

The Fictive Force of Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*

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Abstract: Barack Obama's memoir *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995) has been an enormous public success since it was re-issued in 2004. Obama's narrative is a powerfully crafted account of a personal quest that rhetorically transverses over geographical boundaries and literary genres. What interests me about this work is how it poetically plaits personal history with cultural myth, unbolting fact with imagination. Textually contiguous with other African American stories of self-representation and liberation, *Dreams from My Father* strikes me as a potent narrative of self-inscription. To put it in its simplest performative expression, the narrator of this book asks "who am I" and in doing so writes itself into place, not as an identity found but as the subject in writing.

Keywords: Barack Obama—personal narrative—self-inscription—memoir—autobiography—story telling—bildungsroman—Shelby Steele

... the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*.

Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author"

Introduction

To recall the past is precarious at the best of times. For a writer of personal narratives, such challenges presume a measure of spirit, a faith in making meaningful what is not quite present, a hope that imagination will prevail when memory fails. These reflections seem particularly relevant with regard to autobiography where life is held accountable to self-examination. Narratives of self-scrutiny, however, can take many forms. The fourth-century *Confessions of Saint Augustine*, widely acknowledged as the prototype of autobiography, is a personal narrative of crisis and spiritual conversion. In contrast to St. Augustine's religious meditations, the sixteenth-century French scholar Michel de Montaigne turns the script of his reflecting eye to a secular self. Montaigne's *Essays* ponders the inner structures of personal experience and frames them in the flux of changing perspectives. The modernist Gertrude Stein dramatically accentuates the notion of changing perspectives by writing an autobiography in the persona of her companion Alice B. Toklas. Stein's parody of autobiographical writing flaunts the genre's traditional principles of narration and perception.¹

Given the variety of personal narratives outlined above, it is perhaps the entwined proximity of writing to life that continuously sustains the genre's popularity. Moreover, there is a general assumption that the powerful account of an individual has a potent and inclusive meaning larger than its scripted origins. These thoughts are inescapably at the forefront of my mind when reading Barack Obama's narrative *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995). For many, this book may have served primarily as an explanatory prequel for an exceptional moment in history. However, in the wake of post-election euphoria, *Dreams from My Father* still holds a firm grip on the public's fascination. With over three million copies in print, *Dreams from My Father* has been on the *New York Times* paperback non-fiction bestseller list for 127 weeks and as of December 25, 2008 holds the number 3 position.²

When *Dreams from My Father* was first published in 1995, it was met with modest approval. Paul Watkins, writing for *The New York Times*, described the book's leading themes respectfully and focused on Obama's developmental passage from youth to adulthood, a route that begins with

1 For a concise historical overview of autobiography's evolution and textual analysis of selected autobiographical works, see James Goodwin's *Autobiography: The Self Made Text*.

2 Barack Obama's *The Audacity of Hope* was in the number 2 position.

his birth in Hawaii, traverses the South Side of Chicago, and ends in Kenya, the birthplace of his estranged father. Watkins concludes: "At a young age and without much experience as a writer, Barack Obama has bravely tackled the complexities of his remarkable upbringing." The book sold 8,000 to 9,000 copies and quietly went out of print in a few years. However, in March 2004, Obama unexpectedly won the Democratic Party's U.S. Senate primary in Illinois, which immediately rekindled his publisher's interest. Janny Scott recounts how Crown Books, who owned the rights to Obama's book, decided to re-issue the memoir: "Crown moved up the publication date, Barnes & Noble increased its order to 20,000 copies, and the book hit the top 50 on Amazon before it was even reissued. Bidding on eBay for a first edition copy hit \$255. By December, Mr. Obama was the senator-elect and his book had been on the best-seller list for 14 weeks."³

What makes *Dreams from My Father* such a compelling read? Though the initial *New York Times* review of the book never mentions it, Obama's personal narrative embodies story-telling strategies that are those of fiction. Had *Dreams from My Father* been published in 1847, a shrewd critic might have compared it with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Both "autobiographies" employ the backward glance of a mature self that selects events with imaginative power, contextualizes conversations into a greater whole, and charts the writing subject's journey from bewilderment to appreciation and self-acceptance. Such a comparison would be bold, but a deeper inquiry into the spell-binding nature of *Dreams from My Father*, in my opinion, would require a different tack. Instead, a close consideration of the fictive force that is present in this memoir would be a useful beginning. In particular, an analysis that persistently dwells on the compositional reality of Obama's narrating subject, a veracity that I argue is textual rather than referential, would illuminate the fictional filigree that imaginatively transforms recalled events into a larger circumference of meaning. The ultimate result of such an inquiry would suggest how *Dreams from My Father* summons its writer into being, a phenomenon explicitly and repeatedly expressed in the legacy of African-American writing. Contiguous with antebellum stories of self-representation found in the *Nar-*

