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## Using the 2008 Presidential Election to Think about “Playing the Race Card”

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### Abstract

Bill Clinton and Geraldine Ferraro were accused of “playing the race card” during the 2008 contest for the Democratic presidential nomination. This essay explores the different forms race cards may assume and the dangers each poses to the public dialogue. Moving away from the traditional focus on persuasive effects, the Clinton and Ferraro utterances are analyzed as argumentative discourses. Then, critical standards are promulgated for evaluating their reasonableness.

**Keywords:** Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, campaigns, Geraldine Ferraro, race card, racism, rhetoric

On Saturday, January 26, 2008, before his wife’s impending defeat in the South Carolina primary, former President Bill Clinton told reporters, “Jesse Jackson won South Carolina twice, in ‘84 and ‘88. And he ran a good campaign. And Senator Obama’s run a good campaign here” (Muir, 2008a ¶. 30).

On Friday, March 7, 2008, a local Torrance, California, newspaper published an interview with Geraldine Ferraro. “If Obama was a white man,” she was quoted as telling the *Daily Breeze*, “he would not be in this position. And if he was [*sic*] a woman (of any color) he would not be in this position. He happens to be very lucky to be who he is. And the country is caught up in the concept” (Farber, 2008, p. 6D).

These remarks sparked a firestorm of controversy. Clinton and Ferraro were accused of improperly introducing race into the presidential primary contest. In defending themselves, each countercharged that it was actually their critics, rather than themselves, who were guilty of this ignominious offense.

In the ensuing coverage, journalists framed their stories around the playing of the “race card.” A headline in the *New York Times* read: “Bill Clinton Irritated by Race-Card Questions” (Phillips, 2008). *Slate* declared: “It Should be No Surprise that the Clintons are Playing the Race Card” (Hitchens, 2008). The *Seattle Times* proclaimed: “Candidates Dealing Race Card” (“Candidates,” 2008). *U.S. News and World Report* used the headline: “Bill Clinton in Race Card Blowup” (“Bill,” 2008).

Geraldine Ferraro’s words generated similar commentaries. On March 13, Ann Curry interviewed Geraldine Ferraro on the *Today Show*. Curry’s questions focused on whether Ferraro or the Obama campaign had played the “race card” (Curry, 2008, March 13). On March 14, Kevin Merida (2008) of the *Washington Post* described the political “landscape” as one filled with “charges and countercharges—of insensitivity, racism, race-baiting, race-carding, sinister calculation and thin-skinnedness” (p. C1). On March 15, Fred Barnes (2008), host of Fox News’s *Beltway Boys*, opened the broadcast by announcing, “The hot story tonight is race cards” (¶. 9).

The card metaphor has been “applied to politics for centuries” (Safire, 1993, p. 106). In the *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes (1998) observed, “[T]here is no honour [in] military [command] but by war, nor any such hope to mend an ill game, as by causing a new shuffle” (p. 66). John Quincy Adams said of Henry Clay, he is “a gamester in politics as well as cards” (Oriad, 1991, p. 326). Franklin Roosevelt borrowed the phrase, “new deal,” from Mark Twain’s (1889) *Connecticut Yankee*. In 1978, Leonid Brezhnev charged the United States of playing the “Chinese card” against the Soviet Union (Leffler, 2007, p. 334).

In the current iteration, the phrase “race card” refers to the trump card or the joker. Playing such a card is a metaphorical reference to the strategic use of racial insinuation (“Playing,” 2001). The term often, though not always, is associated with the use of political “code words,” camouflaging “outright expression of racism,” and thus protecting the user from “immediate social—and political—ostracism” (Taft, 1968, as quoted in Safire, 1993, p. 133).

The race card is not a single phenomenon. The Clinton and Ferraro cases represent different paradigms. Each paradigm presents its own challenges to the standards of reasonable discourse. We argue that when the nature of these race cards is satisfactorily understood, citizens’ vulnerability to their strategic use becomes obvious. Also, such an exploration makes plain that the traditional rhetorical defenses, including tests of evidence and lists of fallacies, may provide in some cases adequate protection and in others no defense at all. In a battle where texts, intentions, and contexts are nearly always in dispute, new weapons and tactics are often necessary.

