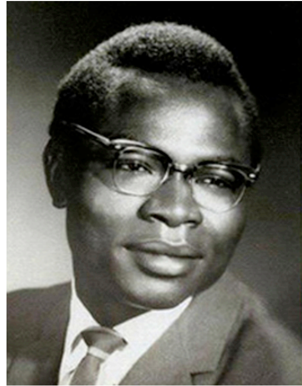
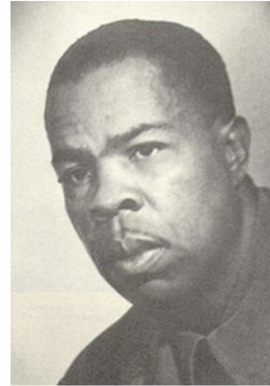
Rhetoric and Silence in Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*

Barbara Foley


Barack Obama, Sr.

Barack Obama, Jr.


Frank Marshall Davis

When Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* first appeared in 1995, it was greeted with relatively modest sales but favorable reviews: critics welcomed a politician who actually possessed writerly skills. In the wake of Obama's celebrated speech at the 2004 Democratic Convention and successful bid for the Illinois seat in the U.S. Senate, sales mounted, and a second edition appeared, this one containing the convention speech. In 2006, the audio book version, featuring the author as reader, won the Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word Album. In 2007, a third edition was published, this time accompanied by an excerpt from Obama's 2006 policy book, *The Audacity of Hope*. By July 2008, as the election neared, Obama's autobiography had been on the best-seller list for 104 weeks. As of this writing in the summer of 2009, the book has sold millions of copies and been translated into eight different languages.[1]

While *Dreams from My Father* has supplied some fodder for attacks by conservative pundits, it has for the most part inspired positive reviews, many of them

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[1] Of the $2.7 million in income recorded on the 2008 tax returns of Barack and Michelle Obama, $2.5 million came from sales of his books ("Obamas declare 2.7 million in income," *Newsday.com* 22 July 2008). The seven languages, thus far, are Chinese, Korean, Spanish, French, Hebrew, Dutch, Italian and Swedish. I am indebted to Grover Furr, Peter Gardner, Greg Meyerson, and Tony O'Brien for information, critique, and debate that have, I feel, strengthened my argument. Needless to say these comrades are not responsible for any shortcomings in what I have written.

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bordering on hagiography. Toni Morrison praised Obama's novelistic skill in "reflect[ing] on this extraordinary mesh of experiences that he has had." Joe Klein, in *Time*, proclaimed that the book "may be the best-written memoir ever produced by an American politician." On the eve of Obama's inauguration, Michiko Kakutani, the *New York Times* critic, described *Dreams from My Father* as "the most evocative, lyrical and candid autobiography [ever] written by a future president." Indicating the book's popular appeal, the hundreds of reviews recorded on Amazon.com give the now-President's autobiography an overall rating of 4½ stars. An informal web-based survey of college course syllabi suggests that, either excerpted or in its totality, Obama's autobiography is being frequently assigned to college students. *Dreams from My Father* has proven to be an outstanding success in commercial, critical, and popular terms.[2]

Arguably, however, it is precisely because the President's literary star has ascended to such heights that his text warrants critical scrutiny. For success in the U.S. book market is in large part a measure not just of literary excellence or authorial prominence but also of a text's embodiment of normative assumptions about society and self. In particular, a narrative of ascent – of which *Dreams from My Father* is a prime example – characteristically invokes dearly held myths about bootstraps individualism and social mobility, however poorly such notions may mesh with the realities of life in modern capitalist society. In this post-millennial moment, rife with anxieties domestic and international, economic and political, there is a particular yearning for tales about individuals who have passed over barriers and triumphed over hardships, thereby affirming the nation's transcendence of its ugly racial past and entry into a present that is, if not "post-racial" – the current popular buzz-word – at least qualitatively more benign. To the extent that the identity quest embarked upon and achieved in *Dreams from My Father* can be taken to illustrate the integrity of not just its central actor, but the nation

[2] Neda Ulaby, "Toni Morrison on Bondage and a Post-Racial Age," Tell Me More, 10 December 2008, NPR; Joe Klein, "The Fresh Face, *Time*, 23 October 23, 2006; Michiko Kakutani, "From Books, President-Elect Obama Found His Voice," *The New York Times*, 19 January 2009. The autobiography was a "common book" required for freshman students at the University of Washington in Fall 2009 (<http://blog.seattlepi.com/schoolzone/archives/160073.asp>). For reviews that couple the autobiography with *The Audacity of Hope*, see Jessica Ramirez, Eve Conant, Sarah Kliff, Andrew Murr, and Miyoko Ohtake, "When Barry Became Barack," *Newsweek*, 151, 13 (31 March 2008): 151; Andrew Delbanco, "Deconstructing Barry," *New Republic*, 238, 12 (9 July 2008): 20-22; and Maria Neophytou, Review, *Renewal* 15 (June 2007): 150-55. For a sharp critique of *The Audacity of Hope*, see Paul Street, *Barack Obama and the Future of American Politics* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2009).

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that has chosen him to be its leader, the text functions as Exhibit A in the case for American progress.

My principal goal in this essay – which is directed primarily to teachers of Obama's text – is to examine the various rhetorical maneuvers that the author deploys in order to render maximally persuasive his odyssey to self-knowledge. I shall engage in a study not just of literary devices – which Obama handles with considerable skill – but of the ideology of form. This project will involve textual analysis on both the macro-level – the text's apparatus of prefaces and postscripts, its tripartite division, the structuring of its individual units – and the micro-level – its narrative voice, methods of characterization, deployment of metaphor. To a significant extent, however, the effect of *Dreams from My Father* is contingent upon what the text does not say – the structured silences that allow it to minimize or, on occasion, exclude material that might impede its ideological work. In order to read the text fully, I shall as needed move outside it – not just to events and situations in Obama's own life that are elided in his narrative, but also to events in the life of the mysterious father who inhabits the core of the narrative. Although readers may find most provocative the occlusions and obfuscations discussed in the final portion of this essay, they are urged to view these in the context of Obama's overall rhetorical project, in which the said and the not-said are indissolubly linked.[3]

Before I begin, two provisos. Up to this point, the positive assessments of *Dreams from My Father* have for the most part been authored by commentators who could be termed liberal or progressive. It is critics on the right – publishing in such venues as the *National Review* and *Accuracy in Media*, as well as the conservative blogosphere – who have attacked both Obama's personal integrity and the veracity of his narrative; Anne Coulter goes so far as to dub the text "Obama's 'Mein Kampf.'" Intent

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[3] Implicitly guiding the methodology used in this essay are two key Marxist concepts – Louis Althusser's theory of ideology as "interpellation" and Pierre Macherey's theory of the role played by "structured silences" in literary production – as well as Seymour Chatman's narratological work with point of view. See Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971); Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 1978); and Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978). I also draw upon my own previous work about factuality and fictionality in narrative (*Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983]) and about politics and rhetoric (*Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* [Durham: Duke University Press, 1993]).

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upon portraying the Senator/candidate/President as disingenuous in his masking of presumed leftist associations – in some extreme versions, as a mole for domestic radicals and foreign nations and religions – right-wing critics have variously accused Obama of embracing black nationalism, anti-Americanism, Islam, and socialism. Such charges, routinely based upon outright misinterpretation and falsification, display their writers' deafness to Obama's tonal ironies; as we shall see, he characteristically dismisses anti-capitalist radicalisms of various kinds with a patronizing shrug. A few of these attacks by self-styled conservatives do, however, direct attention to some of the same occluded materials that figure in my analysis. While the facts constituting this evidence are in themselves neutral, I wish to make it explicit that my purposes in drawing upon them are the obverse of those apparently motivating Obama's critics on the right. Not the affirmation but the negation of leftist and revolutionary ideas, I shall argue, is the intent guiding Obama's text, which reiterates and updates the discourses of American nationalism, liberal pluralism, capitalist progress, and – albeit in sometimes displaced terms – cold war anticommunism.[4]

My second proviso also has to do with truth-telling, but on another level. I shall frequently have occasion to note Obama's characteristic tendency of insisting upon the fluidity of identity and the provisionality of truth while at the same time asserting the bedrock stability of a cluster of verities that constitute the U.S. political and economic system. The central concern of Obama's particular quest – namely, his attempt to sort through the various stories he has been told about his barely-known father – grafts a distinctly postmodernist epistemology onto a conventionally realist narrative structure. *Dreams from My Father* is, among other things, a story about stories, and about the construction of identities – personal, familial, community, and national – through the stories that people tell about themselves or others. Participating in this story-making, Obama himself, we shall see, not only omits certain narrative threads that, woven together, might constitute a very different fabric; he also spins others entirely out of his imagination. In a text that presumably aims at cutting through myth to get at reality – and

[4] Anne Coulter, "Obama's Dimestore 'Mein Kampf,'" *Human Events*, 62, 12 (7 April 2008). One of the more outrageous commentaries circulating among conservative bloggers is Jack Cashill's accusation that the author of the autobiography is not Obama at all, but the former Weather Underground activist Bill Ayers. See "Who Wrote *Dreams From My Father*?" *American Thinker*, 9 October 2008.

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that, as an autobiography, invites its reader to view it as fundamentally "true" in the routine empiricist sense of the word – Obama's fictional liberties coexist somewhat uneasily with his historical premise. It will be important for us to note the places where Obama's ventriloquism passes the boundaries of plausibility. But we need to grant him a certain degree of narrative license, not least because he admits in advance that much of his dialogue is "an approximation of what was actually said," that various characters are "composites," and that some of the events have been rearranged (xvi). For what is most interesting about Obama's preoccupation with the "storied" nature of his family's past is, finally, not so much the occasional fudging of particular facts that this emphasis allows as what it reveals about the extent to which his ascent narrative, qua narrative, not simply exploits but requires the control of reality that fiction-making allows: it *needs* to overlay bildungsroman upon autobiography. Obama's assertion of the priority of story over theory – congruent with a series of presumably anti-essentialist binary oppositions between values and ideology, concreteness and abstraction, uncertainty and dogma – constitutes at once a politics and an epistemology that – especially when proclaimed the essence of an "American" cast of mind – emerges as a master narrative in its own right. The practical consequences of this theory in the policies of Obama's administration as President – where neoliberalism frequently cloaks itself as pragmatism – become more apparent every day.[5]

"A broader public debate": Narrative frames

The teleological structure of *Dreams from My Father* can be described in various terms: a narrative of ascent and quest; a record of redemption, reinvention and rebirth; an odyssey from isolation to belonging, alienation to community. Obama's story is distinctly gendered – unabashedly Oedipal in its focus on fathers and sons – and raced – it places front and center the identity dilemma of a young man of mixed descent coming to terms with the dualisms and hierarchies of a society obsessed with racial categorization. As Obama puts it in his 1995 Introduction, the text records "a boy's

[5] For an appreciation of *Dreams from My Father* as a narrative of ascent, see Amanda Ripley and Jeannie McCabe, "Obama's Ascent," *Time* 164, 20 (15 November 2004): 74-81.