3 See Janny Scott's article "The Long Run: The Story of Obama, Written by Obama" and Dwight Garner's blog "The Obama Market" for fascinating accounts regarding the publication history of Obama's books. In her review "The Politics of Prose," Michiko Kakutani's weighs the merits of Obama's memoirs against the autobiographies of other contemporary presidential aspirants: John McCain, Hillary Clinton, Rudi Giuliani, and John Edwards.

rative of the *Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Obama's narrative is recognizably an act of deliverance, if not in body certainly in character. This liberation is also linked to the "autoethnography" of Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) and the "biomythography" of Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1984), works that poetically plait personal history with cultural myth, unbolting fact with imagination. It is in the condition and momentum of this particular strand of American writing that I feel Barack Obama, the narrator of the memoir, literally and figuratively emerges.⁴

The layered textures of narration

Composed prior any explicit articulation of Barack Obama's public office ambitions, *Dreams from My Father* is a candid tale of personal growth, primarily staged in three different parts: years of youth in Hawaii and Indonesia, time spent as a Chicago community organizer, and a life-altering trip to Kenya. The memoir's episodic structure is evident throughout the narrative and characteristically begins anecdotally. The opening passage recounts a period of transition when, as a young man, Obama is living in Manhattan near the edge of East Harlem. The narration describes a mood of restlessness mixed with instances of self-seclusion. One day an unnamed old man, a neighbor for whom Obama used to occasionally help carry groceries, is discovered dead. The old man's apartment is desolate; small bills adding up to a thousand dollars are found rolled up in newspaper hidden behind jars in the old man's refrigerator. The gloom of the scene is underscored when Obama confesses anxiety: "in that barren room, the old man was whispering an untold history, telling me things I preferred not to hear" (5).⁵ Adjacent to this scene, readers are told that Obama, a month later, receives a phone call from his Aunt Jane in Nairobi informing him that his father is dead. The narrative juxtaposition of these two deaths then thrusts the memoir back in time to Hawaii, an origin shaped by his father's departure in 1963 and further molded by family stories that were selective and stylized to minimize

4 The essays contained in *African American Autobiography*, edited by William L. Andrews, offer an insightful survey of the textual tradition I am alluding to.

5 Unavoidably noteworthy, Barack Obama Sr. is frequently and affectionately referred to as "the Old Man" later in the memoir.

the sting of paternal absence. This narrative opening undoubtedly has been plotted with care and subtlety.

In the meta-commentary found in the memoir's "Introduction," Obama admits that the narrative we are about to read is "a very different book" than the one originally imagined. What Obama had in mind was to compile his thoughts and write "on the limits of civil rights litigation in bringing about racial equality, thoughts on the meaning of community and the restoration of public life through grassroots organizing" among other things. He adds that he also wanted to include "personal anecdotes, to be sure, and analyze the sources of certain recurring emotions" (xiii). When originally planning the book, the political themes were rationally outlined and private thoughts were imagined to play a lighter, more subordinate role. Obama qualifies the double nature of the text: "all in all it was an intellectual journey that I imagined for myself, complete with maps and restpoints and a strict itinerary" (xiv). However, flanking this planned expedition, "Distant voices appeared" in the form of stories told to Obama as a child, accounts from his mother and his grandmother, "the stories of a family trying to explain itself" (xiv). Herein lies the dilemma and the fictive force of *Dreams from My Father*. Issues of identity and origin, place and purpose, are to be disentangled, considered, and discursively re-calibrated in order to make sense but also in order to textually perform the act of sense making.

