rhetoric and his immigration act established a preference system based around nationality, ethnicity and social class of immigrants. Another important moment in United States immigration history that serves as background to understanding Obama’s rhetorical position in 2011 was the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 which continued the path of
McCarran’s act and eliminated the national origin quota system, fully adopting the preference system based on skills and qualifications. In decades since, political rhetoric and discourses about immigration evolved into becoming less radical and exclusionary, and appeared to have adopted a more humane approach toward immigration. But despite increasing emphasis on the values of human rights and equality in the second half of the twentieth century, the legacy of McCarran’s exclusionist rhetoric continues to prevail to this day, in the form of neoliberal policies of immigration, first introduced in the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965, which privilege economic worth, ability to contribute, and ability to fit in the dominant American ideology. As neoliberal politics privileging economic progress started to influence immigration policy, old exclusionary principles were merely replaced with new ones. Especially in the early years of economic turmoil in the 21st century, discourses about economic worth, human capital, and economic burden have become central to the topic of immigration and the politics of exclusion. As Hasian & Delgado (1998) argued, “economic problems need economic scapegoats,” which are often created by the demonization of the “illegal alien” (p. 255).

Even more importantly, Hasian & Delgado (1998) noted that the power of anti-immigrant rhetoric employing economic and class vocabularies “come in part from their ability to avoid more objectionable forms of racism and xenophobia” (p. 255). As Demo (2006) overviewed, “campaign ads produced for the 1996 presidential election prophesied a nation imperiled by unassimilable “illegals.” The 2000 presidential campaign also traded in images of a nation transformed by newcomers” (p. 259). Anti-immigrant rhetoric no longer focused explicitly on race, but targeted the unassimilability, the un-American-ness of the “alien” and the “illegal.” Demo (2006) argued that “the sole prerequisite for assimilation in the twenty-first century has become our identification with and enactment of American dream ideology” (p. 266). Despite
being less explicit in their exclusionary form, I argue that the ideological commitments to protect national sovereignty, privilege economic contributions, and promote assimilation into American-ness remain prevalent in modern day immigration rhetoric, including President Obama’s 2011 El Paso speech on immigration form.

In my analysis of the President’s 2011 El Paso address, I argue that veiled under President Obama’s advocacy for a comprehensive immigration are ideas and policies of exclusion similar to those of the immigration acts of 1924, 1952, and 1965. Obama’s plan relied on neoliberal politics which tend to promote only the inclusion of immigrants who can be culturally assimilated and can contribute to the advancement of the American nation. As such, immigrants from Mexico occupied a unique role of being both rhetorically excluded from President Obama’s speech, but also of being positioned outside Obama’s newly redefined requirements and limits of national inclusion. Their exclusion was further problematized by the fact that President Obama delivered his speech in the city of El Paso, Texas – right on the U.S./Mexico border. The President celebrated the economic importance of highly skilled individuals with “engineering and computer science degrees,” which did not explicitly exclude Mexicans but failed to address a large portion of the population who were excluded because they never had access to education and equal opportunities. The President therefore constructed a rhetorical border between classes that did not explicitly exclude Mexican immigrants based on race, but did so by extension of educational criteria.

President Obama expressed rhetorical insensitivity toward the historic plights and inequalities that had affected undocumented immigrants, and especially immigrants from Mexico. I take note of Flores’s (2003) claim that through history restrictionist, anti-immigrant rhetoric has “rarely discussed the problems of Mexican immigration,” as a probable result of “the
relative invisibility of Mexicans across most of the country” (p. 369). The invisibility of
Mexicans was problematized by Barack Obama as he failed to recognize the historic significance
of Mexican/Americans for the economic and cultural development of the United States. A
rhetorical problem in the President’s speech emerged at the intersection between the silence and
omission of the history of Mexican immigration, the neoliberal need for immigrants to exhibit
capacity for economic contribution and ability to assimilate into American dream ideology, and
the enforcement of border security and immigration control as measures of restriction and
exclusion. The intersecting narratives clashed together in opposition to the President’s claim that
“in embracing America, you can become American” (Obama, 2011). Altogether, the analysis of
this rhetorical intersection extends the work of Ono & Sloop (2002) and Flores (2003) regarding
“the rhetorical processes through which nations and borders are constructed” (Flores, 2003, p.
364). I argue that President Obama’s speech functioned in re-shaping the concept of belonging to
the American nation by modifying the limits of national inclusion. Despite his desire to eliminate
racisms and establish a truly race-neutral immigration policy, his rhetoric managed to establish
new borders of exclusion based on class, education, and human capital. What’s more, his vision
of comprehensive immigration reform depended on the requirement to secure the nation’s
borders and stop illegal immigration. In the next section, I take a look at the history of bordering
practices in controlling immigration and movement of people.

Borders – material, figural, symbolic and rhetorical

A brief discussion and overview of the scholarship on borders is imperative due to their
role in regulating immigration and defining the limits of nationhood. Traditionally, borders are
used to signify limits of inclusion and exclusion. Fundamentally, DeChaine (2012) argued that
“the figure of the border animates the language of social relations in the United States today” (p.
1). Similarly, Cannato (2010) argued that ever since the late 19th century “guarding the borders became the key to defining the character of the nation itself” (p. 12). Throughout the history of the United States borders have shifted meanings and forms. In the early years of the country, the sheer physicality and vastness of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans served as borders regulating and restricting mass immigration from Europe and Asia. Over time, as means and ease of transportation improved dramatically, the people of the United States saw an increasing need to protect and enforce the borders of their relatively newfound nation. Places like Ellis Island served as immigrant inspection stations, initially built to oversee and regulate the entry of immigrants. In the years to follow Ellis Island was transformed into a detention and deportation station. The symbolic meaning of Ellis Island changed – from a place of hope for a new beginning for “the waves of Irish, and Italian, and Polish, and Russian, and Jewish immigrants who leaned against the railing to catch their first glimpse of the Statue of Liberty” (Obama, 2011), into a place symbolizing criminality, prosecution and expulsion.

This change in function of Ellis Island happened immediately after 1924 and the introduction of the Johnson-Reed Act which restricted immigration by enforcing national origin quotas discussed earlier in this literature review. Ellis Island became known as “Heartbreak Island” where approximately 250,000 were turned back to their home countries and many were held as suspects of being spies or saboteurs (Bachelor, 2008). The declining U.S. economy of the late 1920s in the dawn of the Great Depression, created the need for a scapegoat, which was conveniently found in the face of the racially and ethnically different immigrant. What emerged was a narrative of need to protect national sovereignty, the purity of national identity, as well as the need to promote economic prosperity.
Immigrants from Mexico were significantly impacted by these emerging narratives to protect national sovereignty and economic interests, as these national needs started to create physical, symbolic, and rhetorical borders between the United States and Mexico. Prior to the 1920s, Mexican immigration was mostly unregulated, because the Mexican immigrant was seen primarily as a temporary, rural worker (Flores, 2003). During that period, Mexicans were seen as loyal to their nationality and were positioned as ideal temporary workers. There was a greater national narrative where “U.S. economic success and growth required a labor force, but not one that threatened national security and identity,” in which “fears of growing numbers of unassimilable aliens could be eased with the importation of a Mexican labor force” (Flores, 2003, p. 371). However, the situation changed in the 1930s in the aftermath of the Great Depression, when as a response to the increasing needs to secure financial stability of U.S. citizens the government initiated a repatriation campaign and multiple deportation drives which were among the first substantial efforts to restrict immigration from Mexico, and ultimately “served to create rhetorically a border between Mexico and the U.S., between “Americans” and Mexican/Americans” (Flores, 2003, p. 364). The state of the economy during the Great Depression changed the rhetorical characterization of Mexicans from “a controllable population that could be used as a labor force,” into a rhetoric of “the Mexican Problem,” which “defined Mexican immigration as significant and out of control” (Flores, 2003, p.372). This is a rhetorical problem identified by critical scholars who “have drawn attention to the ways the dominant society racializes different groups at different times, in response to shifting needs such as the labor market” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 10). A rhetorical shift emerged in the narratives of border protection and immigrant control – no longer was there a strong emphasis on policing
immigrants at Ellis Island, as the narratives shifted toward the need to protect the border between the United States and Mexico.

And while accounts of racist and prejudiced behavior toward Mexicans exist long before the 1930s, the deportation drives of the 1930s indicated one of the first serious and deliberate attempts to control Mexican immigration, and paved the way for future discrimination, exclusion and enforcement of the border between the U.S. and Mexico. But despite the obvious shift of emphasis in the national economy over the last century from agriculture to technology, it is important to note that the immigrant body has maintained the rhetorical position of the worker who contributes to American success and economic prosperity. Relatively recent examples include the Immigration Reform and Control act of 1986 which contributed to the legalization of seasonal agricultural workers. In 1990, just four years later, it was followed by an immigration act that allowed for increased immigration for highly skilled immigrants (King, 2000). The rhetoric of such policies redefined the national borders of inclusion and exclusion based on the economic needs of the United States at the time. The impacts of such policies continue to be seen to this day, and are the focus of analysis in Chapter 3 of this thesis, which critiques the neoliberal tendency to perceive immigrants through economic lenses.

A particularly problematic outcome of this tendency to privilege economic needs was the emergence of “the Mexican problem” narratives which saw an influx of policies trying to regulate and contain Mexican immigration in the last two decades. In 1994, California Proposition 187 was passed in an effort to restrict public services to “illegals” and to persecute them as criminals illegally residing in the United States, taking economic advantage from services intended for U.S. citizens. These narratives criminalized Latinos and Latinas to the point where, as Van Dijk (1995) noted, “being an ‘illegal’ immigrant in itself is already seen as a
crime, an opinion that seamlessly fits in the widespread system of racist prejudices that associate Black and Latino minorities with problems and crime in the first place” (p. 148). To great extent, the rhetorical power of Proposition 187 came from its appearance as a discursive structure that focused on financial restraint and economic imperatives (Calavita, 1996; Hasian & Delgado, 1998), employing a language of racelessness which did not explicitly identify race or ethnicity as problems. Despite the alleged racelessness, the emphasis on prosecuting “illegal immigrants” had a very clear, albeit rhetorically implicit, purpose of targeting immigrants from Mexico. Supporters of Proposition 187 positioned “Americans” as victims (mostly in economic terms), who had the right to defend their “native” land from the “Other” (Hasian & Delgado, 1998). It established a rhetorical border between “victims” and “criminals,” promoting a rhetoric of innocence and victimhood (Ross, 1995). As such, Proposition 187 with its rhetorical racelessness and criminalization of the “illegal” status polarized the nation and served to form a cultural, rhetorical border of exclusion between “Americans” and Mexican/Americans.

Similarly, and more recently, in 2010 the state of Arizona passed anti-immigrant legislation, titled Senate Bill 1070 (SB1070), which aimed to secure the border with Mexico and persecute undocumented immigrants (Cisneros, 2012). Not only did the enforcement of the law target suspected immigrants purely on the color of their skin, but it also served to collapse “the distinction between border enforcement and civic engagement, normalizing border vigilantism as a mode of citizenship” (Cisneros, 2012, p. 135). The policy served a dual function of policing and protecting a material border between the United States and Mexico, while also reinforcing a symbolic, rhetorical border between cultures and races. The rhetorical border also had an affective element, through which “the affective dimensions of politics and culture speak to ‘how bodies are mobilized (called to action) at a material level’” (Ott cited in Cisneros, 2012). As
such, the border does not merely represent, it has agency and drives people to act through its material and discursive manifestations. On one hand, the border is very real and material, policed and enacted by the fence built along the U.S./Mexico border. On the other hand, the border is symbolic, built rhetorically to protect national sovereignty and commemorate a collective memory of an image of American nationhood defined by whiteness and ideological exclusion of the “Other.”

Because of the symbolic, rhetorical border between cultures, the body of the racialized immigrant continues to “carry” the border with him/her, even after crossing the material, geographic border (Ono, 2012). Thus the rhetorical border shifts constantly and follows the racialized bodies of immigrants across the country. As such, rhetorical borders permeate in the interior of the country, influencing nationalistic discourses characterized by fear of illegality and urge for containment. Here I follow the work of Ono (2012) and Goltz & Perez (2012), challenging “the notion of the border as a thing that is far and away from our lives” (Goltz & Perez, 2012, p. 167). Nationalistic, anti-immigrant rhetoric, seen in policies like California Proposition 187 and Arizona SB1070, saturated the public and political spheres, and brought the border closer to people’s minds, reinforcing the need to exclude certain groups from American nationhood. Within his speech, President Obama vaguely referred to the “ugly rhetoric around immigration,” but did not explicitly identify or recognize California Proposition 187 or Arizona SB1070 as examples of it. In Chapter 4 I provide an in-depth examination of the President’s rhetorical strategy toward border security, as well as an analysis of his political connection to the industries of immigration control. Overall, I argue that Obama expressed a general inattention to anti-immigrant practices of border enforcement and immigration control of recent years, and in fact implicitly defended them as necessary in the efforts to secure the nation’s borders and ensure
economic prosperity for everyone in the nation. Even though border and neoliberal politics seem to have displaced racial segregation as the primary principle of exclusion, it is important to note that the rhetorical omission of race from anti-immigrant discourses has not made those discourses racially neutral. I argue that exclusion based on race and ethnicity is still a foundational element in immigration control rhetorics, but functions implicitly in the silence of a dominant national ideology of whiteness (see Chapter 2 for an extensive discussion of whiteness). In the next section, I provide a conceptual foundation of race as a mechanism of regulating social orders.

**The roles of race and racism in U.S. social orders**

Prior to engaging in my analysis, it is imperative to provide a conceptual definition and understanding of the terms race and racism. Race, as the central object of analysis by critical race scholars, is often conceptualized as a social construct (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Novak, 2006). In this conception, races are “not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality,” but instead are “categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). Furthermore, Garner (2010) argued that socially maintained racisms are "politically inseparable from the project of modernity due to the imbedded process of categorization undertaken in the Enlightenment" (p. 52). He suggested that the hierarchical classification of races, which started in the Enlightenment, has become a normalized practice in Western societies, thus promoting the emergence of racism. For Garner (2010), racism is a historical process, but also an ongoing one. In his vision, “the State is not a neutral arbiter in the way ‘race’ becomes pertinent to various fields, but a significant player in defining membership of the nation” (p. 53). In the processes of defining race as a "prerequisite" for belonging to a nation, bodies who are perceived as different, both physically and culturally,
are segregated and excluded. This concept is relevant to this study because a central theme in President Obama’s immigration reform speech emerged as the immigrant capacity of “becoming American through adopting the American values” (Obama, 2011). It is therefore necessary to understand the roles that racism and racial segregation have played in defining the limits of American national belonging and American identity.

Because in recent decades explicit racial segregation and racisms in immigration discourses and rhetorics have been displaced by exclusionary practices based on cultural or ethnic differences, it is important to examine how the concepts of whiteness and neo-racism can redefine and extend the limits of racism. Novak (2006) pointed out that “more bloody wars have been fought within races, along ethnic lines, than between races. Indeed, “race” is a modern, post-Enlightenment concept. Ethnicity, meaning belongingness to a particular people within a particular culture, is much, much older” (p. 28). This claim enables an important redefinition of racism as a function of xenophobia that exceeds the limits of “race” as a post-Enlightenment concept or a biological characteristic. It creates the possibility to conceptualize exclusionist anti-immigrant rhetorics and practices based on differences of ethnicity or culture as types of neo-racism, “whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences” (Balibar, 2007, p. 84). Balibar recognized that currently for the issue of immigration old-fashioned racisms coexists along forms of "racism without races", in which the issue of race is displaced with a general attribution of otherness. He defined neo-racism as the product of the "decolonization" era, characterized by "the reversal of population movements between the old colonies and the old metropolises" (Balibar, 2007, p.84). I argue that this concept of neo-racism is relevant to modern day studies of immigration and race rhetorics and this thesis in particular because it offers an additional explanation for the lack of explicit mention of race in President
Obama’s immigration reform speech. In his address, he shifted the focus to the need for immigrants to be culturally assimilated by adopting the American dream ideology. President Obama’s rhetoric exemplified a conflicting binary of xenophilia/xenophobia in which immigrants who “embrace America’s ideals” and are able to attribute through their professional skills are welcomed, similar to the rhetoric and provisions of the Hart-Cellar 1965 act which promoted expertise and qualification as criteria for becoming American. At the same time, xenophobic attitudes positioned immigrants who are unable to assimilate, or contribute to the economic development of the nation as outside the limits of inclusion in Obama’s rhetoric.

Importantly, Hasian & Delgado (1998) explained that “simply advocating formal equality in our laws does not mean that race consciousness is obliterated” (p. 263). Along with other theorists (Demo, 2006) they observed “the possibility that race and racial categories involve power relationships as much as they do skin color” (Hasian & Delgado, 1998, p. 263). Similarly to Balibar’s (2007) notion of “racism without races,” Hasian & Delgado (1998) argued that the idea that “only ‘Whites’ can be racist, or that people of color are incapable of discrimination, maintains dichotomous lines that perpetuate social injustices” (p. 263). In other words, racism and discrimination are social phenomena that continue to exist outside the confines of race or skin color as physical characteristics. This leads to an important and necessary recognition of the methods of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Harris (2001) noted that “critical race theory not only dares to treat race as central to the law and policy of the United States, it dares to look beyond the popular belief that getting rid of racism means simply getting rid of ignorance” (p. xx). Bonilla-Silva (2010) noted that in one of the very few speeches in which President Obama addressed the issue of racism, he presented it as a “moral problem” that could be overcome through goodwill. Countering such an idea, Bonilla-Silva (2010) argued that “racism forms a
structure and, accordingly, the struggle against racism must be fundamentally geared toward the removal of the practices, mechanisms, and institutions that maintain systemic white privilege” (p. 221). In my approach to this study, I utilize Bonilla-Silva’s argument by applying the CRT method which “questions the very foundation of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 3). In this thesis, I trace and interrogate the impacts of structural racism on President Obama’s rhetoric of immigration reform, by using and extending CRT through Balibar’s (2007) concept of neo-racism, as racism without race, the dominant ideology of whiteness, and the function of neoliberalism to displace race and mask racisms.

As I interrogate the effects of dominant whiteness on President Obama’s speech, I consider a key element of CRT identified by Delgado & Stefancic (2001), who argued that “because racism advances the interests of both white elites (materially) and working-class Caucasians (physically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it” (p. 7). Through my analysis I extend this understanding of whiteness through engaging neoliberal politics in an effort to better situate and understand xenophobic and racist practices toward immigrants who threaten the interests of American whites. By involving the concepts of neoliberalism and whiteness, I examine the intersectionality of immigrant oppression. Delgado & Stefancic (2001) defined this intersectionality as “the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation, and how their combination plays out in various settings” (p. 51). Intersectionality is an important concept in studying immigration, because in modern anti-immigration discourses and rhetorics immigrants are often segregated or excluded based on complex combinations of racial, class, ethnic, cultural, and religious factors. As mentioned earlier, racism and practices of exclusion transcend the limits of biological races, however it is
worthy of noting that modern anti-immigrant racism maintain their strong bias against racialized immigrants (in the case of Mexican immigrants), and racialized bodies in general who as a result suffer major economic, social and cultural oppressions within American society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Under regimes of dominant whiteness and neoliberal politics racism and xenophobia can hide under the allegedly race-neutral labels “illegal,” “undocumented,” or sometimes even simply “immigrant.” Within anti-immigrant rhetoric immigrants are lumped together regardless of race or ethnicity and are portrayed as bodies that threaten the American economy and national identity. I acknowledge the fact that many immigrants are indeed non-white, and as such suffer as targets of traditional forms of racism, but argue that the problem of racism at present in the United States transcends the physical limits of race and involve issues of class, ideological belonging, and nationhood. Therefore, I extend the efforts of CRT scholars by intersecting traditional critical race theory approaches with theories of whiteness, neo-racism, and neoliberalism that enable us to recognize and interrogate allegedly race-neutral discourses and rhetorics as examples of hidden or silenced racisms and xenophobia toward immigrants. I move beyond tracing racisms toward people of particular skin color, and instead seek to unmask racisms toward people who are conceptualized as “different” or “other” because they don’t fit within the narrowly defined limits of national inclusion. Ultimately, I extend the issue of whiteness into an issue of American-ness, and I advocate for race consciousness (Peller, 1990; Hasian & Delgado, 1998) that would be complemented with a consciousness toward difference and otherness.