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search for his father, and through that search a workable meaning for his life as a black American" (xvi). *Dreams from My Father* thus invokes such classic accounts of black male self-discovery as W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Malcolm X's *Autobiography*, as well as various autobiographical and fictional writings of James Baldwin and Richard Wright – many of which are referenced, implicitly and explicitly in the course of Obama's narrative. Where these earlier explorations of selfhood characteristically end in defeat or ambivalence, however, Obama's journey – described throughout the text by means of a trope of voyaging, charting, and traveling the seas – ends in a triumphal homecoming. The text assures its readers that, although not without a few false starts that were soon corrected, its protagonist has moved from a child's non-racial consciousness through an ambivalent Third Worldism to a confident blend of cosmopolitanism and American nationalism, bolstered by an ecumenical optimism that Obama loosely terms "faith."[6]

The core narrative of the 1995 text remains the same in the different editions of *Dreams from My Father*. In its successive editions, however, the book has assumed the form of a set of Chinese boxes, each of them endowing the enclosed text with an increasingly teleological trajectory. The central story takes place between 1961 – the year of Obama's birth – and 1988, when Obama traveled to Kenya to meet his African family and, in the text's culminating scene, visit the graves of his paternal grandfather and father. This account is followed by an Epilogue that details the closing weeks of the Kenyan trip and then jumps ahead to 1995, by which date Obama has attended law school, taken up a civil rights practice in Chicago, and married Michelle Robinson. The closing passage of the Epilogue dwells upon the marriage ceremony, emphasizing the joining together of the white and black branches of Obama's family and ending with the statement that, as his Kenyan half-brother Abongo – formerly Roy – engages in a Luo toast, the groom feels "like the luckiest man alive" (442). The original 1995 text is further accompanied by an Introduction where Obama reflects upon why he wrote the book. He notes that he was first approached by a publisher when his election as the first

[6] For a discussion of Obama's place within African-American literary tradition, see Darryl Pinckney's "Dreams from Obama," a skeptical review of Shelby Steele's *A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited about Obama and Why He Can't Win*, *New York Review of Books*, 6 March 2008. David Samuels argues for a distinct influence on the autobiography by Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* ("Invisible Man," *New Republic*, 239, 7 [22 October 20008]: 22-27).

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African-American president of the *Harvard Law Review* spoke to “America’s hunger for any optimistic sign from the racial front” by offering “a morsel of proof that, after all, some progress has been made” (xiii). Obama proclaims himself a realist and a skeptic: while the confusion about his identity that he sees in the eyes of others – is he a tragic mulatto? – makes clear to him the need for better communication about race, in his optimism that this communication is possible he disavows any resemblance to those “naïve . . . Communists, . . . wedded to false hopes, . . . who peddle their newspapers on the fringes of various college towns” (xv). As he began to write, in fact, he discovered that his own “well-ordered theories” – “complete with maps and restpoints and a strict itinerary” – had to be abandoned as he was drawn to the “rockier shores” he encountered when retracing his “personal, interior journey.” And although, as a man of only thirty-three, he cannot lay claim to “summing up” or “closure” – let alone “hold up [his] experiences as being representative of the black American experience” – he asserts that “part of what this book’s about” is learning to “embrace my black brothers and sisters, whether in this country or in Africa,” and thereby “affirm a common destiny without pretending to speak to, or for, all our various struggles.” Obama’s proclamation of his achieved blackness – his use of “our” is telling – is coupled with a modest rejection of claims to finality and certainty; his dismissal of the left is effected within a subordinate clause.

The 2004 preface invites the reader to view the narrative that follows through the retrospective lens supplied by Obama’s experiences as a practicing politician. Written after he had worked several years as a lawyer and taught Constitutional law, become a father, served for some eight years in the Illinois State Senate, and won the Democratic nomination for an open seat in the U.S. Senate, this brief text significantly reorients the direction of the narrative and augments its author’s claim to broadly representative status. Noting the “pride mingled with frustration” among his black supporters that he would be, if elected, “the sole African American – and only the third since Reconstruction – to serve in the Senate” (ix), Obama nonetheless stresses the multiracial character of both the political base that elected him and his current Illinois political constituency. The people he represents reflect “the face of a nation in constant conversation,” writes Obama, “inner-city mothers and corn and bean farmers, immigrant day laborers alongside

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suburban investment bankers – all jostling to be heard, all ready to tell their stories" (viii). In this altered context, he recalls having written *Dreams from My Father* in the belief that "the story of my family, and my efforts to understand that story, might speak in some way to the fissures of race that have characterized the American experience, as well as the fluid state of identity – the leaps through time, the collision of cultures – that mark our modern life" (vii). He now stresses the conjunction of democracy with story-telling (each constituency has a tale to tell), the fluidity of selfhood, and the unity of not the "black" but the "American" experience. His "our" now signifies an identity based upon national belonging; his story is now not just a story, but a parable.

The need to mend these "fissures" and proclaim that unity, Obama continues, became all the more urgent in the wake of September 11, 2001, when "the world fractured." While Obama's name has led to his being "an irresistible target of mocking websites from overzealous Republication operatives," the altered political situation enables him to discern the heightened significance of the book he wrote nearly a decade before, since

> the underlying struggle – between worlds of plenty and worlds of want; between the modern and the ancient; between those who embrace our teeming, colliding, irksome diversity, while still insisting on a set of values that binds us together, and those who would seek, under whatever flag or slogan or sacred text, a certainty and simplification that justifies cruelty toward those not like us – is the struggle set forth, on a miniature scale, in this book. . . . And so what was a more interior, intimate effort on my part, to understand this struggle and to find my place in it, has converged with a broader public debate, a debate in which I am professionally engaged, one that will shape our lives and the lives of our children for many years to come.

The "struggle" against Al Qaeda, while remaining unnamed, supplies the historical referent of his continuing struggle – at once moral, political, and epistemological – against "certainty and simplification." The attack upon the United States – not for its actions in relation to "worlds of want," but for its presumed embodiment of modernity and its "irksome diversity" – illuminates what Obama's own "struggle [has] set forth on a

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miniature scale." The 2004 preface retrospectively invests his narrative of personal discovery with both teleology and metonymy.

Although Obama writes, in the 2004 preface, that "[t]he policy implications of all this are a topic for another book," evidently he could not resist the temptation to draw in "another book" in the edition of *Dreams from My Father* that was issued in 2007. Appended to the text is a twelve-page excerpt from *The Audacity of Hope*, in which then-Senator (and emerging Presidential hopeful) Obama sets forth his diagnosis of the maladies affecting U.S. political life and his proposals for cure. In this brief account of Obama's early impressions of the U.S. Senate – the "world's greatest deliberative body" where, he quips, no one is listening" – he laments that "our democracy has gone seriously awry." He decries not so much the "gap [that] exists between our professed ideals as a nation and the reality we witness every day" – since this gap "has existed since the nation's birth" – as the current gap "between the magnitude of our challenges and the smallness of our politics . . . our seeming inability to build a working consensus to tackle any big problem." While he concedes that "the story the Democrats tell" is, in his view, "more often grounded in reason and fact" than that told by the Republicans, both parties are guilty, he adjudges, of offering "stories of conspiracy, of America being hijacked by an evil cabal," that are "mirror images of one another." These reductionist oversimplifications contrast dramatically with "another story to be told . . . by the millions of Americans who are going about their business every day," writes Obama, "whose lives "are full of contradictions and ambiguities" that "will require a different kind of politics" – a politics that will displace "warring factions and tribal hatreds" with "common hopes, common dreams, a bond that will not break." Throughout the excerpt Obama displays the "on the one hand/ on the other hand/ nonetheless" form of pseudodialectical locution that has become the trademark rhetorical articulation of his politics of empathy. As the inhabitant of an empyrean standpoint enabling him to see through and past the cartoonish thinking of the political parties, and penetrate to the complexities of the life lived by the average American, Obama invites his reader to join him on the common ground of the middle ground. The appending of this passage from *The Audacity of Hope* to the text of *Dreams from My Father* carries the clear implication that the quest for self-knowledge limned in the earlier text has produced the wise

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appreciator of “contradictio[n] and ambiguit[y]” who speaks in the later text. The youth is father of the man who now aspires to be father of his country. Oedipus converges with Abraham Lincoln.

“I needed to search for him”: Arcs and inevitablity

The narrative of ascent that supplies both the plot structure and ideological core of *Dreams from My Father* is carefully mapped out in a series of arcs – large, mid-sized, and small. The thematic motif joining the narrative’s opening scene (in which Obama, a college student living in New York, learns by telephone of his father’s death) with the last (in which Obama throws himself weeping on his father’s grave) explicitly associates Obama’s search for community with his quest to know his father. Chapter One opens with a portrait of the writer-to-be as a young man: Obama occupies a liminal space in East Harlem that is close enough to the Upper East Side for wealthy whites to bring their dogs to defecate on the street where Obama lives. The young Obama smokes too much and keeps to himself. But he finds a “kindred spirit” in a lonesome old man whose “silence impressed me”; when the man is discovered dead in the apartment stairway – “his eyes wide open, his limbs stiff and curled up like a baby’s” (4) – thousands of dollars are found squirreled away in his refrigerator. Obama wishes he had known the old man’s name but instantly “regretted that desire,” feeling as though the old man “was whispering an untold history, telling me things I preferred not to hear” (5). This ambivalent desire to know and not to know anticipates Obama’s emotionally frozen reaction when, a month later, he hears of the death of his father, whom he had been vaguely planning to visit in the not-too-distant future. The reader is reminded of the East Harlem vignette when, at the narrative’s closing graveside scene, Obama feels “the circle finally close” as he bemoans the “silence” that “betrayed” grandfather, father, and son alike. Rising from his knees, however, Obama encounters his Kenyan cousin Bernard; refusing Bernard’s request for a cigarette – “I need to quit,” Obama says – he offers, “Come on, let’s take a walk instead.” The text’s closing image of the young black men walking down a “widening dirt road, . . . watching the rain blow down across the several valleys” (430), signals not just Obama’s personal homecoming but his commitment, as he continues his

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journey through the cleansing rain, to overcome the silence between men of African descent.

Each of the narrative's three sections is organized at once to narrate and to thematize the process by which Obama achieves this state of centered maturity. Section I, titled "Origins," covers the broadest temporal and geographical swath: Obama's early years in Hawaii, dominated by tales about the mythic Kenyan who had met Ann Dunham in a Russian language class at the University of Hawaii, impressed her parents with his lively discussion of world politics, from Whitehall to the Kremlin, but then left his young family to study at Harvard; after his parents' divorce, the young Obama's several-year sojourn in Indonesia with his mother and Indonesian stepfather; his fifth grade through high school years at a fancy prep school back in Hawaii, years marked by growing racial confusion, his contact with a black surrogate father figure named Frank, and a largely abortive month-long visit by the senior Obama when his son was ten; Obama's college years at Occidental College in Los Angeles and Columbia University in New York, during which he dabbled in campus politics and was exposed to liberal, leftist, and black nationalist ideas. Each of the nine chapters that make up "Origins" emphasizes key psychological and social lessons learned at each stage in Obama's development. The chapter on Obama's Indonesia years, for instance, is framed by his shocked reading of an article in *Life* magazine about an African-American man who corroded his skin with bleaching creams; it ends with Obama's retrospective observation that the love of his white mother could not "protect" him, and that "her account of the world, and of my father's place in it, was incomplete" (52). The chapter detailing the teenaged Obama's sporadic alienation from his white grandparents ends with a conversation with Frank about the intractability of racial divisions. "The earth shook under my feet, ready to crack open at any minute," writes Obama. "I stopped, trying to steady myself, and knew for the first time that I was utterly alone" (91). Occasionally the chapters and chapter segments end with moments of joy: for instance, Obama closes his account of his father's otherwise unsuccessful month-long visit in 1971 with a memory of watching his father dance and "follow[ing] him into the sound," hearing him "le[t] out a quick shout, bright and high, a shout that leaves much behind and reaches out for more, a shout that cries for laughter" (71). More often, however, the "dying fall" concluding segments of the

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narrative create a mood of longing and incompleteness. If its protagonist is to achieve a sense of wholeness, he will have to discover for himself the meaning of his father's life.[7]

"Origins" essentially ends where it began – with Obama receiving the telephoned news of his father's death – but contains a coda where Obama recounts a dream, a year later, in which his father appears. Set during a bus ride through unspecified rural terrain, it initially features an old white man – "a union man, off to meet his daughter" – who metamorphoses into a "small black girl." The destination of the bus ride appears to be a courtroom with a nearby jail; in the cell is Obama's father, "very thin, with his large head and slender frame, his hairless arms and chest . . . look[ing] pale." When the older man proclaims his love for his son, and Obama moves to embrace him, he shrinks to "the size of a boy." Obama awakens in tears, feeling that he has occupied the roles of jailor and judge as well as son, but realizing "how even in his absence his strong image had given me some bulwark on which to grow up, an image to live up to, or disappoint." The section concludes, "I needed to search for him, I thought to myself, and talk with him again" (128-29).

