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Author

Naman, Tyler

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Message in a Bottle: An Advertising Campaign's Appropriation of Obama's Inclusive Rhetoric, and What This Reveals About National Identity

Tyler Naman
American Studies

Mentor: Kathleen Moran, American Studies

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It was November 4th, 2008. Thousands of people, young and old, of all races, religious beliefs and backgrounds, flocked into the streets in ecstatic unity to celebrate the election of Barack Obama. Obama's campaign had touted the importance of bipartisanship, inclusivity and national unity, a sharp U-turn from the divisiveness that often characterized the rhetoric of the Bush administration. American voters had come together across age and race lines in unprecedented ways to elect the first black president in United States history, and in the wake of Obama's election the sentiment of unity and success was contagious.

It took little time after Obama's election for his language of bi-partisanship and inclusivity to become a marketing slogan to sell perfume. In fact, on January 20th, 2009, the *same day* that Obama was sworn in as the 44th president of the United States, Calvin Klein launched a major new television and print ad campaign to sell its unisex fragrance, ck one.

My name is Tyler Naman, and I'm in the American Studies Department working with Professor Kathleen Moran as my mentor. The title of my research is "Message in a Bottle: An Advertising Campaign's Appropriation of Obama's Inclusive Rhetoric, and What This Reveals About National Identity."

What specific linguistic and ideological features of Obama's campaign message were used to re-construct ck one's brand identity through this 2009 advertising campaign, and how? What does this say about the language used in Obama's campaign, and about the advertising tactics used to market this product? These are some of the questions that will be addressed in the present talk. I argue that these advertisements' messages, as conveyed through text, directly appropriate language of unity and inclusivity used by President Obama. In addition, the advertisements' visual imagery directly mimics and represents Obama's campaign messages of unification across racial, gender and age lines. Lastly, I'll contend that the advertisements' creators have taken these political

messages and slogans out of the historical context in which Obama used them and have stripped them of their historical antecedents, thus transforming them into the realm of myth as described by Roland Barthes in his seminal work *Mythologies*.

Calvin Klein's ck one brand existed for years before Barack Obama was elected president, always marketed as "a fragrance for a man or a woman." But the company used the occasion of his election, and his theme of inclusiveness, to re-launch its product. The slogan of the new advertisements declared "we are one for all for ever" (Figure 1).

Fig. 1: ck one by Calvin Klein. Advertisement. *Rolling Stone* Mar. 5 2009: 11.



Lest there be any confusion that ck one was attaching itself to Obama's wagon, the name of Obama's official celebration and concert, which took place January 18, 2009, was "We are One." The "We are One" celebration and concert attracted an estimated 400,000 people to the live event, and was broadcast free on television as well as National Public Radio [6].

Immediately following Obama's November 2008 election victory, Calvin Klein made no secret of its desire to ride this particular social wave of inclusivity as far as it could. The senior vice president of American fragrances for Coty Prestige (Calvin Klein's parent company) was quoted saying in early January 2009:

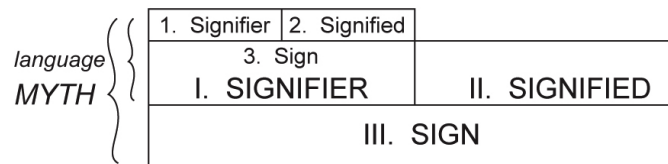
Calvin Klein plans to bring new attention to its ck one franchise with a new campaign to be launched January 20th. . . the ck one 'we are one' campaign is inspired by a social movement of people coming together in the spirit of unity. There is such a natural synergy between the message of the company and the essence of our new president's platform that it seemed the ideal moment to share the TV spot. The campaign. . . gives voice to an optimistic new generation that certainly made its voice heard in the latest election. This is a celebration of the power of coming together as one. [11]

My research involves both in-depth analyses of Obama's public speeches during his campaign and multi-modal discourse analyses of the ck one ads. For the purposes of this talk, I'll focus on one particularly revealing print advertisement for ck one, and I'll draw on a few short excerpts from Obama's acceptance speech delivered in Chicago on election night in November, 2008. This speech was delivered to the entire American public as the capstone speech of Obama's presidential campaign, and thus in many ways is a summation of his political philosophy, and representative of his approach to politics and his messages of bipartisanship and inclusivity. In the interest of time, my analysis of Obama's speech and of the ck one print ad will in no way be complete, but will rather draw on a few particular excerpts that I felt were among the most relevant.