In what follows, we take on four tasks. First, we explain the present literature on the race card. Second, we unpack the complicated pattern of charge and countercharge in the Clinton and Ferraro cases. Third, we offer an account of these cases as argumentative utterances rather than as persuasive strategies. Finally, we explore the avenues for combating these subtle and wily forms of racist discourse.

### **Conventional Accounts: Willie Horton and O. J. Simpson**

Scholars have largely built their understanding of the “race card” around two paradigmatic examples: the Republican Party’s use of Willie Horton in the 1988 presidential campaign, and the defense team’s attack on Mark Fuhrman and the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) in the 1995 O. J. Simpson murder trial.

The analyses of the Horton and Simpson cases share an assumption. The “race card” is regarded as a contemporary phenomenon of the post-civil-rights era, where racism has become a taboo and the accusation of racism is harmful to the accused. In earlier times, advocates openly supported racial discrimination. George Wallace (1963), for example, championed, “Segregation today . . . segregation tomorrow . . . segregation forever” (¶. 14). Such an openly antagonistic discourse is “race baiting,” distinguishable from “playing the race card.”

Yet, the Horton and Simpson examples are in many ways different. One used code language to make its appeal; the other used explicit racial terms. One appealed to conservative white voters; the other appealed to black jurors. One was played by a white politician; the other by a black defense attorney on behalf of an African American client. One evoked images of white victimage; the other evoked images of black victimage. In sorting out this complexity, we describe the Horton and Simpson examples and explain the scholarship each has generated.

#### ***Willie Horton***

Willie Horton appeared in September 1988. The National Security Political Action Committee (PAC) ran a campaign spot, entitled “Crime Quiz.” It featured a photograph of an African American male, Horton, along with a picture of Governor Michael Dukakis. The narrative of the ad said: “Bush supports the death penalty for first-degree murderers. Dukakis not only opposes the death penalty, he allowed first-degree murders to have weekend passes from prison.” The words “kidnapping,” “stabbing,” and “raping” appear on screen (Jamieson, 1989, p. 416).

On October 5, the Bush campaign began airing the “Revolving Door” furlough ad. “The stark, black-and-white Bush ad,” Jamieson (1989) writes, “opened with bleak prison scenes. It then cut to a procession of convicts circling through a revolving gate and marching toward the nation’s living rooms” (p. 416). Although the black convict Willie Horton does not appear, the public could draw the racial inference. “Exposed to Horton’s face for weeks by the saturation-level PAC campaign,” Jamieson (1989) argues that the “viewers analogized the convicts to Willie Horton” (p. 417).

After more than two weeks of public exposure to the “Revolving Door” ad, conservative PACs began running spots featuring the victims of Horton’s crimes. One ad featured a man whose wife had been raped (Jamieson, 1989, p. 417). Mailings, fliers, and campaign speeches reinforced the narrative. The chair of the Maryland Republican Party, for instance, sent a fund-raising letter that identified the “Dukakis/Willie Horton Team.” “You, your spouse, your children and your friends,” the ad read, “can have a visit from someone like Willie Horton if Mike Dukakis becomes president” (p. 417).

Using Willie Horton as the model, Tali Mendelberg's (2001) work identifies the following characteristics of the race card: (a) The race card is a *conservative campaign strategy* to appeal to white voters; (b) Formulated after the successes of the civil rights movement, the race card may be understood as part of a *racial backlash*; (c) This strategy assumes an *egalitarian social norm*, where white voters "want to avoid not only the public perception that they are racist, but also thinking of themselves as racists" (p. 7); (d) As a result, racial appeals must be implicit to be effective. *Implicit racial appeals* "convey the same message as explicit racial appeals, but they replace the racial nouns and adjectives with more oblique references to race" (p. 9); (e) The implicit appeals work because they initiate "*racial priming*"; (f) *Visual images* are "powerful cues" and they can evoke "racial resentments, fears, and stereotypes" without "verbal mention of race" (pp. 9–10); and (g) If implicit racial appeals are made *explicit*, they lose their persuasive power.

### ***O. J. Simpson***

In 1995, a former black football player, O. J. Simpson, went on trial for the gruesome slaying of two white victims, his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend, Ronald Goldman. Simpson "was the most famous person in U.S. history to be put on trial for murder" (Williams, 2001, p. 269). The trial was the longest ever held in California, lasting more than 8 months. The televised proceeding became the most watched trial in U.S. history (McConville, 1995) and, on October 3, 1995, more than 150 million viewers tuned in for the reading of the "not guilty" verdict (Holloway, 2005).

