

Race & Inheritance in Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*

Glenda R. Carpio

There is no getting over race – at least according to the Barack Obama of *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995). The Obama that emerged during the primaries and through the 2008 presidential election tells a different story, both because Obama had to change his position in the decade between the publication of his autobiography and his remarkable rise in politics and because his “hope” mantra has been diluted and taken out of the context in which it first appeared. Obama’s now infamous ex-pastor, Jeremiah Wright, is the source of the phrase, “the audacity of hope.” In *Dreams*, the Wright sermon in which Obama first hears the phrase comes at the very end of the long third section, “Chicago,” just after Obama has been accepted to Harvard Law School and before he takes his first trip to Africa to find his paternal family.¹ We are nearly three hundred pages into the text at this point, having been presented with plenty of evidence for Obama’s dark view of race relations in America. Only in this context can one understand why, for Obama, it takes *audacity* to hope that they will change for the better.

Writing for the *National Review*, Michael Gledhill also notes the difference between the Obama of *Dreams* and of the presidential race; however, he makes a number of facile conclusions. He writes that, while “Obama is touted as a post-racial statesman who sees beyond the narrow issue of white versus black,” in his autobiography he is, “to the

GLEND A R. CARPIO is Professor of African and African American Studies and of English and American Literature and Language at Harvard University. She is the author of *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (2008) and is working on a new book, tentatively titled *Ambivalent Alliances: Black and Latina/o Fiction in the Americas*.

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contrary, obsessed with race: almost all of *Dreams* is about race and race conflict." The Obama of *Dreams* does focus on race conflict, but this fact should not lead us to repudiate him as "a racially obsessed man who regards most whites as oppressors," and "who sees U.S. history as a narrow, bitter tale of race and class victimization."² Instead, it should allow us a better appreciation of the gravitas of Obama's audacity of hope.

In *Dreams*, Obama presents his life, from his parents' courtship through to his birth, childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, in terms of racial conflict. He portrays the conflict with such intensity that one marvels at how young Obama not only survived but also *thrived*. Of his white mother's attraction for his father, an older black, African man (she was eighteen and he in his mid-twenties when they met), Obama writes that it was probably "a reflection of the simple fantasies that had been forbidden to a white middle-class girl from Kansas, the promise of another life: warm, sensual, exotic, different."³ These thoughts are prompted when, as an adult, Obama accompanies his mother to a screening of *Black Orpheus* and is made uncomfortable by the romantic racialism that she reveals in her love of the movie. He turns away from her and the screen, concluding that the "emotions between races could never be pure, even love was tarnished by the desire to find in the other some element that was missing in ourselves. Whether we sought out our demons or salvation, the other race would always remain just that: menacing, alien, and apart."⁴ Obama offers no theory for his father's attraction to his mother but suggests that he enjoyed the attention and kept secret the fact that he was already married when he met his mother, with

his first wife safely tucked away in far-off Africa.

Obama believes that his mother came to love his father despite the racial romanticism that first attracted her to him. But he adds that the love she had for him, a transformative love that allowed her to see Obama's father as "everyone hopes at least one other person might see him," is the kind of love most Americans do not believe really exists "between black and white: the love of someone who knows your life round, a love that will survive disappointment." And according to Obama, this is because interracial love has been tabooed and outlawed so intensely and for so long in the United States that Americans can hardly be "expected" to believe in it.⁵ Early in the autobiography Obama frames the interracial identity his parents bequeath him in the following terms:

Miscegenation. The word is humpbacked, ugly, portending a monstrous outcome: like *antebellum* or *octoroon*, it evokes images of another era, a distant world of horsewhips and flames, dead magnolias and crumbling porticos. And yet it wasn't until 1967 – the year I celebrated my sixth birthday and Jimi Hendrix performed at Monterey, three years after Dr. King received the Nobel Peace Prize, a time when America had already begun to weary of black demands for equality, the problem of discrimination presumably resolved – that the Supreme Court of the United States would get around to telling the state of Virginia that its ban on interracial marriages violated the Constitution.⁶

The gothic images in this passage, which comes after a narrative break and begins in italics, therefore standing out even typographically, emphasize the distorting and consuming violence of a racial

obsession. Meanwhile, the temporal shifts highlight the stubborn resistance against racial progress: Obama's birth is barely legal (in 1960, when his parents were married, "miscegenation still described a felony in over half the states in the Union"), while he celebrates his sixth birthday amid a political climate in which African Americans are accepted, even celebrated, at certain registers (popular culture, global public space) yet still denied equality in their own country. (The irony of Dr. King's receiving the Nobel Peace Prize is particularly piercing in this context.)⁷ Unlike the "post-race" president some tout him to be, Obama in *Dreams* is acutely aware of not only the long history of racial strife in America but also the fact that the gains resulting from the civil rights movement have not rid America of its cancerous racist past. He dryly notes that, instead of resolving the problem of discrimination, America, at the time of his birth, "had already begun to weary of black demands for equality," suggesting that this weariness is as much a significant part of the legacy of the civil rights movement, albeit indirectly, as the legislation it fought to pass.

