POLITICAL BLACKFACE: DAVE WILSON’S
2013 CAMPAIGN AND THE RHETORIC
OF IDENTITY

by

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ABSTRACT

In 2013, Houston native Dave Wilson enlisted his campaign for a position on the Houston community College Board of Trustees for Houston’s second district. Following Wilson’s win over incumbent, Bruce Austin, public and media outrage over Wilson’s alleged political blackface ensued. Wilson, a white man, managed to convince voters in Houston’s second district that he was black without appearing on or using his voice in any of his campaign materials. Wilson used a series of mailers along with two radio ads in his campaign that, the public alleges, serve as an indictment of Wilson’s racially deceptive tactics. In this thesis, I examine Wilson’s campaign materials using a critical rhetorical approach as well as Burke’s Theory of Identification to underscore Wilson’s creation of a nonphysical racial identity. I conclude Wilson’s nonphysical identity flourished through the use of communally recognized markers and ideology associated with black identity in his community. Finally, I offer implications in the broader context of politics and identity established by Wilson’s campaign.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the Alabama Forensic Council: they are my family, my home, my mentors, my friends and my role models. To the students of color on the team- your fight, your life, and your story matters.
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First, I would like to thank my mother who is the strongest woman I know. Thank you for fighting to give me a better future than I ever thought possible for myself. Thank you for teaching me how to stand up for myself and for serving as an example of how powerful a strong Mexican woman can be. Thank you for teaching me not to be afraid of my potential and my desire for success. And thank you for reminding me that women like you deserve a better world than the one you were forced to live in. You will always be my inspiration for demanding better of the world around me.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The October 2013 election for Houston’s Community College Board of Trustees engendered a political controversy throughout Houston’s second district. Underdog Dave Wilson’s gripping victory over 24-year incumbent Bruce Austin by 26 votes captivated local media outlets and the city of Houston (Daily Mail Reporter, 2013). Most interesting, however, was that many voters and the media argue that Dave Wilson, a white Republican, tricked the local electorate into believing that he was Black.

Local news outlets immediately responded to Wilson’s win with critical vigor. Reilly (2013) contends “Wilson, a gleeful political troublemaker, printed direct mail pieces strongly implying that he’s black” to appeal to voters (para. 2). Wilson’s controversial campaign quickly became a point of interest for national news companies, like the Daily Mail (2013), which alleged, Wilson pretended to be black to push forward a homophobic and racist agenda.

Studlick (2014) a year later highlights the troubling nature of Wilson’s campaign and subsequent win:

The real problem with Wilson’s campaign isn’t his residency. It isn’t that he fooled voters by pretending to be black, either. Instead, the problem is just how easily he was able to get away with winning the election. Countless studies have proved that turnout for local elections is typically under half of turnout for national elections. With such low turnout and a lack of mainstream news coverage, it’s perhaps inevitable that local voters won’t be fully informed on the issues, which virtually guarantees that they will be susceptible to tactics like Wilson’s. Wilson’s victory is made more ridiculous by the fact that this happened in the age of information — a quick Google search, even before the story broke, shows clearly that Wilson is white. Moreover, Wilson still should have been fresh on voters’ minds, given his highly publicized failed campaign for mayor just two years earlier. The lack of interest and education evidenced in this case points to systemic
problems in local elections that are even more disconcerting than the egregious implications of Wilson’s racial misrepresentation (para. 5).

Dave Wilson’s campaign means more than serving as another example of a politician deceiving the public. The reason why his campaign is so paramount is that it suggests a potential to take advantage of voters through manipulative rhetorical tactics. When those tactics collide with the rhetorical construction of political blackface, or the intentional misrepresentation of one’s race for political gain, and the deliberate bewilderment of people of color, the potential for radical proponents of whiteness to disempower marginalized groups only grows.

The strategies Wilson employed in his campaign, while shady and arguably manipulative, have implications beyond incriminating another deceptive politician. Wilson’s campaign depended on assigning a value to his nonphysical performance that was considered authentic. Should a similar authentic misrepresentation of race happen on a larger scale, the very idea of representative politics for people of color could be subjected to the manipulation of white candidates in power. Wilson’s manipulation of identity to secure a higher seat on the totem pole of power for white men peaked my interests for reasons anchored in my personal experiences as a Latina and south Florida native. Generations ago, my family came to America for the love of freedom and liberty that comes with the American dream. Yet, their hard work only feels muted by the robotic calls that speak to my mother in Spanish and ask her to support a white candidate that never considered her interests until they realized Latino votes are the ticket to election in south Florida. So, my mother raised me to push my intellectual curiosity into politics and to educate myself in an effort to ensure I always knew which candidates considered my interests and the interests of other women and people of color. So, when I read an article about Wilson’s campaign, my political science background coupled with my undergraduate and graduate study
of race communication and rhetoric pulled me deeper into his tactics. Wilson’s campaign also exists in a political environment wherein politicians can use micro-targeting tactics to woo communities of color into voting for candidates that remain outsiders to the groups they are appealing to. Thus, while Wilson’s campaign is unique and shocking, the underlying tactics Wilson used are not.

Thus, the communicative tactics Wilson employed warrant our review and lead me to posit the following research question: Involving politics and advocacy devoid of physical representations of identity, how are significantly influential identity markers constructed and disseminated to audiences?

To answer this question, I examine Dave Wilson’s 2013 Board of Trustees election campaign through a critical rhetorical lens highlighting the role of race and identification in both affecting and inciting political participation. I examine each aspect of Wilson’s campaign— the three mailers and two radio ads through a critical rhetorical lens. I center my critique in Critical Race Theory. In particular, the Third Pillar, which Delgado and Stefancic (2017) describe as hinging on the social construction of race through expectations of behavior, which links Wilson’s performance with the response of his audience. Wilson’s ability to forge an identity accepted by black constituents in his community was rooted in an intention to mimic performance on an atlas of social construction. I deconstruct Wilson’s use of images, reinforcement of black authenticity and calls to action for the black community in Houston’s second district. Thus, by unpacking the social construction of black identity in Houston’s second district, I apply Kenneth Burke’s concept of identification to show how Wilson was able to use political blackface successfully. Finally, using Louis Althusser’s theory of interpellation alongside critical race theory, I illustrate
how race becomes a call to political participation and civic engagement, making Wilson’s campaign a bridge between identity politics, communication studies, and political science.
CHAPTER 2
THE CAMPAIGN ARTIFACTS

Wilson remains unapologetic for the materials and methods he used in his campaign. In an interview with KHOU News, Wilson justified his actions, claiming “Every time a politician talks, he’s out there deceiving voters” (Kopan 2013, para. 5). Thus, Wilson merely used tactics other politicians use all the time and he believed he should not be held accountable for because it is a common pattern of political communication. But, as reported by Miller (2013), his opponent, Bruce Austin, called Wilson’s tactics "disgusting" because “this is one of the few times a white guy has pretended to be a black guy and fooled black people” (Miller, 2013, para. 7 - 9). The media did not disagree with Austin. In fact, they cited Wilson’s campaign materials as proof of his political black facing. Reilly (2013) describes Wilson’s campaign materials for the Huffington Post as:

Fliers decorated with photographs of smiling African-American faces —which he readily admits he just lifted off websites — and captioned with the words ‘Please vote for our friend and neighbor Dave Wilson.’ One of his mailers said he was ‘Endorsed by Ron Wilson,’ which longtime Houston voters might easily interpret as a statement of support from a former state representative of the same name who’s also African-American. Fine print beneath the headline says ‘Ron Wilson and Dave Wilson are cousins,’ a reference to one of Wilson’s relatives living in Iowa. (para. 4-5)

Wilson’s campaign is principally shocking once one knows Wilson is white. The campaign materials, undeniably, focus on black people, and Wilson is never pictured on any of the campaign materials. Austin also voiced his concern about Wilson’s lack of appearance in his campaign, illuminating “‘he never put out to voters that he was white. The problem is his picture was not in the League of Voters (pamphlet) or anywhere’” (Reilly, 2013, para. 6).
Austin was not wrong:

![Figure 1: Mailer 1 (Falkenberg, 2013)](image1)

![Figure 2: Mailer 2 (Falkenberg, 2013)](image2)
The stock images of black people populated the piles of campaign materials that Wilson passed out to the public:

*Figure 3: Mailer 3 (Falkenberg, 2013)*

Wilson’s deceptive rhetoric did not stop with physical handouts and mailers; he used radio ads that played on the stereotype of the Black female voice as well. The first ad, as described by LoGuirato (2013) is “narrated by two African-American women. ‘Dave Wilson? Isn't he the—’ one woman says. ‘Yes, Dave Wilson is the man who's fighting for our neighborhoods,’ the other says” (para. 7). The second ad features “two ‘neighborhood’ women discussing Wilson's political merits. As reported by *Fox News,*

That Bruce Austin voted against $6 million in scholarships or our children right here in our neighborhood,’ one woman says. ‘Girl, please, I bet he has relatives that could have used some of that scholarship money he voted against. I’ve had about enough of him ... Dave Wilson is the man who is fighting for our neighborhoods (Fox News, 2013 para. 7-8).
The women never outright revealed their races in either transcript. Thus their race was also based on assumption as the rest of Wilson’s campaign. Even still, the *Business Insider’s* writer LoGuirato (2013) fell into the same trap as Houston’s voters considering his aforementioned description of the ad regarded the voices of the speakers as African American women.

The rhetorical strategies used on these mail-ins as well as the radio ads offer a prime platform to analyze how Wilson convinced black people that he was black and ensured doubt and the thought to research him never crossed their minds. As Stucdlick (2014) for the *Brown Political Review* panics, he did not just deceive voters… he gave them a sense of assurance. I believe Wilson’s rhetorical construction of race or his political black facing undoubtedly depended on the creation of this assurance and sense of trust.

