

Barack Obama, Racial Literacy, and Lessons from “A More Perfect Union”

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BARACK OBAMA will play an increasingly important role in U.S. history curricula. As the 44th Presidency transitions from historic milestone to modern history, Obama’s presence in social studies classrooms is becoming all but ensured. In Texas and California, states with significant curricular influence nationally, students are required to learn about Obama in U.S. history courses.¹ Among the Texas state content standards, students are asked to “explain the significance of the following years as turning points,” including “2008 (election of first black president, Barack Obama).”² A 2014 California law stated that Obama’s election was “a historic step in the effort towards equality in the United States” and that the state “shall consider including...instruction on the election of President Barack Obama and the significance of the United States electing its first African American President.”³ These trends suggest that a) Barack Obama will have a central place in history curricula moving forward, and b) such curricula will emphasize Obama’s race as the defining feature of his significance.

As history teachers plan instruction about the racial significance of Obama’s presidency and seek out relevant primary sources,

they likely will include one specific event: Obama's March 18, 2008 speech at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. Referred to as the "A More Perfect Union" speech, or simply "the Race Speech," this event represented Obama's most comprehensive treatment of race and racism during the 2008 presidential campaign and early presidency. Due to its direct approach and its detailed analysis of race, the "A More Perfect Union" (AMPU) speech makes for a likely primary source to be included in a lesson addressing Obama's racial significance. At the time of this writing, a Google search of the terms "Barack Obama," "race," and "lesson plan" yielded downloadable plans on the AMPU speech as the first five results. Thus, as we began to consider questions of Obama's historical legacy and the role curricula might play in shaping that narrative, our searches for existing teaching materials on race and Obama repeatedly led us to lessons on this historic speech.

As social studies teacher-educators who draw from critical perspectives on race and racism,⁴ we hope to see Obama's speech used as a catalyst for nuanced, historicized conversations about race in the United States. We argue throughout this paper that the race speech has the pedagogical potential to create such conversations. To assess whether or not existing lessons on Obama's AMPU speech promoted critical understandings of race, we employed Guinier's notion of racial literacy in asking, *To what extent do lessons on Obama's AMPU speech promote students' development of racial literacy?*⁵ We conducted a document analysis of existing lessons on the subject to ascertain if and how they foster racial literacy in young people. To situate our analysis, we provide contextual information about the AMPU speech, a literature review of research on race and history curriculum, and a description of our theoretical framework of racial literacy. Although we share findings related to the AMPU lesson plans themselves, our intent is not only to evaluate the extant lessons on the speech. We discuss the findings from these lessons as a starting point for a broader argument about Obama's emerging curricular-historical legacy and the possibilities of using Obama's race speech as a tool for promoting racial literacy. We close with specific recommendations for educators and teacher-educators on how to use the AMPU speech and President Obama's other public statements about race in the service of developing racial literacy.

Context: The Speech

On March 18, 2008, as a candidate in the midst of a contested presidential primary election with New York Senator Hillary Clinton, Illinois Senator Barack Obama delivered his “A More Perfect Union” speech at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, making his most direct comments about race during the presidential campaign. In the speech, Obama sought to quell growing concerns about his connection to controversial Chicago pastor Jeremiah Wright, whose Trinity United Church of Christ was attended by Obama for twenty years prior. Despite his long personal and professional history with the pastor—the Obamas were married by Wright, for instance⁶—media attention on Wright’s past statements about U.S. policy were perceived by some as “inflammatory” and anti-American.⁷ The video clips of Wright’s provocative statements on the nation’s racial history, and the loud calls from pundits and politicians that Wright represented a pro-black, reverse-racist position, ultimately forced the Obama campaign to divorce itself from the pastor. The AMPU speech thus became Obama’s public opportunity to address the growing chorus of critics and clarify his relationship to this controversial figure.

The thirty-seven-minute televised address drew on Obama’s own biography as an entry into discourse on the anger and racial resentment experienced by Americans of all races. Candidate Obama took his listeners through a brief history of U.S. racism, placing Jeremiah Wright’s work and commentary within the context of that racial and religious struggle for African American civil rights, all while continuing to denounce the manner in which the pastor expressed his frustration with the nation. As T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting summarized, “Obama waxed on about patriotism, democracy, racial reconciliation and restoration, and the quest for an inclusive American democracy.”⁸ He touched on the history of racial discrimination in the U.S.; on the roots of racial resentments felt by white people, African Americans, and other racial groups; and on his faith in the U.S. Constitution as a tool for fixing the nation’s ailments. Ultimately, though, the AMPU speech advocated for unity as a cure for what Obama called the country’s “racial stalemate,” stating, “I have asserted a firm conviction—a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people—that working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds.”⁹

By most accounts, the speech deftly maneuvered the diverse needs of that historical moment.¹⁰ Obama had to distance himself from Wright without disowning him completely. He needed to affirm his Christian roots and deny accusations of his connections to Islam.¹¹ He drew on the historical trajectory of American racism while naming the part all Americans played in the nation's current racial reality.¹² He reassured white voters by advocating for race-blind policies, like improving access to healthcare and ensuring war veterans receive benefits, but tightened his connections to the black Civil Rights heritage. Obama also addressed questions of his own identity, quieting speculation that he might either be "too black" or "not black enough."¹³ Perhaps most importantly, the AMPU speech articulated Obama's vision of the nation "moving inexorably toward racial equality."¹⁴ Despite this ambitious agenda, the speech was considered a success, drawing comparisons to iconic addresses from John F. Kennedy and Abraham Lincoln.¹⁵ Conservative commentator Andrew Sullivan called the speech "searing, nuanced, gut-wrenching," and "the most honest speech on race in America in my adult lifetime."¹⁶