This coda patently invites Freudian decoding. The son at once yearns for and desires to punish and displace – indeed, exchange places with – the absent father, who not only regresses physically to a child but also becomes "pale" – a key detail, since the senior Obama was very dark-skinned. Indeed, Obama here appears to exhibit racial resentment against his white grandfather as well, since the old "union man," who bears a more than passing resemblance to Stanley Dunham, turns into a small black girl – a regression that in turn recalls Obama's description of the old East Harlemite who, in death, resembled a baby. Although it could be argued that these images of infantilized and re-racialized older men are subversive, suggesting not so much accession as resistance to conventional hierarchies of gender and race, their situation in a scene overlaid with regret, resentment, and displaced guilt suggests the young Obama's felt need to diminish the older men in his life. Not to be overlooked in this family drama

[7] The accuracy of Obama's referencing the *Life Magazine* article about African Americans and skin bleaching is questionable, since no such article has been located in that source during the years Obama designates. The term "dying fall," derived from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (I.i.1-4), ordinarily signifies a beauty associated with sweet melancholy, mortality, and finality. On Obama's "weakness for the dying fall," see Andrew Ferguson, "The Literary Obama: From Eloquent Memoir to Democratic Boilerplate," *Weekly Standard*, 12 (12 February 2007).

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featuring reversed roles between older and younger generations is the fact that, in possessing the key to his father's freedom, Obama identifies, however sorrowfully, with the punitive powers of the state. Even as the dream suggestively embodies details from the Civil Rights Movement – the bus ride, the small black girl, the incarcerated black adult – it encloses these within Obama's own narrative of taking control.

Section II of *Dreams from My Father*, titled "Chicago," is longer than "Origins" but treats a much more limited span of place and time. The section begins with a brief glance back at Obama's New York days, when, Obama writes, he felt like a "spy behind enemy lines" in his job as a research assistant in a "consulting house to multinational corporations" (135). Most of Section II focuses upon his experiences as a community organizer in Chicago between 1985 and 1988. Covered in considerable detail are Obama's interactions with Marty, a Saul Alinsky-style white community organizer who seeks to build a multiracial coalition to counter the hemorrhaging of jobs consequent upon the closing of the South Side steel mills; Obama's entry into the Harold Washington-era Chicago political scene, resulting in contacts with a range of black men, from the rank-and-file frequenters of Smitty's barbershop to various educators, preachers, and wardheelers to the young men spiraling into a life of hopelessness and gang violence; his involvement in a serious of campaigns to organize the residents, mainly women, of the far South Side Altgeld Gardens housing project; his culminating encounter with the beginnings of religious belief in the Reverend Jeremiah Wright's Trinity Baptist Church.[8]

While Obama quite clearly understands that he has thrown himself into the life of Chicago's South Side to forge an African-American identity – indeed, to pursue "the promise of redemption" (135) – the image of Obama, Sr., hardly recedes from view. For his decision to leave community organizing and apply to the Harvard Law School is largely influenced by a visit from Obama's Kenyan half-sister, Auma, who gives him a

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[8] See Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971). For a description that Alinsky-style organizing contemporaneous with Obama's years in Chicago, see P. David Finks, *The Radical Vision of Saul Alinsky* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984). According to Dan Armstrong, one of Obama's co-workers in New York in 1984 at Business International Corporation, the company was a low-wage operation with a modest global reach; Obama's account of its involvement in multinational investing is, asserts Armstrong, exaggerated. See Janny Scott, "The Long Run," *New York Times*, 30 October 2007. The phrase "spy behind enemy lines" echoes the words of the invisible man's grandfather in Ellison's novel: the old man claims to have been a "spy in the enemy's territory."

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fuller picture of their father's tribulations beginning in the late 1960s. "He would tell people that tribalism was going to ruin the country and that unqualified men were taking the best jobs," she stated. When "[w]ord got back to Kenyatta that he was a troublemaker, . . . he was called in to see the president [who] said . . . that because he could not keep his mouth shut, he would not work again until he had no shoes on his feet" (215). Banished and blacklisted, the senior Obama declined into domestic violence and drunken driving: according to Auma, when he visited Barack and his mother in 1971, he was recovering from an alchohol-related car accident in which "the driver of the other car, a white farmer, had been killed." What Obama carries away from this conversation with his half-sister is a portrait of their father as "a bitter drunk . . . [an] abusive husband . . . [a] defeated, lonely bureaucrat"; the possibility that he might "succum[b] to the same defeat that had brought down the Old Man" sends the young Obama into a paroxysm of anxiety – "The emerald curtain is pulled aside. The rabble of my head is free to run riot" – and precipitates his decision to change career course (220-21).

The crucial role of the episode featuring the encounter with Auma is obscured, however, in the series of community organizing vignettes that – while paying tribute to the many African-American adults who helped to center and affirm the young organizer – end up investing with inevitability his decision to seek other pastures. Chapter conclusions and "dying fall" breaks in the text subtly reinforce an underlying sense of the futility of his grassroots labors. A chapter focusing on Obama's early attempts to work with the dogmatic Marty and the opportunistic Reverend Smalls, for instance, leads him to conclude that both men "knew that in politics, like religion, power lay in certainty – and that one man's certainty always threatened another's." The autobiographical narrator recalls, "I realized then, standing in an empty McDonald's parking lot in the South Side of Chicago, that I was a heretic. Or worse – for even a heretic must believe in something, if nothing more than the truth of his own doubt" (163). Obama's skepticism apparently rescued him from the greater error of committing himself to a systemic analysis of the reasons for the racist oppression he saw all around him. A section detailing the political infighting following the sudden death of Mayor Washington – when it became clear that "power was patient and knew what it wanted; power could outwait slogans and prayers and candlelight vigils" – ends with Obama's noticing a flyer bearing the slogan "HIS

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SPIRIT LIVES ON" and a picture of the deceased man: "the handsome, grizzled face; the indulgent smile; the twinkling eyes; now blowing across the empty space, as easily as an autumn leaf" (288-89). The reference to transiency in the natural world underlines the pathos of political organizing on the local level. A chapter on the campaign to remove asbestos from Altgeld Gardens ends with Sadie, a disillusioned former activist, remarking, "Ain't nothing gonna change, Mr. Obama. . . . We just gonna concentrate on saving our money so we can move outta here as fast as we can" (248). While the asbestos removal campaign actually ended up publicizing widely the dire physical conditions in public housing and leading to significant improvements, Obama chooses to feature the demoralization of a key organizer. His clear admiration of many of the people he met is tinged with melancholy; he himself will soon "move outta here as fast as [he] can."[9]

Obama's prose ordinarily flows with grace and clarity; but it can become murky when he confronts issues that press against the limits of his refusal to think beyond "the truth of his own doubt." A section dealing with his tangled feelings of anger, complicity and fear as he contrasts his own privileged situation with that of jobless young black men – whose thumping boom boxes have led him to a potentially dangerous curbside confrontation at 3 a.m – ends with a muddled meditation on what is to be done. Both "guilt and empathy," he decides, speak to

> our buried sense that an order of some sort is required, not the social order that exists, necessarily, but something more fundamental and more demanding; a sense, further, that one has a stake in this order, a wish that, no matter how fluid this order sometimes appears, it will not drain out of the universe. I suspect that these boys will have to search long and hard for that order – indeed, any order that includes them as more than objects of fear or derision. And that suspicion terrifies me, for I now have a place in the world, a job, a schedule to follow. As much as I might tell myself otherwise, we are breaking apart, these boys and me,

[9] For Obama's increasingly jaundiced assessment of the shortcomings of the Alinsky approach to community organizing, as well as his decision to quit community organizing, see John B. Judis, "Creation Myth," *New Republic*, 10 September 2008. At a 1989 Chicago symposium, Obama – then at Harvard Law School – expressed his disagreement with the "suspicion of politics" underlying the Alinsky approach to community organizing, viewing it as a sure route to marginalization.

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> into different tribes, speaking a different tongue, living by a different code. (270-71)

Obama recognizes that "the social order that exists" needs to be replaced by one that would give these youths a "sense of stake in this order." Yet he cannot think beyond the discourse of liberalism, even as his language turns back on itself. The requirement that a better social order be "fluid," yet not so fluid as to "drain out of the universe," shifts the routine association of "fluidity" with upward mobility and democracy into a grotesque image of cosmic dehydration: these boys pose a serious threat. They are, moreover, members of a "different tribe": invoking a term routinely used to describe the social organization of peoples of color, Obama dissociates himself from these young black men even as he displaces into the realm of cultural difference their oppression by a political economy that denies them adequate education and meaningful work. Obama's counterpositioning of "tribalism" with "consensus" in the text's 2004 preface is anticipated in this earlier evasion of the material basis of racialized alienation.

"Chicago" occupies the heart of Obama's bildungsroman: it delineates the process by which the boy grew into a man. In subsequent years Obama has often commented on his indebtedness to his years as a community organizer; Michelle Obama has described her husband as "a community activist exploring the viability of politics to make change." While Obama's litany of failures hardly supports this retrospective assessment, it supplies a rationale for his decision to end the second section of his autobiography with an account of his response to Reverend Wright's sermon on "The Audacity of Hope." Drawing its title from a picture of a harpist who plucks upon her instrument's single surviving string as she contemplates a world "groaning under strife and deprivation," Wright's sermon – which calls for hope even in a world where "cruise ships throw away more food in a day than most residents of Port-au-Prince see in a year," and many of his parishioners have trouble paying their utility bills – leads Obama to "hear all the notes from the past three years swirl around me." Part of him remains skeptical, thinking that the "Sunday communion sometimes simplified our condition . . . and could . . . disguise or suppress the very real conflicts among us and would fulfill its promise only through action." Although the narrating Obama of 1995 is a committed member of Wright's

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congregation, the experiencing Obama of 1988, still secular in his outlook, has not yet found "faith" in organized religion. But the younger Obama is shown to hear in Wright's biblical "stories of survival, and freedom, and hope" reverberating echoes that blend "the stories of ordinary black people" with his own; he feels in the "Sunday communion" a "spirit [that] carried within it, nascent, incomplete, the possibility of moving beyond our narrow dreams" (294). In a finale that parallels the endings of "Origins" and "Kenya," the ordinarily stoical Obama finds "tears running down my cheeks." The section ends, "'Oh Jesus,' I heard the older woman beside me whisper softly. 'Thank you for carrying us this far'" (292-95).[10]

There is no denying the rhetorical power of Obama's testimony to his finally attained sense of belonging: the youth who struggled to define his racial identity in high school and college, and who fled from the impulse to know his silent neighbor's name in East Harlem, has found identification with a black community where "our trials and triumphs" are "at once unique and universal." The passage imposes a conveniently retrospective teleology upon the second section of *Dreams from My Father*, however: for it shows Obama realizing the importance of thinking beyond the "narrow dreams" of Chicago's black folks at precisely the time when his own dreams are taking him elsewhere. The image of the courageous harpist that supplies the title to Wright's sermon – and that will carry over into the title of Obama's 2006 policy book – hardly points the way beyond "the social order that exists." Nor, for that matter, do the words of the woman standing beside Obama in church, heartfelt as they may be. The "heretic" who held up his anti-ideological skepticism in contradistinction to the dogmatic truths of Marty and Reverend Smalls here asks the reader to join him in a leap of faith that bears little relationship to the lessons learned in the preceding narrative. This leap of faith

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[10] Michelle Obama quoted in Judis, "Creation Myth." For a positive assessment of the enduring legacy of Obama's years as an organizer, see David Moburg, "Obama's Community Roots," *Nation*, 14 April 2007. The Reverend Jeremiah Wright's pointed critiques of U.S. racism would figure prominently in Obama's 2008 electoral campaign, drawing fire from the right and occasioning the then-candidate's affirmation of the United States as a chosen site of antiracist possibility in his Philadelphia speech on race; Obama subsequently disavowed any connection with the Reverend's views. Wright figures in the autobiography, however, as a benign but largely marginal figure. For the text of the speech on race, titled, "A More Perfect Union," see <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/18/obama-race-speech-read-th_n_92077.html>. While the speech has been widely praised, Adolph Reed refers to it as "a string of well-crafted and coordinated platitudes and hollow images worthy of an SUV commercial, grounded with the reassuring 'acknowledgment' of blacks' behavioral inadequacies" ("Obama No," *Progressive*, May 2008, <http://www.progressive.org/mag_reed0508>).