Now what? A preview of major points of analysis and criticism

The historical overview provided in this chapter serves to provide insight to the foundational backdrop to the current “immigration problem” in the United States, as well as to
define the President’s exigency to address national concerns about immigration, governed by competing narratives of xenophilia and xenophobia towards immigrants. In the following chapters of this master’s thesis I tease out the rhetorical ambiguities of Obama’s address in order to examine and unmask their effects on contemporary rhetorics of race and immigration. The chapters follow and expand themes and historic tendencies documented in this brief introduction. Chapter 2 begins with an examination of the rhetorical significance of race, the omission of race, and the protection of whiteness within President Obama’s speech. In Chapter 3, I examine the impacts of neoliberal politics on Obama’s rhetoric and their function to redefine the limits of national inclusion based on economic interests and needs. Finally, in Chapter 4, I turn my attention to President Obama’s emphasis on the need to secure the U.S/Mexico border and analyze his conflicting relationship with the immigration control industry. In the concluding section of this thesis I offer a summary of how the politics of whiteness and neoliberalism functioned in collaboration to construct and (re)define rhetorical borders of exclusion within Obama’s speech on comprehensive immigration reform. Through an examination of Obama’s proposed policy of immigration reform, I extend an argument about the President’s overall political and ideological position toward immigrants and immigration in the United States.

My hope is that through the insight of my work readers will recognize the fundamental flaws in President Obama’s vision of an allegedly comprehensive reform of the U.S. immigration system. I hope to forge a path for a discussion of genuine reform that would rely on race consciousness, instead of the current tendencies of simplified racial color-blindness, as well as inspire a vision of national inclusion based on economic as well as cultural contribution and belonging.
Notes:

1 I acknowledge that there are different ways to look at Barack Obama’s character and his agency. In my analysis I attribute authorship, responsibility, and authorship of the speech to Barack Obama as the President of the United States. The actual authorship of the speech can be contested, and could be attributed to the President’s speech writing staff. Similarly, Obama’s status as an agent of change can be challenged by arguing that the policies presented in the speech were not his actual policies, but were instead the policies of his cabinet, and also the policies that have been designed to achieve maximum impact across political groups. My decision to attribute complete agency and authorship to Barack Obama was guided by the fact that in the thesis I analyze the speech act of a President, which entails great levels of responsibility and ownership of the discourse.
CHAPTER 2

The Absence of Race in Barack Obama’s Rhetoric of Immigration - Securing the Hegemonic Normativity of Whiteness

The rise of Barack Obama to political fame in the last decade and ultimately his election as a President of the United States of America sparked a brief hope for change in American race relations and catalyzed the popularity of discourses about a better post-racial America in the hands of a racially conscious President (see Terrill, 2009). The concept of post-racial America relied on the presumption that the United States had entered an era in which racism, racial preference, discrimination, and prejudice no longer existed. Tesler & Sears (2010) noted that Barack Obama’s presidential campaign appeared as race neutral, and that “prior to the first presidential primary contests of 2008, the media had predominantly portrayed Obama as the post-racial candidate who transcended the divisive identity politics of the post-civil rights era” (p. 29). Numerous other scholars noted similarly that Barack Obama obtained the position of a post-racial candidate by employing a language of universal terms designed to yield the greatest rhetorical appeal, and as such attempted to transcend race altogether (Burnside & Whitehurst, 2007; Frank & McPhail. 2005; Fraser, 2009; Hill, 2009; Ifill, 2009; Mazama, 2009; Roediger, 2008; Rowland & Jones, 2007; Walters, 2007).

Countering the views of post-racial America or Barack Obama as a post-racial candidate, numerous scholars have pointed to Barack Obama’s lacking political commitment to tackle racism and race relations (Lopez, 2010; Steele, 2008; Terrill, 2009). Ever since his initial foray into the political sphere, Barack Obama has been forced to balance on a racial tightrope created by the racial logics of his own personal background, being the “son of a black man from Kenya.
and a white woman from Kansas” (Obama, 2008). As Dilliplane (2012) explained, Obama “needed to position himself rhetorically to be perceived as “black enough” to speak on behalf of blacks’ perspective,” but on the other hand he needed to avoid “donning the mantle of “the black candidate” or aligning himself with the image of the angry black,” which could have alienated white voters (p. 131-132). Ultimately, the complexity of his racial identity posed a material challenge to the historic white hegemony associated with the presidential post, but his rhetoric only defended and further embedded the hegemony of whiteness.

Additionally, despite the utopian vision of a post-racial America and the historically significant election of Barack Obama, large disparities still emerged between the envisioned and the actual social reality of race relations in the United States. A study conducted during the 2008 Democratic nomination race presented evidence that overt racism hurt Obama in the primaries, showing that “across 31 states, an average of 9.8 percent of Democratic primary voters both said that race was an important factor in their vote and voted against Obama” (Dilliplane, 2012, p. 133). As Terrill (2009) pointed out, “there is little question that we remain a deeply divided nation with respect to race” (p. 375). Additionally, Tesler’s (2013) research presented evidence of “old-fashioned racism” on the rise since President Obama’s election in 2008, suggesting that “Obama simultaneously activates both old-fashioned racism and racial resentment” (p. 121). There is substantial evidence supporting the claim that racial attitudes and beliefs still affect political judgments in the United States, but more importantly – there is evidence of racial tensions on a larger societal level. A poll conducted by the Pew Research Center (2009) found that “four-in-ten (39%) believe there are serious conflicts between blacks and whites,” and that “a majority (55%) of adults said there are “very strong” or “strong” conflicts between immigrants and people born in the United States.” Racial tensions, while concealed and not as
explicit as those in days of old (i.e. Jim Crow era racist laws), still exist in modern social relations in the United States. Terrill (2009) argued that “not only is the color-line still vivid, but the degree to which it is vivid is itself a symptom of racial division,” emphasizing that “the color-line marks not only a division between black and white, but also a division in the degree to which blacks and whites are able (or willing) to perceive that there is a color-line” (p. 375 - 376). This inability to perceive the color-line as real has directly influenced the invention and popularization of the term post-racial America over the years.

The goal of the present chapter is to show how President Obama’s support of post-racial America was in accordance with and even further reinforced an established dominant ideology of whiteness, as it appeared in his 2011 El Paso address about comprehensive immigration reform. I examine the implicit relationship between race, immigration, and American nationhood in the President’s rhetoric, ultimately arguing that the invisibility of the relationship was a rhetorical strategy of upholding the normativity of whiteness. In the chapter, I engage with literature that treats whiteness as a dominant hegemonic order maintained through social communicative practices, as well as with literature that examines the color-blind racism that a rhetorical culture of whiteness fosters and conceals. I argue that through his speech, President Obama not only did not challenge the established normativity of whiteness, but he entrenched it deeper into the public mind. Through omitting to discuss race explicitly, he shifted the conversation away from race and placed the rhetorical focus on the importance of cultural belonging and assimilation of normative American values. But before I outline how President Obama embodied and promoted the principles of hegemonic whiteness and color-blind racism, I need to explain the significance of whiteness and race as seen through a communication perspective.
Race and Whiteness

A majority of social scientists, and race scholars in particular, advocate the idea that race is a socially constructed category (Bonilla-Silva, 1999; Hall, 1996; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995), which produces a social reality that has real effects on individuals categorized, or racialized, as “black,” “white,” “brown,” etc. When we acknowledge race as a discursive or sociopolitical construct, and not as a predetermined biological condition (Mills, 1997), we make it possible to examine race beyond the confines of skin color, and treat it as a complex construct influenced by discourse, culture, and dominant public ideology. Race can be experienced or manifested differently, based on differences in gender, class, national origin, and citizenship (Ancheta, 1998; Cameron, 1998; Hernandez-Truyol, 1997; Johnson, 1996). Ultimately, it is important to recognize that race is not fixed or essential, but nevertheless has real implications on identity, culture, and social relations. Communication scholars have noted the mainstream tendency to see race as “an ahistorical, essential, and depoliticized aspect of identity” (Allen, 2008; see also Ashcraft & Allen, 2003; Orbe & Allen, 2008). Flores & Moon (2002) articulated the need to recognize the material reality of race “as a fundamental organizing construct” (p. 181). They argued against emerging trends of trying to dispense with race on the basis that it is just a social construct (see Goldberg, 2002; Bonilla-Silva, 2010) and emphasized the need to question the power dynamics and hegemonic orders maintained by race relations. Of great importance to this project is the argument that the established black/white binary of race in the United States is hegemonic in its ordering of racial hierarchies (Davis, 1996; Flores & Moon, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Flores & Moon (2002) clarified that under the black/white binary of race, “policies, laws, and discourse that have implications primarily for Latinas/os and Asian/Americans, rather than for African Americans or whites can masquerade as racially
neutral” (p. 184). As a result of the racially neutral pretense of such discourses, Hall (2000) and Flores & Moon (2002) pointed to the function of silencing racialized voices outside the black/white binary, as well as the capability of shifting the debate of immigration as a question of “national origin, economics, and citizenship rather than about race” (p. 184). A racially neutral, or color-blind, approach to immigration in the United States is reductive and insensitive to the material and social realities and inequalities of race relations that have accumulated through the nation’s history.

The presumed racial neutralty has directly impacted the emergence of the concept of post-racial America. Goldberg (2002) recognized “racelessness” as a predominant method of discursive and rhetorical efforts in contemporary United States, which attempts to transcend race “without (fully) coming to terms with racial histories and their accompanying racist inequities and iniquities” (p. 221). The post-racial approach is characterized also by its reductive understanding of racism as only individual acts exemplifying overt and explicit forms of racial prejudice, and thus failing to recognize the stratification of racism in social structures through the years (see Allen, 2006; Chidester, 2008; Flores, Moon, & Nakayama, 2006; Lopez, 2010; Winant, 1997). I argue that at its core the culture of “racelessness” and the concept of post-racial America not only ignore the social realities of race, racism, and racialized social orders, but ultimately serve to protect an underlying dominant ideology of whiteness that operates in U.S. society.

Similarly to the understanding of race as a social construct, race scholars tend to agree that whiteness is a subject position that is discursively negotiated and maintained, yet rarely explicitly addressed in social discourses. Claims of racism and racial segregation are often rebutted through justifications based around class, skill, education, or other non-essential
categories. Neoliberalism and the language of late capitalism play a large role in concealing the existence and domination of whiteness (I offer an extended discussion on neoliberalism in Chapter 3). As a result, whiteness as a racial position is capable of maintaining its dominance and centrality in contemporary American racial relations primarily because it remains largely invisible and unspoken (Crenshaw, 1997; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Pope-Davis & Ottavi, 1994). As Shome (2000) noted, “whiteness, as an institutionalized and systemic problem, is maintained and produced not by overt rhetorics of whiteness, but rather, by its “everydayness”” (p. 366). In her argument, whiteness is “a nuanced formation that secures its power in different ways through different sites-all of which nonetheless, secures its hegemony in a highly racialized global system” (p. 368). Left unquestioned, racialized social relations have the ability to acquire a seeming normativity, which makes invisible the ways in which the system privileges whites. As Foster (2003) argued, “whiteness does not exist at the biological level. It is a cultural construct, yet whiteness defines us and limits us” (p. 2). Crenshaw (1997) concurred, stating that “there is nothing essential, “natural,” or biological about whiteness” (p. 255). Scholars have noted that “whiteness” is not equivalent or limited strictly to “white people” (Arnesen, 2001; Keating, 1995). Instead, whiteness can be treated as a political aspect of identity (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Nakayama & Martin, 1999) or an ideological subscription. At its core, the concept of whiteness should not be misunderstood as a characteristic of people from a specific race, but “should instead be seen as a term that makes the logic of race thinking possible” (Foster, 2003; Seshadri-Crooks, 2000).

The invisibility and normalization of whiteness over the years has led to the establishment of an ideology of whiteness which implicitly justifies and conceals racist attitudes and exclusion of “others” in society. Its transparency as a socially constructed reality masks its
power and ability to influence discourses of exclusion (Johnson, 2001). At its very core, whiteness is a rhetorical construction that has secured a central position in society (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). As Chidester (2008) noted, “much of the rhetorical power of whiteness is founded in its ability to avoid any explicit statements about or claims to racial centrality. It is a perpetual silence that resists any critical study of whiteness’s social instantiation and rhetorical influence” (p. 158). It is precisely through avoiding the explicit mention of race that whiteness achieves its full rhetorical and ideological force. Ultimately, whiteness becomes commonsense as “an accepted, taken-for-granted ideational matrix that operates as an unconscious baseline for judging what is normal, moral, and legitimate in the world” (Lopez, 2010, p. 1061). Whiteness is a type of identity characterized by a position of power and privilege in society that needs to be constantly maintained through rhetorical and discursive practices.

Studies of whiteness assume the frame of critical race theory introduced in Chapter 1 (Alley-Young, 2008; Gillborn, 2005; Rogers & Mosley, 2006) in their attempt to uncover the ways in which whiteness is normalized and made invisible through various rhetorical strategies and devices (McCann, 2008; Warren, 2001). As Flores et al. (2006) noted, “latent workings of race continue but are masked and harder to identify as racist” (p. 183). The type of rhetoric that maintains hegemonic whiteness has been examined as strategic and tactical (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). The invisibility and everydayness of whiteness make it a rhetorical tool that “can claim immense range and influence precisely because it is so difficult to affix to any single communicative text or set of discourses” (Chidester, 2008, p. 159). As a rhetorical critic I apply Crenshaw’s (1997) proposition that rhetoricians “must do the critical ideological work necessary to make whiteness visible and overturn its silences for the purpose of resisting racism,” by locating “interactions that implicate unspoken issues of race, discursive spaces where the power
of whiteness is invoked but its explicit terminology is not” (p. 254). It needs to be recognized that the power of whiteness lies in its ability to conceal racist practices and discourses deeply embedded in society and present them as racially neutral.

Operating under a dominant regime of whiteness, color-blind racism has the ability to reproduce “racial domination mostly through subtle and covert discriminatory practices,” which often are institutionalized, grounded in racial ideology, and masked by the coded language of whiteness and the pretense of racial neutrality (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Therefore, the idea of color-blind racism becomes an integral element and device within the framework of whiteness as a social order, sharing the same qualities of invisibility and everydayness. The regime of dominant whiteness has both resulted from and helped maintain the stratification of color-blind racism (as well as old-fashioned, explicit forms of racism), ultimately embedding it into social structures. Stratified racism or structural racism is a result of the prolonged exposure and prevalence of racist and exclusionist practices in the past (in Chapter 1 I outlined key historical moments of racism in United States immigration history such as exclusion of Chinese and other Asian immigrants from eligibility for citizenship, and deportation drives of Mexicans in the 1930s), ultimately manifesting itself in a fundamentally racist culture of the present. The stratification or embeddedness of racism in American culture became a direct result of the hegemonic whiteness which anti-immigrant policies and discourses of the past helped create and protect through their explicit racism and xenophobia.

Crucially, stratified or structural racism functions in determining the racial structure of society. Lopez (2010) explained that structural racism “as a popular concept reaches back to the late 1960s, when activists and scholars sought to move away from an earlier focus on individual prejudice and toward an examination of how racism operated throughout society” (p. 1069). It is
important to note that the driving force behind this form of racism is a dominant ideology of
whiteness. Through its ability to conceal racist practices and discourses, whiteness fostered the
emergence of a new form of racism operating in American society. In this new form, racism is
not a randomly occurring phenomenon, but instead it is a constantly embedded principle in social
relations and structures. The history of racism and exclusion in the United States has enabled
racist attitudes to work implicitly within public and private discourses, even when explicit racism
is not intended or exhibited. Additionally, within this new working definition of modern racism,
racism does not operate in a bubble; it can work simultaneously alongside other societal factors,
such as the economy, education, culture, ethnicity, social class, and crime. Here it is important to
note Lopez’ (2010) warning and prescription that “no division between a universalistic focus on
class versus a particularistic emphasis on race is tenable: race and class in the United States
inextricably interdigitate such that neither can be engaged without sustained attention to the
other” (p. 1051). Despite my individual treatment of race and class as separate chapters of this
thesis, I ultimately support and maintain the argument for interdigitation of race and class in the
context of immigration. The concepts work in a complex mutually-influencing relationship,
which ultimately (intentionally or not) serves to privilege whiteness, demonize people of color,
and exclude those perceived as un-American.

The stratification view of racism maintains that racism has been established as a central
characteristic of an American culture that is influenced by and privileges whiteness. In this
frame, racism is deeply embedded in social structures, policies, and cultural practices. It is not
limited to individual, isolated incidents but instead operates on a systemic level. Lopez (2010)
noted that, “as it has for hundreds of years, race - or, more accurately, “racism” - will remain a
principal means through which our society structures and justifies inequality” (p. 1069).
Similarly, Bonilla-Silva (2010) extended an argument that throughout history, the emergence and expansion of racialized social systems “became global and affected all societies where Europeans extended their reach” (p. 9). He thus conceptualized society’s racial structure as “the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege” (p. 9). Additionally, Flores (2003) noted that “contemporary images of immigrants, such as that of the illegal alien, do not emerge in a vacuum. Instead, they are part of our nation’s history of immigration, race, and nation” (p. 363). The stratification or embeddedness of racism in American culture is a direct result of the hegemonic whiteness which anti-immigrant policies and discourses of the past (overviewed in Chapter 1) helped create and protect through their explicit racism and xenophobia.

In the following sections I outline critical work from communication scholars that has examined President Obama’s treatment of race in the past and then examine his rhetorical approach and strategy in the 2011 El Paso speech on immigration reform. In my discussion, I argue that his strategy has been exemplified by refusal to address race directly, which implicitly reinforced whiteness by not challenging its normative dominance in America’s presumably post-racial society.

**The Myth of Obama’s Post-Racial America**

Traditionally, the post of the president in the United States of America has been the ultimate site of whiteness, masculinity, and nationhood (Shome, 2000). In his long journey to the top, Barack Obama attempted to defuse the traditional whiteness associated with the position, as well as challenge its social dominance. During the 2004 Democratic National Convention, then-Senator Barack Obama famously noted that “there’s not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America” (Obama, 2004). In his
keynote address, Obama “linked America’s historically imbued ideals to the need for further progress, telling his audience that ‘we have more work to do’” (quoted in Dilliplane, 2012, p. 141). Additionally, he invoked the foundational motto of “E pluribus unum, out of many, one,” which rhetorically placed the emphasis on the individual emerging from diverse cultural traditions. Dilliplane (2012) argued that, by using a thematic framework and symbolism, Obama was able “to shift all the rhetorical pieces around into one fluid argument for indivisibility—of one person and one nation” (p. 137). Obama displaced the role of race by emphasizing the importance of nationhood and American culture. Obama’s tendency to privilege individuals and acknowledge their diversity of cultural backgrounds as the building blocks of a nation emerged as a recurring rhetorical theme in his future speeches, including his El Paso immigration reform address.

As much as some people hoped that Obama would be the leader of change for race relations in America, his attempts to transcend race through his post-racial rhetoric have failed to acknowledge “the historical and social realities of American racism” (Frank & McPhail, 2005, p. 583). In their critique of Obama’s 2004 Democratic National Convention speech, Frank & McPhail (2005) characterized his rhetorical strategy as one reinforcing "an old vision of racelessness" that appealed to and enabled "rhetorics of whiteness and modern racism" (p. 572-573). Heise & Utley (2009) noted that in the past the post-racial approach has been successful for raced political candidates who have attempted to dissolve voter concerns about their race. Typically, a race-neutral rhetorical strategy deemphasizes or neglects discussions about race and racism and instead advocates public policies that allegedly benefit all American citizens, regardless of race, in an effort to appease the concerns of white voters (Harris, 2009, p. 43). As such, Obama’s post-racial political rhetoric in the 2004 Democratic National Convention speech
did not outwardly address the role of race in politics and society, nor did it declare racism defeated, but instead it only briefly addressed race and attempted to transcend it, indicating a tendency toward racial color-blindness (see Heise & Utley, 2009).