Unsurprisingly, the speech also drew criticism. While some conservatives questioned Obama's credibility in disavowing Wright,¹⁷ much of the critique came from those more aligned with the political left. Some argued that Obama failed to share his own views on the nation's racial issues,¹⁸ that he let white people off the hook,¹⁹ or that he reduced systemic racism to "mere moral lapses."²⁰ To these latter two points, Eddie S. Glaude Jr. similarly critiqued Obama's speech for giving equal treatment to the race-based anger experienced by both whites and African Americans, writing, "It makes it seem that black rage in the face of debilitating inequality is the same as white anger over the loss of white privilege."²¹ And prominent racial and legal scholar Randall Kennedy was generally unmoved, summarizing, "There is little that Obama says that would be news to anyone passably familiar with basic information about black-white race relations" in American history.²²

Despite these criticisms, we argue that the speech allows for a powerful exploration into the workings of racism in U.S. society and the significance of the nation's first black president. Although the speech closed with optimism about the possibility of racial progress, it differed from how past presidents have talked about race. Obama

detailed the historical roots and structural nature of the U.S. racial hierarchy while drawing from the unique perspectives of his biracial, multicultural background. The speech provides a rich opportunity for history teachers to promote racial literacy in their students.

Literature Review: The Politics of Race and History Curriculum

Defining the content of history curricula has long been a divisive issue in public and academic spaces, with curricular debates acting as a stand-in for disagreements over what it means to be American.²³ The nature of the debates has shifted over the past century, but one could fairly categorize lines being drawn between history curricula that is cohesive, patriotic, and universal on the one hand, and multicultural, open-ended, and self-critical on the other.²⁴ Despite these tensions, formal curricula have typically sided with the more patriotic end of the divide, or what VanSledright refers to as the “neo-nativist” and “collective memory” approach to history teaching.²⁵ Such curricula tends to present historical narratives that reinforce overarching themes of American progress, American exceptionalism, and the inevitable and linear march toward “getting it right” as a nation.²⁶

A number of scholars have also critiqued how these narratives of progress and patriotism generally rely on the heroification of historical figures²⁷ and public commemoration myths.²⁸ The mythological figures that populate textbooks and formal curricula generally serve to uphold and perpetuate national ideologies such as persistence, meritocracy, and equality before the law, even in the face of disputed or counterfactual information.²⁹ In response to efforts to reform the history textbooks and the problematic narratives within them, Nash noted, “The deepest threat of the new social history has been that it raises the specter of a society that was never seamlessly unified, never had an entirely common cultural standard, and never fully agreed upon what it means to be an American.”³⁰ Again, for many, the stakes are high in these curricular decisions; what transpires in history classrooms links directly to ideological debates about the very nature of “American-ness.”³¹

While the political struggle over curriculum continues to be fierce (see, for example, recent debates over ethnic studies programs in Tucson, Arizona), some inroads have been made across the country

to include more diverse perspectives and narratives into history curricula that have traditionally centered only on the experiences of white, English-speaking men in any substantive way.³² As Carlson notes, the increasing inclusion of women and people of color in American history textbooks stands as one of the few successes in an era otherwise characterized by neoliberal interests.³³

Despite these limited successes in diversifying history content, a number of scholars have argued theoretically or demonstrated empirically that such inclusion provides false hope.³⁴ Multicultural curricula can, and often do, present superficial additions of diversity, treating multiculturalism as “tourism.”³⁵ Simply including additional minority portraits does not itself stave off misrepresentation, oversimplification, or inaccuracy,³⁶ or even the further marginalization of these groups.³⁷ Adding black and brown faces into the pantheon of curricular heroes does little to interrogate the function of “hero-worshipping” as educational practice or how these historical figures may serve political purposes in the present.³⁸

It is within this long history of curriculum wars and specious inclusion of diverse figures that we interrogate how the next fixture in U.S. history curricula—Barack Obama—will be represented. Apple suggests that “activities that we now ask students to engage in every day...can be at one and the same time forms of regulation and exploitation *and* potential modes of resistance, celebration, and solidarity.”³⁹ In this spirit, we take this activity—lessons on Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” speech—as a possible site for a wide range of political and educative outcomes, including both racial literacy and racial liberalism, both of which we discuss in greater detail below.

Theoretical Framework: Racial Literacy

Legal scholar Lani Guinier’s generative writing on racial literacy provides the theoretical backbone of this inquiry. She defines racial literacy as “the capacity to conjugate the grammar of race in different contexts and circumstances.”⁴⁰ All Americans, she argues, “need to be better schooled in the subtle yet complex ways that race actually works in the 21st century.”⁴¹ This process involves a nuanced approach to identifying racism, beyond the overt displays of outright bigotry, to see how race operates in social structures and individual biases. Seeing—*and reading*—the racial hierarchies that

privilege some racial groups and marginalize others, Guinier argues, is a necessary step in dismantling these sociopolitical inequities. Guinier’s vision for racial literacy includes three tenets:

1. *Reading race as a structural phenomenon with room for individual agency.* Guinier encourages a racial analysis that considers the “psychological, interpersonal, and structural dimensions” of race.⁴² When race is considered through a racial liberalism lens (detailed below), race is only viewed as a problem of irrational, interpersonal prejudice that either buoys or damages the psyches of those positioned differently in society by race. Racial literacy recognizes the potential for individual agency, but remains cognizant of how institutional forces constrain agency. This aspect of racial literacy is particularly wary of establishing formal equality through legal or judicial action, as such policies only provide access within a racially hierarchical system.
2. *Balancing thought and action.* Guinier emphasizes that racial dynamics are “contextual rather than universal.”⁴³ In order to “read” the racial forces at play, the racially literate person centers race during analysis, but does so in an iterative fashion. Race is deployed as a conceptual tool of “diagnosis, feedback and assessment.”⁴⁴ This process ultimately informs action, but only after a long process of “learning rather than knowing.”⁴⁵ Racially literate analysis resists quick fixes or discussions that only focus on solutions. Instead, racial literacy privileges action that is informed by prolonged learning and reflection.
3. *Seeing intersectionalities between race and other social factors.* Guinier stresses the importance of considering additional factors in a racial analysis, such as geography, gender, and class.⁴⁶ Guinier’s investigation of the shortcomings of the *Brown v. Board* decision serves as a model of this type of analysis. Guinier suggested that the *Brown* decision fell short of creating meaningful school integration by underestimating the psychological benefit of segregation for poor white people and disregarding the ways that black students in integrated Northern schools still experienced intense prejudice. Guinier suggested that in focusing on overturning *Plessy*’s separate-but-equal precedent, the NAACP legal team in *Brown* (quite understandably) adopted a narrow racial focus. Although *Brown* struck a blow to state-sponsored segregation, it was not supported by a coalition that cut across class and geographic lines. A racially literate analysis puts race at the forefront, but also interrogates how other social factors intersect with race.

As an analytic framework, racial literacy has several valuable precedents in history education research⁴⁷ and K-12 schooling more broadly.⁴⁸ To date, no scholarship applies these tenets to formal history curricula, but we believe that lessons on Obama's race speech provide the perfect opportunity to examine these public claims of racial progress.

Our hopefulness in the speech's potential for interrogating U.S. race narratives derives from the fact that it included notions reflective of a racial literacy framework. The opening lines of the speech struck a historical and structural tone by stating that the Constitution is "stained by this nation's original sin of slavery."⁴⁹ Obama also noted that the wealth and income gap between white and black Americans is "passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow."⁵⁰ Obama detailed how lack of access to equal education, homeownership, and economic opportunities has contributed to the struggles of black families and urban neighborhoods. He explained that "many working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race,"⁵¹ suggesting that many white folks face economic struggles that obscure the alleged benefits of their racial identities. Collectively, these examples frame racial inequity as both a structural issue and one that intersects with social class and history, speaking to the tenets of racial literacy. Obama also cautioned against race discourses designed to "simplify and stereotype and amplify the negative,"⁵² calling for a nuanced understanding of race and racism. This nuanced approach mirrors the racial literacy focus on pursuing diagnosis and reflection before assessment or action. Another example comes from Obama's claim that race is used divisively, pitting white and black voters against one another, and that race-fueled anger gets "exploited by politicians, to gin up votes along racial lines."⁵³ In these and other key moments, Barack Obama opens the door for Americans—and perhaps history students and teachers in particular—to use the speech as a vehicle for deeper, more racially literate analysis.

Despite the themes of racial literacy coursing through the AMPU speech, elements of Obama's rhetoric may also represent what Guinier terms "racial liberalism," the dominant framework used to address racial inequality in the twentieth century and beyond.⁵⁴ Racial liberalism understands "the peculiarly American race

'problem' as a psychological and interpersonal challenge rather than a structural problem rooted in our economic and political system."⁵⁵ Racial liberals view racism as an irrational deviation from the otherwise sound project of liberalism. In this way of thinking, racism can be remedied largely by reducing prejudice and increasing individuals' cross-racial contact. In the realm of politics, racial liberalism informed the logic of the major reforms of the Civil Rights Era. These policies focused on providing formal equality in areas such as education, voting, and access to public places. However, in a racially hierarchical society, providing equal access does not guarantee equal results for marginalized racial groups.⁵⁶ Crenshaw noted that racial liberalism ideologies such as "color-blindness and equal process...make no sense at all in a society in which identifiable groups had actually been treated differently historically and in which the effects of this difference in treatment continued in the present."⁵⁷ Rather than substantive change, racial liberalism has promoted slow, incremental reforms that do not risk upsetting the race and class-based structure of white supremacy.⁵⁸

In the AMPU speech, Obama expressed some of these racial liberalist interpretations of the nation's racial climate. He referred to Jeremiah Wright's comments about racist U.S. policies as "divisive at a time when we need unity."⁵⁹ He also addressed the African American community specifically, asking more from black fathers and arguing for teaching children that "while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe that they can write their own destiny."⁶⁰ Although racial literacy recognizes the importance of agency, Obama's speech leaned heavily on the power of the individual rather than focusing on structural aspects of racism. This emphasis is not surprising, however, as he was delivering a political speech that required uplifting narratives. Obama also universalized the struggle felt by African Americans, linking their challenges to those of women, immigrants, and whites suffering post-industrial job loss, a rhetorical move some have argued was meant to assuage fears that Obama might be "too black" of a candidate.⁶¹ Obama emphasized self-reliance throughout the speech, furthering the racial liberalist perspective that prejudice and ill-will form the root cause of a racial hierarchy, rather than white supremacy.