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does, however, prepare for the epiphany that will be experienced by the young man who will soon alight in the Nairobi airport.

"A window into his heart": Entering the minds of others

The macro-level mapping of Obama's narrative charts the overall rhetorical structure of his narrative of ascent. It is on the micro-level of style, however, that the text performs much of its ideological work, positioning the reader to affirm shared assumptions and assent to new propositions. What the text does not say, however – or what it presses far to its margins – is often as important as what it directly represents. In order to grasp the significance of the structured silence surrounding the looming figure of Obama's father, we need to analyze the toolbox of rhetorical devices that Obama uses throughout the text to establish and implement his authorial authority.

The narrative point of view adopted in *Dreams from My Father* solicits the reader's agreement in a number of ways. One of these might be characterized as characterization via innuendo. As Obama looks back upon the political follies of his first year in college – which he dubs "one big lie" – he recalls,

> To avoid being mistaken for a sellout, I chose my friends carefully. The more politically active black students. The foreign students. The Chicanos. The Marxist professors and structural feminists and punk-rock performance poets. We smoked cigarettes and wore leather jackets. At night, in the dorms, we discussed neocolonialism, Franz [sic] Fanon, Eurocentrism, and patriarchy. When we ground out our cigarettes in the hallway carpet or set our stereos so loud that the walls began to shake, we were resisting bourgeois society's stifling constraints. We weren't indifferent or careless or insecure. We were alienated.

The point of this ironic summary is, of course, that Obama did *not* "choose [his] friends carefully"; he chose them on the basis of the categories into which they fell, and because his motivation was above all to safeguard his image, to avoid "being mistaken for a sell-out." The insistent location of "we" as the subject of a series of sentences suggests the pressure of robotic group-think – an impression that is reinforced by the implied equation

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of lifestyle gestures (smoking, wearing leather) with the theoretical analysis and critique of such matters as neocolonialism and patriarchy, concerns which by association become aspects of mere lifestyle as well. What especially stands out is Obama's description of the campus radicals' legitimizing their anti-social behavior as rebellion against "bourgeois society's stifling constraints" – when clearly it is fellow-students and campus workers, not the bourgeoisie, who have to pay the price of their self-indulgence. Leftist politics are, it appears, reducible to labels, and leftists are incapable of personal honesty. The rhetorical strategy adopted here does not entail a frontal critique of the substance of leftist analyses of colonialism, capitalism, racism, and sexism. Instead, what we have is argument by innuendo and dismissal by marginalization: Obama plays upon cold war-inflected caricatures of robotic reds and spoiled campus radicals. Indeed, by dubbing his freshman year in college "one big lie" – a term echoing the "big lie" of Nazi propaganda – Obama even hints at the two totalitarianisms thesis that would posit fascism and communism as two sides of the same coin. His ironic treatment of the leftist community at Occidental College supplies not cognition, but re-cognition: the reader is assumed always already to know what leftists are really like.[11]

Indeed, Obama hastens to let the reader know that, even as he was caught in the morass of petty-bourgeois alienation, he retained his critical capacities. A further feature of his technique of ironic dismissal is his routine reassurance that not just the retrospective narrator of 1995, but even his youthful counterpart, quickly sees through his own pretenses. It is his ability to feel at once empathy and skepticism that supplies him with the needed psychological distance. Immediately preceding the above passage about the phoniness of his radical "friends," for instance, appears his admission that, even as he chided Joyce – a fellow-student of mixed racial origin who refused to identify as black, insisting that she is an "individual" – "the truth was that I understood her and all the other black kids who felt the way she did," since "[i]n their mannerisms, their speech, their mixed-up hearts, I kept recognizing pieces of myself" (100). Soon after this description of the student radicals' hypocrisy, moreover, he recounts his growing friendship with another black student named Regina, who (reminding him that someone like her

[11] Obama's substitution of recognition for cognition here supplies an instance of Althusserian interpellation. See above note 3.

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working-class mother or grandmother will have to clean up the mess left by Obama and his fellow-radicals) helps him recover "that constant, honest portion of myself, a bridge between my future and my past" (105). Although he then becomes involved in the campus anti-apartheid struggle and makes a well-received speech, the die has been cast, and he now sees through the activists' pretense to moral purity: "Through my eyes, we suddenly appeared like the sleek and well-fed amateurs we were, with our black chiffon armbands and hand-painted signs and earnest young faces" (107). Presenting political commentary in the form of self-criticism, these passages allay the reader's potential anxieties by showing that the experiencing Obama and the retrospective Obama are closely aligned and allied. This young man did not sow too many political wild oats; for all his confusion about which explanatory narrative he should accept, he could trust in his own "constant, honest portion" of himself for a stability that is both emotional and political.[12]

Obama ordinarily sticks to telling his tale from his own standpoint, whether immediate or retrospective. Occasionally, however, he affords himself the privilege of entering the consciousness of other people, who temporarily take on the ontological status of fictional characters rather than of historical individuals. This ventriloquistic device is deployed most fully in "Origins," where Obama, in an apparent effort to understand what he consistently terms the "innocence" of his white family members, attempts to reconstruct what made them tick. When he tries to imagine his mother's thoughts and feelings about living in Indonesia in the immediate wake of the bloody CIA-engineered coup against Sukarno, for instance, Obama dramatizes a sequence of episodes. Ann Dunham Soetoro is pictured asking about the coup at the U.S. embassy and being stonewalled; arguing with her husband, Lolo Soetoro, when he abandons his youthful anti-colonial ideals and goes to work for a U.S. oil company; wandering through a wealthy neighborhood of Djakarta, where she sees a bony, bare-footed woman begging from men washing luxury cars; fearing that "power" – hitherto something "hidden from view until you dug beneath the surface of things . . . visited an Indian reservation or spoke to a black person whose trust you had earned" – was "taking her son." Obama

[12] For different reactions of other former students at Occidental College to Obama's feelings about his campus anti-apartheid speech – which he at the time acknowledged to have been successful – see Scott Helman, "Small college awakened future senator to service," *Boston Globe* 25 August 2008.

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concludes his imagined account of his mother's interiorized consciousness with a summary judgment of her idealism, which he contrasts with the "relentless skepticism" that he, at the age of eight, had already acquired:

> My mother's confidence in needlepoint virtues depended on a faith I didn't possess, a faith that she would refuse to describe as religious; that, in fact, her experience told her was sacrilegious: a faith that rational, thoughtful people could shape their own destiny. In a land where fatalism remained a necessary tool for enduring hardship, where ultimate truths were kept separate from day-to-day realities, she was a lonely witness for secular humanism, a soldier for New Deal, Peace Corps, position-paper liberalism.

In her insistent moralism, Obama writes, his mother "had only one ally . . . and that was the distant authority of my father. He hadn't cut corners or played all the angles. He was diligent and honest, no matter what it cost him. He had led his life according to principles that demanded a different kind of toughness, principles that promised a higher form of power." The "principles" that motivated his father, presumably the antidote to the "power" that frightened Ann Dunham, emerge as obverse sides of the same idealist coin.

Obama enters his mother's mind in a gesture of sympathy with her refusal to go along with her second husband's complacent accession to the new regime under Suharto. But his praise is, to say the least, back-handed. His description of her "confidence in needlepoint virtues" genders her beliefs as at once old-fashioned and decorative: needlepoint was, after all, historically the preoccupation of Euro-American women during their leisure time. Characterizing as "New Deal, Peace Corps, position-paper liberalism" his mother's resistance to Indonesian fascism further derogates the grounds of her critique: she echoes the official policy positions of others rather than articulating what she thinks in her own terms. Although "faith" will emerge at the end of *Dreams from My Father* as a crucial component of Obama's own universal humanism, his mother's brand of "faith" is vitiated by its catechistic rationalism. The "principles that formed a higher form of power" espoused by Obama's father are tarred with the brush of his one-time wife's innocence and idealism. Without being told anything about the substance of those

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"principles," the reader is led to view them as abstract and unrealistic, able to react against, but unable to critique and confront, the harsh realities of "power" as it exists in the real world.[13]

Obama's white grandfather, Stanley Dunham ("Gramps"), undergoes comparable psychological interiorization – though in his case Obama projects not so much a series of dramatized scenes as Dunham's own imagined narrative of his life. As a young man, Dunham worked on oil rigs and played the sexual field; with his dark hair that made him "look like a Wop," he was something of a rebel against "respectability" (14). Picturing his grandfather as bent upon "rewrit[ing] his history to conform with the image he wished for himself," however, Obama casts doubt upon his grandfather's claims to antiracism – to seeking out friendships with Jewish fellow-workers, to having left Texas because of the neighbors' bigoted reaction to Ann's playing with a black girl. Giving greater credence to his grandmother's view that the family left Texas simply because Dunham's job opportunities diminished, Obama writes, "I don't entirely dismiss Gramps's recollection of events as a convenient bit of puffery, another act of white revisionism . . . precisely because I know how strongly Gramps believed in his fictions, how badly he wanted them to be true. . . . After Texas I suspect that black people became a part of these fictions of his, the narrative that worked its way through his dreams" (20-21). Dunham's sense of fairness, Obama speculates, was an "instinct," tied up with his "American" impulse to take to the "open road" and "obliterate the past." And although this typically American embrace of "freedom and individualism . . . could as easily lead to the cowardice of McCarthyism as to the heroics of World War II," in Gramps's case the "instinct" for justice was articulated in terms that were "vaguely liberal" – albeit "never congeal[ed] into anything like a firm ideology" (16-17). Obama's stated antipathy to Gramps's "revisionism" does not prevent him from conjuring up his own hypothetical

[13] For more on the coup against the Indonesian nationalist movement led by Sukarno, see Nathaniel Mehr, *"Constructive Bloodbath" in Indonesia: The United States, Britain and the Mass Killings of 1965-66*, with a Foreword by Carmel Budiardjo (New York: Spokesman Books, 2009). Although Obama does not mention either Mobil Oil or Suharto by name, it bears noting that both were directly involved in the bloody suppression of the rebellion in East Timor that was occurring while he was writing his autobiography. See George J. Aditjondro, "Business interests are behind Indonesia's fight to hold on to East Timor," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 May 1999.

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scene in which Dunham, upon meeting his future son-in-law, “might have been immediately struck by the African’s resemblance to Nat King Cole, one of his favorite singers; I imagine him asking my father if he can sing, not understanding the mortified look on my mother’s face” (17). But Obama decides upon a charitable assessment of his grandfather’s overall moral balance sheet, concluding that “[w]hether Gramps realized it or not, the sight of his daughter with a black man offered at some deep unexplored level a window into his own heart” (22).