### ***Race Card 1***

Prominent voices accused the defense team, led by African American attorney Johnnie Cochran, of playing the "race card" (Higginbotham, François, & Yueh, 1997, pp. 34–35). The cross-examination of a white homicide detective, Mark Fuhrman, was at the center of this accusation. Fuhrman testified that he had not used the word "nigger" in the past 10 years (Higginbotham et al., 1997, p. 31). But a few months later on August 29, the defense played audiotapes and read from transcripts, obtained from screenwriter Laura McKinny, of Fuhrman using the "n-word" more than 40 times.

The defense argued that Fuhrman played a central role in the investigation. He had uncovered key evidence, most notably the "bloody glove" from Simpson's Brentwood estate. In Johnnie Cochran's closing argument to the jury that included nine African Americans, Fuhrman became a central figure in the supposed framing of the defendant ("Defense," 1995). Post-trial opinion surveys revealed an enormous divide between blacks and whites over their judgment of the verdict (Brigham & Wasserman, 1999).

In objecting to the admission of the Fuhrman audiotape, prosecutor Christopher Darden argued, "If you allow Mr. Cochran to use this word ["nigger"] and play this race card . . . the entire complexion of the case changes. It's a race case then. It's white versus black" (Bugliosi, 1996, p. 66). On the evening after the verdict was announced, Robert Shapiro, a member of the defense team, told Barbara Walters, "Not only did we play the race card, we dealt it from the bottom of the deck" (Jennings, 1995, ¶. 4). "We played the race card," Shapiro said on October 5 to Larry King, "that's what has happened, we have divided the

blacks and the whites in an unnecessary way" (King, 1995, ¶. 119). On the same day, African American columnist Clarence Page wrote, "Mr. Cochran played more than the race card. He played the whole deck" (1995, p. 25A).

Using O. J. Simpson as a model, Linda Williams (2001) constructed an account of the race card: (a) Playing the race card is a *melodramatic presentation of racial suffering*; (b) The card relies on a *historical memory of racial abuse*, which is inscribed in an iconography of interracial violence as a "beaten and enslaved black man" (p. 252); (c) The race card "is in play whenever racial abuse is invoked to cast one racially constituted group as a victim of another" (p. 5); (d) "With the arrival of the black and white melodrama," Williams claims, "into the intensely ritualized medium of the Anglo-American trial comes the ability to see what has been at stake in the American racial melodrama all along: the construction of moral legibilities out of *deep-seated guilt*" (p. 274); (e) In the O. J. Simpson case the race card of *black victimization trumped domestic abuse*; "The injury to the white woman victim was ultimately trumped by the seemingly greater injury to a possibly framed black man" (p. 273).

### *Race Card 2*

A vocal group of social critics argued that the "race card" was actually played by those who criticized the trial tactics of the Simpson legal team. The defense, they argued, followed recognized trial procedure and properly presented and cross-examined witnesses with regard to credibility.

"The Simpson defense team," Higginbotham et al. (1997) maintain, "had a legal and professional obligation to introduce to the jury this very substantial and damning evidence of Mr. Fuhrman's lack of credibility" (p. 40). The Fuhrman testimony was relevant in two respects. First, modern law holds to a standard based on *falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus*—"he who speaks falsely on one point will speak falsely upon all" (p. 39). So, the previous lies about using the "n-word" were relevant in testing Fuhrman's credibility on other material parts of his testimony. Second, racial prejudice is a legally recognized source of bias. The Federal Appellate Court held that "prejudice toward a group of which the defendant is a part may be a source of partiality against the defendant" (*U.S. v. Kartman*, 1969, p. 897).

They argued that O. J. Simpson's acquittal became an opportunity for whites to express their anger at black preferences. "In America," Higginbotham et al. (1997) write, "the 'race card' is usually played as part of a zero-sum game in which any gain by African Americans—real or imagined—is considered to be a loss for whites" (p. 33). Thus, whites constructed the Simpson not-guilty verdict as a victory for blacks, even though it demonstrably was not. "Mr. Simpson's acquittal," they write, "did not and will not redress the discriminatory treatment many African Americans continue to face in the criminal justice system" (p. 33).