Then in 2008, Barack Obama attempted to address criticisms of his discussion of race, and rectify his approach in his now famous “A More Perfect Union” address. In the speech he accurately observed and decried the “racial stalemate we’ve been stuck in for years,” noting that race was indeed an issue that “this nation cannot afford to ignore right now” (Obama, 2008). His ideological position of hope for a better, more equal future appeared to be now matched with a commitment to discuss racial relations in America. As a presidential candidate at the time, Obama acknowledged the grim reality of race relations by citing Faulkner, “The past isn’t dead and buried. In fact, it isn’t even past” (Obama, 2008). He paid specific attention to the “disparities that exist between the African American community and the larger American community” (Obama, 2008). Obama’s rhetorical shift grabbed the attention of communication scholars and divided opinions regarding its impact on race relations in America. Some scholars saw the speech as a healthy move forward in offering the audience a new way to speak about race in America (Dilliplane, 2012; Isaksen, 2011). However, others characterized Obama’s speech as yet another attempt at post-racial rhetoric aimed to protect the normative whiteness of the American nation (Heise & Utley, 2009; Lopez, 2010; Terrill, 2009).

In their analysis of “A More Perfect Union,” Heise & Utley (2009) argued that “while directly speaking about race, Obama remarkably managed to retain his post-racial stance” (p. 156). Additionally, Darsey (2009) observed that Obama's “A More Perfect Union” “illuminates the nexus at which Obama seeks to transcend the limits of racial identification and to identify his narrative with the American narrative” (p. 98). Even more importantly, in recent years scholars
have observed that apart from this now historic 2008 address, Obama has seemed “disinclined to lead a national conversation on race,” (Lopez, 2010, p. 1024) “studiously avoided” the topic of race (Terrill, 2009, p. 367), and been driven more by the “racial idealism he embodied,” and not his actual political ideas (Steele, 2008). After his election in November 2008, Obama’s racial idealism reified some people’s false beliefs that America had indeed reached the post-racial era that many yearned for (Lopez, 2010; Rhymes, 2012; Toure, 2011; Weisenfield, 2012). Weisenfield (2012) noted the powerful arguments that in the “age of Obama,” “America is not a post-racial society,” and claims that it was were “just naïve colorblindness repackaged.” Fischer (2013) explained that through the election of Barack Obama, “four years ago, blacks and whites alike allowed themselves to speak of a post-racial America in which Obama would inspire people of all races to be more accepting. But the president’s first term tempered such idealism” (Fischer, 2013).

President Obama’s apparent disinclination to speak about race and his attempts to transcend it are important elements of my argument that his rhetoric reinforces an ideology of whiteness. Although his 2008 “A More Perfect Union” pointed to the inequities in society’s current racial order, it failed to challenge the established order. His proposed solution involved transcending race by silencing its socially constructed, yet material reality, and focusing on the unity that the American nation offers. As Heise & Utley (2011) noted, Obama employed a master strategy of identification which aimed to create a common ground in the diverse audience, asking them to “find that common stake we all have in one another” (Obama, 2008). Using the American narrative, Obama asked his audience to put race aside, and move towards common goals that would benefit America as a whole. What he failed to recognize is that the values and norms that dictate what is good for the American nation have historically been
plagued by the normativity and hegemony of whiteness. Therefore, even in the silencing of race, whiteness continues to operate.

I now turn my attention to examine how whiteness functioned in the background of President Obama’s 2011 speech on immigration reform. Through a rhetorical analysis I interrogate the absence of race in the speech as an indication of a post-racial agenda that sought to transcend race in the context of immigration.

The absence of race in Obama’s speech

From the very first time I heard President Obama’s 2011 speech on immigration reform from El Paso I was struck by the absence of a discussion on race. Obama did not even mention race, but instead proclaimed that “it doesn’t matter what you look like; it doesn’t matter where you come from” (Obama, 2011). For the entire duration of the speech the President avoided the topic of race, yet race continued to operate in the background – in the stories of immigrants’ success and his constant reminders of the importance of American culture, values, and belonging.

Over the years scholars have explored the ability of absence to function rhetorically in political discourse and mediated texts (Chidester, 2008; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Fiske, 1994; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Scott, 1993). Crucially, Scott (1993) argued that silence can be a strategic and intentional choice of the rhetor that can also function rhetorically if the audience realizes its strategic purpose and presence. With the example of race, Crenshaw (1997) noted the tendency of public political figures to avoid mentioning whiteness or any racial identification in their discourses, which ultimately ignores the ways race and class intersect with each other “to perpetuate oppressive human hierarchies” (p. 1). Despite the President’s desire to move beyond
race and treat the issue of immigration as racially neutral, his approach neglected the historically important role that race has played in determining citizenship and belonging.

As mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, Garner (2010) argued that “the State is not a neutral arbiter in the way 'race' becomes pertinent to various fields, but a significant player in defining membership of the nation” (p. 53). As such, state officials and policies have agency in the discussion of who belongs to the American nation, and who is allowed to become a United States citizen. Barack Obama, in the role of the President, and highest-ranking official, carried strong rhetorical power and political influence in defining the course of the country’s immigration policy. In the El Paso speech only the explicit mention of race was absent, but even in its silence, race functioned rhetorically. President Obama acknowledged the existence of “an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants” in the United States (Obama, 2011), however he failed to acknowledge or discuss the racial distribution of those 11 million people. Research by the Pew Hispanic Center in 2005 reported that roughly 81 percent of undocumented immigrants came from Mexico and other Latin American countries, while only 9 and 6 percent came from Asia and Europe respectively (PEW, 2005). Considering this disproportionately large percentage of immigrants from Mexico and other Latin Countries, it is also important to note the tendency of anti-immigrant discourses and policies to target Hispanics. As Arnold (2011) noted, “although the United States receives an incredibly diverse group of immigrants and asylum claimants, the perception of an immigration “problem” is mainly focused on Mexicans and Mexican Americans” (p. 3). President Obama’s failure to acknowledge the Hispanic race of the majority of immigrants could be understood as a strategic attempt at racial color-blindness as a way to prevent the emergence and suppress anti-Mexican, anti-immigrant sentiments in his audience.
This strategy emerged in the speech’s opening story about the commencement address the President delivered at Miami Dade Community College. He pointed to the fact that the school was “one of the most diverse schools in the nation,” and that its graduates “could claim heritage from 181 countries” (Obama, 2011). Obama explicitly talked about the diverse cultural heritage, but not the racial diversity. Race was displaced, yet still remained attached to the students’ cultural and national heritage. By shifting the focus to national origin, and avoiding the mention of race, Obama defused the potential threat of alienating white voters.

President Obama’s tiptoeing around race continued through the rest of the speech and through the examples of immigrants who had managed to become U.S. citizens. He used three examples – a man from Papua New Guinea, a woman from Mexico, and a man born in California to Mexican parents. Their stories had the purpose of showing that “anyone can write the next chapter in our story” and that “you can make it here if you try” (Obama, 2011). Once again, Barack Obama made no explicit mention of their individual race, but instead focused on their national origin and the route they took to become U.S. citizens. Yet it is important to note that in supporting his claim that “it doesn’t matter where you come from; it doesn’t matter what you look like,” Obama used the specific examples of immigrants from Mexico, Papua New Guinea, Haiti, and Guatemala. He made a rhetorical choice of using racialized immigrants as examples, yet silenced the materiality of their racialized bodies. Their racial difference, or otherness, was not recognized and was displaced by the supposedly race-neutral language of national origin. Ultimately, Obama’s rhetorical strategy in the speech relied on exemplifying the American acceptance of national diversity, yet silencing and concealing racial diversity.

The stories of the three immigrants served to showcase their efforts and strength of character embodying the values and ideals accepted by the American nation. Rhetorically, they
supported Barack Obama’s claim that “in embracing America, you can become American” (Obama, 2011). However, I argue that this strategy was problematic for two reasons: 1) it did not account for the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the country, who had already “embraced America,” yet were not classified as citizens; and 2) by pointing out the magnitude and greatness of their efforts, Obama reinforced the racial color-line and national divides. The first point of my argument is based on the fact that the three immigrant success stories were just isolated scenarios, unrepresentative of the situations of 11 million other people. They functioned as a fallacy, because they presumptuously situated the millions of undocumented immigrants as somehow different or inferior to the three exemplars. The implied notion in the President’s rhetoric was that if you work as hard as them, you too can become an American citizen. The execution of his rhetorical strategy presumptuously dismissed the possibility that that these 11 million people might in fact be just as hard-working and embracing American values as Obama’s exemplars.

As for the second part of my argument, I maintain that the personal narratives served as reminders of the historic racial inequalities in American society and the hardships that people of color or different ethnicity experienced. Not only were the histories of racial segregation and immigrant exclusion overlooked, but the silenced normativity and privilege of whiteness was invoked. The three exemplars in the President’s speech served to show the plight of racialized foreign bodies to accomplish something that is automatically a given to a white citizen of the United States. While Obama’s strategy was to show their efforts as commendable and worthy of praise, rhetorically the strategy also managed to show the tip of the iceberg called white privilege. The stories functioned rhetorically in reinforcing the necessity of being assimilated
into the existing dominant culture of whiteness and professional success in order to become a United States citizen.

The President’s ideas that “it doesn’t matter what you look like; it doesn’t matter where you come from,” and that “in embracing America, you can become American” reduced and simplified the complex process of immigration to a subjective notion of belonging. Obama promoted “the basic American idea that you can make it here if you try,” and thus he neglected important social factors such as race, national origin, and ethnicity. He replaced their importance with American Dream ideology and professional success, which were once again endemic to a dominating culture of whiteness. This rhetorical function emerged clearly in the three exemplar narratives of immigrants mentioned earlier, but it was further supported by Obama’s appeals to American exceptionalism for the purpose of countering racial inequalities.

In doing so, President Obama gave the example of “E pluribus unum; out of many, one” as a foundational value in American culture and pinnacle of American exceptionalism. The phrase elevated the importance and value of individuals, belonging to a diverse nation. Yet, there was an ironic rhetorical dichotomy within the phrase itself. While individual value was placed as central, and the diversity of the nation was acknowledged, with the phrase Obama implicitly established the adoption of American culture as a prerequisite of belonging. Belonging to the American culture and civic identity presupposed the enactment of a “‘national effect’ that connotes American-ness, which includes the English language, public displays of nationalism, and certain markers of socioeconomic class and race” (Muñoz, 2009 quoted in Cisneros, 2012, p. 133).

In telling the stories of immigrants, Barack Obama crystalized the necessity of being assimilated into the American culture. The stories of Perla Ramos and Granger Michael, who
both served in the U.S. Army, exemplified the idea that “assimilation is most complete when an immigrant will die for his or her new country” (Arnold, 2011, p. 26; Feldman, 2008). Within this framework of assimilation, social identifiers, such as race, gender, ethnicity, and national origin were placed as subordinate, and only function under the umbrella of American culture as the baseline for establishing belonging. What’s more, Arnold (2011) explained that “true assimilation can be achieved only when the identity of the host country (broadly conceived) replaces that of the immigrant’s original home” (p. 25). Dual loyalties, bilingualism, racial and cultural otherness become deterrents for assimilation, because as Allen (2004) pointed out, there is a recurrent trope of “oneness” that dominates American culture, also seen in the motto of “E pluribus unum” which acts as a deterrent to engaging in a much needed racial consciousness. Terrill (2009) explained that as a result of the lack of racial consciousness, “we cripple our efforts to engage the color-line productively and are left with twin dysfunctions: we either affect a naïve color blindness that denies the color-line altogether, or we naturalize the color-line as an impossibly recalcitrant barrier” (p. 364). Through the color-blindness of the “E pluribus unum” trope President Obama masked and silenced an underlying culture and ideology of whiteness.

Additionally, the phrase “out of many, one” catered to the interests of individuals who already fell under the umbrella and were assimilated by the dominant culture of American whiteness, but it excluded those who failed to qualify as American. In order to become American, one had to adopt the established American values, “learn English” (Obama, 2011), and be willing to strip away any aspects of her racial, ethnic, and cultural identification that may clash with those American values. Guiding principle behind this rationale and support of American exceptionalism was the invisible, yet present, dominance of hegemonic whiteness. Barack Obama’s approach was an example of a trend identified by Arnold (2011), in which
“learning English is posed as something people must be forced to do, and this coercion is viewed as acceptable, placing concerns of national identity over democratic values” (p. 32). The criteria outlined by the President for becoming a citizen, as well as the exemplar stories served as defensive mechanisms designed to protect the normativity of whiteness and the nation-state. Within this framework, a racialized immigrant could become a citizen only if she becomes “white enough” to be assimilated within the whiteness of American culture and show willingness to “embrace America’s ideals and America’s precepts” (Obama, 2011).

In the speech, the President attempted to balance his praise of American exceptionalism and the value of immigrants with recognition of America’s past racial struggles. Unlike his 2004 speech at the Democratic National Convention, where he failed to acknowledge “the historical and social realities of American racism” (Frank & McPhail, 2005, p. 583), in the 2011 El Paso speech President Obama made an effort to recognize the history of “ugly rhetoric around immigration” (Obama, 2011). He lamented “the mounting consequences of decades of inaction,” as well as the “harmful consequences of a broken immigration system,” while recognizing the American nation that has “often wrestled with the politics of who is and who isn’t allowed to come into this country.” His efforts were nevertheless hampered by his refusal to acknowledge the significant roles of race and racism for the issue of immigration. Obama briefly acknowledged the debate about “the politics of who is and who isn’t allowed to come into this country,” but failed to recognize that they have historically been guided by racial bias, exclusion based on national origin, and general xenophobia toward non-white, non-European immigrants. Obama’s failure to recognize those histories was a strategic rhetorical omission and an effort to silence the social reality of racial inequities in the United States. Much like his 2004 DNC and 2008 “A More Perfect Union” addresses, Obama’s speech on immigration reform “reified many
harmful racial tropes” by “sanitizing the country's histories of chattel slavery and racism (Heise & Utley, 2011, p. 154). What’s more, Obama’s racially color-blind approach in the speech did not counter the dominant racist ideology and culture, but instead exacerbated the racial color-line, and established a divisive line between legal and illegal immigrants.

**The absence of race and “the border”**

The rhetorical divide between legal and illegal immigrants emerged as another crucial aspect of President Obama’s speech that appeared to be racially-neutral, yet was rhetorically bound to the politics of race. In Chapter 3 I examine the legal/illegal binary in full, but for the present discussion I consider its implications for the American racial order and the rhetoric of whiteness. The presence of undocumented immigrants, and their treatment as “illegal” created rhetorical exigency for the President to address concerns regarding border security and the status of undocumented individuals in the country.

As argued earlier, President Obama’s proclamation that “it doesn’t matter where you come from; it doesn’t matter what you look like” vastly differed from the social reality and attitudes toward immigrants in the country. Even though the most notorious and controversial anti-immigrant law of the past several decades, California Proposition 187, was repealed in 1999, on the basis that it was indeed targeting racial minorities, recent legislative efforts in Arizona, Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina, and Utah embodied similar types of resentment toward immigrants and “illegals” in particular. On the surface, the anti-immigrant laws introduced in those states appeared to be racially neutral, guiding their enforcement around the vague requirement of “reasonable suspicion” that a person might be an illegal immigrant. The “reasonable suspicion” clause has been proven to be problematic as both DeChaine (2012) and Cisneros (2012) presented powerful arguments and evidence that the laws were being enacted
with clear racial prejudice and discrimination toward people of color, and particularly toward people that “looked” Mexican or “illegal.” Similarly, the website for American Civil Liberties Union claimed that “laws inspired by Arizona's SB 1070 invite rampant racial profiling against Latinos, Asian-Americans and others presumed to be "foreign" based on how they look or sound” (ACLU, 2009). As Rosello (1998) rightly pointed out, “illegality is, by definition, unrepresentable through exclusively visual means” (p. 139). Yet, in contemporary U.S. culture and immigration discourses, illegality is rarely attributed to whiteness, but instead is reserved for people of color. President Obama’s claim that “it doesn’t matter where you come from; it doesn’t matter what you look like” was an effort to symbolize the post-racial condition of America. He further attempted to neutralize the importance of race by acknowledging the “fear and resentment directed towards newcomers,” as if the country of origin or race of the newcomers didn’t matter.

Evidence of the contrary can be seen in the fervent support and popularity of anti-immigrant policies in California, Arizona, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Utah which indicate dominant public ideology of whiteness that disapproves the presence of racialized immigrant bodies in those states. Ono & Sloop’s (2002) argued that immigration policies of the 1990s, such as California Proposition 187, mimicked those of the 1920s as they hardened the line between illegal and legal immigration, of who is allowed and who isn’t allowed in the United States. I extend their argument and claim that current anti-immigrant laws in Arizona, Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina, and Utah exacerbate the same divisive line, and further exacerbate racial divides between Americans and “others.” Crucially, in their practical application the anti-immigrant laws specifically target Latino/Latina immigrants. While it is true that they represent the largest body of undocumented immigrants in the United States, their
demonization and criminalization, as well as the inattention paid to illegal immigrants from Asia or Europe, “functionally created racializations typical of contemporary U.S. culture” (Ono & Sloop, 2002, p. 162). At the same time as criminalizing the “undesirable” immigrants from Mexico, the “more desirable” illegal immigrants from Asia and Europe enjoy public inattention because they either fall into the category of “model minorities” or they more easily adopt and participate in the dominant ideology of whiteness. President Obama complied with the established normative view of good vs. bad immigrants by strictly separating illegal from legal immigrants in his El Paso address, stating that “the presence of so many illegal immigrants makes a mockery of all those who are trying to immigrate legally” (Obama, 2008). By positioning illegal vs. legal immigrants the President once again avoided the topic of race, yet the hegemony of whiteness functioned in the silence of race. As argued earlier in this paragraph, “those who are trying to immigrate legally” are constructed as people who follow the norms and regulations of whiteness as criteria for citizenship, while on the other hand the “illegals” are allegedly those people who break the rules of the established system. In Chapter 3 I examine in detail this problematic juxtaposition by showcasing the ways whiteness has affected the system of immigration to privilege people of certain class, education, and financial status that are generally unavailable to a majority of racialized immigrants.

Returning to the discussion of the invisible yet present connection between illegality and race, I argue that the President implicitly managed to emphasize on the illegality associated with people crossing the southern border between the United States and Mexico. Despite acknowledging that “some crossed the border illegally,” while “others avoid immigration laws by overstaying their visas” (Obama, 2011), throughout the rest of the speech he maintained his focus on border enforcement. It also has to be noted that it was not just any border that Obama
wanted to secure. He vilified those who enter illegally and emphasized the need to strengthen the border. But it wasn’t Canadians crossing the northern border, and it wasn’t that border that needed reinforcement - it was the U.S./Mexico border. What was absent, yet present implicitly, was the recognition that the “illegals” were mostly Latino/Latina, crossing the U.S./Mexico border. Once again, this was a strategic omission by President Obama, which through vagueness shifted the attention to the necessity of a racially-neutral policy of border enforcement and immigration. However, considering the location where Obama presented his speech, and the numerous references and stories of Latino/Latina people, it became clear that his speech was really intended to address immigration from Mexico and the enforcement of the southern border. Mexican immigrants became positioned as the Third Persona (see Wander, 1984) – the audience that was not explicitly present in the discourse, yet still functioned as an auditor of Obama’s allegedly race-neutral border politics.