Having established the near miracle of his birth – a gesture that could be faulted as histrionic were it not for the fact that Obama grounds it in history and makes it emblematic of a larger set of experiences – he details the "fitful interior struggle" of raising himself "to be a black man in America," without the aid of familial models.⁸ By the time Obama is a young adolescent, he is living with his white grandparents, his father having gone to Africa, leaving him with only "a poet named Frank," a nearly eighty-year-old black male friend of his grandfather, as a guide. Obama is eager for other sources, and with a satiric edge, he considers how he turned to pop cul-

ture. "TV, movies, the radio; those were the places to start," he writes:

Pop culture was color-coded, after all, an arcade of images from which you could cop a walk, a talk, a step, a style. I couldn't croon like Marvin Gaye, but I could learn to dance all of the *Soul Train* steps. I couldn't pack a gun like Shaft or Superfly, but I could sure enough curse like Richard Pryor.⁹

Like Gunnar Kaufman, the protagonist of Paul Beatty's satirical novel, *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), Obama must learn to be "black," though apparently he does not suffer from Gunnar's rhythm problems (signaled by Beatty's title) since he has the aid of *Soul Train*.¹⁰ The connection to Beatty is not superficial, however: Obama heightens the satiric subtones of the opening chapters in part to mock his adolescent trials and tribulations (and thereby measure the height of his success, in the style of Ben Franklin and, later, Booker T. Washington) but also, like Beatty, to control the rage he feels against both his particular predicament (his fatherless and guideless journey) and the fact that black life can still be caged centuries after slavery. Like other members of the "post-soul" generation, Obama is keen to the "changing same" (to quote LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka) of American race relations in the post-civil rights era, in which essentialist notions of race have been questioned, further exposing the fiction of race, but racism has been increasingly institutionalized and made less visible, therefore also making it harder to combat.¹¹

Again, like Beatty's Gunnar, Obama takes up basketball as his ticket into black culture but quickly acknowledges that, in doing so, he "was living out a caricature of black male adolescence, itself a caricature of swaggering American manhood."¹² And yet it is on the

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basketball court, partly through his friendship with a young black man named Ray, that he begins meditating on the "maddening" racial distortions he must sift through in the process of becoming an adult. Obama observes, almost bitterly, that black selfhood seems prefabricated by a racist and racially obsessed machinery with a long past. He writes, "[Y]ou couldn't even be sure that everything you had assumed was to be an expression of your black unfettered self – the humor, the song, the behind-the-back pass – had been freely chosen by you." He concludes:

Following this maddening logic, the only thing you could choose as your own was withdrawal into a smaller and smaller coil of rage, until being black meant only the knowledge of your own powerlessness, of your own defeat. And the final irony: Should you refuse this defeat and lash out at your captors, they would have a name for that, too, a name that could cage you just as good. Paranoid. Militant. Violent. Nigger.¹³

By the time he arrives in Chicago to do community work, Obama has realized that even black rage can be part of the prefabricated machinery; he is aware that "like sex or violence on TV, black rage always [finds] a ready market."¹⁴ Ultimately, by stepping outside the bounds of his own struggle with race in America, and by stepping outside of America altogether, as seen in the passages on Indonesia and, in particular, the long section dedicated to Kenya, Obama saves himself from following the "maddening logic" he outlines here. His stepping out does not necessarily free him from a dark view of racial conflict, however. In the section of *Dreams* dedicated to his Chicago experiences, Obama writes of "the knots of young men, fifteen or sixteen," hanging out in

ghetto corners, "their hoods up, their sneakers unlaced, stomping the ground in a delusory rhythm." He notes that these young men inherit prison records across generations.¹⁵ Here, the subtitle of *Dreams*, "A Story of Race and Inheritance," takes on darker tones than it might first suggest. As an individual, Obama may have survived the obstacles to black self-realization, but throughout his autobiography, he is acutely aware of the gap between him and other young black men who start as "boys with no margin for error." Obama realizes that they live in environments far less "forgiving" than the one that was available to him.¹⁶ In Chicago, he looks "into the eyes of the young men in wheelchairs," victims of gang warfare, "boys crippled before their prime, their eyes without a trace of self-pity, eyes so composed, already so hardened, that they served to frighten rather than to inspire." And here, as throughout the autobiography, Obama recognizes that the crippled and caged have inherited their predicament in ways that may be measured through the "hard statistics" of prison records, unemployment, and health and housing disparities that have come down generations but that also include the more imperceptible "internal struggles" that can lead to self-destruction.¹⁷