Andy Rooney (1995) of *60 Minutes* declared, "The acquittal was the worst thing that's happened to race relations in 40 years" (¶. 7). Marshall Wittmann (1995) of the Heritage Foundation observed, "What we're seeing now is thirty years of moving from a colorblind society to a balkanized society" (p. 36). William Bennett (1995) used the occasion of the Simpson verdict to renew objections against affirmative action: "We have had thirty years of affirmative action. We have been thinking of race, we have been counting by race, and now we are shocked to find a jury judges by race" (¶. 84). The conservative author Dinesh

D’Souza on CNN joined the argument: “I think a positive thing to come out of the verdict is for whites and for all Americans to ask themselves, do we want race to be embedded in our laws, our policy, our voting, our hiring, our promotion of government contracts; or should we begin to de-racialize our society?” (Harris, 1995, ¶. 11). Conservative columnist George Will (1995) wrote, “It is not surprising that the jurors had no pangs of conscience about regarding Simpson as a member of a group—and not seeing his victims at all.” He continued, “People who think ‘race-conscious remedies’ for this or that can be benign are partly to blame” (p. A14).

Linda Williams (2001) understands this reaction as a “form of moralizing revenge” (what Nietzsche termed “*ressentiment*”; p. 290). “Affronted by the advantages granted Simpson as a person of color by a jury sensitive to past injustices toward a person of color,” Williams observed a “peculiar instance of an advantaged racial majority finding it possible to perceive themselves as if they were the aggrieved minority” (p. 290). Kimberlé Crenshaw (1997) regards Simpson as “a new symbol of a reconfigured vision of racism” (p. 97).

Relying on the work of Higginbotham et al. (1997) and Williams (2001), the second Simpson race card has the following characteristics: (a) the race card is played against the backdrop of an ideal colorblind society; (b) the race card is played in a zero-sum game, where any win for one racial group is a loss for the other; (c) the race card is played through the melodramatic performance of majority-group victimage; policies to alleviate racial discrimination are portrayed as victimizing majority group members; and (d) images of minority-group preferences and majority-group victimage are presented in an *ahistorical context*.

**Comparisons**

In Table 1, we lay out the appeal, speaker, audience, grievance, and purpose of the Horton and Simpson race cards. The first Simpson race card (OJ1) differs from the others. It was uttered explicitly by an African American speaker, addressed to a predominantly black jury and focused on African American suffering. The Horton and second Simpson (OJ2) race cards are quite similar, except that Horton was implicit and Simpson explicit.

**Table 1.** Rhetorical Comparison of Willie Horton and O. J. Simpson Race Cards

	Appeal	Speaker	Audience	Grievance	Purpose
Horton	Implicit	Republican Party	White conservatives	Black crime	Campaign strategy
OJ 1	Explicit	Black attorney	Black jurors	White racism	Trial strategy
OJ 2	Explicit	Conservative opinion-leaders	White conservatives	Black preferences	Ideological strategy

**Playing the Race Card in 2008: Bill Clinton and Geraldine Ferraro**

In what follows, we describe the Clinton and Ferraro incidents. In each case, two separate accusations of playing the race card are advanced—four in all.

In the first instance, Bill Clinton’s likening of Obama’s possible victory in South Carolina to that of Jesse Jackson’s started the controversy. Clinton’s comments dominated the news.

Later that day, George Stephanopoulos predicted the Clintons would say that South Carolina “is home turf for Barack Obama. They’ll also say more quietly that now he’s become the black candidate” (Muir, 2008b, ¶. 14). The next day on *Fox News Sunday*, Mara Liasson said, “I think the Clintons have been trying to make the point that no, he’s just like Jesse Jackson . . . he’s a black candidate, not a candidate who happens to be black” (C. Wallace, 2008, ¶. 50). Juan Williams, on the same broadcast, offered, “It is an outrage. . . . [I]t’s racial code language” (C. Wallace, 2008, ¶. 66). Also on Sunday, ABC’s David Wright negatively interpreted Clinton’s remarks: “Even before the polls had closed, Bill Clinton was already dismissing the notion of an Obama victory” (Weir, 2008, ¶. 22).