Barthes' notion of "myth"

Advertisements are so pervasive, and our reading and interpreting of them is so routine, that we tend to take the deep social and political assumptions embedded in them for granted [4, p. 192]. As I previously stated, in analyzing these advertisements, I draw on Barthes' concept of myth (Figure 2).

Fig. 2: Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Chart. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, [1957] 1972: 115.



Myth is a system of communicating meaning, but one in which, in its construction, an already-existing linguistic sign, i.e. the cumulative whole resulting from a signifier being linked with a signified concept, is reduced to simply being a signifier for one concept. Barthes also argued that in transforming a picture or word into a myth, the concept that is signified in the second-order semiological chain loses all of its historical context, and is simply accepted by the myth reader as the natural state of things [2, p. 129]. The myth reader does not read the mythical speech as having a motive behind it. Rather, it is read as something natural, and the reader takes the equivalence of the signifier and signified as having a causal, and therefore natural relationship [2, p. 131].

Here's an example: in the "first-order semiological system" of regular language, the sound-image of the word democracy (/dimocrasi/) forms the signifier (Figure 2, section 1). This signifier signifies the concept of "democracy" (i.e. government by the people), which is the signified (Figure 2, section 2). The association between the signifier /dimocrasi/ and the signified concept of "democracy" form the linguistic sign (Figure 2, section 3). This linguistic sign is also related connotatively to other signs of which it is similar. Yet when democracy is moved into the realm of myth, this linguistic sign becomes merely a signifier for a new signified concept. For example, in becoming a myth, democracy might be stripped of all of its many associations, and become merely a signifier for the concept of "American-ness" (Figure 2, sections I and II, respectively). When a "reader" of the myth thinks of democracy, it serves merely as a signifier that represents the concept of "American-ness." The associative whole of the signifier (democracy) and the signified (American-ness) form a new sign, which is the myth (Figure 2, section III).

Obama's inclusive rhetoric

Let's take a look at some of Obama's inclusive rhetoric used during his campaign. In his acceptance speech, given in Chicago on election night in November 2008, Obama stated that his election was a message that Americans had sent to the world that "We have never been just a collection of red states and blue states. We are and always will be the United States of America." That message, he said, was spoken "by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled." Obama's use of the pronoun "we" is pervasive throughout his speech, and although he occasionally uses it to refer to the Democratic Party, he far more frequently uses it in an all-inclusive sense to refer to the nation as a whole (i.e. all-inclusive within the U.S.) in sentences where he touts the importance of bipartisanship and coming together as one. Not surprisingly, use of the pronoun "we" in an inclusionary fashion (as opposed to an exclusionary, "us versus them" use of the word) often predominates in political discourse to help to share the responsibility for actions that are controversial [13, p. 44]. Indeed, upcoming controversial actions would include an unpopular bailout of Wall Street, continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, health care reform, and

an economic stimulus plan.

As the speech progresses, Obama's politics and language of inclusion signifies not only bringing together his myriad and diverse supporters, but also those who opposed him: "To those Americans whose support I have yet to earn, I may not have won your vote tonight, but I hear your voices. I need your help and I will be your president, too." To those he said, "I will listen to you, especially when we disagree." Obama then proclaims, "If this financial crisis has taught us anything, it's that we cannot have a thriving Wall Street while Main Street suffers. In this country we rise or fall as one nation, as one people." And in the conclusion to his acceptance speech, Obama announces, "This is our time. . . to reaffirm that fundamental truth that out of many, we are one."

One could argue that in a context such as this, when employed as myth the words "we are one" and "The United States of America" are stripped of all their many associations and become merely signifiers that represent the concept of "American-ness." Yet in Obama's use of such language, he is not fully employing speech to communicate myth as defined by Barthes, because there is a historical basis for his claims of inclusivity and national unity. Looking at the entirety of his speech, we see that he places these phrases in a historical context as he mentions Lincoln and Lincoln's healing of divisions in this country, among many other historical references. Yet when Obama says "that fundamental truth that out of many, we are one," and "we have never been just a collection of red states and blue states," he downplays strong historical divisions between states' rights and the federal government, and implies that this country has always been more unified than it really was. *E. Pluribus Unum* ("out of many, we are one") originally represented the notion that out of the many colonies emerged a single nation. Yet Obama uses it to represent not just the unity of the U.S. in regards to state party leanings, but also to represent that out of many races, ethnicities, religions and ancestries emerge a single people, and a single way of viewing the world. Such language would then be moved fully into the realm of myth by advertisers like Calvin Klein.