Context for this campaign offers even more perspective as to why it comes as such a shock and remains so essential to unpack whiteness’ rhetoric in politics. Wilson’s campaign and election fall less than a year after the paramount election of America’s first African American President, Barack Obama, and four years after the controversy surrounding Wilson’s homophobic attacks on then Houston Mayor Annise Parker in his campaign for mayor. These attacks made his name notable in many households as a homophobic racist, but not enough. Furthermore, the 2013 election for Board of Trustees representative in Houston occurred in the midst of outcry over poor leadership in the very same department. DePrang (2013) comments in the *Texas Observer* “The HCC system has been plagued by poor performance, and other trustees were forced into runoffs” (para. 9). In the wake of political upheaval over leadership in the School Board, a shifted focus on race in representative politics, as well as Wilson’s controversial political history, he still managed to hoodwink an entire community and hijack their ignorance to
get himself elected. Given Houston’s political climate, race was the focus of his strategy, as he attempted to appeal to voters in a different manner than the strategies he used in his previous campaigns (Hoenig, 2013).
CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

_African Americans & Voter Turnout_

The rationality of voting has long been a contested point of discussion among political scholars, especially those focusing on American Politics. Fiorina (1995) proposed rational choice theory as a point of explanation for political behavior wherein voters choose one candidate based on a rational behavior that produces predictable outcomes. Such behavior is usually completed out of a choice between two primary options and considers which one is the better choice when regarding the expected benefits and drawbacks (Fiorina 1995). While Fiorina’s (1995) argument seems logically sound, it failed to account for inaction or failure to turn out and vote (Aldrich, 1993). Which is why, as Aldrich (1993) urges, considering voting as an expressive act yields a better basis for understanding voting, including abstaining from voting. Aldrich (1993) continues, “voting is a clearly political act of expression and of consumption” (p. 390). Voting is the way constituents both participate in a political system and react to the campaigns and material presented to them. Aldrich (1993) is continuing the idea that politics exists in relation to one's identity so when a person votes or engages in a political system, they are expressing that identity and reflecting their consumption.

With the view of voting as expression emerging, the relationship between race and voter turnout began to flourish as a point of emphasis for academics. Geys (2006) outlines the multitude of studies that confirmed an otherwise unexplored relationship between voter turnout race in which “[the empirical results tend to support the hypothesis that turnout is lower where
the share of the minority in the population is higher. [...] Indeed, individual-level studies show that blacks are at least as likely to participate in elections than whites when one controls for demographic differences” (p. 645). Yet, Houston Texas, situated in Harris County, tends to be an anomaly. Even though Daniel (2016) illuminates Harris County’s abysmal 39% voter turnout rate, residents of Texas who are black maintain a voter turnout rate of 61.1% compared to white (59.8%), Hispanic (27.7%) and Asian (23.8%) voters even though the population of black Texans is lower than the Hispanic and White populations (McCullough & Ura, 2016). These findings also contrast with Geys' (2006) assertion that studies only found high turnouts of black voters in elections when there was a higher population of black people than white people in a given district. So, Houston’s second district does not fall under typical issues of low voter turnout for black constituents. Instead, voters are active in engaging their political environment.

Wilson used that political engagement to propel his candidacy into a victory on a collective level meaning; he targeted black voters as groups rather than individuals. Thus, black voters in Houston’s second district were approached and acted as a collective voting identity. Pietraszewski, Curry, Peterson, Cosmides & Tooby (2015) offer an explanation for the success of such methods and collective identities under the alliance detection system. Pietraszewski et al. (2015) define an alliance as “sets of individuals cooperating toward common ends, often in competition with other sets” and are influential because they focus on individuality to move the group towards a common goal (p. 25). The alliance detection system focuses on identifying what groups a set of people, or what identifier they all have in common by:

(1) monitoring for patterns of coordination, cooperation, and competition out in the world, and (2) extracting any cues from the environment (such as location, dress, proximity, shared knowledge, etc.) that happen to correlate with these behaviors, whether these are signaled intentionally or unintentionally. [...] The alliance detection system must also (3) be adept at picking up on which alliance categories are currently organizing people's behaviors and inhibit non-relevant alliance categories. This is because alliances
can change and people belong to more than one alliance category. (Pietraszewski et al., 2015, p. 25)

Pietraszewski et al. (2015) are underscoring how groups of people come together, bridging notions of identity with the expression of that identity in a political system. For marginalized communities, such as black voters in Houston’s second district, whose identity links to race voting is an essential component of understanding the political expression of race. Aldrich’s (1993) sentiments of voting as an act of expression are echoed in Pietraszewski et al (2015) research which emboldens the importance of identity in politics.

While alliances occupy many aspects of identity, alliances are an ingrained aspect of identity in black communities across America. The intersection of politics and race becomes a key tenet to examine such alliances and their outcomes. Leighley & Vedlitz (1999) discussed the prominence of social alliances, or what they call social connectedness, in black communities. Many black communities anchor themselves in institutions that represent their alliances to help cultivate, collect, and monitor behaviors ranging from social interactions to political participation (Leighley & Vedlitz, 1999). Leighley and Vedlitz (1999) argue that African American populations and communities have their own group identity and consciousness that manifests itself into identifiable political action. Race as an expression in political alliances is a behavior that is more easily detected, traced and even replicated than other aspects of identity (Leighley & Vedlitz, 1999). Instances such as Wilson’s 2013 campaign suggest replication of identity expressed in alliances may not always be for the greater good of a community. Instead, they can be used to hijack identities for personal gain.

A focus on communities of color and their alliances in particular instances, like in Houston’s second district, more accurately reflects alliance expectations than research focusing on a macro level. Hill and Leighley (1999) affirm “the significance of race is most evident at the
state and local levels because the political system is more likely to reflect the geographic concentration of minority groups there” and institutions established through alliances help mobilize behavior in a said political system (p. 278). Harris (1994) furthers this claim by unpacking the influence of religion in black communities in a political context. Harris (1994) asserts the black church as one of the leading ways black Americans engage in their political system and are encouraged to practice civil participation. This is a controversial discussion given Karl Marx’s (1884) initial assertion that state domination extends through the church to maintain control over the oppression of the people under the role of the state. But religion itself is not as important as ways in which alliances remain a medium that create and embolden religion as an ideology. Since institutions, such as black churches, establish the necessity to express alliance identity then understanding said institutions is key to unlocking the pillars of an alliances.

This thinking influenced scholars in various schools of thought, including Marable (1989), who shed a light on the ability for religion to be used as a tool to strip African Americans of their social and political agency. It was this argument Harris (1994) initially attempted to undermine by acknowledging how alliances, such as those established through the black church, act as a mobilizer for African American voters. Marable (1989) missed the point at deconstructing agency for black communities but was right in pointing to the dominance of the black church as a power structure within those same communities. Chapp (2012) exemplifies this by highlighting the prominence of the politicized sermons and speeches in black churches more so than in other racially centered religious institutions. Thus, race is related to how black voters engage with systems and institutions to participate in politics.
Even before Harris (1994) laid out contentions, Crenshaw (1991) already made the argument for identity politics being “a source of strength, community, and intellectual development” in marginalized communities, including communities of color (p. 1242). The presence of black candidates in an election tends to spark measurable increases in political participation among black voters for many reasons. Representation matters because identity relates to experience (Washington, 2006). “The fact that Black employment is higher in cities with Black mayors [Eisinger 1982] and that Black legislators receive higher scores on the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Index for their voting records [Cameron, Epstein, and O’Halloran 1996] suggests that Black politicians may increase transfers to Black constituents” provoking the aforementioned association (Washington, 2006, p. 975). Race can be a catalyst for engaging in political systems, but in the same respect, it can also be used to reinforce existing power structures.

An exciting relationship arises from this progression of research in the field. Given Aldrich (1993)’s premise that voting is an expression along with role or influence that institutions in Black communities (such as the black church) have in shaping political participation, the layers of political participation by the Black electorate surface. The first layer depends on the development of identity or the expression Black voters manifest through voting. The construction and expression of identity is a critical component of breaking down Wilson’s campaign. Wilson constructed a false Black identity to encourage a paralleled expression from voters in an authentic and communally accepted manner. The second layer is the guidance and policing of that identity through apparatuses like the Black church; powerful institutions guide the expression of Black agency and power. The last layer concerns how a candidate engages with those first two layers, negotiating identity and calling for alliances at the same time. The final
layer has the potential to reveal the most about Wilson’s campaign and how others as he can operate the third layer in a non-physical manner. The first two layers relate to Critical Race Theory and the rhetorical construction of boundaries and apparatuses. The third layer is what calls on the tactics of Burke and Althusser to dupe people of color into falling for a false non-physical construction of race.

**Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory’s (CRT) genesis exists outside of communication studies and political science alike. Delgado and Stefancic (2006) unearth the roots of Critical Race Theory as a movement, more than a theory itself, that:

Sprang up in the mid-1970s, as a number of lawyers, activists, and legal scholars across the country realized, more or less simultaneously, that the heady advances of the civil rights era of the 1960s had stalled and, in many respects, were being rolled back. Realizing that new theories and strategies were needed to combat the subtler forms of racism that were gaining ground, early writers such as Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado (coauthor of this primer) put their minds to the task. They were soon joined by others, and the group held its first conference at a convent outside Madison, Wisconsin, in the summer of 1989. (p. 4)

Critical Race Theory began as a way for students of color studying law to critique the oppressive nature of the legal system. Institutionalized racism in the education system was also apparent and Critical Race Theory provided the theoretical framework for black students to critique such oppression. Critical Race Theory in communication studies evolved from this initial purpose of critiquing the legal system. However, its foundation commits the theory as a method to critique and deconstruct whiteness in a society built to make whiteness seem invisible.

From there, Critical Race Theory became a way of seeing the world through a lens that is constantly evaluating the way race interacted with systems to culminate in oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006). Critical Race Theory is more of a working theory than a static one because its tenets allot for it to evolve as concepts of race, power dynamics, and institutions change. CRT
has what Delgado and Stefancic (2006) refer to as “themes” or tenets: racism is normalized; racism works in favor and to advance the interests of white and working-class citizens; finally, race is a social construct.