If Obama survives his internal struggles by stepping out of his own confines and even those of his country, the question remains: what propels this movement out? Family does not seem, at least at first glance, to provide a source of inspiration. His father, as I have noted, is absent, while his mother's notion of what it takes to raise a black man leaves much to be desired. Obama notes that, for his mother, "to be black was to be beneficiary of a great inheritance, a special destiny, glorious burdens that only we were

strong enough to bear ... [b]urdens we were to carry with style." While in Indonesia, she makes a concerted effort to acquaint young Obama with the history and culture of African Americans by showing him, in postcard-like fashion, "books on the civil rights movement, the recordings of Mahalia Jackson, the speeches of Dr. King."¹⁸ This kind of education leaves him wholly unprepared to face his maternal grandmother, who sends Obama deeper into a crisis when, after being harassed on different occasions at her bus stop, she refuses to take the bus to work because one of her harassers is black. Obama notes sadly that, while he never had a reason to doubt his grandmother's love, her "rawest fears" could be stoked by "men who could have easily been [his] brothers."¹⁹

If family does not provide inspiration for Obama, books seem to fare no better. Before the incident with his grandmother, Obama turns to W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison "to try to reconcile the world as I'd found it with the terms of my birth," but finds no solace. Instead, he finds that, despite valiant efforts, each author ultimately falls prey to the "anguish," "doubt," and "self-contempt" generated by racism. "Even DuBois's [*sic*] learning and Baldwin's love and Langston's humor eventually succumbed to its corrosive force," he writes, "each man finally forced to doubt art's redemptive power, each man finally forced to withdraw, one to Africa, one to Europe, one deeper into the bowels of Harlem, but all of them in the same weary flight, all of them exhausted, bitter men, the devil at their heels." Only Malcolm X's autobiography, with its "repeated acts of self-creation" and expressions of "sheer will" and "martial discipline," provides a vision of possibility.²⁰ Yet reading

Dreams, one can easily see how the very books Obama finds wanting help shape his own acts of self-creation.

In "Invisible Man: How Ralph Ellison Explains Barack Obama," writer and journalist David Samuels rightly argues that the structure of *Dreams*

loosely but deliberately mirrors the structure of Ellison's novel – a picaresque, which shows an intelligent and bookish young black man's struggle with internal and external definitions of self as he moves through a series of institutional settings and self-defining impulses cloaked in the garb of communal politics or culture: the campus anti-apartheid movement, black and anti-colonialist literature, community organizing, the black church.²¹

Unlike Ellison's novel, however, *Dreams* also takes into account what Samuels calls the "global dimension of the color line," a consequence that is, ironically, the effect of his parents' ineffectual efforts to raise him. For it is his mother who, despite her shortcomings, takes young Obama to Indonesia, where he begins to see, especially through his relationship to his stepfather Lolo, "the poverty, the corruption, the constant scramble for security" that people of color suffer in other countries.²² Later, and in the style of the African American literary tradition that he so consciously invokes, Obama orders the lessons he gathers not only in Indonesia but also in Kenya, where he goes in search of his African heritage, propelled by the silence and absence of his father.

In Kenya, Obama observes the world around him through a comparative lens. For example, an incident at a hotel, where African waiters rush to tend to American and European tourists, inspires a long meditation on old and new forms of colonialism and their similarities to American apartheid. The waiters ignore Oba-