NBC’s *Meet the Press* devoted most of its program to Clinton’s comments. Contributor Chuck Todd said, “[T]here’s been all this talk about whether this primary had become racialized and somehow Barack Obama was getting pigeon-holed and he was going to be the black candidate for president rather than a candidate for president who happens to be black” (Russert, 2008, ¶. 5). The program’s host, Tim Russert, added, “Congressman Clyburn (D-SC) had said earlier in the day that Bill Clinton had been using, in effect, code words that really made black Americans nervous.” He continued, “Ron Walters, a professor at University of Maryland, made this observation the other day on NPR, . . . ‘The only way that Obama is going to be elected is to try to neutralize race. . . . The objective of the Clinton campaign is to make him blacker’” (Russert, 2008, ¶¶. 12–14).

On Monday morning, CBS featured “diversity” expert Joe Watson. He argued, “Jesse Jackson causes a visceral reaction in many portions of our population. Many folks within the campaign, I imagine, would hope that it would be negative” (Smith, 2008, ¶. 18). In the evening, Fox’s Bill O’Reilly spoke with former House Speaker Newt Gingrich about Clinton’s comments. Gingrich said that the former president had “been . . . overtly engaged in race baiting. . . . This was a clear effort on the part of the Clintons to . . . define Senator Obama as a black candidate, rather than as a senator who happens to be black” (O’Reilly, 2008, ¶¶. 30, 33). Later that evening, ABC’s *Nightline* juxtaposed Clinton’s South Carolina comments with Senator Edward Kennedy’s endorsement of Obama. The producers selected these words to air from Kennedy’s statement: “I am convinced we can reach our goals only if we replace the politics of fear with the politics of hope and only if we have the courage to choose change” (Moran, 2008, ¶. 49).

On Sunday, January 27, Senator Obama appeared on ABC’s *This Week with George Stephanopoulos*. Stephanopoulos spent the first half of the interview questioning Obama about Bill Clinton’s Jesse Jackson remarks. Senator Obama made no explicit charges regarding Clinton playing the “race card.” Instead, he said, there is “no doubt that [Jackson] set a precedent for African Americans running for office. . . . But . . . that was 20 years ago.” He continued, “I think people want change. I think they want to get beyond some of the racial politics that has been so dominant in the past.” He observed, “I think that [Bill Clinton’s] frame of reference, was the Jesse Jackson races. That’s when . . . he was active and involved in watching what was going to take place in South Carolina.” Later he remarked, “As long as we were focused on those issues [affordable health care and college, addressing the foreclosure crisis], we thought that would transcend the sort of racial divisions we have seen in the past.” He did say quite specifically that he did not think the Clintons were “trying to demonize me” (Stephanopoulos, 2008, ¶¶. 9–17).

Bill Clinton responded to the race card charges with a counterattack. On March 17, he granted an interview to ABC's Robin Roberts (2008). He told her, "They [surrogates] made up a race story out of that. There was no disrespect to Senator Obama in that. . . . They thought they could hurt me with that, and so they put a bizarre spin on it, and it worked for a while" (§. 22).

On the same day, Clinton spoke to Fox News host Greta Van Susteren (2008). "And I think," he told her, "for African-Americans who have been voting for decades for white candidates, they think they have an African-American candidate with a legitimate chance to be nominated and elected. There is a pull there to identify with him. It's not racially tinged to observe that fact or those facts" (§. 72).

Again on March 17, Clinton spoke to CNN's Sean Callebs (2008): "What happened there," he said, "is a total myth and a mugging." "Charlie Rangel, the most important African-American today," he continued, ". . . said in unequivocal terms . . . that no one in our campaign played any race cards; that we had some played against us, but we didn't play any" (§§. 107, 108).

In April, Bill Clinton, in a Philadelphia radio interview, said, "I think that they played the race card on me. We now know, from memos from the campaign and everything, that they planned to do it [all] along" (Phillips, 2008, p. A18).

Obama was asked about Bill Clinton's claim that the Obama campaign had played the "race card." "So former President Clinton dismissed my victory in South Carolina as being similar to Jesse Jackson, and he is suggesting that somehow I had something to do with it?" He continued, "O.K., well, you better ask him about what he meant by that. I have no idea what he meant" (Phillips, 2008, p. A18).

In Table 2, we lay out the appeal, speaker, audience, grievance, and purpose of the two Clinton race cards, labeled BC1 and BC2. The first differs from the second in three respects: (a) the BC1 appeal is implicit, BC2 explicit; (b) The audience for BC1 is white primary voters; the audience for BC2 is all primary voters, including African Americans; and (c) the grievance in BC1 is the black bloc voting for Obama that carried South Carolina; the grievance in BC2 is the attempt to delegitimize Obama as just a black candidate.