Mortise and frame

Since print advertisements are nearly exclusively multimodal in nature, an analysis of such advertisements requires an analysis of the interaction between text, layout and image [4]. In visual semiotic analysis attention must be paid to both visual "lexis" and visual 'grammar'-in other words, to individual visual elements of the image and their denotative and connotative significance, as well as to the ways in which these components are combined to form a meaningful whole [10, p. 1]. It is important to note, however, that the visual "grammar" of advertisements does not confer absolute meaning. As scholars Hodge and Kress have noted, "meaning is always negotiated in the semiotic process, never simply imposed inexorably from above by an omnipotent author through an absolute code" [10, p. 2]. In the present analysis, I use a visual semiotic framework designed for decoding print advertisements for consumer goods developed by

scholar Robert Goldman, known as *mortise and frame*.

Within an advertisement, the term *mortise* as used by Goldman essentially refers to a product insert in an advertisement, i.e. an image of the packaged product that is juxtaposed with another image used in the advertisement [4, p. 63]. Through the use of photographic imagery, advertisements abstract images from their original context and reconnect these images with a new context, changing the meaning of the image [4, p. 5]. Since the interpretation of the image's meaning is not fixed, but rather negotiated by the reader of the advertisement, advertisers design ads in an attempt to guide the "preferred" interpretation of the image. This is most often done through the use of "framing" techniques such as captions.

The mortise is used in advertisements as a way to connect the named product to what is depicted on the rest of the advertisement page, making possible a transfer of meaning between the abstracted image and the product [4, p. 63]. This makes possible, as Goldman notes, an appearance of interchangeability between the product and the visual imagery, making it possible for one to stand for the other [4, p. 63]. It also creates the appearance of a causal relation going from the product to the visually signified meaning. The use of a mortise and framing devices, as a framework used to steer the creation of meaning within an ad, aids in the construction of what Goldman calls a *commodity-sign*, i.e. the image that attaches to a product, such as the image of affluent status connected to a Rolex watch that supplants its functional utility as a timepiece [4, p. 5].

Multimodal analysis of a ck one print ad

Many consumer product ads want to make the consumers feel as if they will appear unique if they use a particular advertiser's product (what Goldman calls *pseudo-individuality*), yet these ck one ads take the opposite tack, proclaiming that using their product will make you part of the group.

Stretching across the entire page of the advertisement we see a long line of twenty-something couples and friends walking, arm-in-arm, toward the camera on a field or lawn (Figure 1). There are 18 young adults, mostly without children, but one couple is carrying a young baby, and another perhaps single mom is walking with a young boy of about ten. Linked together arm in arm, they are a pictorial representation of Obama's words, "out of many, we are one."

In this ad, the mortise contains a superimposed, translucent bottle of ck one through which you can see many of the people. As noted before, frames and framing devices such as captions and headlines provide coding instructions about how to interpret an ad's organization of meaning. In the ck one ad, this contextual framing is completed with very few words: The caption at the top of the ad reads "we are one" and at the bottom reads "for all for ever." This is designed to work on the consumers' perceptions on many levels, and it develops a "preferred" direction of interpretation among the ad's audience members. Since the photograph itself is in many ways ambiguous, the caption directs the meaning. In this case, it is to make the consumer feel that ck one

will help make them connect with “their group,” that it is the fragrance of togetherness, equality and loyalty. The equality even extends to the fact that ck one is marketed as a fragrance for both men and women.

There is no missing the direct link to the official presidential inauguration concert and celebration called “We are One.” But the phrase “we are one” works whether or not the reader is aware of this link or even agrees with it, since it speaks of unity and the product name on its own without an explicit connection to the President. The makers of the ad have also chosen to separate the words “we are one” from the words “for all for ever.” This has the effect, first of all, of defining the brand name. “one” is the name of the cologne, so saying “we are one” is saying that the brand name is “one.” But it also has a double meaning. “We are one” also could refer to the group of young adults pictured arm-in-arm, who are also saying “we are one.” The viewer is left to pick one or both of these interpretations. And by putting the words “for all” separately at the bottom, the advertiser is saying that ck one is for everyone. But “for all” can also be read as the second part of the phrase “we are one for all.” This double meaning helps equate the product to the abstracted image, making possible a symbolic equivalence between two otherwise unrelated meanings. In other words, by using “we are one” to refer both to the product and the people in the photo, the advertiser has rerouted the Obama-era sentiments of working together, bi-partisanship, friendship and unity, and successfully associated those sentiments with the consumption of its product.