The sheer existence of a border fence along the U.S./Mexico border serves as another example of the demonization of immigrants from Mexico, further supporting the racial divide between legal and illegal immigrants. Obama’s words focused around the issues of the physical act of immigrants crossing the border illegally, as well as the importance of securing the border and the border fence. Obama followed the trend identified by Ono & Sloop (2002) to only focus on immigration at the southern border, paying inattention to illegal immigrants from other parts of the world, thus reinforcing the racial divide, and implicitly placing the rhetorical focus on racialized bodies crossing illegally into the United States. Even in the rhetorical silencing of race, illegality was still associated with racial otherness and specifically – with brown bodies. And despite this rhetorical omission, the racial undertones that operate within the supposedly racially-neutral immigration policies of the United States and the reform proposed by the President
remained relevant and emerged through the recognition of Mexican immigrants as the Third Persona in the speech.

When Obama addressed the issue of border enforcement and mentioned the border fence several audience members jeered loudly while another shouted “They’re racist!” Obama not only ignored the audience’s dissent toward the current measures of border enforcement, but he neglected to address them in the rest of his speech. Most crucially, the audience member who shouted “They’re racist” symbolized the audience’s perception and recognition that while immigration and border enforcement were presented as racially-neutral issues, racial prejudice operated silently in their design and enforcement. Ultimately, the President’s repeated emphasis on the need to “secure our borders” constructed an image of cultural and racial exclusion. His advocacy for the need to “secure our borders,” to “stop illegal immigration,” and deport “those who are here illegally” appeared as racially neutral, yet once again invoked Mexicans and Mexican/Americans as the Third Persona. As a result, Obama’s advocacy for border security and vilification of illegal immigrants established illegality and racial otherness as superseding factors of his original claim that “in embracing America, you can become American.”

Conclusion

In the preceding analysis I outlined examples of how President Obama’s rhetorical portrayal of immigrants emulated the same racially color-blind approach of his past speeches on race, and in particular his “A More Perfect Union” address in which he proclaimed that “there’s not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America” (Obama, 2008). As Bonilla-Silva (2010) argued, this kind of nationalist stance had the potential to “shut the door for recognition of race as a central factor of life,” which is precisely what happened during the 2011 El Paso speech on immigration reform.
President Obama’s claim that “it doesn’t matter what you look like; it doesn’t matter where you come from” grossly oversimplified the complex reality of racial segregation and prejudice toward immigrants in American society. Instead, the President catered to the pseudo racially color-blind approaches of the past. By dismissing race as a central factor of life, while privileging belonging to American culture, he invoked the memory of anti-immigrant rhetorics of the past, which sought to protect the purity of American culture and nation. While not explicitly racist, his rhetorical strategy of silencing race was a strategic move toward protecting the established normativity and hegemony of whiteness.

In silencing race, Obama’s rhetoric sanitized the racialized bodies of immigrants and presented them either as people embracing the American values, or persons of illegal status, but never as people of a certain race. President Obama’s strategy to de-racialize immigration and present it as a race-neutral issue relied simply on silencing race, which invoked the emergence of Wander’s (1984) Third Persona – the “it” that was not present. The Third Persona was represented by the audience being negated through the silencing of race. While Obama’s intended audience (The Second Persona) consisted of all Americans and the immigrants willing to embrace America by adopting its values, the Third Persona consisted of the large group of racialized immigrants who were “measured against an ideal” through the laws, traditions, and prejudices established in the normatively white immigration policy of the United States (Wander, 1984, p. 210). The tertiary audience included the people who were affected by the silenced role of race in Obama’s rhetoric of immigration, who fell outside the defined realm of normative American whiteness, and who recognized that despite Obama’s post-racial, colorblind approach, race continued to play an important, yet silenced, role both in his rhetoric of immigration and the politics of who gets to become a U.S. citizen.
Rhetorical scholars have long argued that silence can be strategic and that silence can be rhetorical (Scott, 1972, 1993, 2000; Wander, 1984), and President Obama’s rhetoric exemplified both characteristics. It was the absence of race in Obama’s rhetoric that allowed the dominance and hegemony of whiteness to remain invisible. By strategically avoiding the topic of race, he allowed existing social and racial inequities to remain unchallenged. It is precisely because of such rhetorical strategies that we, as scholars, must remain vigilant for the occasions when race is silenced or omitted, allowing existing racisms and hegemonic whiteness to continue to operate in their invisible form in determining nationhood and the American social order.

To clarify, my argument was not that President Obama’s rhetoric was necessarily racist itself, but that it failed to address the accumulating outcomes of stratified racisms and dominant culture of whiteness that have operated (and continue to operate) in American society. Obama’s rhetorical strategy was problematic because it relied on the assumption that simply avoiding the discourse around race and racism would lead to their extinction, and thus achieve an environment of equality and a race-neutral America. Ultimately, he failed to acknowledge the hegemony of whiteness and the racist condition of society as it exists today. In that condition, racism operates on a subconscious level. As Lopez (2010) explained, racially color-blind approaches, such as President Obama’s in the El Paso speech, are ineffective because as “racial injustice has become commonsense, simply dropping race from the discussion hardly helps over the long term. Just the reverse, this approach leaves the seeming naturalness of racial hierarchies undisturbed and unchallenged (p. 1067). While President Obama may indeed subscribe to an ideology of racial equality and the virtues of the American Dream, I maintain that his rhetoric of immigration reform exhibited a form of racial color-blindness which not only failed to challenge
the racial hegemony operating in society, but further reinforced the strength of racial color-lines, American/Other binaries, and white normativity.
CHAPTER 3

Neoliberal Limits of Inclusion in Obama’s Rhetoric

When President Barack Obama appeared in El Paso, Texas to deliver what he proclaimed to be “a big policy speech,” he addressed the topic of the ever-so-relevant, yet impossible to achieve, reform of the United States immigration system. As outlined in the previous two chapters of this thesis, historically immigration has been a contentious topic plagued by anti-immigrant sentiment, xenophobia, and racism and in the speech Barack Obama acknowledged the fact that “at times, there has been fear and resentment directed towards newcomers, especially in hard economic times” (Obama, 2011). As the country was still struggling to recover from the economic crises in the late-2000s, Barack Obama’s goals were to appease modern anti-immigrant concerns and discourses, and to convince the public that immigration reform was “an economic imperative” (Obama, 2011). I argue that by treating immigration as an economic imperative, Barack Obama adopted the language and principles of neoliberalism which functioned to rhetorically de-racialize American society and immigration policy. What I want to emphasize is that the President’s rhetoric functioned to displace race as a factor in immigration policy, but it did not challenge or eliminate racisms and racist exclusionary practices against immigrants that currently operate in the United States.

My argument extends the one established in Chapter 2, which presented how through rhetorical silence and omission President Obama perpetuated an established dominant ideology of whiteness. I argue that the dominancy of whiteness was further facilitated by Obama’s adoption of the allegedly race-neutral language of neoliberalism that portrayed immigration as an economic imperative for the American nation. Obama adopted the language of late capitalism to
talk about people through market terms which functioned to de-racialize their bodies, and to an extent de-humanize their existence as only temporary commodities. He accomplished this through the juxtaposing narratives of xenophilia/xenophobia and through the displacement of Mexican immigrants from belonging in his narrative of the United States as a “nation of immigrants.”

A central point of my criticism in this chapter is my argument that in Obama’s rhetoric neoliberalism cooperated with the ideology of whiteness examined in Chapter 2 for the purposes of defining the politics of who is and who isn’t allowed access to U.S. national space and publics. In the previous chapter I examined in detail the concept of whiteness and the relevant scholarship surrounding the term. Whiteness continues to inform the theoretical lens of the current chapter, and it is joined by neoliberalism as another dominant ideological force in contemporary United States that serves to de-racialize immigrants and reinforce the privileges of whiteness. As a reminder, whiteness is commonly understood as the social and material process in which an individual is “inhabiting a position that is secured, maintained, and enjoyed through a structural deprivation of advantages, opportunities, and benefits to people of color that are normally enjoyed by whites” (Shome, 2000, p. 368). Crucially, whiteness is not strictly limited to race, as non-whites often embody the principles of whiteness for the purposes of survival, and more importantly – they adopt whiteness as an identity. Therefore, I follow Saxton’s (1990) conceptualization of whiteness as the process of racial stratification and embeddedness in political and cultural regimes, which over time has masked racial identities with supposedly neutral class structure discourses.

I argue that Barack Obama embodied a political identity characterized by whiteness, through his racially color-blind approach to immigration, which served to protect and reify the
established dominance of whiteness in the United States. His political identity of whiteness was necessitated and in accordance with the traditional prerequisite of whiteness associated with the presidential post. While an examination of whiteness and race was the primary focus of the previous chapter, I take note of Garner’s (2007) and more recently Flores & Villarreal’s (2012) arguments that “whiteness exceeds the study of race and can perhaps be better conceived of as the study of a process of mobilization that entails race along with class, nation, gender, and sexuality” (Flores & Villarreal, 2012, p. 87). So even though the chapter’s focus of analysis revolves around neoliberalism, race remains pertinent, because, as I argued in Chapter 2, within discourses of U.S. immigration race and class are often interdigitated (see Lopez, 2010). This has been proven historically, as Flores (2003) argued that during the 1920s and 1930s, anti-immigrant, anti-Mexican “arguments addressed economics, labor needs, disease, and criminality,” yet their rhetorical strategies served to hide “the underlying racial arguments that surrounded immigration” (p. 381). In my analysis, I outline how contemporary issues of U.S. immigration remain grounded in similar underlying racial arguments and anti-Mexican sentiment.

Over the years numerous scholars (e.g., Johnson, 2001; McIntosh, 1997; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995) have examined the relationship between the invisibility of whiteness, power, and class privileges. Specifically, Flores & Villarreal (2012) noted that “social class and labor have been important barometers of whiteness,” and that the connections between class, labor, and whiteness are often explicated through the ways individuals “perform” class (p. 89). In this chapter I extend the efforts of race and whiteness scholars by suggesting that neoliberalism works in tandem with whiteness to secure dominant social and racial orders through regulating U.S. immigration according to market needs. I support my claim through a rhetorical analysis of
President Barack Obama’s 2011 El Paso speech on immigration reform, which has so far in this thesis been used to outline hidden racial undertones and an underlying ideology of whiteness which guided the President’s rhetorical strategy. I argue that in the speech the President adopted a neoliberal approach of treating immigrants as necessary economic commodities, and at the same time as subjects whose presence needs to be regulated as temporary. In doing so, his rhetoric de-humanized immigrants by stripping away their race, culture, language, and civil rights for the single purpose of improving the U.S. economy. Immigrants, and particularly Mexicans and Mexican/Americans, occupied a problematic position of always/already being suspected of criminality, but also recognized for their potential to be economically beneficial. President Obama’s neoliberal rhetoric relied on the rhetorical omission and silencing of the cultural and economic significance of Mexican immigrants, and instead recognized the importance of those immigrants who adopted the American values, norms, and were willing to contribute to the well-being of the nation-state as a whole.

In the analysis section of this chapter I examine President Obama’s focus on the importance of the nation’s economy and the role immigrants play in either supporting or threatening it. The two are inextricably bound and serve to create a dichotomous view of immigrants as both necessary and undesired. In the speech President Obama recognized the dual nature of the United States as a “nation of immigrants,” but also a “nation of laws.” My analysis aims to show how the President (mis)handled the duality through neoliberal rhetorics, which ultimately served to protect economic prosperity as the overarching/foundational principle of American citizenship in determining social orders. Obama’s neoliberal language de-racialized immigrant bodies in a way that silenced operating systems of racism and inequality in U.S. society, and immigration policies in particular. As a result, neoliberalism works in close
connection to whiteness with its ability to protect and reinforce hegemonic orders that secure the privileges of American middle and upper-class whites. Or as Goldberg (2009) argued, neoliberalism can be read as a response to concerns about the impending importance of whiteness and immigrants group that pose a threat to it. Since I have already reviewed the relevant literature on the concept of whiteness in the previous chapter, I now present a brief discussion of neoliberalism as a political ideology and a rhetorical strategy for de-racializing immigration.

**Connecting neoliberalism, race, and immigration**

Over the last thirty-or-so years neoliberalism has been a continuous process that has managed to gain significant prominence in United States politics as an ideological system that promotes free market operations and rejects government intervention or regulation of the market. The integration of neoliberalism in everyday social and political processes has formed the current system in which market logics function as “normative cultural logics in mainstream discourse” (McKinnon, 2010, p. 135). In their essence, “neoliberal policies tend to strengthen individual rights at the expense of the collective,” while also positioning “business interests over individual freedoms” (Arnold, 2011, p. 45). The ultimate goal of neoliberalism is to “redistribute, rather than to generate, wealth and income.” But instead of leveling out the economic playfield, neoliberal politics tend to benefit the economic elite through the practices of “accumulation by dispossession,” and “privatization and commodification.” In essence, despite its theoretical definition, the practice of neoliberalism has not been a “utopian project to realize a theoretical design for the reorganization of international capitalism” (Harvey, 2005, p. 19) but a practical political project meant to restore the power of economic elites. Furthermore, as Harvey (2005)
explained, the real strength of neoliberal political approaches has been in their ability to view national crises as opportunities to test and enact their policies.

Since the 1980s and 1990s new immigration policies have been introduced and older ones have been amended to work in accordance with NAFTA agreements and globalization tendencies, limiting the number of legal immigrants, but at the same time allowing more temporary workers who would boost the American economy. The majority of policies were grounded in a neoliberal double bind in which “immigrant labor is desired for its productive capacity and disdained for its reproductive capacity, which ostensibly places demands on the state for social benefits” (Koulish, 2010, p 61). In many ways immigrants are perceived as the solution to the economic problems of the United States and the growing demand for highly skilled and temporary farm workers. However, immigrants always remain perceived as not-quite-American and can become a threat if they want to “take advantage” of social benefits intended for U.S. citizens only. Therefore, a neoliberal approach to immigration requires “a deregulated market that polices the worker” (Koulish, 2010, p. 66). Certain areas of the market are deregulated in which immigrants are applauded for their willingness to work the jobs that citizens aren’t capable or aren’t willing to do, but other market areas remain regulated and restricted to U.S. citizens only. In the same neoliberal system, demands for policing or deportation of immigrants increase when they threaten to “steal American jobs.”

It is worthy of noting that the term American jobs itself is foregrounded in racial politics because as Ignatiev (1995) argued, race and economic position are always conflated, since at any period in American history, “the ‘white race’ has included only groups that did ‘white man’s work,’” which was work from which racialized individuals were excluded (p. 28). Flores & Villarreal (2012) summarized the arguments of Goldstein (2006), Ignatiev (1995), and Roediger
(1991), noting that historically immigrants have moved into whiteness depending on their “ability to move out of what were commonly considered Black jobs” (p. 89). In the context of the current discussion, immigrant labor is perceived as beneficial only when it does not threaten those American jobs that are traditionally reserved for middle-class white Americans. Therefore, within a neoliberal ideology immigrants function as a source of cheap labor to fill “non-white” jobs, but at the same time immigrants also serve as potential threats when they attempt to “steal American jobs.” As Koulish (2010) explained, immigrants in the post-9/11 global market are both “necessary cogs and perceived threats,” adding that “by commodifying parts of society, neoliberalism ignores the social needs of immigrants as human beings” (p. 69). What is important to note here is that the political adoption of neoliberalism dehumanizes immigrants regardless of whether they are perceived as the “necessary cogs” or the “threats” to the economic system – in either case immigrants are reduced to economic entities and not actual human beings.

The dehumanization of immigrants is a complex process in which, as Arnold (2011) argued, the practice of viewing immigrants through a neoliberal economic lens becomes “historically specific, reductive, and polarizing” (p. 45). Through such a lens, immigrants are dehumanized and their presence in the country is reduced to either economically beneficial or economically threatening. Immigrants from Mexico are a prime example of this because they “are treated as economically necessary and criminal,” which makes their status in the country undecidable (Arnold, 2011, p. 49). As such immigrants from Mexico are always/already suspected for their potential to become criminals who cross the border illegally and “steal American jobs.” As a way to address the dichotomous perception of Mexican immigrants as both economically necessary and threatening, neoliberal-inspired immigration policies reinforced the historically problematic and dehumanizing category of temporary migrant workers. As
temporary workers, individuals can be treated as non-immigrants, their presence can be policed and regulated for as long as their services are required, but they can be sent back to their countries of origin when they become perceived as an economic burden or a threat to the sovereignty of the nation-state. Furthermore, the temporality of the non-immigrant status also serves the neoliberal agenda because it reduces the burden of having to provide social services to these individuals. By excluding people from citizenship, neoliberal immigration policies position individuals as stateless, which Arendt (1973) defined as having no right to rights, whether civil or human. The inbetweenness and hybridity of the non-immigrant and non-citizen status is convenient for the neoliberal agenda, because they enable the system to reap the benefits of cheap immigrant labor which improves the overall U.S. economy and its international competitiveness, but also bears none of the responsibilities to provide care or benefits for the people in that status. Thus it realizes the agendas of neoliberalism and late capitalism of “minimizing costs and maximizing flexibility” (Hu-Dehart, 2003, p. 248).

Furthermore, the statelessness of undocumented immigrants and temporary workers brings up the question of individual human rights. Sassen (2007) clarified that “unlike political, social, and civil rights, which are predicated on the distinction between “national” and “alien,” human rights are not dependent on nationality” (p. 23). The constitutional ideas of inalienable and natural rights for all people, regardless of territorial limitations or national belonging, could be realized by treating immigrants as “persons” first and foremost, and as “citizens” within a nation second. However, neoliberalism promotes the exact opposite principle of privileging citizenship and national belonging, dismissing basic human rights as secondary.

Crucial to understanding how neoliberalism exacerbates the distinction between “persons” and “citizens,” it is important to recognize that discourses reinforcing the legal/illegal
binary amplify the suspicion that all Mexican and Mexican Americans could be illegal, thus attributing potential criminality to all racialized individuals because they “look illegal” (see Cisneros, 2012). Anti-immigrant discourses often problematically conflate several groups of people (Mexicans, immigrants, foreigners, terrorists, undocumented workers and others), under the general term “illegal aliens,” thus positioning them as homo sacer (Agamben, 1998, 2005; Foucault, 1980; Garrett & Storbeck, 2011). An additional effect of using the term “illegal alien” to equate Mexican, foreign, and criminal is the positioning of the racialized Mexican/American body “as being fundamentally outside the national body” (Flores, 2003, p.381). The criminalization of “illegal aliens” justifies their treatment as non-American, and by extension – non-human.

As dehumanized subjects, immigrants are also the target of a nationally dominant binary of xenophilia/xenophobia. In Honig’s (2001) definition, xenophilia is the idealization of immigrants as “agents of national reenchantment,” capable of adopting American values and contributing to the economic improvement of the nation. Through xenophilic discourses “immigration can be represented as a source to replenish the nation with new citizens, fresh labor, innovation and creativity” (Bauder, 2008; Florida 2002; Honig 2001). On the other hand, xenophobia, serving as xenophilia’s counterpart, is exemplified by the feeling of disdain toward immigrants who are lazy, have no work ethic, steal jobs from citizens, and overpopulate the country, and thus dilute national and racial purity (Arnold, 2011, p. 59). Xenophilia and xenophobia are in a constant and complex collaboration with each other in contemporary neoliberal immigration discourses. Most importantly, Honig’s binary of xenophilia/xenophobia falls within the larger category of rhetoric of necessity. As Agamben (2005) explained, “far from occurring as an objective given, necessity clearly entails a subjective judgment, and necessity
clearly entails a subjective judgment, and that obviously the only circumstances that are necessary and objective are those that are declared to be so’’ (p. 30). The economic necessity for immigrant labor is not an objective reality, but a subjective judgment resulting from neoliberal ideology and political agenda. It is nothing more than a rhetorical construct that has been used politically to create a national consciousness of American exceptionalism inspired by neoliberalism and whiteness.