The tone informing Obama’s portrait of his maternal grandfather, while affectionate, is unmistakably ironic and patronizing. The imagined scene where Dunham asks his daughter’s African boyfriend to burst into song could have come from the pages of *Invisible Man*; in the passage where Obama affords a glimpse into his grandfather’s heart, it is not clear how Dunham’s act *of* viewing – his “sight of his daughter with a black man” – connects with his *being* viewed by someone else – his grandson, in fact – who, looking back, sees something in the older man’s heart of which he was unaware. Indicating the formal stress at times accompanying Obama’s ventriloquistic maneuvering, the stylistic awkwardness here signals not just the younger man’s Oedipal need to absorb and dominate this father surrogate, but also an embedded political proposition. For it is crucial to Obama’s project that the white Stanley Dunham’s acceptance of his black son-in-law take shape as an instinctual reflex rather than a conscious act. Where Ann’s antiracism is portrayed as programmatic, an emanation of her “needlepoint virtues,” her father’s is portrayed as spontaneous, an emanation of a potentiality for justice always already embedded in the American national character. The irretrievable naivete that Obama associates with whiteness, however, prevents both Ann and Stanley Dunham from acting out of a purposive ethics or politics. While on one level these ventriloquized projections suggest Obama’s need to diminish the sophistication of his white family, something more is involved here than a personalized take upon the old American Studies notion of Adamic “innocence.” Neither his mother nor his grandfather is permitted an iota of class consciousness in their opposition to racism. Although Obama could have imagined Gramps’s pleasure in discussing Cold War geopolitics with his future son-in-law, he instead opts to envision Stanley conflating the young Kenyan with Nat King Cole. Ann – who would leave her Indonesian husband after he took a job with Mobil Oil,

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one of the key backers of the fascist Suharto regime – is shown pitting herself moralistically against a Foucauldian "power" that she vaguely identifies with Native American genocide and Jim Crow segregation. It is left to their son/grandson to move beyond their limitations and, through his imaginative story-telling, extract the larger meaning encoded in their lives. Obama's postmodernist conception of identities as discursively constructed proves eminently compatible with a novelistic practice that reduces character to a congeries of static traits, holding out his personal embrace of a seasoned skepticism as the embodiment of an encompassing narrative of historical – and national – progress.[14]

The text's most extended efforts to enter the consciousness of characters other than Obama himself are undertaken in relation to his white relatives. Occasionally, however, he enters the consciousness of people whom he has encountered only briefly – or who are in fact entirely figments of his imagination. In Nairobi – where a now-commercial street is named after Dedan Kimathi, a leader of the Mau Mau rebellion who "like other angry young men in Soweto or Detroit or the Mekong Delta started to lash out in street crime and revolution" – Obama speculates about the conflicting pressures of tradition and modernity operating in the mind of a restaurant waiter who has neglected Obama and Auma in order to serve some white patrons. Obama wonders whether the man's memories of "the shouts of 'Uhuru!' and the raising of new flags . . . may seem almost fantastic to him now, distant and naïve, [since] [h]e's learned that the same people who controlled the land before independence still control the land." Obama muses, "[I]f you say to him that he's serving the interests of neocolonialism or some other such thing, he will reply that yes, he will serve if that is what's required." But, Obama continues,

> Then again, maybe that's not all that the waiter is feeling. Maybe a part of him still clings to the stories of Mau-Mau, the same part of him that remembers the hush of a village night, or the sound of his mother grinding corn under a stone

[14] Obama reasserts the motif of having a "window into the heart" of a white family member when he recalls the scene where his mother exhibits a sentimental love of the movie "Black Orpheus"; he and his half-sister, Maya Soetoro, are embarrassed by his mother's "corny" reaction to the movie's romantic primitivism. "I felt as if I were being given a window into her heart, the unreflective heart of her youth," he writes. "I suddenly realized that the depiction of childlike blacks I was now seeing on the screen, the reverse images of Conrad's dark savages, was what my mother had carried with her to Hawaii all those years before" (124-25).

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> pallet. . . . He remembers a time, a way of imagining himself, that he leaves only at his peril. . . . And so he straddles two worlds, uncertain in each, always off balance . . . careful to let his anger vent itself only on those in the same condition. A voice says to him, yes, changes have come, the old ways lie broken. . . . A voice says no, you will sooner burn the earth to the ground. (314-15)

As Obama later rides the train from Nairobi to Kisumu on the shores of Lake Victoria, he attempts to recreate the thoughts of both Europeans and Africans when the first train passed along the tracks in nearly a century before:

> I tried to imagine the sensations some nameless British officer might have felt on the train's maiden voyage, as he sat in his gas-lit compartment and looked out over miles of receding bush. Would have had felt a sense of triumph, a confidence that the guiding light of Western civilization had finally penetrated the African darkness? Or did he feel a sense of foreboding, a sudden realization that the entire enterprise was an act of folly, that this land and its people would outlast imperial dreams? I tried to imagine the African on the other side of the glass window, watching this snake of steel and black smoke passing his village for the first time. Would he have looked at the train with envy, imagining himself one day sitting in the car where the Englishman, sat, the load of his days somehow eased? Or would he have shuddered with visions of ruin and war? (368)

The parallel structure of the sentences, giving equal time to the viewpoints of colonizer and colonized alike, undercuts the supremacist outlook of the Englishman. The suggestion that "ruin and war" might result from the European penetration of the African hinterland, rather than a shared life of ease, gives the lie to the British imperial project and its doctrine of the white man's burden.

The young man who observes the inequalities in present-day Kenya and tries to bring these into alignment with what he knows about East African history clearly has not forgotten the commentaries on Eurocentrism and neocolonialism that he absorbed during his college years: Du Bois and Fanon rumble beneath the surface of his narrative. But he undermines much of his critique even as he utters it. The Nairobi waiter may be caught

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between two worlds and seethe with repressed rage, but the alternative to alienated modernity is cast as a return to the culture of pre-industrial village life. What is occluded here is that, in the wake of the massive conscripting of unpaid labor to dig irrigation ditches for the growing plantation economy in the years leading up to the Mau Mau Revolt, the forces of agricultural production in Kenya were brought into the modern world through a process of violent expropriation and proletarianization – a process that essentially effaced the political economy of traditional village life. The Kikuyu-led rebellion of the early 1950s – which aimed to halt this process and expel British colonialism – is at once pictured as "distant and naïve" and conflated with a continuing impulse to "burn it to the ground" – a portraiture of the Mau Mau revolt as irrationally violent and destructive that reproduces the mainstream historical discourse. A leftist interpretation of the waiter's situation – here associated with a politically correct scolding of the waiter for "serving the interests of neocolonialism" – emerges as abstract and dogmatic, inadequate to address the complexities of the waiter's situation. Indeed, the critique is silenced the moment it is raised.[15]

In the train episode, Obama's projection into the consciousness of the African (who remains, we may note, on the other side of the glass) reproduces conventional notions of African backwardness: the man views the train as a "snake of steel and black smoke." Although local tribes did indeed refer to the Mombasa-Lake Victoria railway, constructed between 1895 and 1901, as an "iron snake," Obama's ventriloquism of animistic beliefs bypasses the irony with which the nickname was laced. The construction of the railway – originally termed the "Uganda Railway" – was actively resisted, with bloody consequences, by the peoples whose lands were being penetrated. The African tribesman witnessing the train's first trip westward might himself have been involved in this resistance rather than – as in Obama's account – taken by surprise. The implied analysis of causality in Obama's narrative further blurs the reasons why that

[15] For more on the political economy of Kenya leading up to the Mau Mau revolt, as well as the massive deployment of coerced labor to develop the nation's infrastructure during the so-called Emergency after the revolt was suppressed, see Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005), especially 233-74; and David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005). One colonial official, commenting specifically on the policy of "villagization" adopted in Kenya in 1955, noted that the process of proletarianization and agricultural modernization amounted to "trying to effect in a few months a major social revolution which took 500 years or more to achieve in England" (Elkins 263).

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"nameless British officer" would have been accompanying the train on its "maiden voyage":

> The project took five years to complete, as well as the lives of several hundred imported Indian workers. When it was finished, the British realized that there were no passengers to help defray the costs of their conceit. And so the push for white settlers; the consolidation of lands that could be used to help lure newcomers; the cultivation of cash crops like coffee and tea; the necessity of an administrative apparatus that could extend as far as the tracks, into the heart of an unknown continent. And missions and churches to vanquish the fear that an unknown land produced. (367)

Although Obama points out that the railroad's construction ended up killing large numbers of Indian laborers, his estimate is far too low: according to the historian Caroline Elkins, perhaps as many as 10,000 "coolies" were "killed or maimed by the punishing work, disease, and frequent lion attacks." Furthermore, Obama's account erroneously implies that it was the English zeal for white supremacist dominance – that is, racist irrationalism – that brought the railway into being. The land-grab, the settlement policy, the establishment of plantations, the imposition of colonial state power, the institution of Christianity: all these policies and actions presumably provided an ex post facto rationale for the "folly" of the British "conceit." This idealist inversion of causality effaces the economic basis of the colonial project, one that continues to wreak its destructive effects on the material circumstances and consciousness of the Nairobi waiter. Obama's empathetic entry into the minds of actors in past and present Kenyan history purports to draw them into the circle of humanity but ends up papering over the sources of oppression. His viewpoint remains that of the man behind the glass, not of the man on the other side.[16]

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[16] Elkins, 2. While the railway, originally called the "Uganda Railway," came to be called the "Lunatic Express" – perhaps the basis of Obama's terming it a "folly" – the project was crucial to Britain's colonial enterprise in East Africa. It served not only to develop the plantation economy but also to transport arms for the suppression of native rebellions and to thwart German colonial ambitions in Uganda, the Sudan, and even Egypt. See Charles Miller, *The Lunatic Express: An Entertainment in Imperialism* (New York: Macmillan, 1971); and Charles Hardy, *The Iron Snake* (London, Collins, 1965). For a discussion of

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"Like a single-celled creature": Dialogue, description, and metaphor

Throughout *Dreams from My Father*, Obama's deployment of point of view shoulders much of the text's ideological work – not only by giving the narrator a high degree of control over the consciousness of the characters who people the text's landscape, but also by persuading the reader to assent to the narrator's implied evaluation of the spectrum of moral and political stances that these characters exhibit. Other micro-level rhetorical devices – in particular, metaphor, dialogue, and physical description – reinforce the text's strategic use of narrative point of view. These devices, while at times conjoined with the observations of the I-narrator, often crop up in passages where narratorial intervention is subdued. The judgments we readers are invited to make thus appear to flow directly from the characters and events described in the text rather than from the acts of recreation and judgment offered by the narrating self.

Obama's account of the community meeting that is supposed to have terminated the campaign to get asbestos removed from the Altgeld Gardens housing project displays his deft use of metaphor to shape the reader's viewpoint. Here is the relevant background. Having labored for well over a year to come up with a project that will mobilize the residents to pool their energies and fight in their common self-interest, Obama and his core of committed activists – Sadie, Shirley, and a few other mostly middle-aged black women – have managed to expand their activist base, in terms of both numbers and age. At a meeting where a large group of residents – seven hundred in all – intend to confront a representative of the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), Linda, the young woman newly designated to act as chair, refuses to allow the CHA official to use the microphone to give anything more than a "yes" or "no" answer, pulling the microphone back with "the slightest hint of mockery in the gesture, the movement of a child who's goading a sibling with an ice-cream cone." She does not see Obama, in the back of the room, signaling her to let the bureaucrat have his say; "a struggle ensued between the distinguished official and the pregnant young woman in stretch pants and blouse. Behind them, Sadie stood motionless, her face shining, her eyes wide." The

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resistance to the construction of the railway, see A. T. Matson, *Nandi Resistance to British Rule 1890 - 1906*, (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1972).

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FHA representative, panicked, rushed out of the room. "Like some single-celled creature," writes Obama, "people near the door lurched after him, and he broke into a near trot. I ran myself, and by the time I had fought my way outside, the director had secured himself in his limousine while a swell of people surrounded the car, some pressing their faces against the tinted glass, others laughing, still others cursing, most just standing about in confusion." The limousine inched through the crowd and "sped away, lumping over the cratered street, running over a curb, vanishing from sight." An aide to the local alderman charges that the event was instigated by a racist white politician; an elderly resident laments that "white folks" watching television would be "seeing us act like a bunch of niggers! Just like they expect." Dr. Martha Collier, a local school principal who is Obama's friend, adjudges the confrontation a complete failure but remarks, "Something like this is just part of growing up. And sometimes growing up hurts." The next week, Obama concedes, "we could claim a victory of sorts," since "men dressed in moon-suits and masks were seen all over the Gardens, sealing any asbestos that posed an immediate disaster." But Obama "couldn't shake the feeling that the window of possibility that had been pried open so briefly had slammed shut once again." When soon thereafter HUD (Housing and Urban Development) announces budget cuts that will make it impossible for the CHA to remove the asbestos as well as make other necessary repairs, the campaign, in his narration, collapses. The chapter detailing the failed confrontation with the CHA is the one that ends with Sadie's sad pronouncement, "Ain't nothing gonna change, Mr. Obama" (244-46).[17]

The actual record of 1980s activism in the CHA housing projects suggests that Obama prematurely adjudged the Altgeld Gardens campaign a failure; in fact the militant confrontation he describes played an important role in motivating an eventual city-wide asbestos clean-up in public housing. But the evident implication of Obama's narration is not only that the campaign failed but that the reason it did so is that the residents blew the opportunity to negotiate with the bureaucracy in a respectful manner. Here is where the metaphor chosen to describe the scene – the designation of the crowd as a "single-celled

[17] For the historical prototypes of some of Obama's Altgeld Gardens "characters," see "They knew him when: First impressions of Barack Obama," *Chicago Tribune*, November 15, 2008; and Lynn Sweet Lynn, "Obama's research memo – on himself," *Chicago Sun-Times* 20 February 2007 (<http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2007/02/sweet_blog_special_obama_in_lo.html>).