To add a final clarifying note on the racial literacy framework, Guinier's writing represents one of two conceptions of racial literacy currently in use. The other, articulated by France Winddance Twine, offers a related, but distinct, interpretation of the term. Based on her research with children of color raised by white parents, Twine used "racial literacy" to describe the set of practices imbued in these children that helped to foster feelings of positive racial identity and to navigate the world as racialized beings.⁶² Within education, Stevenson has also used this form of racial literacy, what he terms the "ability to read, recast, and resolve racially stressful social interactions."⁶³ In this alternative version of racial literacy, the concept takes on a more individualized and interpersonal angle, aimed at equipping students of color with the social and emotional tools to combat racial stressors. While we appreciate the usefulness of this form of racial literacy as an educative tool, we felt that the challenges of combating systemic racism in the U.S., including those issues touched upon by Obama in his AMPU speech, lent themselves best to a Guinierian sense of racial literacy.

The Lessons and Methodology

In determining which lessons to include in this project, we emphasized three factors. First, we sought those lesson plans that directly addressed the topic at hand (Obama and the AMPU speech). We used a range of search terms in various combinations, including "Obama", "race", "race speech", "lesson plan", "curriculum", "Jeremiah Wright," and "A More Perfect Union". Second, we prioritized ease of access for teachers, choosing lessons that were free and easily located online or, in one case, from a popular U.S. history textbook. Finally, we narrowed our scope to secondary-level lessons, saving elementary-focused curricula for future inquiry. The lessons themselves varied in several ways, including the types of activities, duration, and areas of emphasis. However, most of the lessons followed a similar basic structure by providing students with the text of the speech itself and asking them to consider the significance of Obama's message. In many cases, the lessons also asked students to connect central ideas of the speech, such as the history of U.S. racism, to their own lived experiences. For more detailed lesson descriptions, see the **Appendix**.

Ultimately, nine lesson plans met our criteria. Methodologically, we followed similar textual analysis projects in history-social studies curricula.⁶⁴ We treated these lessons as social science documents, and sought to “understand documents in relation to their milieu.”⁶⁵ Like Derrick Alridge in his examination of Martin Luther King Jr., we employed Richard Beringer’s approach to document-based inquiry, a process that included: 1) reading the literature, 2) noting the themes, 3) discussing the themes, and 4) supporting conclusions through example.⁶⁶ The “literature” in this case refers to the existing lesson plans on Obama’s speech. We used an iterative approach to reading and developing codes, with each researcher coding the documents separately and then discussing our codes to find areas of overlap. Our line-by-line analysis of the lessons included all aspects of the curricular materials, including background information provided to teachers, descriptions of activities, questions to pose to students, and excerpts from the AMPU speech itself. These components were analyzed individually and collectively, in pursuit of our original research question: *To what extent do lessons on Obama’s AMPU speech promote students’ development of racial literacy?* Our analysis yielded the three findings presented here, organized around Guinier’s tenets of racial literacy: reading race as a structural phenomenon with room for individual agency, balancing thought and action, and seeing intersectionalities between race and other social factors.

As a final methodological note, we hope to address two potential concerns at the outset. First, one could argue that it is unfair to assess lesson plans for their adherence to a standard to which the curriculum writers did not necessarily aspire (i.e., promoting racial literacy). Our aim in this analysis was not to critique curriculum writers, nor necessarily to highlight the shortcomings of particular lesson plans. Instead, we hope to underscore the potential for using Obama’s AMPU speech as a vehicle for promoting a rich, nuanced understanding of race in America. We contend that this speech has the potential to foster both productive and unproductive conversations about race, reflecting theories of both racial literacy and racial liberalism. Thus, we sought to determine where existing lessons fall on that spectrum and to recommend ways to promote racial literacy pedagogy. And second, we recognize that despite the likelihood of the AMPU speech forming the basis of potential Obama-race

lessons in history classrooms, such a likelihood does not guarantee Obama will be taught in this manner. Examining these curricula does, however, provide a snapshot into how the field of education has begun to conceptualize Obama's historical narrative. Early indicators suggest that the president's curricular legacy will be characterized by themes of racial progress and even "post-racialism,"—notions that hem more closely to racial liberalism than racial literacy.⁶⁷ The lesson plan analysis presented here provides an opportunity to examine how educators may be shaping that narrative in U.S. history classrooms.

Findings

Drawing on the three tenets of racial literacy discussed previously, we organized our findings along these three principles. Each finding title includes one Guinierian tenet, followed by a descriptive subtitle relevant to the findings from our analysis. Within each finding, we discuss to what extent the lessons aligned or failed to align with the tenet, providing examples to support our claims.

1) Reading Race as a Structural Phenomenon with Room for Individual Agency: Taking Individual Action, Improving Interpersonal Relations

Racial literacy entails analyzing how the structural aspects of racism shape particular racial scenarios and the racial lives of individuals. *However, almost without exception, the AMPU lessons focused on the primacy of individuals in overcoming the nation's unfortunate racial history.* One lesson's discussion questions include: "How can we—those of us in this classroom—participate in the hopeful work of forming a 'more perfect union'?" and "Describe someone in your life whom you love but with whom you disagree... Can you ever challenge that person to think differently?"⁶⁸ Another lesson asks, "What is the role of anger in looking at race and racism? What do the different races have in common when it comes to anger?"⁶⁹ A *PBS NewsHour* lesson offers a warm-up activity in which students consider the "heroes" of the Civil Rights Movement and answer the question, "What would you march for?" Later in this lesson, after asking students to reflect on how far the nation has progressed toward racial equality, the lesson closes with, "What can you do as an individual to bring us, as a society, closer to true racial equality?"⁷⁰

In inquiry of this kind, students will likely come to internalize racial equality as a product of individual acts rather than policies and systems, and thus the burden of promoting racial equity gets reduced to the individual actions taken by students in the classroom. While racial literacy appreciates the importance of individual agency, many of the lessons’ central discussion or reflection questions displayed an overreliance on individual choices, thoughts, or actions.