Such a narrative journey is an expedition in self-inscription and dramatically plots Obama's story of mixed heritage or as he teasingly caricaturizes it: "the ghostly image of the tragic mulatto trapped between two worlds" (xv). Thus the narrative opening of the whispering voice heard in the dead man's apartment obliquely yet appropriately serves as the book's point of departure; the textual supposition is that though the original path of this project had been altered, there is nevertheless a point of arrival: the reunion of a divided memory and by extension the restoration of a divided soul. To put it in its simplest performative expression, the narrator of this book asks "who am I" and in doing so writes itself into place, not as an identity found but as the subject in writing. In this sense, the memoir becomes a story to behold and inhabit.

It is in the "Introduction" that Obama raises a number of pertinent reservations about the autobiographical status of his book: "An autobiography promises feats worthy of record, conversations with famous people, a central role in important events. There is none of that here. At the very least an autobiography implies a summing up, a certain closure, that hardly suits

someone of my years, still busy charting his way through the world. I can't even hold up my experience as being somehow representative of the black American experience . . ." (xvii). A more radical, postmodernist formulation would have questioned whether this book is somehow representative of Barack Obama and argue instead that it is a textual performance between experience and imagination, a recital in writing which is scored in various imaginative notes. The "Introduction" unpredictably supports the latter without directly saying so. Similar to the confessions of a modest Victorian memoirist, Obama admits that "there are dangers inherent in autobiographical work: the temptation to color events in ways favorable to the writer, the tendency to overestimate the interest one's own experiences hold for others, selective lapses of memory" (xvi). More specifically he discloses: "Although much of this book is based on contemporaneous journals or the oral histories of my family, the dialogue is necessarily an approximation of what was actually said or relayed to me. For the sake of compression, some of the characters that appear are composites of people I've known, and some events appear out of precise chronology. With the exception of my family and a handful of public figures, the names of most characters have been changed for the sake of their privacy" (xvii). This disclaimer is strategic and notably re-classifies the textual nature of Obama's memoir. Released from the rigid conventions of realist writing, poetic license can be brought into play.

Obama's comments regarding the compression of character is reminiscent of Richard Wright's discussion of his fictional protagonist Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*. Wright confides that the black rage embodied in Bigger was not based on any particular Negro youth "but many of them, more than you could count and more than you could suspect" (506). Arguably more profound, however, is a less cited statement by Wright: "I made the discovery that Bigger Thomas was not black all the time; he was white, too, and there were literally millions of him, everywhere . . . [this] altered the complexion of my existence" (514). Wright's pun on the politics of skin color superimposed on the philosophical force of Bigger Thomas is stunning. Bigger's double and surreptitious identities, to my mind, explains why *Native Son* culturally resonates beyond its crime fiction intrigue.

Similarly, the multiple identities of Barack Obama diversely shade the memoir's project of self-inscription. The struggle to come to terms with bi-racial origins and an undecided cultural inheritance is charted not only in composite characters but, as I would like to argue, in the layered textures of narration. In the "Introduction," Obama addresses this point: "Whatever the

label that attaches to this book—autobiography, memoir, family history, or something else—what I've tried to do is write an honest account of a particular province of my life" (xvii). In addition to this list of labels, I would append the term *text*, the layered traces of language that summon a subject into being. Extrapolating from the admissions noted in the "Introduction," the textual summons I am referring to takes the shape of a call heard by a young man who stooped at the grave of his father and is later answered in the form of a book.

Scripting Time

The "out of precise chronology" plotting of *Dreams from My Father* is one of the strategic fictional features I alluded to above. An illustrative example of this is found in Chapter Six. After an intermediary Occidental College period in Los Angeles, Barack⁶ decides to transfer to Columbia University, in the hopes of encountering a racially more diversified learning environment. Due to a string of mishaps, Barack is forced to spend his first night in New York on the outdoor steps of a friend's apartment building. What was meant to be a move towards a new sense of community ironically begins in isolation. With only his luggage as company, he removes a letter from his pocket. It is from his father who is living in Kenya. The letter's opening address, "Dear Son," is affectionate but marks a formality. His father's letter was in response to a letter that Barack had written earlier, a letter that he found difficult to compose: "I had gone through several drafts, crossing out lines, struggling for the appropriate tone, resisting the impulse to explain too much. 'Dear Father.' 'Dear Dad.' 'Dear Dr. Obama'" (114). Uncertainty and the inability to adequately come to terms with an absent father are represented in these indecisive starts. The recollection focuses on an interior struggle without resolution. The reader is never told which alternative Barack finally chose.