The social construction tenet of Critical Race Theory left influenced communication studies and even the age of critical rhetoric. Olmstead (1998) cites Critical Race Theorists’ additional contention that “speech acts cause racism and that solutions to problems resulting from racism require the use of language to reshape reality” (p. 324). Rhetoric is what fuels racism because the social construction of race depends on the reinforcement of what race is through discourse. In order to dismantle racism, one must first confront the tactics used to maintain race as a construct. Furthermore, given the power of words and the acceptance of Austin’s (1962) Speech Act Theory, racism is a discursive practice at its core that then guides behavior or performance through order, definition, declaration and enforcement (Olmstead, 1998). This premise aligns with the foundational propositions for CRT and dated constructions of racism in practice with the law which is important because the law guides behavior through an extension of the state.

In the early 19th century, distinguishing between a black woman (presumed to be born of a slave) and an Indian woman (presumed to be born free) determined whether or not the burden to prove free ancestry for one’s own freedom was required (Hanley-Lopez, 1994). This determination was originally made solely off of physical characteristics like hair texture, the shape of the nose, and of course skin color (Hanley-Lopez, 1994). Yet, as Haney-Lopez (1994) continues, there were clear dimensions of race missing from this original conceptualization in part because biology failed to prove a scientific justification for race resulting in the consensus that race involved culture and social construction that remained both concrete while constantly
Delgado and Stefancic (2006) cite the historical evolution of standards of race as evidence that the nexus of race is whiteness which is valuable shifting and malleable, flooding consciousness.

This argument is exemplified in the development and use of blackface. Initially, blackface was limited to white theatre performers painting their skin black in order to play black characters in a show or skit (Sorrells & Sekimoto, 2016). However, given race is socially constructed, other methods of blackface are evident beyond physical representation. Lhamon (1998) underscores the presence of blackface in rap, where white artists attempt to vocally pass as black for personal gain in the music industry. Thus, black facing is no longer limited to the physical misrepresentation of one’s race— it can permeate verbal and nonverbal nonphysical representations as well.

One can conclude that race, while it may be based on perceptions of skin color, occurs entirely in an immaterial place: one’s conscious perceptions of reality. The social construction of race designated by Critical Race Theory offers up non-physical real estate to evaluate how consciousness glides into material reality; communication strategies then become the raw materials one can use to navigate this terrain. Cooks (2001) demands the practice of said navigation for critical scholars by “[placing] performance of [racial] identity into a larger and socially/culturally contested frame” (p. 247). Haas (2012) responds to Cooks’ (2001) call in an attempt to sketch the symbiotic relationship between race, rhetoric, and technology in an age that is becoming increasingly digital. Haas (2012) continues,

Increasingly, computers and composition and technical communication inquiry recognize technologies not as transparent things but as cultural artifacts imbued with histories and values that shape the ways in which people see themselves and others in relation to technology. [...] Thus, technology is both integral to culture and always already cultural. Just as the rhetoric we compose can never be objective, neither can the
technologies we design. Technologies are not neutral or objective—nor are the ways that we use them. (p. 288)

As the extended tenet of Critical Race Theory suggests, discourse is the tool used to socially construct and maintain race as a concept. Hass’ (2012) research offers a medium other than spoken discourse through which race is socially constructed and maintained. Since it is a medium of expression, is becomes more than just a medium but a representation of a culture or an alliance’s ideas as they are expressed through the medium.

Indeed, Hanley-Lopez’s (1994) tracing of the historical construction of race emerge at the same time as Omi and Winant’s (1994) Racial Formation Theory, which contends there is a social and historical process through which racial categories are created, changed and used for the advancement of the white working class. But Brock (2009) urges scholars to consider how Racial Formation Theory connects with technological platforms. Racial Formation Theory, according to Brock (2009) is a way to consider who the presumed audience of digital platform is as well as unearth the ability for individuals to construct their ideal identities to perform on digital platforms. Brock (2009) finds the push for authenticity in race is what guides non-physical performance of race in non-physical channels. However, authenticity for the performance of race matters less on physical characteristics in non-physical spaces and depends more on an “understanding of how race operates in particular institutional settings” (Brock, 2009, p. 361). Griffin (2010) suggests that a discrepancy in access to institutions leads to an unequal access to the aforementioned understanding, offering white people an advantage in the construction and monitoring of race in non-physical spaces. Wilson’s campaign was created without the physical appearance of race. Instead, Wilson created a race through assumption in the minds of voters by employing rhetorical strategies on mailers and radio ads. Wilson created a non-physical identity.
This is an important conclusion as far as political communication scholars are concerned. If the communication methodology and tactics politicians employ depends in large part on their ability to navigate identity, and modern campaigns are seen as non-physical spaces then white candidates have a relatively underestimated advantage in appealing to voters. Sure, researchers such as Perry (2011) and the previously cited Washington (2006) can be right in suggesting race can create an equal ground between black voters and black candidates. But as far as performing authenticity in race, white candidates have the advantage to crafting the guidelines of what is considered real or authentic racial performance and inherently can situate themselves nicely within those guidelines with more ease.

Therefore, white candidates have the opportunity to employ convincing, deceptive tactics that can convince constituents that they more authentically perform the standards for a given race than someone who carries the prescribed and problematic physical characteristics of that race. A white candidate might then have the opportunity to convince Black voters that they ascribe more to the benefit of Black identity and black authentic performance than a candidate who is actually Black. Wilson is an exemplification of this. He unseated his opponent, who was actually Black, by creating a false non-physical identity in an effort to trick voters into supporting him. If Wilson could do this while funding his own campaign and running it himself, one has to consider the potential for powerful people to manipulate Americans of color to sway their vote in a direction that might not be in their best interest. But even beyond that, people with the intent to gain something personally from the manipulation of the presentation of their race in nonphysical realms could do so authentically. Furthermore, communities can be called upon to accept nonphysical false representations of identity as authentic and carry through belief systems.
entrenched in that identity. And as confirmed earlier, expression of identity is power in a political system.

Perhaps such a notion is what provoked the dissection of identity and lead to the study of the intersection of power, identity and systems. Crenshaw (1989) delved into the research of one’s identity, coining the term intersectionality to outline the multidimensional nature of identity and how those dimensions intersect and affect how an individual interacts with the power systems around them. Critical Race Theory is a critical tenet of intersectionality because it forces consideration of various aspects of identity, like race, ability, gender identity, class, etc. in movements like feminism (Nash, 2008). Despite nearly three decades of advancement in critical scholarship from Crenshaw’s (1989) work, much scholarship neglects to take a truly intersectional approach in analysis. This is especially true with the analysis of political artifacts and occurrences.

Alexander-Floyd (2012) argues most scholarship that attempts to address intersectionality neglects to consider the relationship race and gender employ in their interactions with power dynamics. Moreover, the experiences of women of color, especially black women, are often used to advance power dynamics by those already in power, i.e. white men (Alexander-Floyd, 2012). Wilson’s radio ads, at first glance, certainly employ the identity practices often associated with black women as part of his campaign. Thus, dissecting his campaign requires not just a consideration of race, but notation of a storied history America has of white men exploiting black female bodies to reinforce their own position of power. This effort proves even more crucial to breaking down Wilson’s campaign when one considers that despite the exploitation of black female bodies for a power grab or political gain, black women are grossly underrepresented in legislation and legal scholarship/advancement.
Burke’s Theory of Identification

In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke outlines his theory of identification as the process which first rests on the perspective that sees language as symbolic action. As Burke (1969) notes “rhetorical language is inducement into action (or attitude, attitude being an incipient act)” (p. 42). Rhetoric is the tool that provokes, incites or demands action. But the complexity of this relationship between rhetoric and action is precisely why Burke urges the conceptualization of rhetoric move towards a theory of identification than persuasion (Burke, 1969). Burke (1969) continues, “Indeed since it is so clearly a matter of rhetoric to persuade a man by identifying your cause with his interests, we note the ingredient of rhetoric” (p. 24). Identification is the link between rhetoric and physical action or behavior. Burke (1969) argues, in order to be persuaded to vote for someone or support a representative, individuals must identify with said representative or a cause on their platform. Identification explains the phenomenon generated by Wilson’s campaign which is using a rhetorically constructed non-physical identity to incite political action from Houston voters.

Burke’s exploration of identification also appears in his 1973 work *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. Burke (1973) affirms identification occurs when constituents, or the individuals seeking representation, identify with the person representing them. Identification then establishes a collective cause and, by its very nature, fulfills what representation is supposed to accomplish. Burke (1969) outlines identification only comes out of the existence of division- thus there is an inherent demand to group together to protect one’s interests. Which explains why race matters so much in representative politics; of course, the socially constructed factor of race that shapes the lived experiences of people of color would
influence how they want their interests represented in the different systems designed to
disenfranchise those interests.

Such an explanation illuminates the process employed in Pietraszewski et al. (2015)’s
alliance system—identification through apparatuses is how alliances unfold into an imagined
existence. The actions within said alliance are then, what Burke (1969) calls consubstantiality.
Brockett (2005) touches on this exact strategy exhibited by Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk’s
1990-1994 campaigns, both of which construct visions of collective actions to implore
identification with their causes among their target audiences. Mandela and de Klerk’s appeal to
community through activism and legislative action manifested through a series of speeches
where community remains a critical emphasis of their platforms. Race was not absent either. In
fact, most of the division that called for identification was rooted in the segregation practices of
the British who wanted to continue promoting the belief that individuals from Europe were
racially superior and the “differences make them ‘incompatible’ with the African” people
(Brockett, 2005, p. 66). Race can is the dividing factor that representative can call on to justify
identification from voters.