Relatedly, a number of the lessons include opportunities for students to offer their personal reactions to the speech. A *Teaching Tolerance* lesson, for example, opens by asking students how they reacted to the speech and if there were parts that made them uncomfortable.⁷¹ Another lesson asks students to create a “Feelings Web” to record and organize words and ideas about how the speech made them feel.⁷² Later, the lesson recommends a discussion in which students again relate their emotional reactions to the speech, as well as what aspects of the speech students disagreed with, found difficult to listen to, and/or could relate to personally. Finally, the lesson closes with a “go-round” in which students each share a word or phrase, again describing how the lesson’s activities made them feel.⁷³ While the Spiegler lesson stood on one extreme by centering students’ emotional responses, most of the lessons included similar questions at some point. Focusing on individual emotional reactions to the speech, while possibly a useful way to engage students in the lesson, can also serve to over-legitimize individual understandings/emotions/intuitions without a more thorough grounding in the structural aspects of racism. Student opinions formed in a structural vacuum will likely fall short of a racially literate analysis and lean toward a racial liberalist point of view that understands racism as irrational prejudice.

As teacher-educators, we do not fault these lessons for emphasizing individuals’ reactions to the speech and their potential actions as a result. In such curricula, we see earnest, understandable attempts to localize the issues for learners and to highlight the students’ agency within society. On the contrary, we would contend that history teachers who consider students’ emotional responses to events or provide opportunities for action are in disappointingly short supply in U.S. schools.⁷⁴ However, from a racial literacy perspective, such questions do not promote a structural reading of race. Rather, these lessons primarily framed racial inequity as an interpersonal

phenomenon, with little regard to the institutional aspects of racialized hierarchies. As Christine Sleeter argues, solely considering the interpersonal allows white individuals to frame themselves as “good whites” once they have attended to personal biases, never forced to consider how society institutionally privileges and oppresses based on race.⁷⁵ Even earnest efforts at the classroom level to improve cross-racial dialogue do little to educate students about the structural-level inequities—such as how U.S. policies maintain generational wealth gaps—that Obama touched on in the AMPU speech.

In contrast, one lesson does give substantial time to Jeremiah Wright’s controversial statements.⁷⁶ For example, the lesson poses discussion questions such as, “What is a ‘three-strike’ law? Why do you suppose the pastor opposes such laws?” Later, the same lesson asks students to consider the suggestion that the U.S. government may have used crack cocaine as a weapon against black neighborhoods. The lesson plan then recommends that teachers and students consider background knowledge such as the Tuskegee “experiments” and the U.S. Senate’s failure to pass anti-lynching laws throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This line of questioning stood out as an exception to most of the lessons reviewed, as it gave considerable attention (and legitimacy) to Reverend Wright’s critiques of the U.S. and asked students to consider U.S. racism in a more structural, historical, and institutional way. The lesson also asks students, “What ‘disparities that exist in the African American community today’ can be traced to ‘the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow’?” Here, the lesson connects contemporary racial inequities to their roots in historical institutions. While this lesson also represents racism as an interpersonal phenomenon at points—the lesson elsewhere suggests a “fishbowl” activity focused entirely on improving race relations in the classroom—the connections to race and racism as historically situated and structurally enforced set it apart from the other curricula that we analyzed.⁷⁷

2) *Balancing Thought and Action: A Focus on “Fixing”*

Guinier frames racial literacy as an iterative process of “diagnosis, feedback and assessment” that values “learning rather than knowing.”⁷⁸ The complex dynamics of race and the high stakes of pursuing racial remedies require that racialized problems be

analyzed from a variety of angles (historic, economic, social, etc.) and that action only occurs after building broad coalitions. However, we noted that the AMPU lessons generally encouraged students to find solutions to race-based challenges with scant attention to understanding the causes or consequences of racism. *Specifically, we found an emphasis on “fixing” inequality and inter-group tensions, but little on what Guinier might term “diagnosing” the problem.*

Many of the lessons include a question like, “What steps can each of us take to achieve a racially just society?”⁷⁹ A National Constitution Center lesson asks students to brainstorm a list of race-related “problems or imperfections” in America and to develop an “action plan” for brainstorming appropriate solutions. Another lesson approaches the problem by asking about who benefits from racial resentment, further encouraging students to consider the labor movement and Great Migration; however, no mention was made of housing segregation, concentrated poverty, or other contemporary factors. Ultimately, the lesson asks, “What do you think we ought to do...to address and heal the anger?”⁸⁰ Again, these questions are laudable in their tilt toward action, but they do not provide a foundation for understanding “the subtle yet complex ways that race actually works in the 21st century.”⁸¹ Instead, racial hierarchies are treated as a given. Students are pushed towards quick fixes for the “symptoms” of racism without understanding the disease itself.

Several of the lessons also emphasize Obama’s own call for unity as a stand-in for action. For instance, a McGraw-Hill lesson includes a short written assignment for the prompt: “Despite the history of slavery and segregation, what makes the United States one nation, in Obama’s opinion?”⁸² The lesson then instructs students to include Obama’s suggestion that “there is an opportunity for unity in pursuing the nation’s problems with health care and education,” but that Americans must resist the tendency to “simply retreat into our respective corners.”⁸³ Again, this lesson selects particular sections from the AMPU speech that promote the theme of unity-as-antidote for the nation’s challenges. This writing activity does not provide space for students to disagree with the premise—that the United States may not be one nation, due, in part, to the history of slavery and segregation—or to fully explore the underlying causes of the “problems with health care and education.”⁸⁴ Again, a more robust diagnosis of these problems may lead students to a richer and more

nanced understanding of the complexity of race in America, without having to seek out solutions through national unity and self-reliance.