The anecdote of this temporary night of homelessness intersects, through his father's letter, the memoir's broader subject of identity and kinship. Remembering his incapacity to work out a suitable address for his father, Barack tells his reader that he refolds the letter, places it back in his pocket and

6 At this juncture of the analysis, I have chosen to use "Barack" to textually mark the narrator of the memoir in contrast to the author Barack Obama and his meta-narrative commentary found in the "Introduction" of *Dreams from My Father*.

playfully fantasizes a directory assistance phone call. An operator answers: "Information—what city please." Reiterating the hesitancy expressed in drafting the letter to his father, Barack replies: "Uh . . . I'm not sure. I was hoping you could tell me. The name is Obama. Where do I belong?" (114-15). The fantasy ends there and the narrative momentarily detours into another invented vision: "I imagined my father sitting at his desk in Nairobi, a big man in government, with clerks and secretaries bringing him papers to sign, a minister calling him for advice, a loving wife and children waiting at home, his own father's village only a day's drive away" (115). The reader is told that the self-conjured scene makes Barack "vaguely angry." Still locked out and standing on the stoops of his New York friend's apartment building he repeats the question first posed in his directory assistance fantasy but this time in the past tense: "Where did I belong?" (115). If this question was ever provisionally yet incompletely answered in Barack's youth, it is now left wide open.

In the stillness that encircles the empty steps and vacated street, Barack then recalls a relatively recent past episode. Some of his nearest friends at Occidental were graduating and moving forward in their chosen careers. However, one close African-American friend, Marcus, decides differently and says: "Need a break from this shit" (117). The reason for Marcus's aggravated tone stems from a swelling frustration, one that runs parallel to Barack's own increasing perplexity over his African-American identity. Prior to Marcus's demonstrative remark, Barack recounts an even earlier episode where he and Marcus are engaged in a heated conversation with an older Iranian student. The framed story, held in yet another framed story, represents a compounded backward shift in time. This narrative move increases the interior drama of the narrator's homeless condition. The episode with Marcus and the Iranian student revolves around an intense discussion about the history of slavery. The Iranian student wonders why there was never a broad-based uprising among slaves that put an end to their subjugation; "why didn't black people fight," he asks. Marcus replies with vigor, recounting the resistance of historically notable individuals such as Nat Turner and Denmark Vescey. This response does not satisfy the Iranian, who persists in asking "why so many men did not fight at all. Until death . . ." (116). This question silences Marcus but Barack takes up the challenge and informs the Iranian that there were thousands of individuals who jumped from slave ships to a certain death rather than a life of brutal captivity. However, it seems that these historical details and qualifications

offer no convincing answer for the questioner or, evidently, for Marcus and Barack. Instead, Barack supplements history with a moral query: "Was the collaboration of some slaves any different than the silence of some Iranians who stood by and did nothing as Savak thugs murdered and tortured opponents of the Shah? How could we judge other men until we had stood in their shoes?" (117). The first question about complicity puts a halt to the Iranian's inquiry and is thus pivotal to this particular scene. The second question about the need to see life from the other's perspective, I believe, figuratively corresponds to the narrator's desire to comprehend the past from the shore where his father stood,⁷ a point analyzed in greater depth when attention is turned to Part Three of the memoir.

The above discussion of passages from Chapter Six illustrates the typical drift and flow of the plotted narration. The forward action of Barack's first night in New York is paused and an interior reel of memory and desire is played instead. The narrative maelstrom between forward action and flashes from the past is skillfully developed in the memoir. The textual layers of the memoir's narrative are held together by an obvious *bildungsroman* quality. Childhood memories from Hawaii and Indonesia in Part One represent a formative yet outlying and somewhat exotic past. The years in Chicago as a community organizer recounted in Part Two portray a young man's growing political awareness and his ability to transform public frustration into collective acts of progress. However, because of its inventive narrative force, it is the concluding Part Three of *Dreams from My Father* where the memoir most clearly demonstrates the textual rather than referential character of its subject.

Writing Home

The journey to Kenya takes on a hallowed dimension. The exact moment when Barack decides to go is not disclosed. Instead, while in Europe on

7 At the time of the memoir's writing, this is impossible because Barack Obama's father was already dead. However, at the time of the recalled incident, a re-union, though complicated, was conceivable.