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creature" – figures centrally. Working in the Alinsky tradition of grassroots community organizing, Obama is presumably committed to training the Altgeld Gardens residents to form a conscious collective that fights in their group self-interest. But this display of bold mass action – in which the CHA representative is treated not like a "distinguished official," but a hack and antagonist – is apparently beyond the pale. Indeed, the comparison of the crowd with a massive amoeba suggests that the residents, losing their rationality and acting like a mob, have moved backward on the evolutionary scale. This suggestion of regression is reinforced by Obama's barely metaphorical description of Linda acting like a child in her treatment of the CHA representative; it is compounded by Dr. Collier's characterization of the event as "part of growing up." In this account, Obama the man is in the background, waving helplessly to the stubborn Linda; but Obama the author wields the devices of narrative to shape decisively the reader's understanding of the dos and don'ts of bottom-up activism.[18]

As the asbestos rally episode demonstrates, Obama writes a lively prose that distills character and action in sharp and memorable detail. A number of Obama's cameo portraits of individuals – especially of activists embracing strongly-held class- or race-based politics – deploy this skill to validate Obama's centrist political outlook. A description of a political meeting at Columbia University, for instance, features Kwame Toure (the former Stokeley Carmichael) browbeating a woman who inquires into the plausibility of his proposal to "establish economic ties between Africa and Harlem that

[18] Yvonne Lloyd, an Altgeld Gardens activist – "Shirley" in the autobiography – noted that Obama's advice to her was routinely, "Don't get confrontational, don't raise your voice, don't scream and holler. . . . You'll get more the other way" (quoted in Byron York, "What did Obama Do as a Community Organizer?" *NationalReview.com* 8 September 2008). The nature and extent of Obama's involvement in the Altgeld Gardens asbestos removal campaign were the focus a media flurry in early 2007 that was seized upon by his detractors. The *Los Angeles Times* published an article asserting that Obama had claimed too much credit in the activism; the Obama campaign – which ordinarily ignored hostile attacks on the candidate's career – published a detailed refutation. See Peter Wallsten, "Fellow Activists Say Obama's Account Has Too Many "I's," *LA Times*, 19 February 2007; and the Obama campaign statement at <http://www.barackobama.com/2007/02/19>. Partly at issue was the criticism of Obama's account by Hazel Johnson, an Altgeld Gardens resident who claimed to have played a major role in the campaign and to have been unjustly omitted from his narrative. Johnson and her daughter Cheryl Johnson also charged that the encounter with the CHA official – at which they claimed to have been present – did not result in disruption: "'I think he portrayed us as barbaric that we ran behind CHA officials beating on the car, and that didn't take place, because I was in that particular meeting,' stated Cheryl Johnson" (Mike Flannery, "Obama's Community Service Called Under Question: Altgeld Gardens Resident Who Worked With Senator In 1980s Says He Is Exaggerating His Role," WBBM Chicago Radio, 20 February 2007 (<http://www.cbs2chicago.com/topstories/barack.obama.altgeld.2.335433.html>).

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would circumvent white capitalist imperialism." He cuts her off: "'It's only the brainwashing that you've received that makes it impractical, sister,' he said. His eyes glowed inward as he spoke, the eyes of a madman or a saint." This fanatical portraiture of the Pan-Africanist and former Black Panther Toure is compounded by Obama's depiction of two young female leftists at the meeting – one black, one Asian – engaged in debate over Trotsky's historical role. As he walks out of Toure's presentation, Obama hears them calling one another "Stalinist pig" and "[r]eformist bitch." This experience, taken to be a typifying gauge of historical realities, supplies the basis for Obama's narratorial conclusion that "[t]he movement had died years ago, shattered into a thousand fragments." Every path to change was well trodden, every strategy exhausted" (139-140). The stage is set for the call for a new politics of change

In a parallel characterization, Asante, a black nationalist educator whose Chicago office is filled with Afrocentric decorations, is shown to go on automatic when Obama inquires into his educational philosophy:

> "The first thing you have to realize . . . is that the public school system is not about educating black children. Never has been. Inner-city schools are about social control. Period. They're operated as holding pens – miniature jails, really. . . . From day one, what's he learning about? Someone else's history. Someone else's culture. Not only that, this culture he's supposed to learn is the same culture that's systematically rejected him, denied his humanity." Asante leaned back in his chair, his hands folded across his belly.

Continuing his monologue, Asante proposes that black children be "rooted in their own traditions" and taught that "Africans are a communal people." When finally interrupted, he speaks glowingly of his "first trip to the continent" when he "felt like I had come home"; he looks "momentarily confused" upon learning that his interlocutor, despite having a father from Kenya, has never visited the homeland (258-59). Obama does not explicitly confront Asante's view of the inner-city school system, which contains a significant critique of institutional racism. Instead, Obama hoists Asante on his own petard by portraying his talk as a non-stop monologue and noting, midway through it, that Asante folds his hands under his stomach. The implication of this self-satisfied gesture is

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subliminal but effective: Asante emerges as something of a gasbag, enamoured of his own words. While Obama himself offers a culturalist analysis of the "tribal" behavior of young black men, Asante's brand of cultural nationalism is presumably rooted in a romantic Afrocentricity and dogma of victimization that cannot help – indeed, can only hurt – the very people it would empower. Recapitulated speech and physical details function to reveal character, which bears its meaning on its sleeve: no argument is apparently needed to assess what might be the strengths or shortcomings of what Asante has to say.[19]

Obama subjects not just black nationalists but also white progressives to this method of critique by innuendo. Obama's portrait of Marty Kaufman, the man who hires him to do community organizing in Chicago – initially seen as "a white man of medium height wearing a rumpled suit over a pudgy frame" and a tea-stained shirt (140-41) – suggests the fundamental irrelevance of a class-based reformist politics to the South Side's black denizens, particularly when espoused by a white organizer. Preoccupied with the need to "rebuild manufacturing" in a city where the working class has been devastated by the closing of the steel mills, Marty wishes to "give people some short-term victories" that will "show [them] how much power they have once they stop fighting each other and start going after the real enemy." When the naive Obama asks who that is, Marty replies, "The investment bankers. The politicians. The fat cat lobbyists" (150). While Obama at first likes Marty – "he wasn't as cynical as he liked to make out" – and acknowledges the appeal of Marty's "confidence in the populist impulse and working-class solidarity" (152), he revises this estimate of his mentor as the prospects for success dim. Marty becomes increasingly limited in his expectations and urges Obama to quit, saying, "You need to worry about your own development. Stay here and you're bound to fail." Obama reflects, "As I listened to him lay out his plans, it occurred to me that he'd made no particular attachments to people or place during his three years in the area, that whatever human warmth or connection he might require came from elsewhere. . . . In his work, it was only the idea that drove him." In his emotional detachment, Marty more

[19] While a prototype of Asante has not been identified, Rafiq, a black nationalist subject to comparable critical characterization by Obama, has been identified as Salim Al-Nurrudin ("Facing the reality of deprivation." *Irish Times*, January 23, 2009. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/opinion/2009/0115/1231738223323.html>).

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than faintly recalls the manipulative Communist Brother Jack of Ellison's *Invisible Man* – another frumpily dressed white leftist male who is shown to view urban African Americans as pawns in a grander scheme of class warfare. Marty, at most a social democrat, cannot be accused of being a red. Nor, as a committed community activist, can he be accused of embracing theory at the sacrifice of experience; his version of political leftism hardly entails peddling left-wing literature on the fringes of college towns. But his class-based vision of social change nonetheless strikes the young Obama as politically mechanical and emotionally barren. Obama's somewhat unsympathetic novelistic portraiture helps us forget that Marty in fact continues his work as a grass-roots organizer, while it is Obama who moves on.[20]

Perhaps the most fully novelized character appearing in *Dreams from My Father*, however, is the elderly black man named Frank who functions as the young Obama's principal mentor during his teen years in Hawaii. A poet "who had enjoyed some modest notoriety once" and "a contemporary of Richard Wright and Langston Hughes during his years in Chicago," Frank – a drinking buddy of Stanley Dunham – is portrayed as a grizzled, dew-lapped, whisky-swilling former radical with an "ill-kempt gray Afro" who "would read us his poetry whenever we stopped by his house" (76-77). A dashiki-wearing critic of white supremacy, Frank complains that his corns result from the futile effort to fit African feet into European shoes; alerts the young Obama to the dangers of being co-opted when he goes off to college – which he calls "an advanced degree in compromise . . . where you go to get *trained*" (97); and reminds him of the unbridgeability of the racial divide. When Obama brings Frank his grandfather's aggrieved reaction to an incident revealing his grandmother's irrational fear of young black men, Frank affirms that she is right to feel that way – "She understands that black people have a reason to hate" – and that Stanley, for all his friendship with Frank, will never be able to know what it is like to be black. "[H]e can come over here and drink my whiskey and fall asleep in that chair you're sitting in right now," says Frank. "See, that's something I can never do in his house. . . . I have to be vigilant, for my own survival." It is after his last conversation with Frank that Obama feels "utterly alone" (90-91).

[20] Marty appears to be a composite character based upon traits of two organizers with whom Obama had contact: Jerry Kellman and Mike Kruglig. See Judis, "Creation Myth."

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While the real identity of Frank has been bruited about in the right-wing blogosphere, many readers of *Dreams from My Father* may be unaware that the historical prototype of Obama's Frank is Frank Marshall Davis, a red poet and journalist who moved to Hawaii in the early 1950s – at the suggestion of Paul Robeson – to escape the heat of McCarthyism. Author of six separate volumes of poems – many of them first published in left-wing magazines – and an extensive body of reportage and commentary, Davis had been an important participant in the proletarian and Popular Frontist literary movements of the 1930s and 1940s. Obama's portrait of Davis as a cynical black nationalist misses the Marxist core of Davis's outlook. In "Snapshots of the Cotton South" (1937), for instance, Davis had written,

> The rich men grow richer
> Big planters get bigger
> Controlling the land and the towns
> Ruling their puppet officials
> Feeding white croppers and tenant farmers
> Banquets of race hate for the soul
> Sparse crumbs for their thin bodies
> Realizing
> The feat of animosity
> Will dull their minds
> To their own plight.