	Appeal	Speaker	Audience	Grievance	Purpose
BC 1	Implicit	Bill Clinton	White voters and super-delegates	African American bloc voting	Campaign strategy
BC 2	Explicit	Obama surrogates	Media, primary voters, and super-delegates	Delegitimize as black candidate	Campaign strategy

### ***Geraldine Ferraro***

On Friday, March 7, 2008, Ferraro's interview with the *Daily Breeze* sparked controversy. She claimed that Obama would not be "in this present position" if he were a "white man" or a "woman (of any color)" (Farber, 2008, p. 6D).

Obama dismissed her comments as “divisive” (Bazinet, 2008, p. 13) and “patently absurd” (“Obama camp,” 2008, p. A8). Obama adviser Susan Rice found them “outrageous and offensive” (“Obama camp,” p. A8). Campaign spokesman Bill Burton attacked Senator Clinton for her “refusal to denounce or reject Ms. Ferraro,” and said, “She has once again proven that her campaign gets to live by its own rules and its own double standard” (“Obama camp,” p. A8). Chief strategist David Axelrod argued that Ferraro was trying to “diminish Senator Obama’s candidacy because of his race” (Kornblut & Slevin, 2008, p. A1). The next day on NBC, Obama characterized Ferraro’s comments as part of a “slice-and-dice politics that’s about race and about gender” (Saul, 2008, p. 18).

Ferraro’s comments were widely covered. On March 11, Keith Olbermann and Tim Russert discussed the controversy. Russert claimed these comments jeopardized black support for Hillary Clinton (Olbermann, 2008). Later that evening, Dan Abrams (2008) went on the air and interpreted the strong African American vote for Obama in the Mississippi primary as a backlash against Clinton. On the same day, conservative commentator Tucker Carlson (2008) defended Ferraro. “I actually think,” he said, “that a lot of what Geraldine Ferraro says may be true. It’s a net plus that Obama is black” (¶. 191). The next day, Ferraro was the lead topic on *Fox Special Report with Brit Hume*. One contributor, Morton Kondracke, interpreted Ferraro’s remark very negatively. “But that’s not all he’s got going for him,” he argued, “and what she said was that he would not be in this position except for the fact that he’s black” (Hume, 2008, ¶. 15).

In the wake of the firestorm Hillary Clinton distanced herself from Ferraro. Ferraro resigned from the campaign (“Obama camp,” 2008; Saul, 2008). Ferraro, however, did not go quietly. She gave interviews defending her remarks and charging the Obama campaign with playing the race card.

On March 11, Ferraro appeared on Fox News. “What I find offensive,” she said, “is that every time somebody says something about the campaign, you’re accused of being racist” (McCallum, 2008, ¶. 138). On March 12, Diane Sawyer (2008) interviewed Ferraro. Ferraro claimed her “comments have been taken so out of context and been spun by the Obama campaign as racist” (¶. 9). She argued that she was “celebrating the fact that the black community in this country has come out with a pride in a historic candidacy” (¶. 34). On the same morning, Ferraro appeared on CBS. “I’m outraged,” she charged, “that Axelrod . . . his campaign manager, has chose to spin this as a racist comment, he does it every time anybody makes a comment about race that’s white” (Mitchell, 2008, ¶. 34). On the NBC Evening News, Ann Curry (2008, March 12) asked Ferraro directly: “You’re saying they’re playing the race card, not the Hillary campaign.” “Absolutely,” Ferraro answered (¶. 32, 33).

Obama replied to the charges that the campaign had called Ferraro a “racist.” “I would defy anybody,” Obama said, “to look through the record over the last year and a half, or the last year and couple months, and find one instance in which I have said some criticism is racially based” (Purnick, 2008, p. A16).

In Table 3, we display the features of the two Ferraro race cards (GF1 and GF2). Each is explicit, for they both use racial terms, and both may be understood as a campaign strategy, no matter how misguided. The distinction is in the grievance. Ferraro’s original comments (GF1) were interpreted as arguing that Obama is the leading Democratic candidate

because he is black and, therefore, afforded some racial preference. In the second race card (GF2), the Obama campaign describes itself as the victim of white/female resentment.