Yet, one of the critical tenets of identification is that it is only a semi-conscious act
(Burke, 1969). Mangum (2013) challenges this by analyzing the relationship between
identification and politics. Indeed, the process of identification on behalf of the represented
group is a semi-conscious act, but the incorporation of identification into politics is an entirely
purposeful and conscious act by elites with decades of historical layers and racist actions
(Mangum, 2013). Augoustinos and Garis (2012) note President Obama’s two presidential
campaigns as a prime example of the impact intentional craftsmanship of a racialized campaign
can have on provoking identification. They note “political leaders strategically craft social
identities to mobilize mass identification and electoral support” (Augoustinos and Garis, 2012, p. 565). This strategy is expected for campaigns to be successful and for candidates to win over groups (Augoustinos and Garis, 2012). In 1996, Reicher and Hopkins reported:

> to win votes and hold office, political parties, and their leaders strategically construct and deploy social categories and identities in political discourse with which the majority of their constituents can identify. Within the context of winning elections, these categories and identities can reliably invoke mass group identification by stripping down ‘membership in the outgroup while building up the in-group such that it encompasses the entire social field’. (As quoted Augoustinos and Garis, 2012, p. 565)

Voting as an expressive act that evokes identity necessitates politicians appeal to that identity because it masks the politician with power as someone very much like the people voting. If a rhetor, politician or leader evokes identification, then people within a particular alliance break down the barriers separating them from an out group. Once the walls are broken down, the candidate sees this as an invitation to participate in expression through political participation with their constituents.

So, if identification is a requirement to successfully appealing to voters, the construction of this imagined identity that calls on collective actions is the method to deconstructing the identification strategies present in a campaign. Such a technique was noted by Bormann (1972) as the process of identifying rhetorical visions or “the composite drama which catches up large groups of people in a symbolic reality” (p. 398). This process cannot exist in a vacuum though and needs institutions within apparatuses to reinforce them as well as spread the messages intended to account for the proliferation of the drama.

*Ideological State Apparatuses and Interpellation*

In an attempt to further and clarify Marx’s work in the context of capitalism, Althusser (1993) deconstructs the systems that add to varying ranges of oppression. The way the state
ensures its framework remains intact is through apparatuses known as Ideological State Apparatuses which Althusser (1993) defines as

A system of defined institutions, organizations, and the corresponding practices. Realized in the institutions, organizations, and practices of this system is all or part (generally speaking, a typical combination of certain elements) of the State Ideology. The ideology realized in an ISA ensures its systemic unity on the basis of an 'anchoring' in material functions specific to each ISA; these functions are not reducible to that ideology, but serve it as a 'support'. (p. 77)

A system works through governing the people who are a part of it, much like an alliance. The only difference is, as Althusser (1993) confirms, is a system is an extension of a power dynamic used to keep the powerful in power. It does not work to enable or empower groups that could challenge a power dynamic.

These systems are essential in their own right, but mainly to communication theory when considering their practice of interpellation, or as Althusser (1993) describes as like “the most commonplace, everyday hailing by (or not by) the police: ‘Hey, you there!’” (p. 190).

Interpellation is a call to join a group and submit to an ideology. The call is usually then made by either someone in power or someone who can identify people who belong to the group, as a current group member. Interpellation depends on the subjection of an individual as they subscribe to a given ideology. The difference between Althusser’s conception of ideology and Marx’s outline of ideology is Althusser offers a perspective to see ideology beyond solely those constructed by the dominant class (Hall, 1985). By looking at an ISA, like the black church, for example, one can understand how the construction of a non-dominant ideology works in a system of dominant ideologies to construct identity through physical and non-physical performance or behavior (Hall, 1985). If the black church is an extension of an alliance, but religion is an ISA used to generate discourse that reinforces power, then it is still oppressive. The behavior to perform as a good black churchgoer depends on what power systems are in play in a
given community and how they are using black alliances in the black church to protect the status quo.

The black church is a relevant example of Althusser’s argument. Mitchell (2004) dates the black church’s influence to pre-Civil War America and slavery; a time when religion was one of the only outlets that resembled any remote amount of agency for black slaves. Since then, the black church has inspired a characterization of black agency situating religion as the center of many protests, evidenced by Dr. Martin Luther King’s own rhetorical strategies (Mitchell 2004). Chapp (2012) cites the construction of sermons that connect pillars of leading a good religious life (like spreading the word of god and selflessness in a community) to political engagement as a way to carry out these pillars. This view of the church makes it difficult to separate its existence from falling under one of Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatuses, in fact, he names religion as one of those said apparatuses (Althusser, 1993). Hay (1995) builds on this conclusion in arguing interpellation is a method of mobilization employed

Identification, as mentioned before, is worked by politicians to position themselves in alignment with their desired voting base. Wilson uses identification through calls to relate to religion, communal accountability and racial authenticity as compared to his opponent— all matters that Houston’s second district expressed concern over through electing Wilson. The campaign itself then hails or is the method of interpellation, which calls on voters to also participate in identification. This process all works within the social construction of race as the foundation for bridging communication. Understanding the methodology behind the creation of an identity warrants an examination of the Ideological State Apparatuses that shape and monitor expectations for nonphysical racial performance because those are the parameters politicians can
play on to establish a non-physical identity that successfully rhetorically passes as race, creating another wing of Racial Passing.

Racial Passing is anchored in the ability for communication to shape our realities and the identities we set out to interact in those realities (Rottenberg, 2003). Rottenberg (2003) posits, that passing is a phenomenon when people who are not black attempt to pass as black because “identification with blackness under white racist regimes has historically not only been coerced, but it has also been coded as undesirable” (p. 443). Thus, to understand why someone would want to pass as an oppressed identity, one would have to outline what they gain from it. Yosso (2005) suggests this desire to pass as an oppressed group one does not belong to is rooted in the social capital of blackness wherein people who are black develop ways of monitoring and evolving conceptions of black, while of course in the confines of whiteness, which are used to create pathways.

Instances of deception through passing suggest those pathways exist in communication and the social currency of blackness lie in power- electing a white person whom voters thought was black reinforce the power of whiteness needed to ensure power dynamics stay the same in the face of potential wins for black agency and individualized power.

*Christianity and LGBTQ Rights*

The fight for LGBTQ rights made considerable strides in the 21st century. However, court approval of marriage equality represents merely a battle won in a long war that still wages in America’s political and social climate. Indeed, just as activists vocalize their demands for equality, politicians and community leaders vocalize their opposition to LGBTQ rights in the name of religion.

While the widespread fight for LGBTQ equality through legislative protections only recently materialized into a viable and recognizable force, religion’s condemnation of same-sex
relationships remains a constant echoed throughout history (Becker, 1995). In fact, religion often characterizes the anti-LGBTQ rights movement in American politics, despite some factions of Catholicism and Protestant religions supporting more progressive stances on said issue (Sherkat, de Vries & Creek, 2010). Sherkat, de Vries & Creek (2010) mention the growing assumption that much of the momentum for Anti-LGBTQ movements comes from religious African American voters. Indeed, while the overall disapproval of same-sex marriage decreased across various races since 1988, African Americans still maintain the highest level of dissatisfaction of same-sex marriage among all racial groups (Sherkat, de Vries & Creek, 2010). But to say that all African Americans support homophobic agendas in politics assumes the various and diverse black communities across the county are monolithic.

That is not to say though, that there are not African American voters who are homophobic just as homophobia rages in other racial groups. In fact, politicians promoting a homophobic agenda exploit religion in black communities to demand support for anti-LGBTQ agenda that a black and religious electorate might not otherwise support. Ward (2005) elaborates on the general fear of expressing sexuality in black communities, noting:

> Beyond their adaptive sense of humour in response to debilitating stereotypes, black people in the USA have been profoundly affected by the persistent efforts of whites to demonise them and their sexuality. In the social construction of standards of beauty, measures of intelligence and assessments of moral character, elements of racism have been used to effectively privilege whiteness and denigrate blackness. Much of this has been accomplished through the institution of slavery and its aftermath. US media stereotypes developed during slavery such as that of the mammy, the jezebel, and the wild and hypersexual buck have their latter-day incarnations in the domineering matriarch, the 'welfare queen' and the violent and sexually promiscuous black man. The old images of blacks as bestial, lustful, wanton, lascivious, and promiscuous persist in the US psyche today. (p. 495)

The subjection of black bodies to sexual demonization perpetuates the notion that the simultaneous existence of a black person and a sexual person is foul and fear evoking. It is no
surprise then when one considers the power dynamic that favors white politicians, that white candidates would use excerpts from the Bible, just as Wilson uses a verse in Mailer 1. Ward (2005) draws on Marable’s (1989) contention of the influence of religion in black communities to conclude that scripture is one of the most prominent and evident ways black community members are drawn to support homophobic practices. While there is no excuse for homophobia, power influences the interaction between religion and politics for black voters that does not exist for white voters. Ward (2005) cites homophobia as a survivalist tactic for black voters in the wake of the demoralization of black consciousness in an American political sphere. More specifically, imperialism forced black slaves to adopt Western homophobic thoughts to survive in an already life-threatening environment (Wade, 2005). Religion, thus, became a way to make black masculinity seem not only less threatening, but more palatable for white people in power who saw religion as a binding guide for behavior (ironically, many of these white religious men also owned, abused, raped and murdered black slaves) (Wade, 2005).

Thus, while homophobia exists in various communities across the country, it serves a different function in politics for some black Americans who are religious. Wilson (2007) even highlights how advocates for LGBTQ rights who are black generate different rhetoric in black communities by using outlets, such as rap music, to reach religious black communities. And sometimes, that rhetoric positively impacts the consciousness of the community targeted by generating a platform for recusing homophobia and embracing equality (Wilson, 2007). Yet, when the rhetor is white, and the audience is both black and religious, one must consider the tactics employed by the rhetor can quickly turn into exploitation of black identity masked by a call to identify with homophobic platforms.
Dave Wilson’s campaign yields an array of inferences rooted in the relationship fostered between the identity he portrayed in his candidacy and the people of Houston’s second district, much of which one of his primary mailers displays, pictured above.

Admittedly, despite Wilson’s deceptive racially targeted tactics, at this mailer’s core is an exemplification of classic Burkean identification, one of which Wilson attempts to evoke thoroughly. And before one can dive into the disingenuous, nonphysical, manufactured identity
illuminated on this mailer, one must make sense of the foundation of the political tactics used by Wilson; tactics that can be understood through Burke’s theory of identification.