In what can only be described as an uncanny fit, the interrogative and past perfect grammatical features of the second question, "How could we judge other men until we had stood in their shoes?" represents an unrecoverable time through the past perfect verb phrase "had stood" yet the sense of an anterior and completed action is recast as a presumed likelihood through the adverb "until." The uncommon syntactic construction meshes factual and temporal dimensions of interpretation with, I would claim, a levitating trace of eventuality. Thomas Lavelle deserves acknowledgment for helping me to unravel these points.

route to Africa, feelings about the perpetual longing that ultimately prompted the venture are voiced directly by the narrator and indirectly in the reported speech of others:

Would this trip to Kenya finally fill that emptiness? The folks back in Chicago thought so. It'll be just like *Roots*, Will had said at my going-away party. A pilgrimage, Asante had called it. For them, as for me, Africa had become an idea more than an actual place, a new promised land, full of ancient traditions and sweeping vistas, noble struggles and talking drums. With the benefit of distance, we engaged Africa in a selective embrace—the same sort of embrace I'd once offered the Old Man. What would happen once I relinquished that distance? It was nice to believe that the truth would somehow set me free. But what if that was wrong? What if the truth only disappointed, and my father's death meant nothing, and his leaving me behind meant nothing, and the only tie that bound me to him, or to Africa, was a name, a blood type, or white people's scorn. (302)

There is both hope and dread in this passage. An essential part of Barack is entombed in an emotional deficit, buried as is the body of his father, as well as hidden in an unearthed story of self and kinship. Avoiding the mass cultural anagrams of unacknowledged identity, where history is made real through stereotypes and loss is offset through sublimation, *Dreams from My Father* creates textual conditions that bear Barack's unclaimed self into being.

Interestingly, Barack's voyage to Kenya was portentously foreshadowed when his half-sister Auma visited him in Chicago in Part Two. It was a first encounter filled with affection and reciprocal tales about the separate routes their adult lives had taken. At the time, Auma had received a scholarship and was working on an advanced degree in linguistics in Germany. Her present European experience sets her mind thinking about what it must have been like for their father to leave Africa to study in the United States and "Whether he felt the same loneliness . . ." (208, ellipsis in original).⁸ The unfinished sentence is left without comment in the narrative but it nevertheless resonates a deep sense of shared emptiness and sorrow. The time Auma and Barack spend together in Chicago is intensely meaningful. Narratively, it allows the insertion of family stories that were unknown to Barack. Auma speaks about their father and Ruth, the American woman who became their father's wife after his separation from Barack's mother. Auma also speaks of the shifts in their father's professional life upon his return to Kenya.

8 In the memoir, Auma's detailed account is reproduced as direct quotes. Paragraph after paragraph, page for page, Auma's first-person narrative commands the reader's attention. See pages 212-219.

The country's internal tribal conflicts destabilized the government around 1966 and their father began to criticize the wrong-headed nature and disastrous consequences of tribalism. Such outspokenness was not tolerated and Auma states that "Kenyatta [the prime minister of Kenya] said to the Old Man that, because he could not keep his mouth shut, he would not work again until he had no shoes on his feet" (215).⁹ Auma speculates that the result of this disfavor had shattering effects on their father's personal life.

After her ten-day visit, Barack and Auma are seated at an airport departure terminal. Barack notices that Auma is lost in thought. He asks what she is pondering. Auma replies: "I was thinking of Alego," and continues:

Home Square¹⁰—our grandfather's land, where Granny still lives. It's the most beautiful place Barack. When I'm in Germany, and it's cold outside, and I'm feeling lonely, sometimes I close my eyes and imagine I'm there. Sitting in the compound, surrounded by big trees that our grandfather planted. Granny is talking, telling me something funny, and I can hear the cow swishing its tail [sic] behind us, and the chickens pecking at the edges of the field, and the smell of the fire from the cooking hut. And under the mango tree, near the cornfields, is the place where the Old Man is buried . . ." (221-22, ellipsis in original)

The ellipsis at the end of Auma's inner vision is then narratively spliced to the present action of the departure terminal. The siblings are holding hands. The reader is told that the flight is boarding. Around them, one imagines, the intercom calls of arrival and departure times, an undulating wave of movement, the transit of travellers and the anticipation of outbound passengers as they trundle their carry-on bags past the departure gate and through the narrow connector between terminal and aircraft. But these details are not present in the encircling panorama of the departure hall. Instead, similar to a cinematic close-up, the scene is tightly framed by bare essentials: "We remained seated, and Auma closed her eyes, squeezing my hand." The image and the gesture are bewitching. In what can be considered a powerful incantation, Auma utters: "We need to go home, . . . We need to go home,

9 The repeated metaphoric use of "shoes" and grammatical construction of the subordinate clause "until he had no shoes on his feet" stands in remarkable kinship to the earlier discussed subordinate clause "How could we judge other men until we had stood in their shoes?" (my emphases); see my footnote 5.