**Table 3.** Rhetorical Comparison of Geraldine Ferraro Race Cards

	Appeal	Speaker	Audience	Grievance	Purpose
GF 1	Explicit	Geraldine Ferraro	White voters and super-delegates	Racial preferences	Campaign strategy
GF 2	Explicit	Obama campaign (David Axelrod)	Media, primary voters, and super-delegates	White/female resentment	Campaign strategy

### Reason and the Race Card

Scholars have understood the race card as a persuasive strategy. We set this strategic focus aside and inquire whether the Clinton and Ferraro utterances are a species of argumentation. For, if they are, then traditional standards of criticism are available. If they are not, then we must locate new angles of evaluation. “To argue” is an illocutionary act defined as a reason-giving utterance (Ehninger, 1980). Uttering a claim and its supporting reasons constitutes arguing. It is wholly irrelevant, as a matter of definition, whether or not the argument is convincing, for we may be said to argue even if our arguments have no discernible effect. The sentence “I argued with her for an hour and yet was unable to change her mind” is perfectly intelligible.

“To persuade” is a perlocutionary act defined in terms of an effect. To persuade is not limited, as a matter of definition, by any particular means. The sentence “I persuaded him to alter the accounting procedures in the annual report, when I threatened to fire him” is meaningful. Although we might consider threats an ethically defective form of persuasion, this sentence uses the verb “to persuade” in a literal sense. However, to say “I persuaded her to give me \$10, but she would not give it to me” is nonsense because “persuaded” just means to have the desired effect.

Are the various race-card cases we have examined made up of argumentative utterances? The answer is mixed.

In the Willie Horton case, Mendelberg (2001) defines the race card as a specific effect achieved by a particular means. The playing of the race card instigates racial priming and calls forth racial stereotypes—the effect. Deploying code words and images plays the card—the means. The code words work because they have a long history in American race relations. Black-male-on-white-female crime, especially “rape,” is just such a code. They are code because they are racist conventions. They have appeared frequently in racist texts and are, thus, recognizable at some level, but certainly by the informed critic. The ghost of Emmett Till hovers over the Horton discourses.

We have encountered a definitional trap. Does the act of deploying conventionally understood racial code words or images constitute playing the race card? Or, is the card only played when the act is completed in a desired effect? We might speak of race card “attempts.” Certainly, such attempts deserve criticism apart from the demonstrated evidence

of impact. To return to the original metaphor, a card is played whether or not it wins the trick.

Setting the illocutionary standard aside, does Horton meet the "reason-giving" criterion? We think the answer is certainly no. "Arguing," Ehninger (1980) observes, is "more than a reason implying discourse; it is reason-giving discourse" (p. 93). The only explicit reason-claim in Horton drew an inference between the Massachusetts prison furlough program and Governor Dukakis's record on crime. The racial connotation is offered neither as reason nor claim. After all, speakers use code just so they can avoid uttering racial arguments.

In the O. J. Simpson case, the melodramatic presentation of racial suffering by one group at the hands of another constitutes the race card. In both OJ1 and OJ2, the act of presentation, apart from effect, played the card. The racial context was understood because the appeals were explicit. Here, too, the melodramatic presentations are familiar. Williams (2001) illustrates black victimization images going back to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. From Reconstruction to Bakke, the terms of white resentment over black preferences are familiar. In OJ1 and OJ2, the race-card utterances are illocutionary.

Do the Simpson cases meet the "reason-giving" standard? Playing the race card presents racial suffering and calls forth cultural memories. These memories are then used as justifications. In OJ1, they give reason for the jury's suspicion of the LAPD. In OJ2, the specter of black preference underwrites the suspicion that color-blind justice was not rendered in the Simpson case. Unlike Horton, here the racial reasoning is explicit.

How may we evaluate the Clinton and Ferraro race cards? Although they resemble the Horton and Simpson paradigms, they add vexing complications.

BC1 resembles Horton. Clinton could be said to have played the race card if his remarks instigated racial priming and called forth racial stereotypes associated with "Jesse Jackson." Clinton does not make an argument. He is involved in the illocutionary acts of stating (Jackson won in '84 and '88) and complimenting (Jackson and Obama ran good campaigns) not reason giving. Even if we might find in Clinton's comments some analogy, the comparison is between winning and good campaigns. Any racial claim, buried in code language, falls short of our arguing standard.