Ultimately, neoliberal sociopolitical logics maintain a complex trifecta of race, economy, and criminality that influence and affect the issue of immigration. Neoliberal policies combined with a dominant ideology of whiteness create a hostile environment for those who are racially different, economically inferior, and unwilling/unable to assimilate into American-ness. As McKinnon (2010) explained, immigrants “are classified, regulated, and constituted through values of democracy, human capital, and race that materialize bodies when they appear on the doorsteps” (p. 137). At that moment, immigrants are either recognized as worthy of access to United States space and publics based on their productivity or refused access based on the threat of becoming “parasites” or “dependents” of the state, which in U.S. immigration discourses often happens through racializing schemes that stigmatize their bodies (Ong, 2003, p. 12).

As a result, important questions of racial difference and racisms emerge in the allegedly race-neutral language of neoliberalism. Goldberg (2009) articulated the neoliberal connection to racial politics in the United States by arguing that “race is a foundational pillar of modernizing globalization, both shaping and coloring the structures of modern being and belonging, development and dislocation, state dynamism and social stasis” (p. 329 – 330). In his earlier work, Goldberg (1993) argued that modern racist culture is marked by its refusal to acknowledge the role of structural racism in society, and how political and social structures work to disguise
and reify the power of racism in society. Furthermore, Giroux (2005) argued that “even more than being saturated with race, neoliberalism also modifies race” (quoted in Davis, 2007, p. 349). A central function in neoliberal racism is that it “either dismisses the concept of institutional racism or maintains that it has no merit” (Giroux, 2008, p. 71). Accordingly, Davis (2007) provided a very useful definition where:

Under neoliberal racism the relevance of the raced subject, racial identity and racism is subsumed under the auspices of meritocracy. For in a neoliberal society, individuals are supposedly freed from identity and operate under the limiting assumptions that hard work will be rewarded if the game is played according to the rules. Consequently, any impediments to success are attributed to personal flaws. This attribution affirms notions of neutrality and silences claims of racializing and racism. (p. 350)

But in silencing racisms and racializing schemes, neoliberalism does not eliminate them. The resulting colorblindness – or racelessness - only protects racisms through the allegedly race-neutral language, claiming to “judge people according to individualized merit and ability” (Goldberg, 2009, p. 330). However, neoliberalism presents a real obstacle for immigrants because as Davis (2007) noted, it uses capitalism to hide racial inequalities “by relocating racially coded economic disadvantage and reassigning identity-based biases to the private and personal spheres” (p. 349). In essence, neoliberalism creates a false sense of racelessness and as such serves to reify the dominance of whiteness. In Chapter 2 I examined how President Obama adopted and presented the condition of racelessness through rhetorical omission and silence. While my argument in the present chapter once again revolves around the racelessness in Obama’s rhetoric, I examine how he achieved it through the language of neoliberalism which
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displaced race with matters of economic worth and ability to contribute to national development. In the next sections I utilize a methodological frame of ideological criticism to examine how President Obama embodied the principles of neoliberalism in treating immigrants both as economic units and potential threats to the American economy in his 2011 El Paso speech on immigration reform.

My analysis here examines several aspects of Barack Obama’s rhetoric that served to reify neoliberal sociopolitics of immigration that protect the interests of whiteness. First, I examine the President’s rhetorical construction of a “nation of immigrants,” which I argue served to define the limits of inclusion in American nationhood. Second, I interrogate President Obama’s claim that immigration is an economic imperative, which served to de-racialize and dehumanize immigrants. Ultimately, I re-create Obama’s rhetorical vision of immigration reform as an exemplar of xenophilia, qualified and tempered with a dose of implicit xenophobia. The continuous juxtaposition of the two illustrates the impossibility of a truly comprehensive immigration reform as long as it remains grounded in the politics of racial neoliberalism which exclude certain populations according to merit and human capital.

Obama’s “nation of immigrants” as a way to project an image of the ideal immigrant

As a starting point of examination and criticism, I consider President Obama’s narrative of “a nation of immigrants” as a rhetorical device of audience identification and exclusion (see Burke, 1945). Through a brief trip down memory lane the President defined national membership and its limits based on economic prosperity as a foundational American precept. He celebrated the millions of immigrants, “ancestors to most of us,” who “braved hardship and great risk to come here – so they could be free to work and worship and start a business and live their lives in peace and prosperity” (Obama, 2011). He positioned economic prosperity and the ability
to start a business as paramount characteristics and qualities of the types of immigrants that America welcomed. Further supporting the “nation of immigrants” narrative, President Obama recognized specifically the waves of Asian, German, Scandinavian, Irish, Italian, Polish, Russian, and Jewish immigrants, as the core groups of immigrants that had “helped make this country stronger and more prosperous” (Obama, 2011). The President applauded the diversity of immigrants not for their cultural impact, but for their willingness to “embrace America’s ideals and America’s precepts,” and their ability to “contribute to the nation that is their home” (Obama, 2011). While Obama acknowledged national heritage, he subordinated it to the need to be assimilated into American-ness, and reinforced the importance of American exceptionalism.

But even more importantly, his narrative of “nation of immigrants” depended on the neoliberal expectation that immigrants should be able to contribute to the economic prosperity of the nation. In Obama’s speech cultural or racial differences were eradicated as long as an immigrant was able to contribute and embrace America’s precepts. The President proclaimed that “it doesn’t matter where you come from; it doesn’t matter what you look like,” adding that “what matters is that you believe in the ideals on which we were founded” (Obama, 2011). While he identified “equality” and “certain inalienable rights” as these foundational American ideals, his speech ignored the long history of anti-immigrant sentiments and restrictionist immigration policies that have failed to reflect these ideals. Instead, Obama’s speech established economic achievement and success as the paramount American ideals and requirements for belonging. Setting up these requirements, the President invited current and potential immigrants to identify with his rhetorically created “nation of immigrants.” However, President Obama’s idealized image of “nation of immigrants” implicitly omitted and excluded groups of immigrants who have had historic significance for the development of the United States as a nation. While the
President recognized the waves of Asian, German, Scandinavian, Irish, Italian, Polish, Russian, and Jewish immigrants, he failed to acknowledge the importance and significance of immigrants from Mexico, Latin America, and Africa. Through rhetorical silence and omission (see Scott, 1972, 1993, 2000), Barack Obama downplayed the significant and important role that Mexican immigration has played in supporting the ever-so-important U.S. economy.² The rhetorical omission of Mexican/Americans in Obama’s speech functioned as an example of Flores’ (2003) claim that Mexican/American bodies are always/already conceptualized as outside the national body. Obama’s failure to recognize their significance or address them directly in his speech could be due to “the relative invisibility of Mexicans across most of the country” (Flores, 2003, p. 369). However, it can be argued that such invisibility is challenged by recent restrictionist narratives and anti-immigrant rhetorics that target Mexican immigration in particular (see Chapter 4 for a discussion on the topic).

Most importantly, I argue that his omission was problematic due to the unique location where he delivered the speech - the city of El Paso, right on the U.S./Mexico border. The location created exigency to address the Hispanic population directly, yet the President failed to address this exigency and only implicitly included Mexican and Mexican/American immigrants in the vaguely defined large category of “nation of immigrants.” While Obama’s target audience and implied auditors (Second Persona, see Black, 1970) were indeed the entire body of immigrants, documented and undocumented, as well as the American voting public, the fact that more than 80% of the 11 million currently undocumented immigrants in the United States are from Mexico and Latin America created yet more exigency for Obama to address Latino/a immigrants in particular (PEW, 2005). Instead, the President rhetorically constructed image of a “nation of immigrants,” who were willing and able to contribute economically defined the
Second Personas in President Obama’s speech. As Black (1970) noted, the Second Persona is the audience extracted solely from the discourse, and not necessarily representative of the actual auditors of a speech. It is an implied audience, one that represents Obama’s idealized model of what he “would have his real auditor become” (Black, 1970, p. 113). President Obama’s definition of a “nation of immigrants” served as invitation for immigrants to identify themselves as members of the idealized image of immigrants who came from Europe or Asia, were willing to contribute, and were shooting to reach the American dream. By not addressing Mexican immigrants directly, and failing to recognize their historic significance in his “nation of immigrants” narrative, President Obama positioned them outside the boundaries of his implied audience. As a result, immigrants from Mexico became Third Personas as the audience “rejected or negated through the speech” (Wander, 1984, p. 209). Accidental or strategic, the rhetorical omission of Mexican immigrants was nevertheless critical in that it positioned them outside the history of national formation and implicitly excluded them from ever becoming fully American. Barack Obama defined the limits of inclusion through his description of a “nation of immigrants,” which commemorated the achievements and significance of white European immigrants and apart from the brief mention of immigrants from Asia excluded the history of non-white immigrants as members of the national body.

**Economic contribution and technical skills as paramount criteria for inclusion**

Crucially, the exclusion was achieved partly through rhetorical omission, but also through Obama’s neoliberal requirement for immigrants to be able to contribute to national development. The President commemorated the individual accomplishments of Einstein, Isaac Asimov, I. M. Pei, and Andrew Carnegie as exemplars of immigrants’ capacity to make “this country stronger and more prosperous” (Obama, 2011). Obama’s neoliberal agenda emerged
when he promoted economic prosperity and individual achievement by expressing his support for retaining “the best and the brightest” individuals, which he further reduced to just foreign students who “get engineering and computer science degrees at our top universities” (Obama, 2011). Stating that, the President placed the country’s economic interests first and positioned immigrants as individuals who could be used to help America become “more competitive in the global economy.” Obama reinforced this notion when he brought forward examples of high-tech companies like Intel, Google, Yahoo!, and eBay, emphasizing that “every one of those was founded by, guess who, an immigrant.” He additionally applauded the fact that in recent years high-tech companies started by immigrants “led to 200,000 jobs here in America” (Obama, 2011). Ultimately, President Obama’s rhetorically constructed “nation of immigrants” relied on and further reinscribed the reductive neoliberal principle of treating people as economic units.

Obama’s “nation of immigrants” capable of contributing to national development had a rhetorically divisive function of creating two main categories of Second Personas as implied auditors and idealized types of immigrants. The first category included the type of immigrants described in the previous paragraph - individuals of high socioeconomic class, the highly educated foreign students, and the highly-skilled workers in computer science and engineering fields. President Obama’s rhetorical strategy in defining the “nation of immigrants” made it easy for them to identify with the projected image of what the ideal immigrant would act and look like. But then, there was the second category of auditors, which included the less educated, non-documented, those who were “just looking to scrape together an income” (Obama, 2011). These immigrants who came from lower socioeconomic class and never had the educational access to become computer scientists or engineers could not identify with the image of the ideal immigrant projected by Obama. President Obama briefly envisioned their inclusion as necessary farm
workers and advocated that “we need to provide our farms a legal way to hire workers they can rely on, and a path for those workers to earn legal status” (Obama, 2011). But even more problematic than the clear divisive line between the two types of Second Personas was the emergence of a rhetorical Third Persona in Obama’s speech. The President’s narrative of “nation of immigrants” which projected the ideal types of immigrants welcomed in the United States established a reductive binary of immigrants as either highly-skilled computer scientists and engineers, or migrant farm workers, leaving no possibility for immigrants to occupy middle-class American jobs. The rhetorical exclusion of middle-class immigrants with no specialized or manual labor skills positioned them as the Third Persona, the “it” that was not present, the Other that could not assimilate in the dominant neoliberal ideology of late capitalism, and ultimately as the Other that did not belong to the American national body. Obama’s definition of immigrant belonging depended on the ability to contribute and further the interests of economic elites – either by being a highly-skilled engineer who would take on jobs that average Americans can’t, or by being a migrant farm work who would work jobs that average Americans won’t. Ultimately, by excluding the inconvenient middle-class immigrant as a Third Persona, and by narrowly defining the types of immigrants that America welcomes as his Second Personas, the President managed to secure the relative economic and job comfort of middle-class American whites and economic elites.

**Displacing race through the language of class**

It is interesting to note that in defining the limits of the “nation of immigrants” Barack Obama employed an allegedly race-neutral rhetorical strategy of privileging “the best and the brightest,” who receive “engineering and computer science degrees at our top universities” (Obama, 2011). Obama’s rhetoric was designed as all-inclusive, promoting an idea that anyone
can become “the best and the brightest,” yet it failed to acknowledge the dire reality of many undocumented immigrants (and immigrants at large) who never had the opportunity or access to education required to become members of “the best and the brightest.” So even though Obama promoted that he wants “everybody to be able to reach that American dream,” he excluded a large group of immigrants based on class politics which privileged access for only the educated and the best and the brightest.” In essence, Barack Obama defined the limits of national inclusion by projecting a model image of what he expected his real auditors to become. The “hypothetical construct that is the implied auditor” (Black, 1970, p.112) in Obama’s rhetoric was the idealized image of an immigrant who would adopt neoliberal principles and ideology, educate herself with a degree in computer science and engineering, work hard to create American jobs, and thus gain her right to stay in the country. Obama’s implied auditor, as a product of neoliberal ideology, established a disconnected with the Third Persona in Obama’s speech – immigrants from Mexico as the majority of undocumented immigrants in the country.

While the President’s rhetoric appeared to be race-neutral as it did not target or stigmatize specific races and ethnicities, racial politics remained pertinent through their connection to class. As Lopez (2010) noted, “race and class in the United States inextricably interdigitate such that neither can be engaged without sustained attention to the other” (p. 1051). President Obama displaced racial politics through placing importance on education, socioeconomic class, and the ability to contribute. The displacement of race was a tactical move to neoliberalize race, through which, as Davis (2007) explained, “the relevance of the raced subject, racial identity and racism is subsumed under the auspices of meritocracy” (p. 350). Under neoliberalism, as long as an immigrant is economically beneficial and contributes to the interest of the United States, his or her race and class are irrelevant and eradicated. Similarly, if an immigrant is perceived as
burdensome or inconvenient to the interests of American publics, neoliberal racism allows and justifies his or her exclusion based on the inability to contribute and fit the market needs of the United States. As a result, their bodies are de-racialized but nevertheless excluded in the United States’ neoliberal system of meritocracy.

In essence, during his immigration reform speech of 2011, President Obama embraced the language and politics of antiracialism, which seek “to wipe out the terms of reference, to wipe away the very vocabulary necessary to recall and recollect, to make a case, to make a claim” (Goldberg, 2009 quoted in Enck-Wanzer, 2011, p. 28). Additionally, as Enck-Wanzer (2011) argued, Barack Obama’s refusal to address issues of race and racism has placed him “squarely within the neoliberal racial project” (p. 28). President Obama exemplified this type of racial neoliberalism by not only failing to acknowledge the historic role of non-white immigrants from Mexico, Latin America, and Africa, but also by implicitly excluding them from his idealized image of “nation of immigrants” for their inability to contribute. The President’s rhetoric exemplified the neoliberal theorization of society, through which the successful admission of an immigrant into the national body is directly related to his or her work output. Within such a neoliberal frame, “modalities of difference, such as race, do not predetermine one’s success as each individual is evaluated solely in terms of his or her economic contribution to society,” which however ignored the social reality in which “this ideal relationship is not equally realized by all members in society” (Roberts & Mahtani, 2010, p. 253). President Obama’s neoliberal de-racialization of immigrants allowed hidden racisms and racial inequalities and inequities in society to perpetuate undisturbed and even protected them under his meritocratic vision of “nation of immigrants.”
Based around this meritocratic view of “nation of immigrants,” Barack Obama maintained a dichotomous binary between attitudes of xenophilia and xenophobia toward immigrants, which further reinscribed neoliberal tendencies of defining the limits of national inclusion.

**Competing narratives of xenophilia and xenophobia**

In this section of my analysis, I argue that the President’s rhetorical strategy was guided by a neoliberal idea of American exceptionalism that showcased an attitude of xenophilia toward immigrants who are capable of contributing to the economic and technological development of the nation. However, Obama’s xenophilia was tempered by a much more implicit and concealed form of xenophobia toward immigrants who fall outside his ideal image of the immigrant. While President Obama’s neoliberal rhetoric openly exhibited an attitude of xenophilia toward “the best and the brightest” immigrants, it concealed its xenophobic counterpart under the idealistic proclamation that “you can make it here if you try.” The resulting image of Obama’s “nation of immigrants” was tainted by xenophobia, which emerged through the narrowly defined limits of inclusion veiled under the politics of neoliberalism, socioeconomic and educational class. Together, the xenophilic and xenophobic attitudes toward immigrants attributed a sense of hybridity and temporality to immigrants, which once again furthered the neoliberal interests of the nation.

During the 2011 El Paso speech on immigration reform, President Obama’s narrative of “nation of immigrants” can be characterized as xenophilic for it praised immigrants’ ability to contribute to the economy of the United States. In Burkean pentadic terms, Obama’s xenophilia treated immigrants as capable agents, whose primary purpose was to strengthen the American economy and help the American people. President Obama established and maintained a binary of
we/they in which “we” (the American nation) provided “them” (immigrants) with the opportunity to work and help grow “our” economy. The binary implied a sense of otherness that positioned immigrants as the never-quite-American agents capable of revamping the national economy. Obama repeatedly proclaimed that immigration reform was “an economic imperative” in which “they” (immigrants) have the capacity to strengthen the middle class and enable everybody to “reach that American dream” (Obama, 2011). He praised immigrants who start high-tech companies for their ability to create American jobs, and he also praised immigrants as reliable farm laborers.

Effectively, Obama’s xenophilia and overall rhetorical strategy dehumanized immigrants as little more than economic commodities and ignored their cultural or personal worth. However, the dehumanization differed from the traditional form of dehumanization found in anti-immigrant rhetorics which treat immigrants as actual threats and enemies of the United States. Rubio (2011) argued that rhetoric and discourses using the term “illegal” in particular “dehumanizes undocumented immigrants, depicting them all as criminals” (p. 51). Obama's dehumanization of “illegal” immigrants followed the neoliberal principles by presenting immigrants through the language of late capitalism that depicted them as the necessary agents of economic reinvigoration. For the intents and purposes of the neoliberal project, President Obama was right when he proclaimed that “it doesn’t matter where you come from; it doesn’t matter what you look like.” As long as an immigrant is perceived as an agent capable of contributing to the economic development of the United States, whether as a computer engineer, or as a migrant farm worker, his or her race, gender, sexuality, culture, religion, etc. become irrelevant. The immigrant although welcomed becomes but a mere tool stripped of human qualities.
Problematic and dehumanizing as it was Obama’s xenophilic attitude toward immigrants was also joined by a much more implicit form of xenophobia concealed in the narrative of “nation of laws.” President Obama’s xenophilia only extended to his idealized vision of “nation of immigrants,” while immigrants who fell outside the established categories were treated through a xenophobic neoliberal lens. The President acknowledged that “at times, there has been fear and resentment directed towards newcomers, especially in hard economic times.” Obama paid attention to the fact that “some crossed the border illegally,” while “others avoid immigration laws by overstaying their visas,” ultimately recognizing that “regardless of how they came, the overwhelming majority of these folks are just trying to earn a living and provide for their families” (Obama, 2011). He did not blame them directly for national economic hardships, however he did place them outside the narrative of “nation of immigrants” who contribute to national development. President Obama further reified their position as Third Personas “rejected or negated though the speech” (Wander, 1984, p. 209), when he took note of the fact that the hardships of undocumented immigrants place at a disadvantage American businesses and “Americans who rightly demand the minimum wage or overtime or just a safe place to work.” The hardships of immigrants were only briefly recognized, while Obama’s primary rhetorical move served to establish American citizens as victims of underground economies and illegal immigration. In doing so, he did not explicitly stigmatize immigrants themselves, but instead scrutinized the practice of illegal immigration and the system that had failed to prevent it. Obama further shifted the focus away from the issues of immigrants by recognizing the struggles of the middle class “to get by as the costs went up for everything.” The President strategically expressed the importance of recognizing “that being a nation of laws goes
hand in hand with being a nation of immigrants” by stressing the detrimental effects of illegal immigration on United States citizens and businesses.