We recognize that these lessons likely reflect the constraints in time and state-mandated curricular coverage felt by many social studies teachers. The suggested one- to two-class duration hardly allows for a racially literate analysis of the AMPU speech. However, the lessons were decidedly quick to push students toward offering solutions rather than broadening their understanding of how racism operates. Although we would prefer more time allocated, students could explore an array of racial dynamics mentioned in the AMPU speech even within one or two class periods, and may be better served by doing so. As Sara Ahmed suggests, when discussions about racism move too quickly toward calls for solutions or action, they can “*block* hearing...In other words, the desire to act, to move, or even to move on can stop the message from ‘getting through.’”⁸⁵ Kathy Hytten and John Warren also critique this compulsion for taking quick action, noting that, “reflection and action are set up as binaries, and, consequently, reflection is not seen as an integral part of action, or worse, is seen as getting in the way of action.”⁸⁶ Racial literacy calls for “learning rather than knowing” precisely for these reasons.

3) Seeing Intersectionalities Between Race and Other Social Factors: Absences and Missed Opportunities

Racial literacy calls for an intersectional analysis of race alongside other social factors such as class, gender, or geography. *However, we found that most of the lessons did not take up intersectionality of race with other social factors in any substantive way, choosing instead to focus the lessons exclusively on race as an isolated phenomenon.* When lessons did provide opportunities for an intersectional analysis, these topics were marginalized within the lesson or were positioned as opportunities for enrichment without specific guidance on how teachers might help students unpack these intersections. In one telling example, an AMPU lesson includes a statement about discussing “the impact of culture, class, and age on race” as one of the lesson objectives, but then these potential intersectionalities were not specifically featured in any of the lesson activities.⁸⁷

In the instances of lessons that did attend to intersectionality in some way, we observed that such considerations were relegated to

the margins and/or left problematically open-ended. For instance, a *New York Times* lesson ends with a section called “Interdisciplinary Connections.” In one of these interdisciplinary connections ideas, students are encouraged to select an economic topic from the AMPU speech for further investigation and “consider how the topic relates to race in America or the 2008 presidential election.”⁸⁸ The same lesson recommends that students consider geography by creating an “annotated map” that traces the ancestry of students in the classroom. The lesson plan then suggests that students could write a reflection paper on the question, “How do you think each person’s family history might factor into their perspective on race in America?”⁸⁹ Although students were provided with an opportunity to analyze class and geographic issues alongside race, positioning these activities as lesson extensions rather than a central part of the lesson symbolically framed these intersectional elements as peripheral and potentially less important. Also, while questions about economic principles, family geography, and race relations could lead to a deeper understanding of these complex issues, we fear that such open-ended questions, without the benefit of more direct teaching and learning on the subjects, may ultimately confuse students or never lead to robust connections to race and the AMPU speech. As we discuss in greater detail below, lesson activities that connected the AMPU speech to the nation’s history of housing segregation, redlining, and the growth of concentrated poverty in urban centers would likely provide a more robust opportunity for learning about how race intersects with factors like geography and economics.

In another exception to the lack of intersectionality in the curricula, one lesson includes several ideas from Jeremiah Wright’s speeches and asks students to discuss U.S. drug policy and the idea that the U.S. government may have introduced crack cocaine to “destroy black neighborhoods.”⁹⁰ While such questions would undoubtedly require providing students with considerable background on the subject, this lesson does encourage students to consider how race, social class, policing, and drug policies intersected to inform current racial disparities. However, even this lesson fell into some of the shortcomings noted above. The lesson offers the extension activity to “write a paper of a few hundred words” about “race relations in my neighborhood.”⁹¹ As with other lessons, we interpreted such activities as missed opportunities. Such a broad topic as “race

relations in my neighborhood,” we argue, was left too open-ended for substantive learning about race and geography, particularly without direct conversations on how U.S. public policies influenced notions such as neighborhood dynamics, wealth distribution, white flight, etc.⁹² A student could meet the requirements of this prompt by writing an essay on how everyone in his or her neighborhood gets along well, for example, but such a response would not adequately address the racial makeup of that neighborhood, who gets to live there and who does not, the policies that influence why Americans live where they do, and so on. These intersecting notions of race, class, and geography are rich learning opportunities, particularly in the context of the AMPU speech. However, we do not see how such ideas can be usefully included in a lesson when treated superficially or relegated to the curricular margins.

While we would like to see greater attention to intersectionality in the AMPU lessons, we do recognize some merit in a narrow curricular focus on race. Particularly when students have had little exposure to discussions about race and racism, they will need support in developing a racial vocabulary⁹³ and appreciating how racism has morphed over time.⁹⁴ Though we feel strongly that race relations can never be entangled from class formation, geography, gender, and other social forces, it may help students with a burgeoning understanding of racism to begin with a more focused analysis.

Implications and Recommendations

The lessons analyzed generally emphasized individuals’ role in combating racial inequality, but paid minimal attention to forces beyond local communities. The curricula clearly invoked Obama’s call for Americans who are “willing to do their part.”⁹⁵ However, absent from these lessons were connections to the speech’s structural implications, such as when Obama elsewhere urged “enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system.”⁹⁶ The lessons pushed students quickly toward proposing solutions rather than adopting the disposition of “learning rather than knowing” called for by racial literacy. We also found a dearth of direct teaching on how race intersects with other social factors like social class and geography. These curricular decisions suggested an interpretation of the AMPU speech that promotes Guinier’s notion

of racial liberalism more so than racial literacy.⁹⁷ Rather than a deep understanding of the complex, historically rooted, structurally embedded, and intersectional nature of America’s racial hierarchy, these lessons collectively emphasized the possibility for a slow and incremental march toward a more perfect union.