We said of Horton that just the utterance of code words might be said to constitute playing the race card. Perhaps, the act of "attempting" may rightly be regarded as illocutionary. If Clinton deployed code, even if unsuccessfully, this is worthy of criticism. Although Clinton was accused of using "code" in South Carolina, his words were hardly conventional. They lacked the prior textual history associated with code. If this was code, then it follows Burke's ironic formula, "what goes forth as A returns as non-A" (1969, p. 517). Clinton's praise of the Jackson and Obama campaigns returns as code for diminishing them as "black" candidates.

Despite their talk of code, Clinton's accusers had to muster a case based on intention rather than convention. They imagined the meaning and effect that Clinton intended. Whatever else it was, praising Jesse Jackson's South Carolina primary campaigns was not a historically racist allusion. Even if the name "Jesse Jackson" referred to a candidate who won with a majority black vote, the notion that a black candidate is diminished by such a

vote hardly constitutes conventional code. None of the interpreters of the Clinton remarks supported their interpretations with previous examples of the "Jackson" code.

BC2 and GF1–2 resemble the Simpson models. The speakers explicitly claim to have suffered at the hands of another racial group. They articulate their grievances in reasoning form. The two countercharges, BC2 and GF2, are startling clear. These utterances specify who played the race card and what was said that constituted playing the card. Regardless of the soundness of these claims, they are unambiguous examples of arguments.

### **Defeating the Race Card**

The race card carries with it the fear that prejudice will subvert reason and, thus, short circuit criticism. In this essay, we have examined seven putative instances of playing the race card (Horton, OJ1, OJ2, BC1, BC2, GF1, and GF2). Each is susceptible to at least one of these critical inquiries:

1. Did the speaker employ conventional racist code?
2. Was race introduced appropriately or inappropriately into the argument?
3. Was the claim true or false?
4. Is the claim supportable by trustworthy evidence?
5. Is the reasoning defensible?

The Horton and first Clinton (BC1) cases can be criticized by posing the first question. Goldberg (1993) discusses such a standpoint as an "antiracist" standard (p. 220). "We need clear criteria," he writes, "for identifying individual responsibility" for the use of "racist expression" that is not tied "too restrictively to individual intentionality" (p. 97). The way to do this is by establishing a criterion that the users of certain language or images are presumed to know or should have known the racist history of those words or images. "Persons may also be racist," Goldberg maintains, "where their expressions fit a historical legacy or where the effects exhibit a pattern of racialized exclusion, and these are effects the persons should reasonably be clear about or it is a historical legacy to which they should reasonably be sensitive." He continues, "The tendency to hold agents accountable in these cases becomes more acceptable the more reasonable it is to insist that they should have known better" (p. 98).

The critic of the Horton case may answer "yes" to question one. The same critic, when exploring BC1, must answer "no." Clinton does not use terms that have a "historical legacy" of "racialized exclusion."

The evaluation of the first Simpson case (OJ1) turns on the answer to question two. Higginbotham et al. (1997) advance an argument over "appropriate" legal defense. They offer credible evidence and follow standard forms of reasoning.

The second Simpson (OJ2) and the first Ferraro (GF1) cases are analyzable, in one way or another, by all five standards. (a) Raising the specter of black privilege has a historical

legacy of racial exclusion. (b) One may reasonably ask whether the claims were appropriate given the circumstances. Each was arguably an unnecessary distraction from the salient issues at hand. (c) OJ2 and GF1 were contested over the criterion of truth or falsity. Critics argued that the historical record could not support any black-privilege claim. (d) Evidence concerning black privilege is available. (e) The OJ2 and GF1 claims exemplified reasoning from cause and sign.

The second Clinton (BC2) and second Ferraro (GF2) cases can be investigated by asking questions two through five. Certainly, it is a straightforward procedure to determine if the speakers have been accused of playing the race card (questions 3, 4, and 5). The matter turned on question two. Was the accusation inappropriate? This turns on a prior evaluation of BC1 and GF1. In our view, Clinton has a much stronger case than Ferraro.

### Conclusion

The Clinton and Ferraro remarks represent the complex of race cards. No single standpoint for assessment works for all the cards. Yet, if scholars patiently explore the rhetorical variations, they will discover productive angles of criticism. Then, we can trump the race card.

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