Davis's portrayal of the genesis of racist ideology in the divide-and-conquer political economy of capitalism hardly accords with Obama's portrait of him as a biological essentialist highly skeptical of the possibility of overcoming racism. Notably, indeed, Davis had been married to a white woman with whom he had five children.[21]

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[21] Frank Marshall Davis, "Snapshots of the Cotton South," *New Challenge*, 1, 1 (1937). *New Challenge*, a black Marxist literary magazine, was co-edited by Marian Minus, Dorothy West., and Richard Wright. See Davis, *Black Moods: Collected Poems*, ed. John Edgar Tidwell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Davis, *Writings of Frank Marshall Davis: A Voice of the Black Press*, ed. John Edgar Tidwell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); and Davis, *Livin' the Blues: Memoirs of a Black Journalist and Poet*, ed. John Edgar Tidwell (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

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Davis's class-conscious antiracism is effaced from Obama's portrait; when the older man advises him to "keep his eyes open [and] [s]tay awake" in college, the narrator reflects, "It made me smile, thinking back on Frank and his old Black Power dashiki self. In some ways he was an incurable as my mother, as certain in his faith, living in the same sixties time warp that Hawaii had created" (97-98). Obama's depiction of Davis as an embittered alcoholic and 1960s leftover carries the implication that the various beliefs constituting Davis's "faith" need not be confronted seriously because they are products of a "time warp." Frank is "fictionalized" in the fullest sense of the word: not simply subjected to novelistic characterization through dialogue and physical description, but also constructed through a highly selective drawing upon the historical record to suit the ideological ends of Obama's text. Indeed, Obama's success in creating a persuasive portrait of a cagey but misguided – and misguiding – mentor is contingent upon his effacing the roots of his mentor's radicalism in Depression-era Communism. We should keep in mind the structured silences informing Obama's portrait of Frank Marshall Davis – a black man, a Marxist, and a father figure – as we approach his representation of Barack Obama, Senior.[22]

"It was the silence that betrayed us": Fathers and sons

The elder Obama: his presence supplies the title of *Dreams from My Father* and, explicitly or implicitly, informs every page. The subject of a creation myth bordering on hagiography when his son was a child, the father emerges as fragile and thin, walking with a cane, when he arrives for his month-long visit to his son and former wife in 1971. Although he makes an impressive presentation about the Kenyan independence struggle to his son's classmates and teaches him the beauty of the body in dance, these utopian moments cannot compensate for his hyper-critical comments on the boy's study habits or, more fundamentally, for his previous abandonment and neglect. Although father and son

[22] Obama's relationship with Davis has become a staple of right-wing attacks portraying the now-President as a closet socialist. See, for example, "Is Barack Obama A Marxist Mole?" in the ill-named *Accuracy in Media*, March 18, 2008; and David Freddoso's *The Case Against Barack Obama: The Unlikely Rise and Unexamined Agenda of the Media's Favorite Candidate* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2008). For a critique of the inaccuracy and "red-baiting" in Freddoso's book, see John K. Wilson, "John Freddoso's Hatchet Job," 12 September 2008 (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-k-wilson/david-freddosos-hatchet-j_b_118410.html>).

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exchange infrequent letters over the next several years, Obama's impassive behavior on hearing of his father's death displays the depth of his alienation. Auma's earlier depiction of the "Old Man" – initially an outspoken Luo critic of the authoritarian Kikuyu Kenyatta, subsequently an alcoholic, bad driver, wife abuser, and bigmouthed petty bureaucrat – heightens his anxiety that his father was a concocted figure on the screen like the wizard of Oz. It is only when Obama travels to Kenya that he is able to fill in enough gaps in his father's story to enable him, in the text's emotionally wrought finale, to understand who his father was and forgive him for his silence over the years.

Such is the ostensible trajectory of Obama's quest narrative. But Obama's discovery of the truth about his father – or at least his fashioning of a narrative that provisionally figures as true – is contingent upon a high degree of fictionalization on his own part. During his Kenyan visit, Obama receives scattered and contradictory information about his father. As soon as he arrives in Nairobi, he learns that his father was a figure of public repute: a British Airways security official recognizes his name. From a range of relatives, Obama hears anecdotes illustrating his father's poor driving, heavy drinking, and inflated ego. Yet he is also told that the senior Obama, although a man who enjoyed his double-double scotches and gave expensive gifts, disdained the amassment of private wealth. A cousin relates an episode in which Obama's father used his Rolls Royce as a taxi, carrying several workers home to separate neighborhoods and refusing payment of any kind. The patchwork of stories and impressions is sewn together in a passage of some thirty pages in the narrative's closing section, where Obama condenses the translated oral account given by Sarah Onyango Obama ("Granny Sarah") – the grandmother who was the third wife of Obama's paternal grandfather, Hussein Onyango Obama, and who raised Obama's father.[23]

Granny Sarah's narrative emphasizes the tangled relationships of successive generations of Obama's male forebears. Onyango, an ambitious and gifted man who left the countryside to work for various British employers in Nairobi as a house servant, earned the antipathy of his own father and brothers because of his early embrace of Western ways. He would not tolerate physical abuse – once thrashing a white employer

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[23] Sarah Onyango Obama is not Barack Obama's biological grandmother, but in Luo society she is designated as such. For the Obama family tree, see the *Chicago Sun-Times* series by Scott Fornek (<http://www.suntimes.com/news/politics/obama/familytree/index.html>).

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who tried to cane him – but was brutal to his own three wives, especially Obama's biological grandmother, Akumu. Although Onyango was originally sympathetic with the Kenyan liberation movement, Granny is said to have told her grandson, his arrest and approximately six-month detention by the British (from which he returned limping and prematurely aged) resulted not from any revolutionary sympathizing on his part, but from his having been falsely accused of sedition by a fellow-Luo who was attempting to seize Onyango's land. "What your grandfather respected was strength," states Granny (407). But he became skeptical of the independence movement because "the white man was always improving himself, whereas the African was suspicious of anything new." He would tell his son, "How can the African defeat the white man . . . when he cannot even make his own bicycle?" (417). Granny's portrait of Onyango leads Obama to relinquish the idealized image he had had of his grandfather as "an independent man, a man of his people, opposed to white rule." That image was now "scrambled . . . causing ugly words to flash across my mind. Uncle Tom. Collaborator. House nigger" (406). This impression is enhanced by the documents remaining from Onyango's days as a servant, all but one – the last – testifying to his having been a highly capable servant and cook (425-26).[24]

The image of Obama's father that emerges from Granny's account is of a brilliant but lonesome and rebellious youth. After his mother, Akumu, fleeing from her husband's violence, temporarily abandoned her children, her son rejected her and went to live with his father's third wife, Sarah. He chafed against his father's discipline, was expelled for misbehavior from the mission school, and in his early twenties took a job working for the railway; "bored . . . he became distracted by the politics of the country . . . began to attend political meetings after work and came to know the KANU [Kenyan African National Union] leadership" (419). He was once arrested and jailed, but – because he was not deeply involved on the leadership level – quickly released. Above all, according to Granny Sarah, young Barack was ambitious to go abroad to study – a dream fulfilled when, after writing dozens of letters of application to U.S. universities, he was admitted

[24] KANU was the Kikuyu-Luo coalition party, formed in 1960, that figured prominently in the movement for independence, winning the first colony-wide elections in 1961. While Kikuyus – who had led the Mau Mau revolt and opposed the British most militantly – led in KANU (Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first president, was Kikuyu), Luos had significant power in the party. Since Barack Obama, Sr., arrived in Hawaii in 1959, Granny Sarah's narrative is inaccurate here.

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to the University of Hawaii and was chosen to participate in the "airlift" that brought the first generation of potential leaders of the new Kenya to the West. Granny Sarah's narrative emphasizes the troubled relationship between Obama's father and grandfather, noting that many years later, "when Barack fell from power, he would try to hide his problems from the old man . . . continu[ing] to bring gifts that he could no longer afford." When she would scold her grandson for being "too stubborn in his dealings with the government," he would "talk to me about principles, and I would tell him that his principles weighed heavily upon his children." Barack remained alienated from his father until the old man died. Granny Sarah's narrative ends with the words, "[I]t is only when he sorted through a few of the old man's belongings that I saw him begin to weep" (424). The parallel with the ending of Obama's own narrative is hard to miss.[25]

As Obama views the fragmentary documents that constitute his grandfather's and his father's inheritance, he summons up poignant images of the two men. He first envisions his grandfather,

> a wiry, grim-faced boy, almost ridiculous in his oversized trousers and his buttonless shirt. I watch his father turn away from him and hear his brothers laugh. . . . As his figure turns and starts back down the road of red earth, I know that for him the path of his life is now altered irreversibly, completely. . . . He will have to reinvent himself in this arid, solitary place. Through force of will, he will create a life out of the scraps of an unknown world and the memories of a world rendered obsolete.

This picture of Onyango as a youth fades into one of him as an old man, still hearing the laughter and rebukes as he "waits to die, alone" (427-28).

Obama then conjures up a series of pictures of his father – first as a nine-year-old boy rejecting his mother, then as a young man at a "narrow desk," realizing that "[h]e, too, will have to invent himself." He furiously starts writing letters that he will send out "like messages in bottles that will drop through a post office slot into a vast ocean and

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[25] Although in *Dreams from My Father* Obama describes the "airlift" as a project of the Kennedy brothers, the Kennedys became involved only a year after the Kenyan Luo political leader Tom Mboya initiated the project of "Airlift Africa."

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perhaps allow him to escape the island of his father's shame." When "his ship came sailing in," Obama continues, his father must have felt "lucky," now that he had "the degree, the ascot, the American wife, the car, the words, the figures, the wallet." With all his success, however, he would "discover that he had not escaped after all . . . that he remained trapped on his father's island, with its fissures of anger and doubt and defeat" (428). It is at this point that Obama drops to the ground and touches his father's grave:

> Oh, Father, I cried. There was no shame in your confusion. Just as there had been no shame in your father's before you. No shame in the fear, or in the fear of his father before him. There was only shame in the silence fear had produced. It was the silence that betrayed us. If it weren't for that silence, your grandfather might have told your father that he could never escape himself, or re-create himself alone. Your father might have taught those same lessons to you. And you, the son, might have taught your father that this new world that was beckoning all of you involved more than just railroads and indoor toilets and irrigation ditches and gramophones, lifeless instruments that could be absorbed into the old ways. You might have told him that these instruments carried with them a dangerous power, that they demanded a different way of seeing the world. That this power could be absorbed only alongside faith born out of hardship, a faith that wasn't new, that wasn't black or white or Christian or Muslim but that pulsed in the heart of the first African village and the first Kansas homestead – a faith in other people. (429)

Obama feels "the circle finally close" as he sees that his "life in America – the black life, the white life, the sense of abandonment I'd felt as a boy, the frustration and hope I'd witnessed in Chicago – all of it was connected with this small plot of earth an ocean away. . . . The pain I felt was my father's pain. My questions were my brothers' questions. Their struggle, my birthright" (429-30).

Hesitant until now to ventriloquize the thoughts and feelings of his Kenyan relatives, Obama, after hearing Granny Sarah's tale, finally feels able speculatively to inhabit the consciousness of both his grandfather and his father. The quest for identity has been completed; the son has moved through and past his anger and become

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reconciled with the father – indeed, now appears empowered to offer guidance to both him and his grandfather, sympathizing with their shame and fear and forgiving their silence. But the high emotional charge – and Oedipal inflection – of this moment of closure are not accomplished without significant rhetorical coercion. Obama's decision to characterize both his grandfather and his father as atomistic individuals, isolated ("islanded") from the ocean of humanity and forced to "reinvent" themselves, imposes upon members of an African society that was at least residually communal a concept of selfhood that has its origin in a distinctly Western – and capitalist – historical experience. At the moment when the text purports to transcend national and racial divisions in a celebration of cosmopolitan humanism, it effects a Eurocentric psychological move. This individualistic focus upon self-invention is accompanied by a reading of history that jumbles the temporal processes it would encompass and clarify. When Obama imaginatively counsels his grandfather – through his ventriloquizing father – that the "power" of modernity consisted in more than "just railroads and indoor toilets and irrigation ditches and gramophones" (advice that the cagey Onyango most likely did not need to hear from anyone), this catalogue equates the forces of production that through violence brought the colonial plantation economy into being (railroads and irrigation ditches) with the conveniences and luxuries resulting – for some – from that process. Modernity thus emerges as at once inevitable and trivial. And the "power" needed to grapple with historical change derives not from an understanding of material causality, but from a "faith born of hardship . . . a faith in other people" that presumably "pulsed" in the hearts of both nineteenth-century Kansas homesteaders – themselves hardly innocent participants in the project of U.S. manifest destiny – and the inhabitants of the cradle of humanity – "the first African village" – some tens of thousands of years before. Presumably this "faith" is to be counterposed with the partial and limited faiths embraced by such "time warped" relics of the 1960s as Ann Dunham and Frank. Although Obama's graveside speech is intended to mesh the historical experiences of his white and black families within a world-historical narrative conjoining their experiences in different nations and continents, this effort at metonymic inclusion – to "contain multitudes," in Walt Whitman's phrase – is contingent upon a substantial fictionalization of their lives.