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ma, his sister Auma, and other Africans in favor of the tourists, prompting his sister to voice her bitterness but Obama to imagine their position. "Did our waiter know that black rule had come?" he wonders. "Did it mean anything to him?" Perhaps he has "learned that the same people who controlled the land before independence still control the same land, that he still cannot eat in the restaurants or stay in the hotels that the white man has built." Still, considers Obama, if "he's ambitious he will do his best to learn the white man's language and use the white man's machines, the same way the computer repairman in Newark or the bus driver back in Chicago does, with alternating spurts of enthusiasm or frustration but mostly with resignation." The comparison here, as elsewhere, is striking for its linkage of experiences spanning continents and centuries under the common sign of black struggle against the effects of racism. Obama notes that the waiter is old enough to remember the independence brought about by the Mau-Mau rebellion and that "a part of him may still cling" to its memory. Yet earlier he also notes, in another striking instance of comparison, that the Mau-Mau fighters, who at some point "played on all the fears of the colonial West, the same sort of fear that Nat Turner had once evoked in the antebellum South and coke-crazed muggers now evoked in the minds of whites in Chicago," did not leave a significant legacy, as evidenced by the signs of neocolonialism to which he pays witness. In the end, Obama imagines the waiter straddling "two worlds," between resignation and anger, "always off balance, playing whichever game staves off the bottomless poverty, careful to let his anger vent itself only on those with the same condition."²³

In the Chicago section of *Dreams*, Obama repeatedly shows that poor African

Americans straddle similar worlds and for similar reasons. Yet in the comparison he makes between the fear that the Mau-Mau rebels inspired and that inspired by Nat Turner and "coke-crazed muggers," he suggests that their straddling may be more precarious. It is curious in this respect that Obama did not choose a more recent figure to invoke uprising within the U.S. context. (He might have chosen Malcolm X or any major Black Panther figure.) He may have wanted to emphasize the distance between moments of black insurgency and disillusionment or to suggest the difficulty of maintaining the "balance" between anger and resignation (one thinks of Obama's own flirtation with drugs and the despondency that fuels it, at least as he represents it early in the autobiography). Perhaps more urgently, he may have wanted to offer a vision of what happens when you cannot sustain that balance. You become trapped by the very categories that you want to strike against: "Militant. Violent. Nigger." Taking into account the global dimensions of the color line reveals a world many times as troubled as the one Obama observes in America; at times it allows him to see, in even sharper focus, how dire and persistent the problem is both at home and abroad.

Obama's personal search for his inheritance in his paternal home yields similar results. Upon arriving in Africa, he enjoys the freedom that black Americans often feel when they first visit a predominantly black country. "You could see a man talking to himself as just plain crazy," he writes, "or read about the criminal on the front page of the daily paper and ponder the corruption of the human heart, without having to think about whether the criminal or lunatic said something about your own fate. Here the world was black, and you were

just you.”²⁴ He also enjoys what most black Americans *cannot* enjoy when they visit Africa: he is greeted by an extended family, one that he hardly knows. Yet as he searches for a way to understand the mystery of his father, he finds only the tragic story of his father’s self-destruction. Obama learns how, as David Samuels puts it, his father became “a scary polygamist who abused his wives and children and drank away his intellectual promise, then crippled himself in a car accident,” and finally killed himself in another one. Obama also re-creates the long story he hears from his grandmother (amounting to twenty-eight pages of embedded text) through which he learns the story of his grandfather, an intense and proud man who worked as a servant for a colonial family and whose troubled relationship with Obama’s father in many ways led to the latter’s self-destruction. At the end of the grandmother’s long story, Obama re-creates an entry from a book that his sister Auma gives him, a *Domestic Servant’s Pocket Register* in which his grandfather’s identity as a colonial servant is included:

Name: Hussein II Onyango
 Native Registration No. *Rwl A NBI 0976717*
 Race or Tribe: *Ja’Luo*
 Usual Place of Residence When Not Employed: *Kisumu*.
 Sex: M.
 Age: 35.
 Height and Build: 6’0” Medium.
 Complexion: Dark.
 Nose: Flat.
 Mouth: Large.
 Hair: Curly.
 Teeth: Six Missing.
 Scars, Tribal Marks, or Other Peculiarities: None.

In the context of *Dreams*, it is impossible not to think of bills of sale advertising chattel slaves in antebellum America when reading this entry, particularly the categories emphasizing phenotypic traits. Obama reproduces the entry along with reviews of his grandfather’s performance as a servant (one states that he “*performed his duties as a personal boy with admirable diligence*,” another that he “*was not worth 60 shillings per month*”), letters of inquiry to American colleges written by Obama’s father, and letters of recommendation written by an American in support of his application (“*given Mr. O’bama’s [sic] desire to serve his country, he should be given a chance, perhaps on a one-year basis*”). Reviewing this material at the end of his long narrative, Obama declares: “That was it, I thought to myself. My inheritance.”²⁵ The journey on which Obama has taken the reader ends not with a resolution of the mystery surrounding the father figure that opens the autobiography and haunts the text. Instead, we are left with Obama imagining the lives of his male ancestors in the same way that he imagines the life of the waiter who ignores him, using the little evidence he has.

Writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, Gregory Rodriguez called *Dreams* “lyrical yet interminable,” and, indeed, at times it feels as if Obama gathered every piece of evidence that there is no getting over race, in the United States as in the rest of world, and interweaved this evidence with his own struggle.²⁶ Yet the autobiography is decidedly not bleak or bitter. Rather, it offers Obama’s own version of the image that purportedly inspired the “audacity of hope” sermon that he hears in Chicago shortly before he leaves for Kenya. It is the image of a woman “atop a great mountain,” over which she sees a “fallen world” but still has the “audaci-

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ty" to hope for its deliverance.²⁷ Obama gives us an expansive vision of our fallen world, but he leaves ambiguous what fuels his own sense of hope. It is hard to imagine Jeremiah Wright as the ultimate source of Obama's hope (though he coined the phrase). As David Samuels notes, Wright is a "religious con man who spread racist and anti-Semitic poison while having an alleged sexual affair with a white church secretary and milking his congregation for millions and a house in a gated community whose residents are overwhelmingly rich and white." And it is hard to imagine astute Obama falling for his charisma.

This is why it pays to read *Dreams* carefully, for while the text may not reveal what ultimately fuels Obama's hope, it does make clear that it is founded in a man's hard look at his life and the world around him. At best, the text offers possible sources for Obama's audacity. His peculiar inheritance may be one such source, even if, as a result of his parents' marriage and their own struggles in life, it turns out to be a dare to fashion a self through the "sheer will" and "martial discipline" that Obama admires in Malcolm X's autobiography. Curiously, he imagines his paternal grandfather's fate to have been similar. "He will have to reinvent himself," Obama thinks of the African grandfather who leaves the farms of his youth to work for white people. "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."²⁸ From the retrospective viewpoint of writing, Obama projects his own experience onto a figure whose life he hardly knows but whose legacy is to push him to search beyond his own narrow struggles.

Dreams reveals that, beyond circumstance, it is love – the kind of transfor-

mative love that he imagines existed between his parents – that arguably sustains Obama's audacity to hope that the fallen world he sees can and will be changed for the better. It would seem then that despite Obama's early rejection of Baldwin as a source of guidance, the latter's belief in the redemptive power of love resonates in Obama's adult life. For however alienated he feels from his family, Obama repeatedly emphasizes the love that he receives from both his black *and* white relatives. And although he does not discuss his relationship with his wife, he ends his autobiography with his marriage. But Obama is also no sentimentalist. Much has been made (and certainly by Obama himself) of the fusion he represents as the product of an interracial and transnational family. But at least in *Dreams*, the effort to embody this fusion nearly tears him asunder. Love is there, like faith, as a force that goes beyond the sheer will and martial discipline that he can depend on; but neither faith nor love alone can provide transcendence. Listening to Jeremiah Wright's sermon on hope, Obama notes: "part of me continued to feel that this Sunday communion sometimes simplified our condition, that it could sometimes disguise or suppress the very real conflicts among us and would fulfill its promise only through action"; yet "I also felt for the first time how that spirit carried within it, nascent, incomplete, the possibility of moving beyond our narrow dreams."²⁹

Again and again, Obama seeks what will move him out beyond his "narrow dreams," though what propels him arguably remains a mystery, despite the possibilities that I have here entertained. And this is because *Dreams*, like the books by Wright, Du Bois, Hughes, Baldwin, and Ellison that Obama turns to for answers, emphasizes the struggle to face

the doubt, anger, and self-contempt produced by racism, although Obama's text only partially sheds light on what transcendence really entails. In the years since the original publication of *Dreams* and, especially, since the publication of the second edition in 2004,³⁰ the complex vision of race that the autobiography offers has been watered down and marketed as slogans, its starker aspects de-emphasized in order not to alienate readers like Michael Gledhill (of the *National Review*). Certainly, *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) has gone a long way toward achieving these goals (although

that book is not entirely devoid of the piercing honesty so fundamental to the autobiography).³¹ If, as David Samuels notes, Obama could not use the identity that he "so painstakingly created for himself" in *Dreams* once he became a presidential candidate, then the "price of his political success is that he is forced to sublimate the material he had so painfully excavated." And yet the existence of *Dreams* ensures that there is a record of Obama's experiences and beliefs before he became the political machine and the symbol of a supposedly post-racial America that he is now.