In summary, this particular ck one ad effectively creates a commodity-sign by abstracting an idealized image of togetherness and unity in a photo, and by equating this concept of unity to the product through captions. The product and the concept become virtually interchangeable, and the concept of togetherness is reified as the cologne. Of course, you cannot really find friendship and togetherness in a bottle of cologne, but implying so can help sell the product. Corporate profit, as scholars such as Goldman have duly noted, is the main motive behind assigning meaning systems in ads.

As shown earlier, while Obama’s language of inclusion downplays historical divisions, his language is still tied to history. When Calvin Klein uses “we are one,” “one for all” and “for all for ever” combined with the image of the unified group of young people walking arm in arm to sell perfume, these terms and image have moved entirely into the realm of myth. When read as myth, the image and captions of the advertisement conjure up the very “essence” of America after the election of Barack Obama as being “multicultural and diverse, yet unified”: American national unity coexisting with racial and ethnic diversity is presented simply as a fact, shown by the image of the multiracial group walking together arm in arm, as the image is completely removed from any contextual information of how or why they came together, or even who they are. The words “we are one for all for ever” are also removed from any historical context or basis, and they, along with the abstracted image, become more than mere examples of the coexistence of American multiculturalism and unity as touted by Obama: they become, as Barthes would say, the very *presence* of it [2, p. 6]. The emptying of the historicity of these first-order signs, upon close inspection, is aided by

visual aspects of the image such as the fact that the ground on which the group is walking fades into white directly behind them, and that all of the people in the group are looking forward-visual components that emphasize that their past does not matter, as it simply fades away with their every step. For the myth reader, there appears to be a natural, and therefore causal relationship between the image of the group walking together and the notion that with Obama's presidential election, people from all racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds have "come together as one."

"Flagging" America

Now you may be wondering, what does consumer product advertising have to do with nationalism? To answer that question, it is instructive to look at what nationalism is, and how it is built up within an individual. Building on sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, (i.e. the collection of different dispositions that people are socialized into having, and that incline people to act in specific ways), we can look at the concept of nationalism as built up or created in the minds of people by small, everyday acts of identity. Scholar Michael Billig has written extensively on this, in regards to what he calls "banal nationalism." Billig and others contend that nationalism is "flagged" not just in the soaring rhetoric of patriotic speeches and songs or at sporting events, but also every day in "banal" ways that we hardly notice: the coins and paper money in our pockets, a limp flag hanging at the court house that people drive by daily without noticing [3, p. 8]. This banal nationalism constantly reminds "us" of who "we" are as a people. In other words, it flags America. Nationalism and national pride are formed from the accumulation of small acts of identity, from everyday verbal discourse, to "flaggings" of nationhood on television and in advertisements. The dispositions that compose the *habitus* also shape the specific attitudes, practices, and even perceptions of events that individuals have, and so too for nationalism: Nationalism can be seen as an insidious, invisible, repeated and permanent way of acting, thinking, and seeing the world. Much more than a simple affiliation to one's country, nationalism is a way of life [3].

But how does one study banal nationalism? To notice these "flaggings," Billig says we must become "linguistically microscopic," and look for banal nationalism not just in the language of political speeches: "The flagging has other locations," says Billig, "as the mass media daily bring the flags home to the citizenry" [3, p. 94]. This ck one advertising campaign, that has directly lifted the "we are one" slogan and imagery of a successful presidential campaign, and then used them in print and television ads that seem to "naturally" conjure up the presence of American national unity out of racial and ethnic diversity, is a prime example of the banal flagging of America through the mass media. The reader of the ad discussed earlier and of many others like it, who actively participates in the interpretation and negotiation of the ad's meaning, is involved in a small, routine, daily act of identity formation.

Conclusion

My research has taken existing theories and frameworks from influential scholars such as Goldman and Barthes, and applied them to the contemporary theme of the inclusivity and bi-partisanship promoted in Obama's presidential campaign. Though far from a complete analysis of the relations between political language and advertising language, I believe that my work illuminates connections between the two in ways that have not been heavily researched before, particularly because my research is focused on a very recent advertising campaign created in response to the election of the first black president in American history.

I want to thank all of you for attending this SURF conference, and I would also like to give special thanks to all of the people who have helped me throughout my research process thus far: Professor Kathleen Moran, Timo Rodriguez, Professor Claire Kramsch, all of the generous SURF donors and supporters, my fellow SURF scholars, Mard Naman, Bonnie Powers, and the rest of my wonderful family. Thank you.

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