By concentrating on how students can individually tackle issues like racial resentment and cross-racial communication, these AMPU-based lessons effectively promote a racial liberalist framework, embodied by “proponents of greater tolerance [who] suggested that racism was irrational and would surrender to logic and interpersonal contact.”⁹⁸ Such a static, one-sided view of U.S. racism, Guinier would argue, fails to account for the myriad ways that race operates in concert with social class and geography. Teachers must also recognize that their students—regardless of their race, economic status, or geographic location—are circumscribed by U.S. housing policies, school funding models tied to property taxes, school tracking schemes, and a plethora of other related geographic and socio-economic forces.⁹⁹ Such complex conceptions of equity and access cannot be solved through avoidance or the myopic focus on how high school students can overcome interpersonal differences.

Despite the limited foci of the lessons analyzed here, we maintain that the AMPU speech offers rich opportunities for fostering racial literacy in history classrooms. However, such lessons must balance the interpersonal elements of race relations with deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of institutionalized, racialized hierarchies. We applaud the lessons for connecting AMPU to students’ lives and empowering them to act accordingly. Before the nation can “fix” racial inequity, though, it must understand the racial grammar through which inequity operates.¹⁰⁰ The complexity of this racial-political moment—Barack Obama’s election broadly, and the AMPU speech in particular—offers an opportunity for careful consideration of the nation’s racial reality in the age of the first black president.

As such, we close with our own recommendations for classroom activities using Obama’s AMPU speech. The following list, organized by the three principles of racial literacy, is not meant to be exhaustive or prescriptive. Rather, we pose several ideas as starting points for educators and researchers seeking to take up this useful historical text in the service of promoting racial literacy in the classroom.

1) Reading Race as a Structural Phenomenon, While Recognizing Individual Agency

Teachers and students could turn their attention to Obama's comment about the nation's "corporate culture rife with inside dealing" and "short-term greed."¹⁰¹ This statement provides an opening into analyzing how racism operates through social structures and institutions rather than just interpersonal prejudice. Associated activities could include using online news outlets to look for examples of current events that reflect the culture of "inside dealing" and "short-term greed," categorizing the kinds of people involved with these stories, and hypothesizing who might be most affected. As one example, studies of the U.S. housing crisis of 2007-2009 revealed that minority communities experienced higher rates of foreclosures, due in part to financial institutions' predatory and discriminatory lending practices.¹⁰² Communities of color were specifically targeted and exploited by banks and other lenders. Even when similarly situated financially, people of color were entangled in riskier subprime loans than white people, and were more likely to lose their homes.¹⁰³ The housing crisis is but one example of how institutional and structural forces impoverish communities of color. This specific topic also allows for a discussion of the limits of individual agency. These families, in pursuit of the classic "American Dream" of homeownership, took action to secure a better economic future. Unfortunately, institutional forces constrained those actions, leaving many families trapped with bad mortgages that led to foreclosure and economic ruin for their households. Obama touches on a number of other policy issues in the AMPU speech—including affirmative action, loss of manufacturing jobs, immigration, school busing, and urban crime—that could all serve as the basis for robust exploration of how racism operates at a structural level that often constrains individual agency.

2) Balancing Thought and Action

This tenet of racial literacy involves using race as a tool of "diagnosis, feedback, and assessment."¹⁰⁴ Rather than studying the AMPU speech in isolation and proposing simplistic solutions, students and teachers could study it alongside other important

statements about race relations in the United States. For a historical perspective, they could read excerpts from the work of W. E. B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, James Baldwin, Angela Davis, Vine Deloria Jr., Gloria Anzaldúa, Rodolfo Acuña, or Ronald Takaki, all of whom detailed how white supremacy operates in the United States. To focus on contemporary events, students and teachers could compare the AMPU speech with the Guiding Principles of the Black Lives Matter movement¹⁰⁵ or student testimonials in support of the embattled ethnic studies program in Tucson, Arizona.¹⁰⁶ For any of these individuals or movements, students could create an imagined dialogue between President Obama and these writers and activists.

Another way to broaden students' knowledge about Obama's views on race would be to analyze his other related speeches and writings. Students and teachers could explore excerpts from Obama's two published books, *Dreams from my Father* (1995) or *The Audacity of Hope* (2006). For an analysis of how Obama responded to racialized events during his presidency, students could analyze Obama's statements related to Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s arrest by Cambridge police officer James Crowley in 2009 or his response to Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor's "wise Latina" comments. Obama has also spoken about racial profiling and tensions between communities of color and the police at several points over the last several years. Students could read or watch Obama's 2013 speech on the death of Trayvon Martin¹⁰⁷ and discuss if/how the president's views on race have evolved since the AMPU speech. Students could also discuss their own interactions with the police in light of recent high-profile incidents of police killings of black men in Missouri, New York, Ohio, Louisiana, Minnesota, and elsewhere.

3) *Seeing Intersectionalities Between Race and Other Social Factors*

To consider aspects of intersectionality in the AMPU speech, students and teachers could explore the history of housing segregation in the United States. The California Newsreel film, *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (2003), provides a good starting point for understanding residential segregation and its impact on wealth creation. PBS hosts a companion website for the documentary with several resources for fostering classroom discussions.¹⁰⁸ Students and teachers could discuss how housing segregation can lead to racial

resentment and increases in the wealth gap between white people and communities of color.