Burke (1969) underscores identification as the paramount link connecting rhetoric, especially the rhetoric of a politician, to action because it stands as a call for the audience to align themselves or their identity with the rhetor. Wilson’s attempt to persuade his audience to identify with him is evident in Mailer 1. At first glance, the mailer’s phrase “What kind of role models do we want for our children” in bold white letters contrasts the blue background and immediately calls for the reader’s attention—unlike the rest of the black text on the mailer. Thus, the sentence was visually framed to grab peak the reader’s interest, ensuring it is the central message of the mailer. Which interesting when one considers the mailer is contrasting Wilson, the religiously devout, hard-working family man and his opponent Bruce Austin, a supporter of LGBT rights. Wilson’s use of “we” and “our” in this particular sentence establishes a sense of community-based on a moral compass for what Wilson thinks is in the community’s children’s best interest. Thus, it is a call for anyone agreeing with that moral compass to identify with Wilson.

Wilson’s attempt to create a sense of community, absent of physicality, continues with other phrases featured on the mailer. Immediately under the aforementioned message, is a picture of various people who are black. Under said pictures, the words “Please vote for our friend and neighbor Dave Wilson.” This move by Wilson follows the structure of identification of which Burke (1969) warns the public. Wilson’s use of visual rhetoric through the images of people who are black above words like “our,” “friend” and “neighbor” suggest an implied community. Rather, the implied community quickly becomes people who subconsciously consent to align with individuals in the image as a group- acceptance of the word “our” to imply a community
that includes the people in the images and the audience. Aldrich’s (1993) description of voting as an act of expression, especially for communities of color, sets the stage to understand how people who are black reading this mailer would consider themselves a part of a community of collective interests, which is also why the internalization of this message might be different for a latinx or white voter. The mutual interests expressed are protecting the future and preservation of sound role models for children in the community- a community which seems to primarily focus on black voters and black interests.

Moreover, Wilson’s rhetorical creation of a community outside of physical contexts depends, in part, on his rhetorical distancing between the community he created and himself. The phrases “Please vote for our friend and neighbor Dave Wilson” and “What kind of role models do we want for our children” hedged by images of people who are black, rhetorically frames the speakers as black community members in Houston’s second district. Consequently, Wilson does not frame himself as a speaker within the community, but more of a speaker for those who identify with the mailer’s cause. This certainly covers Wilson’s tactics, though deceptive, because the way he paints a picture of this imagined community relies entirely on inferences made by the audience. Inferences that support the conclusion that Wilson, though speaking for “our children” and alongside “friends[” and “neighbors[s],” may very well be a part of the community established through the mailer’s rhetoric.

Given that racial passing depends on factors outside of skin color, Wilson’s tactics take advantage of a reader’s willingness to grant passage of identity into a community based on identity. Burke’s theory of identification and Rottenberg’s claim that racial passing is the shaping of one’s reality collide in Mailer 1. Wilson’s attempt at community building through the rhetorical construction of a community through inference is contingent on the success of
identification through inference. One way this mailer does that is by following through with another tenet of Burke’s theory of identification: action. Burke (1969) urges a key characteristic of identification is often its urgency is inducing action on behalf of those interests. Wilson’s use of the phrase “please vote for our friend and neighbor” advocates the action of voting in an effort to preserve the moral compass highlighted on the mailer. Those that identify with the community and its interests are asked to participate in the act of expression through the political system to preserve collective interests. Even so, Wilson’s use of visual rhetoric that employs images of people who are black, while identifying as a white man, allows for identification to occur on a non-physical level. The audience is called upon to identify with the community first based on preserving said collective interests. Interests are not physical, yet they are still used to incite physical action. Burke’s theory of identification, therefore, can occur on a nonphysical level wherein groups that may share physical aspects of their identity, in this case, that would be race, but whose identification with the community occurs based on theoretical or conceptual elements of identity.

Next, Wilson’s active role in calling for Houston’s second district to identify with his campaign exploits divisions in Houston’s second district. Burke (1969) argues, in light of division, given rhetoric (and thus inherently the rhetor) must “lead us through” the division that separates one group from another (23). Burke (1969) gives rhetorical scholars a way to recognize the call for identification through exploiting divisions, a tactic he calls “ingenuous and cunning identification”- fitting for Wilson’s campaign. Such persuasive rhetoric is identifiable because, as Burke (1969) argues, it “so directly designed for use, involve[s] us in a special problem of consciousness, as exemplified in the Rhetorician’s particular purpose for a given statement” (p.
36). Burke (1969) illuminates deceptive and exploitative rhetoric as identifiable based on its usage and purpose, both of which depend on highlighting what aspect of division the rhetor uses.

In order to understand Wilson’s use of division, one must understand where the division’s roots rest. Wilson calls on stereotypically Christian values to contrast LGBTQ rights and support. As a whole, Wilson draws on religion and its effects on voters’ opinions. After all, Leege and Kellstedt (1993) note, while there is conflicting research as to the effect of religion on voting patterns, one can be sure that “the influence of religion is most likely when individuals perceive or are reminded of its relevance to specific attitudes or opinions” (p. 158). Wilson uses rhetorical tactics to establish that reminder of religion as it pertains to same-sex marriage and LGBTQ rights first by using verses from the bible to condemn same-sex couples on his mailers. On the aforementioned detailed mailer which sets out to contrast Wilson with his opponent Austin, Wilson includes the bible verse “Romans 1:27 ‘In the same way the men also abandoned neutral relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.’”.

Drawing from Marable’s (1989) mapping of the influence of the black church in religious communities of people who are black, this tactic seems most certainly like a call to identify with religious beliefs.

Wilson’s campaign fits this criterion through an examination of his manipulation in existing divisions surrounding LGBT rights, which is overt, and race, which is more covertly expressed in his campaign materials. Initially, Wilson expresses an anti-LGBTQ rights candidate in juxtaposition to Bruce Austin’s platform as a supporter of LGBTQ rights. For instance, one of Dave Wilson’s mailers features two columns, one of which lists Wilson’s attributes and the other side lists features of Austin’s platform. “A Christian and founder of Houstonians For Family
Values (HFFV)” falls under Wilson’s characteristics. Conversely, the mailer describes Austin’s platform as supporting “Sodomy” and “marriage between a man and a man” which are both clear attacks on Austin’s support for marriage equality for same-sex couples. The division on this mailer includes visual rhetoric as well as written rhetoric. The visual rhetoric is initially used to establish a sense of division based on the picture of Austin and Annise Parker, which centers the mailer with a caption below reading “Annise Parker - Bruce Austin at the LGBT (lesbian and homosexual organization). Sought and got their endorsement”. Annise Parker was the mayor of Houston from 2010 until 2016 and openly identified as a lesbian. This particular visual and textual feature on the flyer clearly stands to characterize Austin as the pro-LGBT rights candidate. Furthermore, the picture features both Austin and Parker, mouths open. This picture is strategic because it does not just frame Austin as a silent supporter of LGBTQ rights. But the image features his speaking alongside a lesbian identified politician while allegedly at a pro LGBTQ event which paints Wilson as an outspoken advocate for those rights. Since the mailer takes an active approach at targeting religion as the identifiable interest in need of protection, the audience is set up to know Austin as the pro-LGBTQ rights candidate who supports Parker, marriage equality, and the right for Transgender people to use whichever bathroom they want to use.

Wilson’s choice to divide the mailer with a list contrasting himself and Austin indicates a division in beliefs surrounding marriage equality; the mailer frames Austin as the negative or the out-group for his support of marriage equality and frames Wilson in a more positive light as a married Christian who stands in firm rejection of marriage equality because of his dedication to traditional values. But marriage equality for same-sex couples is not the only aspect of LGBTQ rights Wilson attacks. The last statement under Austin’s list on the mailer reads that Austin
supports “that a man can use a women's restroom.” Improper grammar aside, the statement is referencing the ongoing debate surrounding Transgender rights and public restroom usage.

Wilson takes a more exclusive and oppressive approach to what he frames as a religiously traditional candidate for himself. He frames himself as a “Christian” and “married- 3 children” which contrasts his description of Austin as a believer in “marriage between a man and a man” as well as a supporter of “that a man can use a woman’s bathroom.” While these two sets of statements do not directly contrast each other, Wilson’s positioning of his characteristics on one side of the page and Austin’s description on the other side with a picture dividing the lists, the flyer establishes a Wilson vs. Austin list. Wilson’s list frames him as a religiously devout family man whereas it frames Austin as the anti-religious because of his support for LGBTQ rights.

Interestingly enough, Wilson never outright indicates what he believes in on this flyer. In fact, his side of the flyer is titled merely “Dave Wilson.” Yet, the other side of the flyer is titled “Bruce Austin and Annise Parker believe and support.” The division here is thus not calling for people to identify with Wilson as the anti-LGBTQ candidate. Rather, the flyer is framed to create a division wherein people reject Austin for being a pro-LGBTQ candidate. Both lists are then underscored with the previously mentioned Bible verse: “Romans 1:27 ‘In the same way the men also abandoned neutral relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.’” The choice to feature this quote sends a direct message about Wilson’s beliefs without the need to quote himself.

Instead, Wilson elects to draw text directly from the Bible. The division this creates fosters a call for identification that is controversial. Because, when Wilson uses a quote from the
Bible that directly contrasts the beliefs listed under Bruce Austin’s name, he is framing the division to be the word of God against Bruce Austin. Thus, the call to identification is not only for people who are black seeing these flyers, but a particular group of individuals who also subscribe to the belief that the Bible considers homosexuality, and subsequently marriage equality, transgender rights a sin. Again, Wilson does not overtly say or list that in which he believes but draws a map for the audience to connect his view of what Christian values are with his beliefs surrounding LGBTQ rights and marriage equality. Therefore, Wilson establishes a division that he wants the audience to consider when they cast their vote for either him or Austin: stances on marriage equality.