10 When Barack arrives in Kenya, his older half-brother Roy clarifies: "it's not Home Square. It's Home Squared" (369). Roy explains that one's ancestral home, although a simple hut, was considered special, as in "home twice over . . . Home Squared" and continues: "For you, Barack, we can call it Home Cubed" (369). I am grateful to Catharine Walker Bergström for reminding me of this detail.

Barack, and see him there” (222). Auma’s spell-like call to return to their ancestral homeland is not acted upon immediately. Other episodes from Barack’s years as a South Side community organizer unfold as the narrative moves towards its Part Two ending.

The scene that finally concludes Part Two is a distinctly powerfully rendered one. It contains a pivotal moment of spiritual awakening and appropriately serves as a narrative bridge from Barack’s years of community work to a path of previously unclaimed purpose. Barack recounts his attendance at a Trinity United Church of Christ service where Reverend Jeremiah Wright holds a sermon titled “The Audacity of Hope.” The reverend characteristically delivers a forceful meditation on the mass injustices and subsequent suffering that stretches from hemisphere to hemisphere, from historical epoch to historical epoch, and links this spectrum of misery to the image of a painting where the foregrounded figure is a female harpist, her demise visible in her torn clothing stained with blood. But the reverend remarks that the harpist’s gaze is turned upward. It is the impertinence of hope that is firmly fixed in her eyes: “Like Hannah, that harpist is looking upwards, a few faint notes floating upwards towards the heavens. She dares to hope. . . . She has the audacity . . . to make music . . . and praise God . . . on the one string . . . she has left!” (294, ellipses in original). Barack is moved by the spiraling crescendo of the reverend’s rhetoric and the congregation’s charged response:

People began to shout, to rise from their seats and clap and cry out, a forceful wind carrying the reverend’s voice up into the rafters. As I watched and listened from my seat, I began to hear all the notes from the past three years swirl about me. The courage and fear of Ruby and Will. The race pride and anger of men like Rafiq. The desire to let go, the desire to escape, the desire to give oneself up to a God that could somehow put a floor on despair. (294)

The climax of Barack’s years in Chicago is emotionally embedded in this scene and is transformed into a personal epiphany. Reverend Wright’s sermon, which blended the everyday concerns of the black community with the imagery of apocalypse and deliverance, intersects with Barack’s community organizer efforts and, I would argue, his desire to firmly embrace the absent father who has constantly been beyond his reach. In the middle of this highly charged moment, one that was reached through a swiftly paced weaving of direct quote and electrifying descriptions, the emotional frame of the scene changes by means of a delicate textual juxtaposition. During

the sermon, Barack has been sitting next to two boys and their mother. The fervent energy of the sermon is narratively redirected. After gently touching Barack's hand, one of the boys gives him a tissue. Barack recalls: "It was only as I thanked the boy that I felt the tears running down my cheeks" (295). The previously named emotions of courage and fear, pride and anger, that Barack affiliates with his community co-workers Ruby and Will, and a more militant minded Rafiq, are passions that he has been laboring to master in his quest to unite the divided parts of himself. Reverend Wright's oration transports Barack to a personal summit where he too can turn his eyes up and acknowledge a heritage that was deferred through an absent father but is now made visible through the concord of hope. Part Three of the memoir is thus the story of reunion, recognition, and in the end, self-fulfillment.