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ENDNOTES

¹ In the sermon, Wright uses the phrase "the audacity to hope," which Obama later changes to "the audacity of hope."

² Michael Gledhill, "Who is Barack Obama?" *National Review* 60 (16) (September 1, 2008): 37–40.

³ Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 124.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11–12; bold emphasis added.

⁷ Of course, one might argue that anti-miscegenation laws worked both ways: whites were equally prohibited from interracial marriage as were blacks. Moreover, during the civil rights struggle, blacks strove to make the point that they were not mainly after marriage with whites, which is what many whites persistently claimed. Whites could say that there was no law prohibiting blacks from marrying other blacks or even people of certain other races, only laws that prohibited them from marrying whites. Finally, blacks themselves generally had complex feelings about interracial marriage: most black women bitterly resented black men marrying white women, and interracial marriages on the whole were condemned as a sign of lack of race pride. It is thus interesting that Obama avoids the very charged issue of what attracted his black father to his white mother.

⁸ Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, 76.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁰ Beatty's novel takes place in the late twentieth century and follows Gunnar, the "only cool black guy at Mestizo Mulatto Mongrel Elementary," the "all-white multicultural school" that he attends in Santa Monica. When his mother moves him and his family to a black and Latino ghetto in West Los Angeles, Gunnar undergoes a peculiar education: he must learn to transform from a slacker surfer, whose cultural associations are almost exclusively white, to a fast-talking street-smart ghetto kid who can hang with hard-core ballplayers and gangbangers. In other words, he must learn how to be "black." Paul Beatty, *The White Boy Shuffle* (New York: Picador, 1996); quote above appears on page 28.

¹¹ Author, critic, and filmmaker Nelson George defines the members of this generation as those born roughly between the March on Washington in 1963 and the landmark case, *The Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), which imposed limitations on affirmative action. See Nelson George, *Post-Soul Nation: The Explosive, Contradictory, Triumphant, and Tragic 1980s as Experienced by African Americans (Previously Known as Blacks and Before that Negroes)* (New York: Viking Adult, 2004). One might also consider expanding the "post-soul" era to include the period immediately preceding it (1953 to 1964, or, the period between the end of the Korean War and the beginning of the Vietnam War and the War on Poverty). People born during that period would also have been too young to have directly participated in much of the civil rights movement.

¹² Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, 79.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 252.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 270.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 252.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 50–51.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 85–86.

²¹ The fact that the nameless protagonist of Ellison's novel is a powerful orator, though not always in control of his own gifts, may have resonated with Obama, whose own capacity for oratory has carried him far but has also placed a certain uncanny burden on him. See David Samuels, "Invisible Man: How Ralph Ellison Explains Barack Obama," *The New Republic*, October 22, 2008, <http://www.tnr.com/article/invisible-man>.

²² Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, 50.

²³ *Ibid.*, 311–312, 315.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 311.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 425–427.

²⁶ Gregory Rodriguez, "Is Obama the New 'Black'?" *Los Angeles Times*, December 17, 2006, <http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/opinion/la-op-rodriguez17dec17,0,7336980.column>.

²⁷ Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, 294.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 427.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 294.

³⁰ The 2004 edition includes a new preface written by Obama as well as the Democratic National Convention keynote speech that he delivered in July 2004.

³¹ As Michiko Kukutani puts it, *The Audacity of Hope* is "much more of a political document" than is *Dreams*. "Portions of the volume read like outtakes from a stump speech, and the bulk of it is devoted to laying out Mr. Obama's policy positions on a host of issues, from education to health care to the war in Iraq"; Michiko Kukutani, "Obama's Foursquare Politics, with a Dab of Dijon," *The New York Times*, October 17, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/17/books/17kaku.html>. At the same time, an Ellisonian sensibility underwrites parts of the new book. David Samuels notes that the "tragic thrust of Ellison's novel is often reduced to the banality that black people are invisible to white people." Yet "Ellison's deeper point is that the symbolic and actual baggage of race makes it difficult if not impossible for a black man to ever realize his full humanity in the eyes of anyone – white, black, communist, capitalist, or himself." This insight echoes through-

out *Dreams* and resonates powerfully in passages of *The Audacity of Hope*, such as when Obama writes, “I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views.” As Samuels argues, here “Obama seems to agree with Ellison about the effect of the racial baggage that people bring to his public performance as a politician. The black candidate is rendered invisible to his white audience, a fact that would appear to leave him with little choice but to use that blindness in a strategic way if he wishes to lead.” See Samuels, “Invisible Man.”

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