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Indeed, the fictionality of the finale to *Dreams from My Father* consists not just in Obama's dramatic shaping and interpretation of his father's and grandfather's lives, but also in his occlusion of important information – available both from Granny Sarah and from the published historical record – about the relationship both men had with the movement for Kenyan independence. In a 2008 interview with the *London Times*, Sarah Onyango Obama supplied an account of her deceased husband's imprisonment that diverges significantly from the one she is said to have passed along to her grandson in *Dreams from My Father*. Onyango, according to this later and fuller account, was not merely detained for some six months, as Obama reports, but instead imprisoned by the British for two full years in Nairobi's maximum security Kamiti prison, where as a political prisoner he was regularly tortured to reveal what he knew about the growing insurgency. According to the *London Times*, "Mr Onyango was denounced to the authorities by his white employer, who sacked him on suspicion of consorting with 'troublemakers.'" Sarah Onyango stated that "[t]he African warders were instructed by the white soldiers to whip him every morning and evening till he confessed. . . . This was like a death camp because some detainees died while being tortured." She asserted, further, that "her husband was told that he would be killed or maimed if he refused to reveal what he knew of the insurgency, and was beaten repeatedly until he promised 'never to rejoin any groupings opposed to the white man's rule.'" Even after he confessed, the torture continued; a number of Onyango's fellow-prisoners were beaten to death. Sarah Onyango concluded, "My late husband was lucky to have left the prison alive without any serious bodily harm, save for the permanent scars from beatings and torture, which remained on his body till he died." While Onyango may well have attempted to absorb the ways of the West in the years preceding his imprisonment, and even have expressed skepticism about African self-rule in their aftermath, the length and brutality of his imprisonment indicate that the British hardly viewed him as a reliable "Uncle Tom," "collaborator," or "house nigger." Indeed, Obama's earlier view of his grandfather as "an independent man, a man of his people, opposed to white rule" was in fact closer to the historical mark than the revised opinion that he claims to have reached after hearing Granny Sarah's story. There is little basis for Obama's assertion that his grandfather acted out of "shame" or "fear"; and while Onyango may have been

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emotionally silent in relation to his son, he was permanently scarred – and nearly lost his life – for having maintained his silence with his British jailors. Obama's silence about Onyango's politically motivated silence constitutes a troubling ideological silence in the text.[26]

Still more troubling, however, is Obama's ventriloquized version of his father's ambitions as entailing "the degree, the ascot, the American wife, the car, the words, the figures, the wallet." For the older Obama was not primarily an ambitious careerist, but instead a distinctly leftist voice in the mid-1960s debates over the direction that post-independence Kenya should take. In 1965 – four years after his son's birth, and two years after he left Hawaii to study economics at Harvard – Obama, Sr., contributed to the *East Africa Journal* a polemical critique of "Sessional Paper No. 10 on Harambee and the Principles of African Socialism," a widely debated policy document authored by a committee headed by the prominent Luo politician Tom Mboya. Obama agreed with the document's framers that the development of the new nation's productive forces was an urgent priority, making it necessary to "encourage international trade, foreign investment, etc." But he queried whether agricultural development had to be based upon a policy of "land consolidation" that ruled out "communal ownership"; he called, instead, for the government, "if need be, [to] force people to consolidate through . . . clan cooperatives rather than through individual initiative." Decrying the growing polarity between "the haves and the have-nots in Kenyan society," he queried the plan's description of Kenya as a "classless" society, as well as its inadequacies in showing "how we [are] going to remove the disparities in our country such as the concentration of economic power in Asian and European hands . . . and at the same time assimilat[e] these groups to build one country." Calling for the government to "tax the rich" – even up to 100% of their income – he placed a priority upon "find[ing] means by which we can redistribute our economic

[26] Ben Macintyre and Paul Orengoh, "Beatings and abuse made Barack Obama's grandfather loathe the British: The President-elect's relatives have told how the family was a victim of the Mau Mau revolt," *London Times*, 3 December 2008. One of the favored tortures used by the British was the twisting or crushing of testicles, often resulting in permanent limping on the part of its victims. For more on the significant role played by Luo activists in Nairobi in the early phases of the Kenyan revolt against British rule, as well as the centrality of Kamiti prison in the suppression of the movement, see Anderson, 184-98. During the Mau Mau revolt, Kamiti would be the principal site where women rebels – and suspected rebels – would be incarcerated (Elkins 221-31`). See also Cora Ann Presley, *The Mau Mau Rebellion, Kikuyu Women, and Social Change* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992).

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gains to the benefit of all and at the same time be able to channel some of these gains to future production." Aware that Kenya had undergone an immense transformation in a very short period of time, Obama saw that "development" was a two-edged sword, with the potential either to improve the conditions of the masses of people or consolidate the power and wealth of the few.[27]

It bears noting that Obama, Sr.'s contribution to the debate over the future of Kenya was titled "Problems Facing Our Socialism": his choice of possessive pronoun is telling. In his polemic the author several times refers to the challenge facing the emerging nation as one in which socialism and capitalism are in sharp antagonism. He evinces acquaintance with the literature of "scientific socialism" and "communism" and counterposes the Mboya document's hazy proclamation that "society will reward [the] efforts" of its productive citizenry with the doctrine of "reward to each according to his needs" – a formulation echoing Marx's famous description of the guiding principle of communism in *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*. Obama, Sr., explicitly invokes Marx by name to counter the document's contention that "the company form of business organization is a departure from the direct individual ownership typical of Marx's day." He writes,

> Yet one who has read Marx cannot fail to see that corporations are not only what Marx referred to as the advanced stage of capitalism but Marx even called it finance capitalism by which a few would control the finances of so many and through this have not only economic power but political as well.

For the senior Obama, what mattered in Marx's theory was not its immediate connection with the dominant forms of capitalism in the nineteenth century but its larger structural explanation of the relationship between economic power and class rule. He was chastising those who, claiming Marxism to be dated, threatened to become apologists for

[27] Barack Obama, "Problems Facing Our Socialism: Another Critique of Sessional Paper No. 10," *East Africa Journal* (July 1965): 26-33, quoted 26-29, 31. "Position Paper #10," while expressing a group position, was authored by Mboya. The senior Obama's essay has been circulated widely in the conservative blogosphere; see, for example, Greg Ransom, "Obama Hid His Socialism from Readers," 7 April 2008, <http://blog.mises.org/archives/008007.asp>. Obama, Sr.'s contribution to the debate over Kenyan development is mentioned briefly in David William Cohen and E. S. Atiambo Odhiambo, *The Risks of Knowledge* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004), 182.

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the dominance of Kenyan society by a reconfigured ruling elite. The "dreams" *of* Obama's father – not to be confused with the dreams his son would draw *from* him – were, at least for a time, distinctly radical, connected with the same global leftist matrix from which Frank Marshall Davis had emerged. It is not incidental that the radicalism of both the surrogate father and the biological father are expunged from Obama's text.[28]

In the light of "Problems Facing Our Socialism," the older Obama's relationship with his colleagues in the project of constructing a new Kenya emerges as something a good deal more complex than a tribal warring over government posts and access to resources. What was at stake was the outcome of the class struggle following the dissolution of the colonial state: the contested meaning of "*Uhuru!*" Within this debate, tribal loyalties were for several years trumped – or at least restrained – by class politics: the Luos, for instance, comprised tendencies ranging from the pro-USSR socialist Jaramogi Oginga Odinga (who served as Kenya's first vice president) to the pro-capitalist (and, some have alleged, CIA-connected) Mboya. Obama and Mboya clearly differed significantly over important matters of policy: yet the tone of Obama's *East Africa Journal* essay is sharp but comradely, indicating his attempt to maintain unity amidst a heated debate that would presumably continue for several years. Besides, Mboya had acted as the older Obama's mentor, sponsoring his participation in the original "airlift" and maintaining contact when Obama was in the United States. When Mboya was assassinated in July, 1969, Obama, who had been present and witnessed the shooting, testified at the trial of the alleged assassin, Nahashon Isaac Njenga Njoroge, who was almost certainly a government operative. Afterwards Obama was tailed for weeks by government agents and was himself almost killed by a car in an "accident" that, he later told a friend, he knew to have been arranged by "the same people who killed Mboya." Obama's visit to his son and former wife in Hawaii in 1971 occurred while he was convalescing not from a random car accident, but from this assassination attempt. It was not simply the petty interference of tribal politics in government, this friend concluded, but the demoralization and intimidation he experienced after Mboya's death, that pushed Obama, Sr.,into his depressed, angry, and alcoholic state – that made him a "broken

[28] Obama, **"**Problems Facing Our Socialism," 26, 28, 30; Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/index.htm>. The term "scientific socialism" appears throughout the oeuvre of Marx and his collaborator Frederick Engels.

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spirit." The dreams of the older Obama cannot be separated from the political struggle over the future of Kenya that dominated the decade of the 1960s.[29]

The clear evidence of the senior Obama's early radical political involvements does not negate the stories about the disappointed older man, enraged at the dominance of post-independence Kenya by corrupt tribalist politics, that his son would hear from Auma, Roy, and other relatives. But this information calls for a substantially revised view of Barack Obama, Senior. The "principles" about which he spoke – to Ann when he was young, to Granny when he was older – were not abstract ideals, but concrete proposals for how the new Kenya – and perhaps, given his interest in Kremlin politics, much of the formerly colonized entire world – could free itself from imperialist domination. His open-handed behavior with money and gifts – including the use of his Rolls Royce as a free public taxi – can be seen less as a way of calling attention to his status and more as an enactment, on the personal level, of Marxist principles. His chronic inability to feather his own nest might testify less to his stubborn individualism than to his belief that the country's wealth should be shared. The actual substance *of* the dreams of the older Obama – the "higher form of power" in which he believed – is excluded from the circle that is closed at the end of *Dreams from My Father*.

* * *

For the circle *is* closed. Obama may write in his 1995 Introduction that, because he is young, "still busy charting his way through the world," his autobiography possesses neither the "summing up" nor the "closure" routinely associated with the genre. To be

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[29] On the relationship between Mboya and Obama, Sr., see Sallie Jacobs, "A Father's Charm, Absence," *Boston Globe* 21 September 2008. The person to whom Obama confided his suspicions about his attempted assassination in 1974 was Pake Zane, a friend from his days at the University of Hawaii. Although Njoroge, the alleged assassin of Mboya, was convicted and hanged, after his arrest he reportedly asked, "Why don't you go after the big man?" a remark interpreted to refer to Kenyatta. It is not clear whether Obama actually identified Njoroge at the trial; he may heeded the threats that he and his family would be killed if he did. For more on Mboya, see David Goldsworthy, *Tom Mboya: The Man Kenya Wanted to Forget* (New York: Africana Publications, 1982). For the argument that Mboya was supported by the CIA as an alternative to Kenyatta, see Douglas Okwatch, "Tom Mboya's Fatal Links with CIA" (<http://www.afroarticles.com/article-dashboard/Article/Kenya---Tom-Mboya-s-fatal-links-with-CIA/111469>). For the argument that, in the context of 1960s Kenyan politics, Obama, Sr.'s article should not be read as particularly radical and has been misread by Obama's conservative detractors, see Ben Smith and Jeffrey Ressmer, "Long-lost scholarly article by Obama's dad surfaces," Politico.com 16 April 2008.

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sure, the Obama of 1995 – like the Obama of 2009 – still has much of his life before him; his reconciliation with the ghost of his father is merely one episode in an ongoing saga whose end cannot be known. To the extent that *Dreams from My Father* constitutes political doctrine in the form of autobiography, however, it is rife with closure, both rhetorical and ideological. From its prefaces and appendices to its multiple narrative arcs, from its ventriloquistic point of view to its deployment of metaphor and description, the text controls its reader's response in such as way as to portray its protagonist as the fulfillment of an updated version of the American dream. Alternative political doctrines that would posit the falsity of that dream, as well as its role in legitimating and promoting past and present inequality in the United States and around the world, are either caricatured or silenced. Liberals, progressives and radicals who hold out the hope that the origins and experiences of the first black president equip him to deliver change they can believe in should read carefully and critically the early testament to his values and beliefs embodied in *Dreams from My Father*.

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