Upon landing at Kenyatta International Airport, Barack arrives without his checked-in luggage. Auma meets him with enthusiastic joy. Auntie Zeituni, their father's sister, is there too. In contrast to the night he camped on an outdoor stoop in New York, with only his suitcase to shield him from a mocking sense of abandonment, Barack's arrival in Kenya is devoid of packed belongings but one of spontaneous familiarity. A British Airway's service agent, a "strikingly beautiful woman," assists Barack in filling out a lost baggage claim. She asks: "You wouldn't be related to Dr. Obama, by any chance?" (305). The agent's question goes straight to Barack's heart: "For the first time in my life, I felt the comfort, the firmness of identity that a name might provide, how it could carry an entire history in other people's memories, so that they might nod and say knowingly, 'Oh you are so and so's son'" (305).

During those initial days in Nairobi, Barack wanders among the stalls in the local market place with Auma and, in fun, humorously beats his chest and claims that he is a Luo. He may be linguistically severed and culturally divided from the homeland of his father but Barack notes that unlike the North American, European, and Asian tourists, he is nevertheless on native soil. His arrival as an Obama son ignites excitement and pride among his father's family and Barack is tenderly received by the extended clan. He soon meets Aunt Jane, the relative who called to inform him of his father's death, and Aunt Jane's sister Kezia, his father's first wife and mother of Auma and Barack's half-brothers Roy and Bernard. Barack also journeys to visit Sarah, his father's older sister. In advance, he is warned of the simmering discontent Sarah holds regarding her claim to a share of Barack's

father's inheritance. This conflict, however, does not diminish Barack's desire to meet Sarah who, despite an ongoing family dispute, is undeniably a blood relative.

Amidst the ascending emotions of arrival and reunion, it is in Alego, the ancestral home of his father and his father's father, where Barack's Kenya narrative achieves its climax. It is in Alego he finally meets Granny, the woman who raised Barack's father as her own child. Granny is the keeper of Home Squared, the patch of land that holds family history and family legend as one. Granny lives in a modest house, mud based with concrete walls and a corrugated-iron roof. Upon entering the compound Barack notes: "Bougainvillea, red, and pink and yellow with flowers, spread along one side in the direction of a large concrete water tank, and across the packed earth was a small round hut lined with earthenware pots where a few chickens pecked in an alternating rhythm. I could see two more huts in the wide grass yard that stretched out behind the house. Beneath a tall mango tree, a pair of bony red cows looked up at us before returning to feed" (374).

This description of Home Squared is not the idealized one given by Auma back in Chicago but the recurrence of chickens and cows, and the mango tree are common features that join Auma's lyrical projection with Barack's more prosaic first impression. As Barack steps deeper into this "legendary" space, he is welcomed by Granny, her physical presence is simple and genuine:

"Halo! she said, attempting English.

"*Musawa!*" I said in Luo.

She laughed saying something to Auma.

"She says she has dreamed about this day, when she would finally meet this son of her son. She says you've brought her a great happiness. She says that now you have finally come home." (374)

The unadorned immediacy of this encounter is without protracted narrative commentary or anecdotal insertion. The reader is told that Granny draws Barack into a warm embrace, then leads him into her home. The move into an interior space is natural and narratively opportune. On Granny's walls hang "various family artifacts" (374). Home Squared is a spirited archive where Barack's father's Harvard diploma and discolored family photos intimate a network of meanings that reach beyond separate accounts.

After a number of celebratory meals and drink, including close conversation with different individuals, the affective character of "homecoming"

is reconfigured into a magical recital of the Obama clan's past and present. The night before, Barack and the other Obama men drank merrily and abundantly. Roy and Abo (the youngest of Barack's half brothers) have huge hangovers. Barack is in better shape but comes down with "the runs" on his way back to Home Squared. He is offered a steamy drink. It is a remedy based on the recipe of his grandfather, who was an herbalist. Auntie Zeituni says: "It's made from a plant that grows here. Trust me . . . it will firm up your stomach in a jiffy" (393). As the brew takes its effect, Barack asks his Granny to tell him more about his grandfather. In practical terms, it would have been rather difficult to recount what follows had the memoir been insistent on the accuracy of realism. The intermittent requirement for translation and the occasional need for repetition and additional clarification would have made Granny's account fragmentary. But similar to the brew ingested by Barack, the narration offers a remedy to insure firmness and power to Granny's story. As if under the effects of his grandfather's potion, Barack notes:

I felt the wind lift, then die. A row of high clouds crossed over the hills. And under the fanning shade of the mango tree, as hands wove black curls into even rows, *I heard all our voices begin to run together*, the sound of three generations tumbling over each other like the currents of a slow-moving stream, my questions like rocks roiling the water, the breaks in memory separating the currents, but always the voices returning to that single course, a single story . . . (394, ellipsis in original, emphasis mine)

Just as characters have been compressed, here is an example of how narration itself is compressed. Barack's first-person narrative and its reported speech of others (Granny's story and Auma's translation of Granny's story) merge in one seamless textual event. This extraordinary fictive move allows Granny's account the space and freedom needed to fill the historical absence that has plagued Barack. The exceptional nature of Granny's testimony is registered not through quotation marks but typographically as a long-running indented passage.