Wilson’s attempt to recruit homophobic fanatics isn’t entirely separate from his appeal to black voters. In fact, Mailer 1 seems to draw directly on people who are black and are also religious enough for religious to affect their political identity. Wilson is drawing on precisely what Althusser warns of; influence of religion and even the black church in the political identity of black voters who are religious, and a certain kind of religious at that. In that though, Mailer 1 can appeal to more than black voters who are homophobic based on what they claim are religious grounds because that mindset is not isolated to a specific race. Therefore, the religious notations on Mailer 1 can appeal to people who identify with these beliefs across various races, but the visual representations of people who are black on Mailer 1 ensure it especially engages black voters with those beliefs.

The relative inability of a Houston Community College Board of Trustees member to affect legislation and policy surrounding marriage equality gives some sense to the purpose of highlighting a division over LGBTQ rights. Wilson is thus not calling on voters to reject Austin because of his support for LGBTQ rights on the basis that he can change policy but by what he
considers the moral reflection of the city’s leadership. The same flyer even poses the question “What kind of role models do we want for our children?” This question, along with the previously mentioned plethora of strategically framed details on the flyer, allot for what Burke (1969) calls, “both the use of persuasive sources (rhetorica utens, as with the philippics of Demosthenes) and the study of them (rhetorica docens, as with Aristotle’s treatise on the “art” of Rhetoric)” (p. 36). Burke references sources that both persuade members of the audience of something whilst asking them to examine the given information for themselves.

Wilson’s flyer not only visually and rhetorically exploits the division of public opinion over LGBTQ rights, but presents a rhetorical question that offers the opportunity for the audience to make sense of the persuasive information displayed on the flyer. Thereby not only illuminating the existing divide over support for LGBTQ rights but asking the audience to pick sides on said divide. What makes this flyer mainly a part of Burke’s theory of identification as a conscious call by politicians is its absence of persuasive rhetoric surrounding LGBTQ rights as a collection of issues. Wilson does not attempt to persuade people to reject marriage equality and Transgender rights, but only seeks to recruit those that already refuse said issues. McBath and Fischer (1969) clarify, rhetors (especially politicians or producers of political rhetoric) who intentionally call for identification do not attempt to change the opinions of their audiences but persuade through calling for an alliance with a set of views or an identity. Those that reject Austin or align with Wilson identify with Wilson’s platform.
Mailer 2 & Mailer 3 (Falkenberg, 2013)
Both Mailer 2 and Mailer 3 feature a man who is black holding children in an outdoor landscape—one with a little girl and one with a little boy both of whom are black. Both mailers include the phrase “our children’s future is in your hands.” “Our” is the optimal phrase because, when coupled with images of people that share a common identity, it implies a sense of community—a community based on race that Wilson does not belong to as a white man. The use of “our” to describe a community as it parallels images of people who are black is even more curious when one considers Wilson’s failure to include any pictures of himself on any flyer as well as a lack of appearance on his radio ads.

Burke (1969) offers up his own take on a rhetor’s call to identify based on an identity they do not belong to. He affirms:

This aspect of identification, whereby one can protect an interest merely by using terms not incisive enough to criticize it properly, often brings rhetoric to the edge of cunning. A misanthropic politician who dealt in mankind-loving imagery could still think of himself as rhetorically honest if he meant to do well by his constituents yet thought that he could get their votes only by such display. (p. 36)

Burke (1969) is touching on the sort of identification rhetoric that does not always offer up the opportunity for the audience to, within full and free capacity, to study the rhetoric presented to them as part of the two-step process of calling to identify. In such a sense, the audience would still believe they can study the rhetoric before them, but they are only able to do so in a limited way because of the manner in which the rhetor presents the information.

Dave Wilson’s manufactured nonphysical black identity is an example of the manipulative, persuasive rhetoric Burke touches on because he establishes an identity that passes for black based on nonphysical characteristics, all of which depend on successful identification.
from the audience. Dubrofsky and Hardy (2008) urge that because racial authenticity, a critical component of passing, is often determined by the community one is attempting to pass in, referencing communal responsibility, communal grief, or shared experiences can help one identify with the group of people monitoring and determining the legitimacy of passing. In Burkean terms, a community of people maintains and reinforces the duty of studying persuasive conditions based on how the rhetor identifies with them. Consustantiation only occurs if, in instances of persuading based on race, the audience deems the claim to identity as legitimate. What Dubrofsky and Hardy (2008) argue is reference to community is one of the easiest ways to do that. Thus, part of Wilson’s passing through his manufactured nonphysical racial identity depends on his motif of collective obligation to the community and to children in the community. Furthermore, the use of “our” alongside images of people who are black indicated the community referenced in the rhetoric are black people in Houston’s second district (indeed, Wilson is treating all black people in the area as a monolith with this tactic which is problematic in its own right).

The exclusion of Wilson’s identity as a white man or the failure to mention his race or show a picture of himself in any campaign materials fits the standard for deceptive calls for identification outlined by Burke. Furthermore, the calls to protect “our community” and to elect someone that fights for “our neighborhoods” and “our children” demands a study of the persuasive material from the audience but almost ensures the study is not of Wilson’s attempt to pass as a member of Houston’s black electorate. Rather, the study focuses on “children” and issues of what Wilson references as “family values” as it relates to electing the new member of the Houston Community College Board of Trustees. Wilson’s references to family and values as a part of one’s identity suggests this campaign addresses two different parts of one’s identity.
The first involves those parts of one’s identity that they cannot choose. Race, as illuminated by Critical Race Theory race as a social construct tenet, is a part of identity-based in large part on how society identifies that individual. Thus, Wilson’s campaign is identity building through community building on the notion of collective treatment- he assumes black people will identify with images of other black people endorsing Wilson because he thinks black experiences are all the same.

Wilson’s treatment of black experiences as a monolith are evident in the nature of Mailer 2 and Mailer 3 based on the pictures they feature. Wilson chose to feature a black man smiling and playing with a child who is also black in both mailers with the slogan “Our children’s future is in your hands.” Both mailers are communicating an obligation to community; a community that is defined by familial obligation, black identity, and interest in the power of politics to protect those two things. Both mailers are thus drawing from Althusser’s assertion of the power of Ideological State Apparatuses in influencing the behavior of the individuals who subscribe to them. Ideological State Apparatuses, while oppressive in some cases, can be used to preserve and protect individuals in a world that operates based on power complexes. In this case, Wilson’s appeal to black people with interest in protecting the future of their children creates a black identity that can use politics to protect black voters and their children. Or so the voters are made to believe.

In contrast to Mailer 1, Mailer 2 and Mailer 3 do not mention religion at all. In fact, apart from the pictures and the communal call to protect children’s futures, Wilson did not feature much on these campaign materials. However, on Mailer 3, Wilson features the endorsement line “Endorsed by Ron Wilson” in bold letters and in fine print underneath the endorsement, a sentence reads “Ron Wilson and Dave Wilson are cousins.” This claim is where the second
aspect of identity Wilson draws on comes into action. To the politically uninvolved, Ron Wilson would not seem to be a significant endorsement. He is not a household name nor a nationally renowned figure and that is perhaps why Wilson used the name. LoGiurato (2013) elaborates, “In Houston, voters take that to mean he was endorsed by longtime state representative Ron Wilson, who is black.” (para. 5) This little feature becomes something far more intriguing and impactful on the audience reading it with context. But it is exactly that context which matters in calling upon a voluntary identity. Wilson uses this subtle message to call upon black residents of Houston’s second district who are politically knowledgeable.

People who identify as politically knowledgeable are not always immediately evaluated based on that aspect of their identity. Yet, consider how much of American politics runs on the assumption that many people are not politically knowledgeable; think “Fake News.” Endorsements from people who are politicians are thus meant to appeal to a specific subset of a given population, which is exactly what Wilson’s featured support does. Those who read the endorsement immediately call upon prior political knowledge to make a judgment about the candidate about whom they received information. The assumptions that flow from this endorsement are twofold. First, those that know Ron Wilson is black can then assume that because the flyer says him and Dave are cousins, that Dave must also be black. Second, Ron Wilson’s political agenda and career aligns with Dave’s. If people felt that Ron Wilson had the best interest of black communities in mind, then his endorsement of Dave could mean Dave has the same interests in mind.

Unfortunately, these assumptions are shortsighted, and they are not completely a lie. Dave Wilson really does have a cousin named Ron Wilson, but it is not the longtime state representative. Instead, Ron Wilson is Dave Wilson’s cousin who lives in Iowa, Katherine
Howell reported for *The National Review* (2013). The implication that Wilson is black becomes more of an assumption based on the information he chose to present and the details of his identity he decided to not overtly include. Sure, a quick google search of Wilson’s name would have revealed pictures of Wilson- a bald white man with glasses- and details of his failed attempt at running for Mayor of Houston. Still, there was no reason to believe Ron Wilson wasn’t the longtime state representative and unless a voter approaches all politics with the utmost suspicion, who would expect the average reader of Mailer 3 to investigate the endorsement further? Thus, the assumptions stand as a significant influence on Wilson’s identity building. Not only does it solidify public assumption that Wilson is black, but the endorsement helps solidify that he is a politician focused on furthering the interests of black people in the community.

One can consider Wilson’s choice in excluding overt mention of his race a form of deception. And it is. While it is not the duty of a rhetorician to determine intentions of a rhetor, it is clear Wilson did not explicitly state his race to contrast the endorsement he featured. So, the audience only has the information in front of them to evaluate unless they choose to dig deeper. Yet, negotiating identity is not something many people are inclined to dig deeper on. It can be easy to assume there is audience failure to research the politician they are reading about. And maybe that argument would stand if the politician were running on a grand, national stage and spoke of issues the public could research: foreign policy, tax plans, education, etc. But, part of Wilson’s tactic is that he does not approach this campaign that way. He uses chosen aspects of identity, such as calls for communal responsibility and extreme religious beliefs, that are more difficult to research and more associated with one’s identity that foreign policy. While there is undoubtedly a role the audience played in the interpretation of this campaign, their role was
limited to what Wilson gave them. Any further action is assuming more out of the audience for a small, local election than what is expected out of voters on a national scale.