The juxtaposing binaries of nation of immigrants/nation of laws, xenophilia/xenophobia, we/they took shape when Obama recognized that as a nation the United States has “often wrestled with the politics of who is and who isn’t allowed to come into this country,” and that the debates of who is allowed to immigrate in hard economic times have been characterized by “fear and resentment towards newcomers” (Obama, 2011). He tempered the deeply embedded xenophobia of the politics of “what it means to be an American,” by promoting the idea of immigration as an “economic imperative” that would allow everyone to reach for the American dream (Obama, 2011). He championed the value of individuals who follow immigration laws and legal immigrants who contribute to American development, remarking that historically it was in America “that they had a chance to contribute to the nation.” And even though he focused primarily on the need to “make it easier for the best and the brightest to not only stay here, but also to start businesses and create jobs,” Obama briefly recognized the “folks who are just looking to scrape together an income” and “provide for their families,” advocating that “we need to provide our farms a legal way to hire workers they can rely on, and a path for those workers to earn legal status” (Obama, 2011). Not only did President Obama’s speech dehumanize immigrants as mere economic commodities, but it also attributed to them a sense of temporality.

**Foreign workers as a necessary but temporary commodity**

During the 2011 El Paso speech on immigration reform President Obama established an image of foreign workers as temporary through a rhetorical binary of legal/illegal, in which he professed the need to make it easier for individuals to gain legal status. Obama’s rhetorical strategy positioned actual immigration and permanent residency for immigrants outside his
narrative of legal/illegal. He positioned illegal immigration as something that needs to be controlled, regulated, and eventually restricted (see Chapter 4). At the same time, while Obama envisioned legal immigration as beneficial, he nevertheless portrayed it as controlled and regulated based on the current economic needs of the country.

For example, in the speech the President advocated for more worker visas for students in the high-tech fields, and thus he implicitly supported the current system of restrictions which legally positions foreign workers and college graduates as non-immigrants, allowing them to work only for a specified number of years. The legal status of such workers can be terminated at any point when their services are no longer required or beneficial to U.S. economy needs. In President Obama’s statement that “we should make it easier for the best and brightest to not only stay here, but also to start businesses and create jobs here,” I take note of the phrase “stay here” and the implied otherness of Obama’s sentence structure where “we” allow “them” to stay “here.” While the phrase “stay here” did not define the length of stay for these individuals, it also did not explicitly define grounds for permanent residency or citizenship. Implied was the sense of sovereign control that government has in defining the terms of stay when allowing high-skilled workers in the country. Similarly, the temporality and flexibility commonly attributed to migrant farm workers emerged in Obama’s advocacy for granting vaguely defined “legal status” to these workers. Said “legal status” did not specifically imply permanent stay but was once again subordinated to the sovereign powers of government to define the terms of legality. The president did not offer the promise of citizenship and national belonging through a rhetorical omission that served the neoliberal political agenda of championing productivity and flexibility.

In the rhetorical binary of legal/illegal, President Obama maintained that illegal immigration needs to be prevented, advocating that the best way to achieve this is by “reforming
our outdated system of legal immigration” (Obama, 2011). His strategy appeared as a genuine step forward in international relations and a move toward a better immigration policy for the country. However, it is when we interrogate the details of his plan that we begin to see the underlying structures of neoliberalism that dictate the parameters of immigration reform. For instance, despite his endorsement of allowing “the best and the brightest” to “stay” in the country, and granting “legal status” to migrant farm workers, Obama failed to recognize the temporality of most non-immigrant work visas. He did not address or challenge restrictions and pitfalls in the immigration system that place foreign workers in a constant state of limbo – their presence is deemed “legal” for a specified amount of time, or for as long as their services are required, but their “legal” status can be terminated at any given moment. I argue that this kind of condition is often overlooked in the competing narratives of legal/illegal. President Obama’s speech is a good example because the President did not interrogate the limits of the “legal” status, but only reinforced the current ambiguities associated with it, which are ultimately designed to fulfill the neoliberal agenda to keep foreign labor flexible and under control.

Relying on such legal/illegal controversies and ambiguities, over the years the neoliberal regulatory project has fostered and sustained an informal economy of day laborers, largely comprised of “illegal immigrants” in the name of greater labor market flexibility (Roberts & Mahtani, 2010; Theodore, 2007). President Obama’s speech did not challenge this economy but only served to redefine its terms. While Obama’s vision of immigration reform would grant legal status to currently “illegal” foreigners and allow for more highly-skilled workers to “stay” and work in the country, the President’s policies perpetuate the current treatment of such workers as temporary economic commodities. Their presence may become legalized, but it would remain regulated based on the economic needs of the country. For legal and practical purposes, Obama’s
speech solidified the position of foreign students and migrant farm workers as non-immigrants. Even though Obama’s narratives of legal/illegal immigration exhibited xenophilia toward immigrant workers, they were nonetheless garnished with a neoliberal need to regulate immigration and define the limits of national inclusion, which President Obama established according to immigrants’ merit and ability to contribute, but only as temporary commodities.

Ultimately, the competing narratives of xenophilia and xenophobia attributed a sense of hybridity and temporality to immigrants. This hybridity and temporality dictated that an immigrant could never be permanently perceived through the lens of xenophilia, but instead she could be seen through a xenophobic lens a moment later, depending on the national interests at the time, and her perceived (in)ability to contribute to the state. In the competing narratives of xenophilia/xenophobia immigrants are always/already perceived as temporary and as hybrids that are not-quite-American. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, historically the temporality of immigrants has been exemplified by policies that treat them as migrant or temporary workers. Such policies continue to be dictated by the neoliberal principles of privileging flexibility and productivity that allow foreign workers to be used for their skills, but sent back to their homes as soon as their services are no longer required, or if they become an economic burden to the state (McKinnon, 2010, p. 136).

While it appeared that the President truly wanted to reform the United States immigration system in a way that would benefit all, he implicitly reified neoliberal practices and policies that treat foreign workers as temporary commodities. The President’s speech reified the use of surveillance and control systems implemented after 9/11 that “help to ensure that large numbers of new laboring bodies come into the nation to do work ordinary citizens may not want or have the skill to do, and to help ensure that those bodies leave when the work is done or when they are
no longer needed” (Ono, 2012, p. 25). Furthermore, Obama placed rhetorical emphasis on the interests and economic development of the nation state. In Obama’s rhetoric, immigrants occupied the position of dehumanized, temporary agents capable of improving the American economy.

**Conclusion**

Considering the preceding analysis, I can ultimately argue that in his speech on immigration reform President Obama struggled to define a middle-ground position between the narratives of the United States as a “nation of immigrants” and a “nation of laws,” which served to define the limits of national inclusion according to neoliberal policies and agenda. Guided by a neoliberal agenda that maintains and secures a continuous binary of xenophilic/xenophobic narratives about immigration, President Obama presented immigrants as temporary economic necessities. The President’s rhetorical strategy was influenced by neoliberal principles through which certain groups of immigrants, but undocumented immigrants in particular, became alienated and alienized because of their position as Third Personas in the President’s speech.

Alienation as “the basic mode of being in capitalist and state socialist societies,” (Aronowitz, 2007, p. 137) is key to understanding the nationalistic desire to differentiate between us and them - citizens and immigrants. These desires result from ideological subscriptions influenced by neoliberalism and whiteness that dictate the order of everyday life. Alienation could also function as a rhetorical strategy through which the treatment of immigrants as temporary economic commodities alienates them as an always/already Other, incapable of ever achieving full access to U.S. public life and citizenship. Similarly, alienization “operates in U.S. society as a hegemonic project concerned with the forging and maintaining of dominant American civic values” (DeChaine, 2009, p. 52). DeChaine (2009) further explained that
alienization depersonalizes (and dehumanizes) immigrants, articulating that “by establishing a socially acceptable position for anti-migrant sentiment, one that places blame not on a person or an ethnic group but on an impersonal condition, the formal construction of alienization provides an inoculation against charges of racism and scapegoating” (p. 56). Obama’s race-neutral rhetoric served this purpose of alienization by setting requirements based on education, professional skills, socioeconomic class, and ability to contribute. As a result, the implicit process of alienization in Obama’s speech dismissed the individual values of immigrants who fell outside the defined employment categories of eligibility and positioned them as Third Personas - as non-human entities unable to contribute to American development, and as such excluded them from national belonging. Combined together, the practices of alienation and alienization functioned in naturalizing socio-cultural borders, constructing we/they binaries by “defining clear and self-evident lines between American citizen and alien invader,” and establishing the “racialized, alienized, border-crossing migrant” as excluded from United States national space and citizenry (DeChaine, 2009, p. 59). Race, while not present in the discourse, remained pertinent because of its interdigitation with class (Lopez, 2010), but more importantly, because of the “seductive, common-sense logic to neoliberalism that reproduces racist ideologies” (Roberts & Mahtani, 2010, p. 250). Furthermore, Roberts & Mahtani (2010) argued that racism is “an inevitable result of neoliberalization” (p. 250). Just like my argument in Chapter 2, I am not arguing that President Obama’s rhetoric was racist itself, but only that it perpetuated a neoliberal ideology that invites the emergence of racist sentiments and discourses against immigrants. Obama’s speech served to seemingly de-racialize American society but not to eliminate existing racisms and racial inequalities.
President Obama’s neoliberal rhetoric that connected immigration and utility was characterized by antiracialism which eradicated all references to race under the pretense of anti-racism. But the speech did involve racial politics, albeit implicitly. In defining the limits of national inclusion through the historic narrative of “nation of immigrants,” President Obama alienated and alienized undocumented immigrants from Mexico by treating them as different from other immigrant groups, not recognizing their historic significance for the U.S. economy, and positioning them as temporary economic commodities. President Obama defined strict limits of inclusion based on the economic needs of the country for highly-skilled and educated engineers and computer scientists, as well as temporary farm workers. Any immigrant that fell outside the two categories became a Third Persona, representing an audience negated through the speech. Under the neoliberal agenda, and current economic needs of the nation, the Third Persona consisted of the economically unnecessary, undesirable, and burdensome. Through his definition of the United States as both a “nation of immigrants” and a “nation of laws,” President Obama exemplified a constant struggle between attitudes of xenophilia and xenophobia toward immigrants which depended on an immigrant’s capacity to contribute to the nation’s economic development, as well as her ability to not burden the state and maintain a temporary status as a removable subject.

In the end, President Obama’s speech functioned in reinforcing existing rhetorical borders for immigration veiled under the supposedly race-neutral language of neoliberalism and late capitalism. These rhetorical borders, shaped by Obama’s speech and national immigration policies serve to “define who is eligible as a future member of the national community, and who must remain beyond the “impassable symbolic boundary” of Otherness (Hall, 1996 quoted in Bauder, 2011, p. 103). Although Obama advocated that “we need to come together around
reform that reflects our values as a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants,” he nevertheless established a divisive line between the two and maintained a cluster of rhetorical exclusion. The cluster specifically encircled immigrants from Mexico and undocumented immigrants as people who were excluded from membership in the “nation of immigrants,” and as people who lived outside the rules defined by the “nation of laws,” because they failed to fit in the President’s narrowly defined limits of inclusion. Ultimately, President Obama’s vision of comprehensive immigration reform functioned as a rhetorical border of exclusion influenced by neoliberalism and the economic needs of the nation.

Notes:

1 The history of migration from Mexico serves as an important example of the practice to treat foreign workers as temporary, non-immigrants. In the beginning of the 20th century Mexican farm workers helped to build one of the nation’s most significant and profitable industries – the agriculture industry in the southwest. The rapid expansion of the farm industry depended “upon an ever-increasing number of migrant workers to seasonally plant and harvest the crops” (Hernandez, 2009, p. 25). Mexican workers were perceived as the ideal source of labor, but also as “birds of passage” which reinforced their identity as not-American and eventually justified their exclusion as unwanted foreign burden when the economy collapsed in the 1930s (Guerin-Gonzalez, 1996). When the demand for agricultural laborers in the southwestern United States increased once again during World War II, the United States established the Bracero program, which welcomed Mexican farm workers on a temporary basis.

2 For a detailed examination of historical significance of Mexican immigrants on the U.S. economy and culture see Xenos (1997). His analysis showed how Mexican immigrants as a group that has been a crucial part of American history and has contributed to developing American identity, politics, economics, and culture (among others) is viewed currently as alien and threatening.

3 I acknowledge the possibility of identifying more than two categories, especially considering Obama’s discussion and provisions of the DREAM act. The act was eventually passed in 2012 and generally established a pathway to obtaining legal status for undocumented individuals who were brought to the United States by their parents before the age of 16. I argue that they do not constitute a distinct category of auditors for Obama’s speech as the majority of them would fall in either of the two already established categories, depending on the socioeconomic status of their parents.
CHAPTER 4
Obama and the Border Fence: Neoliberalizing Immigration Control and Further Defining the Limits of Inclusion

“Immigrants – you can’t live without them, you can’t keep them in the country” - Anonymous

At this final stage of analysis, I examine how neoliberal politics and principles constructed a rhetorical border of exclusion which materialized in President Obama’s advocacy to “stop illegal immigration” and to “secure the borders” (Obama, 2011). In addition to viewing immigrants as economic units, neoliberal politics have the ability to position immigrants as potential threats to American sovereignty and as criminals that pose a threat to the lives of citizens. As a result, questions of border security as a measure of immigration control are linked rhetorically to the needs of protecting American sovereignty and neoliberalism. In the 2011 El Paso speech on immigration reform President Obama recognized that questions about border security “were legitimate concerns.” Crucially, he advocated that “the most significant step we can now take to secure the border is to fix the system as a whole so that fewer people have the incentive to enter illegally in search of work in the first place (Obama, 2011). As a solution, he proposed and outlined a four-fold plan of a comprehensive reform of the United States’ immigration system. In this chapter I analyze the rhetoric of President Obama’s approach toward border security and immigration control. I examine his plan of reform in an effort to outline how it was influenced by neoliberal principles and I interrogate his tenuous and conflicting relationship with the U.S./Mexico border fence and the immigration control industry.
As a theoretical and methodological foundation I use the literature outlined in Chapters 2 and 3 because I argue that an ideology of dominant whiteness and neoliberal politics influence the President’s agenda to tighten immigration control and secure the border. I take note of Obama’s implicit emphasis on improving security at one specific national border – the U.S./Mexico one, and as a result I focus my efforts on examining the U.S./Mexico border fence and the functions of its materiality, rhetoricality, and symbolicity. The primary concern of my analysis is to provide understanding of Obama’s complicated position regarding border security at the Mexican border, influenced by his conceptualization of immigrants as both subjects of necessity and subjects of threat. Obama’s position was influenced in large part by the already discussed (Chapter 3) complex relationship between United States as a “nation of immigrants” and a “nation of laws.” Honig’s (2001) binary of xenophilia/xenophobia is also relevant to this chapter’s analysis as it offers insight into the need to surveil and regulate immigrants, and prevent further illegal immigration in the country. Finally, I return to the conflicting binary of legal/illegal immigration, as it affected Obama’s conceptualization of border security. Taken together, the various rhetorical binaries construct a rhetoric of necessity in which border security and immigration control emerge as paramount features of Obama’s plan for immigration reform.

In his 2011 El Paso address President Obama repeatedly emphasized the need to “secure the borders,” recognizing that government has a “threshold responsibility,” and applauded border security measures that have decreased the number of people who “are attempting to cross the border illegally” (Obama, 2011). Thus it is important to examine the border as a solid, material, but also rhetorically defined threshold. I take note of the work of Xenos (1997) to argue that in the context of immigration rhetoric, “the border between the United States and Mexico is frozen in time, naturalized, and its history ignored to produce the binaries of patriotic/traitorous,
citizen/enemy, legal/illegal.” Xenos (1997) additionally noted that modern media portray Mexican immigrants who cross the border illegally as “invaders, criminals, and carriers of disease and disorder” (cited in Arnold, 2011, p. 30). In order to understand how Barack Obama maintained and reified the different binaries that perpetuate the border and the border fence as integral and necessary parts of immigration policy, I first need to provide a brief discussion of scholarly literature on borders and national space as rhetorical products of neoliberal U.S. ideology and politics.

**The border as a symbolic, material, and rhetorical limit of nationhood**

Established scholarship on the topic of the U.S./Mexico border has already examined extensively the rhetorical functions of borders, and the border fence in particular, to criminalize the act of entering United States national space (DeChaine, 2009; Flores, 2003; Madsen, 2011; Ono & Sloop, 2002). In its essence, bordering reinforces exclusionary practices based on race, ethnicity and culture. Ono (2012) argued that “a border acts as a separator or divider of people with different social, economic, and political affiliations, as a signifier of inclusion and exclusion, and as a way of determining one’s worthiness as a living being” (p. 22). Because of this function, borders have the ability to dehumanize or alienize people. With this understanding in mind, it could be argued that the U.S./Mexico border fence was constructed primarily as an ideological barrier. Its function as a material boundary between two countries is only secondary. While it was ideally designed to prevent illegal entry into American national space, in its actual realization it only functions in controlling the entry of Mexican immigrants, slowing down their crossing or making it more dangerous (Clifford, 2012; Garrett & Storbeck, 2011; Langerbein, 2005). As an ideological construct, the border fence can be seen in two ways – as a symbol protecting the sanctity of the American nation and life, or as a symbol of American nationalism.
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that fosters xenophobic feelings and exclusion of the Other. Both images are socially constructed and depend on the ideological commitments of the collective.

Nevertheless, anti-immigrant rhetorics around border security position American space and the border as pre-existing and ontological. These rhetorics elevate the importance of safe American communities by criminalizing the bodies of “illegal aliens.” The border fence has a rhetorical function of “equating criminality with illegal entry” (Flores, 2003, p. 377). The U.S./Mexico border and the accompanying border fence are used to signify the boundaries of the American nation. Thus, when people attempt to cross the boundary created by the fence, radical anti-immigrant groups such as the Minutemen feel a necessity to protect the fence and its sanctity. From this perspective, the fence functions as a rhetorical device of restricting immigration and restoring “a narrative in which America controls its borders and identity” (Flores, 2003, p. 369). As such, the border fence is primarily a political structure in slowing human movement across the border. However, what needs to be recognized is that despite its ideological function the border fence is a very real, material barrier that impacts people directly by criminalizing them as “illegal aliens,” which is used to justify their treatment as non-American, and by extension – non-human.

Within modern anti-immigrant discourses the American identity takes primacy over immigrant bodies and the value of their human lives. Therefore the criminalization of immigrants can be understood as primarily a political agenda to protect the “pureness” of culture and identity. Protecting the American identity becomes a primary goal and justifies any measures to stop the mass invasion of un-American bodies. Or as DeChaine (2012) articulated, “individuals, groups, and governments call upon symbolism of the border in order to mobilize communal allegiances, negotiate boundaries of civic identity, construct unities and divisions, and, often
enough, craft understandings of “us” and “them” (p. 1). The resulting relationship between exclusionary, nationalist ideology and the border impacts the collective memory of the border which becomes established and grounded in “supposedly age-old traditions [that] are in fact comparatively recent inventions” (Vivian, 2010, p. 4). More importantly the border and its physicality become symbols that signify and protect the “universal ideals of democracy, human rights, and social justice” of the American people (Vivian, 2010, p. 5). As Cannato (2010) overviewed, ever since the late 19th century “guarding the borders became the key to defining the character of the nation itself” (p. 12). In essence, the narrative was reversed – the nation’s history and precepts did not define the practice of border control, but instead guarding the border and controlling immigration became the practices defining what it means to be an American. Narratives and representations of the border conceal a political agenda in which texts and historical artifacts are produced “in order to subordinate them to legitimizing narratives of historical progress and national identity” (Haskins, 2007, p. 402). Despite criticisms of the border and border fence, their images remain embedded in American collective ideology as protectors of democracy, nationhood, and the sanctity of American national space. Ultimately, as human symbolic and rhetorical constructs, the border and the border fence achieve their real power when their images are invoked or called upon to accomplish specific goals (DeChaine, 2012). Their exclusionary powers are only materialized as a result of their ideological and rhetorical charge.