For a geographical analysis of race, classrooms could use an online mapping tool like Google Maps to locate where public services and private businesses are located in the students' town or city. These locations should then be analyzed for how they map onto the city's racial makeup. Students can use a U.S. Census-based tool, such as the University of Virginia's Racial Dot Map to search for the location of hospitals and clinics to see which communities enjoy better access, or for grocery stores to see which neighborhoods have proximity to fresh produce.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, they could search for businesses that target lower-income communities—such as payday loan companies—to assess where they are positioned vis-à-vis different racial groups.

These lesson ideas can hopefully serve as a starting point for moving away from racial liberalist interpretations of the “A More Perfect Union” speech and toward developing greater racial literacy through Obama's iconic address.

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Appendix

Lesson Plan Descriptions

Author/Publisher and Date	Lesson Title	Key Ideas/ Concepts	Duration	Lesson Summary
Lauren Cristella, National Constitution Center, 2008	“A More Perfect Union: Barack Obama’s Race Speech at the National Constitution Center”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constitutional connections • Voting Rights Act of 1965 • working toward a more perfect union 	40-60 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small-group discussion; summary and presentation of relevant Constitutional Amendments (13th, 14th, 15th) and court cases (<i>Grutter v. Bollinger</i>, <i>Brown v. Board of Ed.</i>). • Review Preamble to Constitution and discuss the phrase, “A More Perfect Union” • Create “action plan” for promoting a more perfect union
Edsitement!, n.d.	“The Election of Barack Obama, 44 th President of the United States”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • civil rights • Voting Rights Act of 1965 	<i>None listed</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part 1: Read Obama biographies; Discuss how his background prepares him for presidency • Part 2: Read sections of Voting Rights Act, 15th Amendment, 26th Amendment; Discuss importance/success of the act • Part 3: Read sections of AMPU; group discussions on speech and the role the president should play in race in America • Assessment: Write a paper on if Obama’s election marks end of Civil Rights Movement

Author/Publisher and Date	Lesson Title	Key Ideas/ Concepts	Duration	Lesson Summary
Katie Gould, PBS NewsHour Extra, 2013	“Racial Equality: How Far Have We Come and How Far do We Have to Go?”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • civil rights • historical/ current social issues 	45 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student reflection on civil rights history, and issues they would march for • Read AMPU excerpts from; find evidence of discrimination • Four Corners activity: evaluating nation’s progress on civil rights
McGraw-Hill Education <i>U.S. History since 1877</i> , 2016	“Interpreting the Sources: Barack Obama, ‘A More Perfect Union,’ Speech given in Philadelphia, March, 2008”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sourcing historical documents • slavery • national unity 	<i>None listed</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read AMPU excerpts • Answer sourcing questions (type, author, bias, purpose, audience) • Write short responses on influence of slavery today, Obama in relation to U.S. history, how U.S. is still one nation despite history of slavery
RaceBridges for Schools, n.d.	“President Obama’s Speech on Race: Looking More Closely at His Words & Our Own Lives”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • race and racism • working toward a more perfect union 	1, 2, or 3+ class sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small Group: read, analyze, discuss excerpts • Class Discussion: summarize discussions, discuss how to improve the “union” • Extension: examine other texts, including Jeremiah Wright’s speeches, history textbooks, MLK’s “I Have a Dream” speech, and section from Loewen’s <i>Lies My Teacher Told Me</i> or Tatum’s <i>Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?</i>

Author/Publisher and Date	Lesson Title	Key Ideas/ Concepts	Duration	Lesson Summary
Jennifer Rittner and Javaid Khan, <i>The New York Times</i> , 2008	“Free Speech”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • race • hypertext annotation • historical/ current social issues 	2 days	<p>Day One:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read/watch AMPU speech; discuss issues students connected with most strongly • Homework: Highlight important passages <p>Day Two:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Class discussion on AMPU speech, including historical events referenced, relevance to students’ lives, and current events • Create annotated version of speech to explain ideas referenced • Extension Activities: annotate speeches of other historical figures; organize school-wide consortium on race and America; read and respond to reader comments on AMPU in <i>NYT</i> • Interdisciplinary Connections: ideas for connecting speech to economics, geography, fine arts, media studies, and <i>NYT</i>
Alan Shapiro, Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility, 2008	“A More Perfect Union: Examining Senator Obama’s Speech”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • race and racism • current events • working toward a more perfect union • individuals’ emotions 	<i>None listed</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read/discuss AMPU excerpts • Discussion activities, such as fish bowl and “Group Go-Around” • “For Inquiry”—list of key terms students investigate on their own • “For Writing”—list of topics for short-paper, including personal feelings on race and racism and ideas for creating a more perfect union

Author/Publisher and Date	Lesson Title	Key Ideas/ Concepts	Duration	Lesson Summary
Jinnie Spiegler, Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility, 2008	“Exploring Race and Racism through Barack Obama’s Speech”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • race • segregation • individuals’ emotions 	<i>None listed</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss background information on Obama; watch AMPU speech • Create “Feelings Web” about speech • Small-group discussions on topics students agreed/disagreed with, how they felt, etc. • Whole-class discussions on Obama’s views on race, generational divides, Reverend Wright
Teaching Tolerance, n.d.	“A Nation of Immigrants?”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • immigration • history textbooks 	<i>None listed</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read AMPU speech • Discuss section of speech on immigration and white experience • Textbook Assessment: examine and analyze representations of other “immigrant” groups in U.S. history textbooks • Revisit original discussion on immigration; consider other narratives presented in history books • Extension: re-write textbook narratives/ passages