The two mailers, when analyzed together, also indicate another exciting message. One can presume that the same man is featured in both Mailer 2 and Mailer 3 - adding a level of consistency in who the campaign materials feature. Therefore, given the endorsement can lead one to assume Wilson is black, this assumption coupled with the constant images of the same individual on both mailers can lead a viewer to think the man on the flyers is Dave Wilson. Especially since, unlike Mailer 1, there is only one image featured on both mailers. If it is the case that a person viewing these mailers is lead to believe the person on the mailer is Wilson, then the image deconstructs a common stereotype plaguing black male identity - the absent black father myth. While the myth itself is pervasive and rooted in decades of racist assumptions attached to black male bodies, here it serves to bolster Wilson’s credibility. If the man in the photo is believed to be Wilson, images of him smiling and playing with his children challenge the absent black father stereotype and only further paints him as a model community member that expels this stereotype.

Black bodies are plagued with stereotypes based on expectations that are often not even fulfilled by many white bodies as the absent black father myth is indeed a racist stereotype assigned to black men. As a white man, Wilson’s use of these images and the implication they bring of challenging the absent black father myth is perhaps one of the most destructive rhetorical choices Wilson makes. Wilson’s whiteness gives him an advantage in negotiating the rhetorical and communicative world around him. Thus, his ability to craft a message with few words but a range of assumptions is predicated mainly on his lifetime of navigating the social world as a white man. So, when Wilson’s rhetoric can lead a reader to the assumption that he is a
black man who believes in family values and plays with his children in a park, he is setting them up to be disappointed. This deception creates an air of mysticism around the image Wilson forged in these mailers. The absent black father myth is just that, a myth based on racist assumptions associated with black male bodies and black communities. But when people discover that Wilson was not the black family man that his mailers implied, it makes a present black father look like a mask that white politicians can put on when they need votes from black community members. In the aftermath of Wilson’s campaign then, his construction of a nonphysical identity lead to the further deconstruction of black male identity in a way that could promote distrust in the images he presented and the identity that he implied.

Furthermore, this endorsement adds another level to Wilson’s creation of nonphysical identity through racial assumptions. If one reads the flyer and accepts the implication that Wilson is black, then references to community and the future of our children become far more inclusive. This eliminates the need to physically negotiate identity because Wilson created a nonphysical avenue for passing that operates outside of skin color. Instead, his road to pass as black, whether it was his intention or not, is not built on the premise of verifying the legitimacy of his identity. His passing becomes a negotiation of interests, morals, family, values, and religion: all of which are aspects of one’s identity that an individual can choose to align with. Unlike skin color, Wilson’s mailers forge a nonphysical identity based on interests and ideology rather than race. Even more pressing though, is the inherent connect those interests have to race. Critical Race Theory posits through all of its tenets, that whiteness affects the nonphysical aspects of identity. It is the social construct that molds identity that aligns communities. While identity is unique to each person, Wilson’s treatment of black experiences beyond skin color as a monolith illuminate the fact that his nonphysical identity was surface level. It could align with a wide range of people
but was so broad that upon further inspection could not be a convincing individual identity. But for black voters wanting change, or with interests in protecting their children, or those with homophobic views (black or white) who are scared that those views are the minority, would be less interested in confirming Wilson’s identity. They would be more interested in protecting their own identity instead. Wilson’s path to passing is thus almost a given. He expresses chosen aspects of identity just enough that alongside the implication that he is black, can convince a voter that he is the right candidate for the job.

**Radio Ads**

Wilson’s campaign featured two radio ads that aired in Houston’s second district. The first ad is “narrated by two African-American women. ‘Dave Wilson? Isn't he the—’ one woman says. ‘Yes, Dave Wilson is the man who's fighting for our neighborhoods,’ the other says.” (LoGuirato, 2013, para. 7). The second ad features:

Two ‘neighborhood’ women discussing Wilson's political merits ‘That Bruce Austin voted against $6 million in scholarships for our children right here in our neighborhood,’ one woman says. ‘Girl, please, I bet he has relatives that could have used some of that scholarship money he voted against. I’ve had about enough of him ... Dave Wilson is the man who is fighting for our neighborhoods.’ *(Fox News, 2013 par. 7-8)*

Unlike the other aspects of Wilson’s campaign, the radio ads offer an opportunity to look at the actual assumptions made by individuals consuming the rhetor. In this case, both Fox News writers and *Business Insider* reporters assumed the women in the radio ads were black. LoGiurato (2013) describes the women in the ad as African American, and *Fox News* describes them as “neighborhood women”. LoGiurato’s (2013) description is more overt and thus warrants immediate analysis. While a recording on the ads is not available, one can conclude that the assumptions of the race of the women in the ad made by LoGuirato (2013) were made based on how the women talked. This is because merely looking at the topic at hand, discussing a
candidate, does not imply race. Nor does the medium in which the ad occurred because various voices from people ranging in race populate radio ads and talk shows.

LoGuirato’s (2013) assertion that the women were black is not a statement of fact. It is something he assumed based off of how the women were talking on the ad. Yet, as Popp, Donovan, Crawford, Marsh, and Peele (2003) confirmed, black women do have a unique communication style as a result of the intersection between communication expectations for black communications and an entirely different set of expectations for female communicators. So, theoretically, to assume a speaker is black based off of communication styles is not the problematic part of describing an interpersonal interaction. What is problematic is the description of the speakers as “neighborhood women” like Fox News’ description of the ads. When a white audience member describes the rhetoric of an artifact as neighborhood women, they are themselves implying oppressive stereotypes—assuming the communication style is associated with living in a specific neighborhood with negative connotations, i.e., the ghetto.

*Fox News* racist stereotyping aside, both articles reveal that there is a pointed communication style used in the radio ads. That communication style, based on both article’s description of the speakers, must be a style often associated with black women. Wilson never revealed who the speakers of his ads are though, which leaves the actual race of the speakers unknown. But Wilson’s approval of an ad that features two speakers who verbally pass as black women suggests he knew the audience might assume these women are black. Again, there is a level of deception by exclusion here because the ads do not feature Wilson’s voice at any point. They only feature two nameless women discussing Wilson and endorsing him. In hindsight, Wilson’s use of these ads as a white man reveals a dichotomy in the use of black voices. If Bruce Austin used these ads, there might be less cause for concern because Austin is actually a black
man. But Wilson’s use of perceivably black female voices to promote his own hidden agenda echoes the exploitation of black female bodies that white men in power have used since enslaving black women.

Undoubtedly, black female bodies are used by black men to push forward agenda at their expense as well. This is true for even modern movements for racial equality that depended mostly on the support of black women but focused on the protection of black male bodies from police brutality. On that level, if Bruce Austin used the same ads for his own campaign, there is a level of exploitation of black women happening on a gendered scale. But power dynamics change when the one using the voices of black women is a white man who is only using those voices to advance his position of power. Wilson’s use of a communication style ascribed to black women in the act of deception devalues the level of security black women can find in that style of communication. Popp, Donovan, Crawford, Marsh, and Peele (2003) even argue that communication styles of black women are more of a method of survival and reclaiming identity. So when a white man exploits that for personal gain, he is damaging the autonomy black women find in communicating in a certain way. One might argue the race of the women speaking in the ads might determine whether Wilson really is participating in the act of deception. But their actual race does not really matter. In an age that depends on communicating race in nonphysical ways through digital means, such as message boards and social media, what matters more is how convincing the speakers were at communicating a given race. And since Wilson orchestrated the ads, even if the speakers are black, he is still exploiting their voices in an effort to deceive voters that he is speaking for them.

The idea that Wilson is speaking for black community members, more specifically black women, comes directly from the script of the text. The first radio ad echoes the motif of identity
building through community building with one of the speakers asserting “Yes, Dave Wilson is the man who's fighting for our neighborhoods,” and another speaking in the second radio ad using the phrase “our children right here in our neighborhood” (Logiurato, 2013, par. 7). Like in the print mailers, Wilson uses a repeat tactic to call for communal responsibility to protect the interests of children as well as collective identity through the uses of “our children” and “our neighborhood.” The implication that the speakers in the radio ad are black adds depth to these sentences though. First, because the use of “our” with an implied identity of the speaker establishes an in-group out-group dichotomy. The in-group in this case aligns with the identity of the speaker: black and black women. Thus the outgroup would be people who do not identify as either black or as black women. In such, the interests of the in-group are framed against the out-group and mounted in the broader context of blackness versus whiteness. Whereas, blackness is usually framed as the other with whiteness situated in the center of power. But in this case, the women speaking express an interest in protecting the community and they are used in a call to identify with an in-group associated with their perceived race, gender, and subsequent interests.

If the speakers, who are believed to be black women, claim that Dave Wilson is the candidate who will protect their interests and speak for them than those that identify with the speakers can assume the same. Wilson becomes a candidate that will, under various assumptions, speak on behalf of black women in the community.

Both ads also exclusively feature women who are assumed to be black and do not include male voices. This choice draws on the role black women have in influencing communities. Edwards (2000) highlights the influence black women have in motivating political action in their communities. As Edwards (2000) argues, “Black female political activists had become involved in politics as a result of their earlier agitation on behalf of the children of their community.
Effective Black mothers were said to be the ones who are ‘sophisticated mediators between the competing offerings of an oppressive dominant culture and a nurturing Black value-structure’ (Hale, 1980).” (pp. 87-88). Wilson draws on precisely this through the radio ads. Unlike the mailers, the calls to protect children were not necessarily gendered. But the ads portraying the voices of black women set a different tone for who is speaking and the power they have for talking on the said topic. Wilson thus doesn’t just use the voices of black women; he rhetorically crafts the voice of a black mother who wants to use their vote as an expressive act to protect the interests of children in the community.

Wilson’s construction of a nonphysical identity finds much of its legitimacy here. Black mothers, as the speakers for the children of the community, are demanding action through voting to protect those same children. Denying this call would also mean denying protection to children and disrespecting the interests of black mothers in the community. Chatelain and Asoka (2015) contend women have such a significant role in advancing the Black Lives Matter movement in the political sphere because of the neighborhood black mother trope that assigns black women influence in emboldening black people through political and social movements. So, while black women are often marginalized through these movements, denying them a voice would also mean denying a movement one of its most critical components. Therefore, it is likely the messages communicated by the women in the ads are seen as legitimate calls to political action by other black voters. Still, the use of these voices by a white man to advance his interests in a deceptive tactic shifts this rhetorical method from an empowering ad to an exploitative one.