**Border security and immigration control as products of neoliberal politics**

During the 2011 El Paso speech President Obama exhibited strong ideological commitment to protect American identity and sovereignty through enforcing border security and immigration control measures, which I argue was closely tied to neoliberal principles and
capitalist politics. They were tied for two primary reasons: 1) undocumented immigrants serve as justification to maintain the thriving industry of immigration control; and 2) because undocumented immigrants are always suspect of criminality, their mere presence in the United States is presented as a danger to “American jobs,” and American everyday life. Both are products of a national environment of xenophobia and enchantment with protecting national identity, but together they create a dichotomous view of immigrants as unwanted, but also as necessary to keep the immigration control narrative and industry going.

Crucially, over the years the narratives that criminalize immigrants who cross the border as “illegal aliens” have served as justification for establishing and maintaining a thriving industry of immigration control. Particularly in the aftermath of 9/11, a movement to present immigration as a security issue gained significant attention and popularity, with Chávez (2012) noting that “the events of September 11, 2001, provided a convenient rationale to heighten these strategies [to militarize the border and strengthen immigration control], which had been in motion for decades” (p. 49). As Ono (2012) pointed out, “9/11 emerged as the raison d’être for the massive fortification of the surveillance state” (p. 25). DeChaine (2012) defined the movement as “fueled by the proclaimed Global War on Terror,” through which “alienization surfaces most prominently in the rhetoric of “national security” that dominates contemporary US immigration discourse” (p.8). Guided by a neoliberal agenda that criminalized the bare presence of undocumented immigrants on American soil as a security threat to national sovereignty, the movement fostered the development of a new industry of border security. In the true spirit of neoliberalism, the new industry of immigration control was mostly privatized and only remotely supervised by the federal government. However, it is imperative to note that “while it may appear that the state relinquishes sovereignty for the sake of the free market in neoliberalism, the
state nevertheless remains a central actor in the institution of neoliberal market logics as sociocultural logics” (McKinnon, 2010, p. 136). In outsourcing border security and immigration control to local officials and private companies, the state appeared to “relinquish sovereignty for the sake of the free market,” but instead enacted another neoliberal trend in which “the government both assumes power and abdicates responsibility by having another body do its dirty work” (Koulish, 2010, p. 133). In the past two decades numerous government-funded initiatives and programs were established and outsourced to private companies in order to patrol, police, and secure the southern U.S. border, culminating with the Secure Fence Act of 2006 which sanctioned the construction of a border fence between the United States and Mexico. Essentially, the government fully embraced neoliberalism by supporting free markets and private industries, navigating and protecting national sovereignty in a mediated form through the hands of local officials and private contractors, ultimately maintaining its powers but bearing none of the responsibilities.

By privatizing the immigration control industry, the state followed neoliberal principles and gave birth to the thriving industry of border control. As a head of this industry, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) began “a procurement process of outsourcing billions of dollars to defense contractors for the purpose of building the border fence and a virtual border fence, which would include digital databases for the purpose of collecting information about people entering the country and immigrants already residing in the country” (Koulish, 2010, p. 81). In addition to contracting companies like Boeing to establish a virtual border fence, and other private contractors to build the physical border fence, in the years after 2001 Congress extended the authority of state and local governments to enforce immigration law. Historically, placing enforcement powers and responsibilities in the hands of local and state agents has been
problematic for immigrants’ human rights as immigration officers have often been ill trained and poorly-qualified (Koulish, 2010, p. 80). In recent years, Arizona’s notorious Sheriff Joe Arpaio became a prime example of poor enforcement of the 287(g) program which authorized local police to detain and verify the legal status of suspected undocumented criminals (Cisneros, 2012; Shahani & Greene, 2009). While the program was not meant to allow state and local agencies to perform random operations, the ACLU reported that the “available statistical data suggests that 287(g)-deputized officers are using race or Latino appearance to stop, question and arrest for immigration related offences (ACLU, 2009). A notable example of these practices became the workplace and neighborhood sweeps that Arizona Sheriff Arpaio conducted in gross violation of the law and human rights, detaining the suspected “illegals” in his “tent city” prison.

Such privatized prisons and detainment facilities were yet another result of privatizing immigration control as part of the neoliberal agenda. Poorly skilled, ill-trained, and ill-supervised private security guards were given absolute powers of enacting immigration law in poorly maintained facilities with inhumane and uninhabitable conditions. Most notably, Sheriff Arpaio became notorious for his practices of housing both convicted criminals and undocumented individuals awaiting trial in surplus Army tents (thus the name “tent city”) behind barbed wire in the desert, putting them to work on chain gangs, and limiting rations of water and bread as the only form of sustenance. Sheriff Arpaio’s abuse of powers and the use of private facilities to detain suspected “illegals” for indefinite amounts of time became paramount examples of the United States’ neoliberal approach to immigration – the state created the policies, artificially produced a whole new industry of immigration control, and then assumed no responsibility by placing unrestricted judicial and enforcement powers in the hands of individuals like Arpaio. Ultimately, by criminalizing the “illegal” status of immigrants, neoliberal politics managed to
use their criminality as justification to dehumanize them and treat them as mere objects of threat, which necessitated maintaining the immigration control industry under the pretense of national security, maintaining the “war on terror,” and protecting national sovereignty.

The preceding discussion provides important extrinsic and background information to understand the national enchantment with border control and the need to regulate immigration. In my analysis I examine President Obama’s connection to recent anti-immigrant discourses and immigration control practices. Additionally, I examine his failure to challenge but actually perpetuate the established immigration narratives that dehumanize and permanently exclude immigrants from national belonging and citizenship. Obama established this through personal positioning and rhetorical identification in defining the limits of national exclusion that served to alienate and alienize immigrants. DeChaine (2012) argued that “the alienization of border(ed) subjects is also predicated on a state-directed discourse of migrant illegality, a mode of subjectivity that constructs the “illegal alien” as one who is by nature out of place, a problem and a threat to the national body” (p. 8). The rhetorical construction of the alienized “illegal alien” invites the emergence of border and border security discourses that seek to control and restrict entry into U.S. national space. In his 2011 El Paso speech President Obama engaged with those discourses, which prompts me to examine his somewhat problematic and conflicting position regarding the need for immigration control, border security, and the border fence.

**President Obama’s stigmatization of “illegal” immigrants and the necessity for control**

President Obama’s rhetoric of necessity emerged in his 2011 El Paso address when he promoted an idiosyncratic view of the border as both necessary and undesirable. The necessity was primarily dictated by neoliberal principles and agenda to control immigration for the sake of protecting national economy and sovereignty. The undesirability stemmed from his desire to
promote a more humane immigration policy for the United States. Ultimately, the rhetoric of necessity created a rhetorical problem when the President shifted back-and-forth between praising the immigration control efforts of his cabinet, condemning republicans as members of a vaguely defined “they” that wanted a border fence, and at the same time advocating the government’s responsibility to “secure our borders.” Obama justified the need for border security through adopting the neoliberal principle of economic prosperity, emphasizing the need to protect the U.S. economy from “illegals” as potential criminals, all the while presenting the issue as race-neutral. His speech embodied a rhetoric of necessity justified by the vilification of the “illegal” status. The necessity for immigrant labor and border control emerged as a result of the conflicting binaries of xenophilia/xenophobia, legal/illegal, we/they. My goal here is to interrogate the connections between Obama’s rhetoric of necessity for immigrant labor and immigration control, for the purpose of further outlining the intricate binary of xenophilia/xenophobia in his speech.

In large part President Obama’s rhetoric of necessity was exemplified by his advocacy for the need to stop “illegal immigration,” and his recognition that questions about border security were “legitimate concerns.” He applauded the efforts of Janet Napolitano, Alan Bersin, and “everybody who’s down here working at the border” in strengthening border security. Obama proudly announced the results of border enforcement in preventing drug and weapon trafficking across the border. He proclaimed that as a result of the stricter measures “far fewer people are attempting to cross the border illegally” (Obama, 2011). The action of crossing the border illegally was presented as criminal and undesirable. Rhetorically Obama constructed a necessity to strengthen border security and put an end to illegal immigration. Ultimately reinforcing the neoliberal need to protect and secure the U.S./Mexico border for the sake of
national sovereignty and the economic privileges of American citizens, Obama’s plan called for more control measures through which, as Cisneros (2012) noted, “the migrant/stranger must be regulated, surveilled, and potentially even excluded from the body politic for the threat it presents” (p. 140). President Obama’s rhetoric of necessity depended on the criminalized, alienized image of immigrants as threats to U.S. economy and sovereignty. This image was silenced, yet implicitly present in Obama’s speech as the entire narrative of border security and the necessity of a border fence depends on the threat of foreign invasion. The strength of border security rhetoric depends on the criminalization and alienazation of foreign, racialized bodies as threats to American sovereignty. This image was established over the years by anti-immigrant discourses that articulated “the border crisis,” immigrants as “foreign threats,” and the dangers of “our borders are being invaded,” and being “under attack” (Chris Simcox, co-founder of the Minutemen Civil Defense Corps, cited in DeChaine, 2009). Especially in the aftermath of 9/11 the U.S./Mexico border because of its porous nature was demarcated as one of the primary vulnerabilities for future terrorist attacks, despite the fact there has never been a documented terrorist entry through the Southern border (Chávez, 2012). Nevertheless, such rhetorics created fear that any individual crossing the U.S./Mexico border may be a terrorist threat.²

President Obama’s rhetoric did not challenge xenophobic anti-immigrant discourses or the images of criminalized and alienized immigrants that border rhetorics bring along with them, but instead reified the necessity of protection and control. He accomplished this by repeatedly reminding the audience of the “need to secure the borders” and the responsibilities of the government to protect the nation, as defined by the image of the United States as a “nation of laws.” Despite recognizing the “broken immigration system,” the President nevertheless stigmatized the practices of breaking immigration laws and crossing the border illegally. He
argued that those who are here illegally have to pay a fine for breaking the law, and even went as far as to claim that their mere presence “makes a mockery of all those who are trying to immigrate legally” (Obama, 2011). Even though he advocated for a comprehensive immigration reform that would fix the system, he nevertheless emphasized the need to prevent illegal immigration and applauded the fact that “far fewer people are attempting to cross the border illegally.” As argued in Chapter 3, President Obama privileged legal immigration based on strictly defined and narrow limits of inclusion. People outside the limits were positioned as inadmissible to national publics and space. As a result, the President justified the need for border enforcement as a way to prevent such individuals from entering the country. In essence, Obama’s rhetoric of comprehensive immigration reform did not challenge the established legal/illegaI binary, but only modified its parameters of inclusion.

Throughout his speech President Obama perpetuated the legal/illegaI binary by adopting a problematic and perplexing attitude toward undocumented immigrants. He expressed the need to stop “illegal immigration” and the need to fix the immigration system so that “fewer people have the incentive to enter illegally.” Additionally, he endorsed the government’s responsibility to uphold the law and deport “those who are here illegally.” Ultimately, Obama’s speech served to demonize the “illegal” status of individuals – being “illegal” was frowned upon and perceived as detrimental to both American citizens and legal immigrants. A rhetorical problem emerged when the President qualified his disapproval of “illegals,” noting that “we’re focusing our limited resources and people on violent offenders and people convicted of crimes - not just families, not just folks who are just looking to scrape together an income” (Obama, 2011). He additionally recognized that “as long as the current laws are on the books, it’s not just hardened felons who are subject to removal, but sometimes families who are just trying to earn a living, or bright,
eager students, or decent people with the best of intentions” (Obama, 2011). And thus the perplexity emerged – on the one hand Obama decried the “illegal” status of immigrants, but on the other hand he expressed sensitivity to their plight and recognized that they are not all criminals. This was a conflicting position because he repeatedly advocated the need to secure the borders and prevent illegal immigration, but he also recognized the innocence and good intentions of most “illegal” immigrants. In addressing this rhetorical dichotomy Obama proposed that the ultimate solution would be “to pass genuine, comprehensive reform” (Obama, 2011). In the 2011 El Paso speech he proposed a four-fold plan of a comprehensive reform that would reflect the values of the United States as both a “nation of immigrants” and a “nation of laws.” However, I argue that his plan relied on a rhetoric of necessity which reified his vision of a “nation of laws,” and further entrenched the competing narratives of xenophilia/xenophobia.

To summarize briefly, Obama’s plan promoted the government’s “responsibility to secure our borders and enforce the law,” yet the vague generality of his statement did not challenge the harsh anti-immigrant measures taken to secure the nation’s borders in recent years (see next section). Secondly, Obama expressed the need to hold accountable businesses who “exploit undocumented workers.” Once again, the statement did not provide specific details regarding what it means to be held accountable. The need for accountability extended into the third step of Obama’s plan which required “those who are here illegally” to take responsibility by paying their past taxes and paying a fine for breaking the law before they can “get in line for legalization.” The final fourth step of his plan for immigration reform entailed making it “easier for the best and brightest to not only stay here, but also to start businesses and create jobs here.” Ultimately, all four steps in Obama’s plan were rhetorically veiled under the principles of
neoliberalism, which commodified immigrants through the constantly competing narratives of legal/illegal and xenophilia/xenophobia.

With the first step of his plan, Obama embodied the neoliberal principle of protecting national sovereignty, as well as maintaining the thriving industries of immigration control and border security. While this narrative targeted “illegal” immigrants as subjects of removal and focused on preventing future “illegal” entries into national space, it nevertheless relied on the existence and presence of “illegal” immigrants as alienized, racialized threats for the sake of keeping the border security narrative fresh and relevant. With no “illegal” immigrants, the entire industry of border security and immigration control would be rendered redundant.

The second and third steps of Obama’s plan aimed to protect national laws and the economic interests of law-abiding citizens and businesses. President Obama did not explicitly stigmatize undocumented immigrants and businesses who broke the law but instead stigmatized their actions and positioned them as capable of redeeming themselves by paying fines. As such they were seen through a neoliberal lens both for their potential to contribute to the economy, and the need to be regulated and controlled. Similarly, the immigrant potential to contribute was the focal point in Obama’s fourth step, which in conjunction with the other steps served as the final exemplar of Obama’s tendency to dehumanize and commodify immigrants by seeing them as purely economic entities. Crucially, the four steps functioned as rhetorical borders defining the limits of inclusion, alienizing and alienating those outside. Obama’s new limits of inclusion relied on redefining the old legal/illegal binary through categorizing immigrants as economically beneficial/economically burdensome. In the new, redefined binary legal immigrants were those who could contribute, but also not threaten American jobs (as argued in Chapter 3), while illegal immigrants represented a varied group of people, who are economically inconvenient, but also
necessary as they justify the existence of the border control industry. As a result, I argue that President Obama reified the legal/illega1 binary. In the 2011 El Paso speech he redefined the qualifications for legal immigration based on neoliberal principles that foster xenophilia, but at the same time he reinforced the need to prevent illegal immigration, and implicitly expressed the need for illegal immigrants as commodities that justify the efforts of the immigration control industry. As a rhetorical centerpiece of the speech, President Obama declared that “the most significant step we can take to secure the borders is to fix the system as a whole so that fewer people have the incentive to enter illegally in search of work” (Obama, 2011). His statement seemed a little ironic considering that earlier in the speech he had attacked immigration reform opponents for their “borders first, borders first” refrain. In essence, he participated in and reinscribed the same border protection narratives that seek to eliminate illegal immigration.

**Interrogating the necessity for securing the border and the border fence**

In this last section of analysis I examine another function of President Obama’s speech which repositioned borders as the source of the immigration problem and thus served to propose stronger border enforcement, such as the construction of a border fence. It is also worthy of noting that despite the rhetorical omissions and silencing of race, Barack Obama’s rhetoric fell into the pool of anti-immigrant discourses and narratives of recent years that tend to target the U.S./Mexico border as the only border that needed protection from foreign invaders (Chávez, 2012). Ever since its construction, the U.S./Mexico border fence became the material manifestation of such anti-immigrant border rhetorics. As DeChaine (2012) argued “borders are products of human symbolic action, created by human agents through particular and often complex rhetorical practices” (p. 3). So while the border fence has actual material presence and serves as a psychical deterrent, its greatest power of exclusion is rhetorical and symbolic. In
essence, the border fence serves as a symbol of national limits, and national enchantment with protecting American-ness.

Over the last decade Barack Obama’s political track record around the issue of border security has been exemplified by a tenuous and dichotomous love-hate relationship with the border fence and immigration control. Ever since his initial rise on the political horizon as a senator, Barack Obama has expressed continuous support of the measures to secure the southern U.S. border and in fact voted in favor of the Secure Fence Act of 2006, approving $1.2 billion for a 700-mile-long fence along the U.S./Mexico border. A year later, he voted in favor of a failed bill for immigration reform that would have created a guest-worker-visa for temporary farm workers, forged a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants already in the country, but most importantly would have increased border security measures. In those early years as a U.S. senator, Barack Obama appeared to fulfill the neoliberal immigration agenda of securing the nation’s sovereignty, while benefiting from the temporary services of immigrants as cheap labor source. But then in July 2008, now as a presidential candidate, Barack Obama traveled to Berlin, Germany where he famously proclaimed:

The greatest danger of all is to allow new walls to divide us from one another.

The walls between old allies on either side of the Atlantic cannot stand. The walls between the countries with the most and those with the least cannot stand. The walls between races and tribes; natives and immigrants; Christian and Muslim and Jew cannot stand. These now are the walls we must tear down. (Obama, 2008)

In a newfound urge to advance humanity, or simply a rhetorical strategy to further his presidential campaign, Obama condemned “the walls between the countries with the most and those with the least.” The same Obama that only two years prior had voted in favor of building a
border fence between the United States and Mexico was now advocating for the destruction of walls between nations, countries, and races. This brief but contradictory history of Barack Obama’s relationship with the border fence was further exacerbated in his 2011 El Paso speech.

During his speech President Obama repeatedly advocated the importance of securing “our” borders, which included the border fence as a necessary and functional evil. He indicated that “the fence is now basically complete,” and applauded the efforts of his cabinet in doubling the number of agents that patrol the border fence and tripling the number of intelligence analysts (Obama, 2011). At the same time, the President appeared to recognize the futility of the border fence when he ridiculed the ideas to make the fence taller, or dig a moat next to it, or place alligators in it, noting that border fence proponents would “never be satisfied.” Implicitly, he appeared to understand that border walls are permeable and not capable of preventing the migration of people. But even though he portrayed the border fence as negative and flawed in its function to stop the movement of people, the President’s strategy suggested that policing and securing it would remain a priority even under his proposal for comprehensive immigration reform. Curiously, Obama’s rhetoric emphasized border security as a necessity, which contradicted his 2008 advocacy to tear down the walls between nations. As mentioned earlier, the President applauded the efforts of his administration in securing the border and cutting down illegal immigration. This was part of his rhetorical strategy in constructing the image of the United States as a “nation of laws.” Within the larger narrative of “nation of laws,” the binary of legal/illegal remained as a rhetorical border of inclusion/exclusion that defined the limits of national identity.

However, even more importantly, the President’s speech on immigration reform did not challenge but actually commodified existing and dominant narratives of need for border security.
Over the years, such narratives fostered the implementation of anti-immigrant laws such as California’s Proposition 187, Arizona’s SB-1070 (as well as its sister-laws across other Southern states), the formation of anti-immigrant groups, such as Minutemen, Numbers USA, and the rise of anti-immigrant radicals, such as Arizona Sheriff Joe Arpaio and border fence designer and supervisor Michael Chertoff. As overviewed in this chapter, Barack Obama participated in these narratives of need in his advocacy for border security, prevention of illegal immigration, and deportation of criminalized “illegals.” His participation in these narratives of need challenged his image as an immigrant rights advocate, which was further tarnished by his relationship and endorsement of anti-immigrant public officials and politicians.

**Obama’s political position and problematic relationship to the border control industry**

During the 2011 El Paso speech on immigration reform President Barack Obama broadly endorsed the efforts of “everybody” working at securing the border – a border that Obama never explicitly identified or named. Yet, through the location of where the speech was given, and through implicit references in the speech, Obama focused his narrative of need for border security on none other but the U.S./Mexico border. His refusal to explicitly identify it as the only problematic border and his vague endorsement of “everybody” working at securing it was problematic because it implicitly embraced but silenced rhetorically the atrocities of anti-immigrant radicals, such as the previously mentioned Arizona Sheriff Joe Arpaio. As one of the loudest proponents of securing the border and prosecuting “illegal” immigrants, Arpaio was not explicitly mentioned in the President’s speech, but was implicitly included in the endorsement of “everybody” working at the border. Arpaio’s anti-immigrant raids, as well as Arizona’s controversial SB-1070 in general, have been a popular object of examination in numerous modern border rhetoric studies (i.e. Calafell, 2012; Cisneros, 2012; Goltz & Perez, 2012). For the
sake of my analysis Arpaio’s name and actions have an extrinsic value in providing important background information about current Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano, who has continuously supported and protected Arpaio’s anti-immigrant policies and actions. In the 2011 El Paso speech President Obama described Napolitano’s work as “outstanding,” which I argue was problematic precisely because it ignored her history with Sheriff Arpaio. Throughout her political career Napolitano has either explicitly supported Arpaio’s treatment of “illegals,” or has done so implicitly by rhetorical omission. By endorsing Napolitano’s “outstanding work,” President Obama silenced the atrocity of her past actions, as well as those of Sheriff Arpaio, as part of his rhetorical strategy to promote border security and immigration control.

Another important figure that received President Obama’s recognition and endorsement as a person understanding the need for immigration reform was former Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff. Best known as the person in charge of building the 700-mile border fence between Arizona and Texas, Chertoff embodied neoliberalism by placing “national security” above all other national laws, or even human rights. Additionally, in deciding the route of the border fence Chertoff privileged economic elites and political contributors by agreeing to stretch the fence around their properties. He did not grant the same privilege to those of lower socio-economic and political status and divided their properties “in the interest of national and border security.” Once again, while the issue appeared to be race-neutral and strictly guided by neoliberal principles, the construction of the border fence impacted negatively primarily Mexicans and Mexican/Americans. The border fence protected the interests of whiteness both locally and nationally. During his 2011 speech, President Obama applauded Chertoff’s understanding of the need to reform the nation’s immigration system, but ignored and rhetorically silenced Chertoff’s often explicitly racist past in constructing the border fence.
What’s more, it further problematized Obama’s relationship to the border fence – how could Obama recognize the futility and detrimental effects of the border fence, but at the same time applaud Michael Chertoff – a person directly responsible for the construction of the fence?

President Obama’s recognition and approval (both explicit and implicit) of Arpaio, Napolitano, and Chertoff ignored and rhetorically silenced their combined histories of injustice toward undocumented immigrants through racial segregation and privileging of economic and political elites. Furthermore, Obama’s endorsement of them served to rhetorically position him among them as allies with similar neoliberal goals. In the speech, the President both explicitly and implicitly identified them as fellow advocates of comprehensive immigration reform. However, the straightforwardness of this identification was problematized when Obama condemned the “ugly rhetoric around immigration” and the people who advocated the construction of a border fence. President Obama established a complex and conflicting rhetorical binary of we/they. He decried that “they wanted more agents at the border,” “they wanted a fence,” further speculating that “now they’re going to say we need to quadruple the Border Patrol. Or they’ll want a higher fence. Maybe they’ll need a moat. Maybe they want alligators in the moat. They’ll never be satisfied” (Obama, 2011, my emphasis). His efforts to bring humor into the discussion served to alienate and stigmatize a vaguely defined they, placing the blame for the delays in passing an immigration reform on them.

At the other end of the we/they binary, President Obama celebrated the efforts of his own cabinet: “we now have more boots on the ground on the southwest border than at any time in our history,” “we tripled the number of intelligence analysts working at the border,” “we have forged a partnership with Mexico to fight the transnational criminal organizations” (Obama, 2011, my emphasis). The juxtaposing we/they binary posed a rhetorical problem caused by Napolitano and
Chertoff’s history of border and immigration control measures. In his speech Obama rhetorically positioned Napolitano and Chertoff as immigration advocates and members of the pro-immigration reform *we*, but at the same time their political history positioned them as the opposing group of anti-immigrant *they*. Even more controversial was Obama’s own position – how could he condemn *them*, the people who wanted the border fence, when in fact he voted in favor of building the fence in the first place?

So far in the section I have brought to light two important questions that President Obama’s position in his 2011 El Paso speech invited. The President did not offer answers, but instead relied on ambiguity masked by the narratives of necessity and the rhetoric of control influenced by neoliberal principles and political agenda. Ultimately, President Obama failed to take a firm position on border security and immigration control in relation to how they impact the lives of immigrants. He positioned himself problematically within a group of politicians that allegedly supported comprehensive immigration reform, but their individual political histories (including Obama’s own) revealed that they were actually immigration control and border enforcement advocates, and not the pro-immigrant politicians that Obama’s speech presented them (and himself) to be.

**Conclusion**

As argued in Chapter 3, Obama’s rhetoric (re)defined access to national space and publics based on an immigrant’s perceived ability to contribute economically. At the same time the President extended his rhetoric of economic necessity through a rhetorical strategy that maintained the need to protect the border, strictly enforce immigration control, and prevent illegal immigration in the country. While his proposed plan for immigration reform would make legal immigration easier for individuals in the narrowly defined categories examined in Chapter
3, it would also make the rhetorical borders for everyone else much stronger. Individuals outside Obama’s categories of economically desirable immigrants were rhetorically excluded, alienated (see Aronowitz, 2007), and even criminalized for their illegal presence in the country. President Obama achieved this by stigmatizing the action of illegally crossing the border, and expressing the need to prevent future illegal immigration through increased border security and immigration control. In his reductive and restrictive plan for immigration reform the U.S./Mexico border, and the border fence, played important roles as rhetorical constructions that define the limits of national identity, restrict access to those deemed economically inconvenient, and criminalize their attempts to cross it. Never explicitly identified or addressed, immigrants from Mexico yet again took the role of the Third Persona as auditors and silenced victims of immigration control and border enforcement, which served to alienize their bodies (see DeChaine, 2009) and exclude them from belonging to the American nation. President Obama’s role in this rhetorical construction was implicit as he did not challenge the functions of the U.S./Mexico border fence to alienate, alienize, and exclude, but even advocated border security and immigration control as necessary measures of protecting America as both a “nation of immigrants” and a “nation of laws.”

Furthermore, President Obama once again positioned immigrants as economic commodities, essential for the interests of national security. Neoliberal principles, as guiding factors of the speech, dictated the need to maintain the perplexing status of undocumented immigrants in the United States – constantly surveilled, policed, and hunted, but at the same time necessary as justification for maintaining the thriving immigration control industry. Honig’s (2001) binary of xenophilia/xenophobia becomes more conflicting than ever before. In the immigration control and border security narrative presented by Barack Obama in his 2011
speech on immigration reform the same problematic group of immigrants, represented mostly by the undocumented Mexican immigrants, is both desired in order to keep the immigration control industry alive and pursued as dangerous to economic stability and national sovereignty. Quite similarly, the President presented the border fence as both despicable and necessary to protect the American nation. In the end, we are left with a perplexing image of immigrants and borders that Obama constructed rhetorically in his speech. Obama’s rhetorically constructed image reified the historically problematic binaries of we/they, legal/illegal, xenophilia/xenophobia in the context of U.S. immigration. Their reification in the speech serves to suggest that Barack Obama may not be the immigration rights advocated that people hoped for, and that his proposed plan for immigration reform would only serve to modify current immigration policies by slightly redefining the limits of national inclusion based on neoliberal principles that protect the interests of hegemonic whiteness.

Notes:

1 For an interesting discussion on the topic see Dennis Romero’s blog article: http://blogs.lawweekly.com/informer/2012/06/immigrants_needed_american_economy_study.php

2 A recent example occurred in mid-April 2013 after the Boston marathon bombings when Texas Republican Louie Gohmert preposterously tied terrorism, radical Islamists, Hispanics, and the need for U.S./Mexico border security. The politician said: “We know Al Qaeda has camps over with the drug cartels on the other side of the Mexican border. We know that people that are now being trained to come in and act like Hispanic when they are radical Islamists. We know these things are happening. It is just insane not to protect ourselves, to make sure that people come in as most people do … They want the freedoms we have” (C-SPAN’s Washington Journal, April 18, 2013). He further exacerbated the difference between legal/illegal immigrants, noting that “illegals” pose a threat not only to American citizens but to legal immigrants as well.
Nearly two years have passed since President Obama originally delivered his big speech on immigration reform in El Paso, Texas. One thing that can’t be denied is that since the speech the Obama administration has been persistent and consistent in moving forward the President’s ideas of reforming the broken immigration system of the United States. On June 15, 2012 the President announced the adoption of the DREAM act, which meant that his administration would stop deporting young undocumented aliens in certain categories. Furthermore, on April 16, 2013 the Senate’s Gang of Eight (four Republicans and four Democrats) introduced a long overdue 884-page immigration reform bill which mostly followed the prescriptions and policies introduced by President Obama in his 2011 El Paso speech. I argue that the President’s speech remains an important and valuable artifact that exemplifies the foundations of the immigration reform bill introduced in 2013 (Obama, 2013; The White House, 2013).

But the purpose of these concluding remarks in my thesis is not to judge the effectiveness of the President’s rhetorical strategy, but instead to revisit major arguments I presented throughout the different chapters in order to offer a holistic view and interpretation of their implications for immigrant rights and status, as well as for race politics and social orders in the United States. In addition, I suggest avenues for future studies, pointing out potential points of branching out the interrogation of President Obama’s rhetoric of immigration reform. Throughout this thesis, my goal has been to heuristically bring to light problematic areas of the President’s rhetoric which challenge the idea of his plan of reform as “comprehensive.” Instead, I have been building up an argument that the rhetoric of his immigration reform plan served only
to redefine existing rhetorical borders of national inclusion and belonging, reinforce others, and even create new borders of exclusion. Overall, I have aimed to extend an argument that Barack Obama has not been the immigration and racial equality advocate that everyone hoped for.

Scholars have already done extensive work outlining how the ideas and hopes for a post-racial Obama were mostly a long shot, and have proven to be false over the last several years (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Terrill, 2009; Tesler & Sears, 2010). Bonilla-Silva (2010) notably argued that “Obama is clearly not a stealth progressive, but a centrist, pro-market, traditional politician with a quasi-color-blind view about race matters in America” (p. 231). Instead, a more accurate representation may be Koulish’s (2010) description of Obama as a freemarketer and “a neoliberal with a civic conscience” (p. 166). To be sure, the unfortunate contemporary reality is that race still remains a central organizing factor in American society, and there is even evidence that racism has been “on the rise since President Obama’s election in 2008, suggesting that “Obama simultaneously activates both old-fashioned racism and racial resentment” (p. 121). My goal was to extend scholarship that examines Barack Obama’s presidency and his failures to embody a truly post-racial position. In my thesis I outlined how Obama’s rhetoric protects dominant forms of hegemonic whiteness and invites the emergence of racisms, both explicit and implicit, toward economically burdensome or culturally unassimilable immigrants. By centering around the question of United States immigration, I examined President Obama’s problematic and conflicting rhetorical position veiled under the relative invisibility of dominant whiteness and neoliberalism.

To briefly summarize, in the opening chapter of this thesis I offered a brief historic overview of racist and exclusionary practices in United States immigration policies of the past. Additionally, I set up my methodological framework by defining my understanding and
conceptualization of race, borders, ideology, and the use of narrative analysis through the theory of dramatism, Second and Third Persona as tools for rhetorical criticism. In the following Chapter 2, I examined President Obama’s reification and protection of hegemonic whiteness through adopting an allegedly neutral language of racelessness. My argument in that chapter posited that Obama’s rhetoric protected the existence of silent racisms, and even invited the emergence of new ones under the “not-racist” disguise of racelessness. I argued that Barack Obama adopted a political identity of whiteness that served a political agenda to appease voters’ concerns about his own race. By omitting discussion of race, or the accumulating effects of stratified racist principles in the current immigration control system, he implicitly ignored the reality of racialized social orders in the United States and reinforced the dominance of whiteness.

Next, in Chapter 3 I extended my discussion of Obama’s alleged rhetorical racelessness by looking at his commodification of immigrants through the language of late capitalism and neoliberalism. Effectively, Obama’s neoliberal rhetoric served to redefine the social system of the United States as a meritocracy, in which immigrant belonging was determined by his or hers ability to contribute economically and not threaten the interests of middle- and upper-class Americans and their jobs. Finally, in Chapter 4 I analyzed the President’s rhetoric of necessity for increased border security and immigration control. I critiqued his reliance on the reductive binary of legal/illegal and his problematic political position among border security advocates, who also happened to be anti-immigrant supporters.

The resulting image of President Obama’s plan for comprehensive immigration reform bears striking resemblance to past immigration system policies and practices of exclusion. Obama’s rhetorical strategy of relying on post-racial or anti-racial language was not new by any means. His reluctance to address race reminisced anti-immigrant narratives against Mexicans in
the 1920s and 1930s which “framed the discussion in language that was, on its surface, non-racial,” but instead relied on arguments which “addressed economics, labor needs, disease, and criminality” that hid underlying racial arguments (Flores, 2003, p. 381). Furthermore, the President’s tendency to perceive certain groups of immigrants as economic units, whether they were the highly-desirable foreign computer scientists and engineers, or the cost-effective and hard-working migrant farm workers, invited memories of the Bracero program started in the 1940s. Galarza (1964) pondered whether the bracero worker, as an indentured alien, might be a prototype of the economic man “stripped of political and social attributes” (p. 16). The Bracero program welcomed “only healthy, landless, and surplus male agricultural workers,” while “those who were too young, too old, or too sick and rural landowners, urban dwellers, or female” were ineligible for the program (Hernandez, 2009, p. 26). The contemporary criteria for inclusion of immigrant laborers may be different, yet parallel in principle the exclusions of the Bracero program. Furthermore, Koulish (2010) noted that comprehensive immigration reform plans under Obama bear a lot of similarities to previous plans, such as the IRCA (1986) plan or George W. Bush’s immigration reform plans of 2006-2007 which proposed similar plans of legalization combined with employer sanctions. Koulish (2010) most importantly argued that in those plans “amnesty and sanctions were merely flip sides of the same neoliberal coin, aimed at adjusting the balance between the supply of immigrant labor and demand and the supply of immigrant prisoners and demand” (p. 181). The same principles emerged in Barack Obama’s 2011 speech on immigration reform, where he balanced the need for immigrant labor with the need to maintain the immigration control industry. Ultimately, these similarities help reinforce my argument that Obama is not the fresh immigration advocate he was envisioned to be, but instead
he is no different than his predecessors in following the rules and principles of whiteness and neoliberalism to determine the limits of national inclusion.

Over the course of this thesis, I established this argument through my examination and analysis focused on Obama’s use of narratives and employment of binaries, which problematized and challenged his image as a post-racial politician and immigrant rights advocate. The competing narratives of xenophilia/xenophobia, legal/illegal, we/they veiled under the anti-racial language of neoliberalism served to protect the economic interests of dominant American whiteness. Furthermore, their function as reductive binaries served to delineate rhetorical border of inclusion and exclusion. Within President Obama’s speech one side of each binary was represented by the construction of Second Personas – rhetorical images of what the ideal immigrant would look like and act. And while individuals positioned on the other side of the binary would be excluded due to their contrast to the images of ideal immigrants, I argued that a much more important exclusion emerged outside the limits of the binary relationships. The exclusion of audiences as Third Personas, as the audiences negated, omitted, or forgotten by the discourse was crucial to my argument about Barack Obama’s redefinition of rhetorical borders. While not explicitly addresses, these Third Personas fell outside the image of the “good” immigrants, and were constructed as the undefined, non-distinct, but nevertheless inconvenient and undesired “Other.”

I argue that the binaries in Obama’s speech, and in particular the competing narratives of “nation of immigrants” and “nation of laws,” function as rhetorical devices and strategies of identification. Kenneth Burke saw identification as a rhetorical means of inducing cooperation and building communities (Hauser, 1986). Similarly, Crusius (1999) argued that “rhetoric complements dialectic and its multiple dramatistic perspectives by promoting “identification”
and “cooperation,” building “a community, a sense of oneness amid diversity of conflicting interests and values” (p. 28–30, quoted in Zappen, 2009). But even more crucial for the context of immigration is the idea that identification necessarily entails division – ‘us’ vs. ‘them,’ ‘legal’ vs. ‘illegal’ (Biesecker, 1997; Crusius, 1999; Zappen, 2009). Condit (1992) additionally noted that in the United States those divisions are often based on differences of gender, culture, economic, and social class. I extend her argument to posit that these differences, accompanied with differences of race, ethnicity, and national origin, collectively affect the issue of immigration and the formation of rhetorical borders of inclusion and exclusion. President Obama’s 2011 speech on immigration reform was an example of how these rhetorical borders can be constructed when seen through the Burkean lenses of (mis)identification and dramatism. With the speech Barack Obama had the difficult task of addressing multiple audiences and appeasing their concerns about immigration policy reform. In doing so, the President’s rhetorical strategy relied on combining the narratives of nation of immigrants and nation of laws, which have historically been in a continuous tension central to defining belonging and the American identity. Despite this approach of recognizing them as inseparable, Obama also relied on the reductive binaries of legal/illegal, we/they, and simultaneously exemplified competing attitudes of xenophilia/xenophobia toward immigrants. I argued that these binaries served to conceal latent forms of racism, invite the reemergence of old fashioned racism (based on skin color), or invite new forms of racism that interdigitate with social class, education status, and professional skills. As a result, the perpetuation of binaries in Obama’s speech signifies his ideological commitment and participation in the established normative orders of whiteness and neoliberalism in the United States. Additionally the competing narratives and binaries function as rhetorical
devices that symbolize Obama’s construction, both strategic and inadvertent, of rhetorical borders of inclusion and exclusion from national belonging.

Ultimately, borders, both as rhetorical constructs as well as material constructs (i.e. the border fence), remain as symbols defining the limits of national identity, and serve as places of exclusion. The rhetorical exclusion of immigrants results as much from the principles of neoliberalism, as from the need to protect the interests of dominant whiteness. While this project has come to an end, showing how both neoliberalism and whiteness dictate President Obama’s rhetoric of comprehensive immigration reform, my findings enable opportunities for future studies that would expand my arguments. Specifically, I would be interested in revisiting the exclusionary functions of neoliberalism and whiteness through Bonilla-Silva’s (2010) idea of a triracial social order in the United States. His preliminary map includes the large categories of “Whites,” “Honorary Whites,” and “Collective Black” (p. 180). The categorization of people under these labels depends on their ability to assimilate into American-ness, as well as their public perception of fitting and ability to contribute both economically and culturally. Such triracial social order complicates the issue of immigration and the practices of exclusion in ways that my current thesis is not capable of addressing. For instance, a more complicated approach would make it possible to account for discrepancies and slippages that currently occur as a result of the collaboration of whiteness and neoliberalism. For instance, a person could be excluded for being foreign and skilled but racialized, with the exclusion being justified by old-fashioned racism against differences in skin color. But at the same time, one could also be excluded for being white and foreign but non-skilled, with the exclusion justified by neoliberal need to contribute economically. And last but not least, an individual could be excluded for being white and skilled but foreign, with xenophobia and otherness as primary factors of exclusion. These
three hypothetical scenarios serve to illustrate the complexity of the current immigration system, where the trifecta of whiteness, neoliberalism, and xenophobia make it possible to exclude virtually anyone from access to U.S. citizenry, public, and national space, and thus completely dismissing the founding principles of the country, its democratic values, and its history as a nation of immigrants.

My study of President Obama’s 2011 speech on immigration reform barely glazed the surface of this complex relationship, but it has at least served to showcase how whiteness and neoliberalism collectively impact contemporary immigration rhetorics, as well as social orders in the United States. Most importantly, I hope the study has helped to debunk myths and misconceptions about post-racial America, and Barack Obama as an immigration and equality advocate. While we may indeed see an immigration reform bill pass in 2013, its provisions would not change dramatically the status and rights of immigrants, and the pervasion of silent racisms and xenophobia that continue to operate in contemporary United States of America.

“The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr, 1849
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