Because Burke’s identification involves the rhetor and the audience to align beliefs, when deception is integrated into the call to identify, one can then classify it as exploitative. This is because, in the radio ads, the audience is called to identify with Wilson, not the speakers. The
women who are presumably black speaking in the ads are just mediums for Wilson, instead of
women he identifies and aligns with. Wilson’s choice to use women who use a communicative
style similar to that of black women instead of women who use identifiable white communicative
styles is an exercise of power, dominance, and privilege to hoodwink a marginalized community.
When calls to identify with a rhetor or politician use deceptive and exploitative tactics, like this
radio ad, it reveals the power dynamics at play. In this case, Wilson uses his power as a white
man at the expense of the legitimacy of the voices and influence of black women.
CHAPTER 5
IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Wilson’s intentional exclusion his race in his mailers, as well as the radio ads, can be considered deception. However, audience expectation that individuals reveal aspects of their identity can be dangerous for instances outside of race. For example, if a candidate instead hid their LGBTQ status, that same expectation falls into an oppressive expectation that forces individuals out of the closet outside of their own terms. Indeed, Wilson’s use of black female voices in the radio ads and images of black people in the mailers is exploitative because he is in a position of power. If someone were navigating a political campaign from an opposite perspective though, mandating they reveal their identity could cost them the protective measure associated with the proverbial closet and with racial passing.

Kennedy (2001) contends that racial passing was originally a tactic used by people of color who could pass for white during the period of early America where people of color were condemned to violent fates. Even today, racially passing, while deceptive, is also a survival technique. Thus demands for one individual to reveal full aspects of their identity can result in the upheaval of survival tactics used by individuals who would otherwise face a slew of violence or discrimination based on said identity. But the simple answer to this would be it depends when an audience can demand revelation of one’s identity by the rhetor themselves. And that argument could undoubtedly stand but only if Burke’s theory of identification evolves to consider power constructs and race.
Burke’s theory of identification depends on an interaction between a rhetor and the rhetor’s audience with whom they make the call to identify. Burke (1969) does acknowledge the possibility of deceptive in identification:

> Of course, there is always the possibility of ‘mystification,’ in the sense that language can be used to deceive. And at least as a kind of rough preparation for finer scrutiny, rhetorical analysis should always be ready to expose mystifications of this simple but ubiquitous sort (mystifications broadly reducible either to ‘unitary’ devices whereby a special group gains unjust advantage from the services of other groups, or to ‘scapegoat’ devices whereby an ‘enemy abroad’ is wholly blamed for untoward conditions due mainly to domestic faults). But we are here asking whether there may be a profounder kind of mystification as well, implicit in the very act of persuasion itself. (p. 178)

Burke’s (1969) explanation of deception here is less of a warning and more of a side acknowledgment that deception can happen in identification. He acknowledges that there may be some level of power at play with deception in identification in his references to disadvantaged and advantaged groups. But for the most part, Burke relatively dismisses the concern with the notion that persuasion itself may be inherently prone to deception. And while that may be true, Burke’s theory still does not include consideration of power dynamics in the establishment of potential for one to deceive. Thus, his current method does not give rhetoricians a tool to examine when and where it is okay to expect a rhetor who calls for identification through persuasion should be expected to reveal the full spectrum of details on their identity.

Critical Race Theory, however, does forge said tool alongside Burke’s theory of identification. Wilson’s campaign, at face value without Critical Race Theory, is merely another example of a politician deceiving people. And, to be fair, he is not the only one to employ such tactics. Anguiano (2016) recalls Hillary Clinton’s attempt to appeal to Hispanic voters with the article “7 Things Hillary Has in Common with your Abuela” and her comments about carrying hot sauce in her bag. Fraga and Leal (2004) highlight former President Bush’s attempt to align with Latino voters by speaking Spanish. In these cases the race of the candidate is/was known.
But that did not stop candidates from calling for marginalized groups to identify with them through relatively deceptive tactics. In reality, Hillary Clinton is nothing like an abuela and does not understand the role food has in black communities and culture. President Bush speaking Spanish does not mean he understands the experience of brown bodies. Burke’s theory would suggest identification. But Wilson’s campaign complicates that application and demands depth in the rhetorical application of Burke’s theory of identification.

That depth comes from the tenets of Critical Race Theory because it forces rhetorical scholars to consider a powerful social construct that both guides and is the result of behavior within racial groups. Such consideration reveals one can expect Wilson to reveal his race as he attempts to call black voters to identify with him. Because unlike someone who identifies as LGBTQ or as a person of color, Wilson is in the position of power. He wields the social construction and application of race. And because of that, exclusion of information regarding one’s ability to fully evaluate the influence he has as a white man is no longer straightforward deceptive political persuasion. It is exploitation of marginalized voices, interests, agency, and autonomy. Therefore, Wilson’s campaign serves as a demand for rhetoricians to adopt a critical race approach alongside Burke’s theory of identification when evaluating persuasive and political rhetoric.

This is especially true when considering the increasing power white people have in constructing nonphysical identities. Lyons (2017) references the origins of the alt-right which depended largely on the public display of identity through nonphysical means on 4chan and Reddit, which Lyons (2017) describes as online message boards and chat rooms: racist comments, declaration of white supremacy, support for Nazis and support for Trump in the 2016 presidential race. The calls to identify through consubstantiation are nonphysical but rely on the
expression of beliefs. The rise of white nationalism through digital and online platforms went relatively unnoticed because of the belief that race as an identity depended solely on the presentation of skin color. Yet, Wilson’s campaign demonstrates that there are nonphysical levels of one’s identity that may be shaped by race, but can be presented independently of race to allow for one to pass as that race. Wilson appealed to a communal responsibility to children, shared experience, prior knowledge of black political leaders and shared communication styles to create a seemingly convincing identity. While in his case, it was to bamboozle black voters, white supremacists can use similar tactics to build factions online that then manifest in real votes and real candidates elected into office. Wilson’s creation of a nonphysical racial identity should serve as a warning of the potential for the rise of oppressive groups on digital platforms as they construct whiteness in nonphysical ways.

While there is danger in the tactics Wilson uses, his decision to appeal to black voters reveals a changing landscape for the political agency of marginalized voters. Guillaumin (2002) explains that decades of sexist and racist practices have made it difficult for marginalized groups to get political power if they get it at all. However, Wilson’s appeal to black voters and his subsequent win, by 26 votes, sheds light on the power the black electorate had in this instance. Without an in-depth exit poll survey, it would be impossible to isolate Wilson’s appeal to black voters as the sole reason why he won the election. But the choice itself to appeal to black voters suggests Wilson noticed the potential in appealing to black community members. That potential indicates a shift in the power dynamics that surround contemporary American politics. If politicians, ranging from Wilson to Clinton to Bush, feel the need to appeal to marginalized voters, it must mean those voices have power. Perhaps not individually in a political area or up against a white man. But in numbers, marginalized voices do have power.
Wilson also indicated in creation of a stock black identity, which relied on the treatment of black voters as a monolith. Wilson’s first mailer appeal to black voters with homophobic views which means Wilson ran the mailer under the stereotype that all black people hold homophobic views are devoutly religious. While there are people in every race who have homophobic beliefs, Wilson chose to appeal to what he thought would be the most significant subset of voters because black voters have power in mass. Wilson used the radio ads to forge a stock black identity that appeals to black women in mass. His treatment of black voters in his district as a monolith, though oppressive and problematic in the way it reduces black interest down to single issues, it demonstrates a tactic to appeal to the most amount of black voters as possible. Wilson’s campaign, ironically, illustrates how a white man in this instance needed the support of black community members to gain more power.

Agency and autonomy, therefore, still belong to marginalized groups. And there are times when those groups lose pieces of their autonomy and agency because a rhetor exploits them to gain more power. But if Wilson’s campaign teaches marginalized people anything, it is that we can learn from Wilson’s tactics to preserve our interests in the future. Wilson demonstrates an instance where black voices had the power to empower a white man or dismantle that. And while Wilson is a case of the former, he shows groups like the black voters in Houston’s second district that they hold power to determine who protects their interests in the future.

Dave Wilson’s 2013 campaign for Houston Community College Board of Trustee’s Second District representative successfully established a racialized identity in a nonphysical manner. Wilson accomplished this by using nonphysical markers to communicate race and pass as black to black voters in his district. Wilson specifically used a call for identification based on community building through the portrayal of race through pictures of black people he pulled of
the internet and featured on his ads. Wilson also used communal responsibility for the future of
the community’s children as well as religious appeals to homophobic platforms to call on a
particular group of black voters in his district. Because of the power dynamics that exist between
white people and black people in politics, Wilson’s call to identify was more than deception— it is
an exploitative tactic that uses the expressive voting tactic of people of color to hoodwink them
into voting for someone that hides and misinforms aspects of their identity.

Wilson’s campaign also draws on a historical pattern of exploiting black female bodies to
influence community action and perceptions. Through his radio ads, Wilson targets those in the
black community in Houston’s second district that would listen and respect the advice of a black
woman they believe to also be a part of their community. Critical Race Theory and
intersectionality suggest Wilson’s privilege as a white man allots him the ability to recognize the
roles women of color have in their communities as well as the ability to exploit it.

Wilson’s tactics effectively create an identity that is negotiated and accepted among his
black audience which allows him to pass as black. While Wilson exhibits the grave exploitative
potential for white politicians to exploit marginalized groups, his campaign signals a positive
shift in politics. Now, more than ever, people of color are targeted by politicians like Wilson
because of their evolving impact on the status quo social and political climate in America.
Therefore, Wilson’s campaign serves as both a cautionary tale and a reminder of the power
identity has in influencing political outcomes.
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