Granny's account begins in a creation myth tone and her description of ancestral lines of descent is similar to the first census of Israel recorded in the book of Numbers in the Old Testament:

First there was Miwiru. It's not known who came before. Miwiru sired Sigoma, Sigoma sired Owiny, Owiny sired Kisodhi, Kisodhi sired Ogelo, Ogelo sired Otondi, Otondi sired Obongo, Obongo sired Okoth, and Okoth sired Opiyo. The women who bore them, their names are forgotten, for that was the way of our people.

Okoth lived in Alego. Before that, it is known only that families traveled a great distance, from the direction of what is now Uganda, and that we were like the Masai, migrating in search of water grazing land for great herds of cattle. In Alego, the people settled and began to grow crops. Other Luo settled by the lake and learned to fish. There were other tribes, who spoke Bantu, already living in Alego when the Luo came, and great wars were fought. Our ancestor Owiny was known as a great warrior and leader of his people. He helped to defeat the Bantu armies, but the Bantu were allowed to stay on and marry Luo, and taught us many things about farming and the new land. (394-95)

Granny's story continues at length. Page after page in the memoir, she recounts the details of family affiliation, the patriarchal authority that was practiced by heads of family and how Barack's grandfather Onyango broke rank with tribal tradition by learning the white man's language and adopting his ways and eventually takes employment in service of the white man. As time passes, Onyango clears land and establishes himself separate from his father's compound, using his saved earnings to improve his property. Onyango and his father remained at odds and the spheres of their lives never overlapped again.

Another irreparable family estrangement is recounted by Granny. Onyango's first wife Aukumu, the mother of Sarah and Barack's father, reels under the harsh authority of Onyango and finds it intolerable to remain his wife. Taking her newborn infant with her, Granny says: "[Aukumu] disappeared with her baby into the darkness" (412). According to Granny, Barack's father never forgave Aukumu for her desertion and his abandonment. In the context of Barack's own father's departure in 1963, this revelation is laden with sad irony. Granny's account continues uninterrupted without authorial comment and she concludes with a final poignant memory. She remembers Barack's grandfather and his father sitting "facing each other and eating their food, but no words passed between them" (424). Shortly after, Onyango dies. Barack's father returns to arrange Onyango's funeral. Granny recalls: "He said very little, and it is only when he sorted through a few of the old man's belongings that I saw him begin to weep" (424). Her story telling complete, Granny rises, looks towards the sky and predicts "It's going to rain" (425), as if a spell was now undone.

Under the pending threat of rain, everyone gathers inside Granny's home. Barack asks whether she has saved anything from his grandfather or father. Granny fetches a passport-size document that notes the particulars of Barack's grandfather "Hussein II Onyango" and lists not only Onyango's tribal affiliation and physical attributes but brief details about his employment

among the white colonial class. Granny also produces a bundle of more than thirty letters from Barack's father which were originally addressed to different universities in the United States. These textual artifacts remind Barack of how both his grandfather and father ignored family expectations in their individual efforts to "reinvent" themselves and how their separate attempts to create a life different from their respective father's lives ended in severed family ties. Barack despairs over the missed opportunities both men endured and how the estrangement that took place between fathers and sons results in a grief that literally brings Barack to his knees as he wanders outdoors and collapses between the graves of his grandfather and his father. Barack laments over both men but perhaps in particular over his father's inability to combine his vision of a broader world and the irrevocable claim of family: "For all your gifts—the quick mind, the powers of concentration, the charm—you could never forge yourself into a whole man by leaving those things behind . . ." (429, ellipsis in original). Directly after this reconstructed inner monolog, Barack continues with self-reflective commentary. He states how a sense of peace fell upon him and confides:

I felt the circle finally close. I realized that who I was, what I cared about was no longer just a matter of intellect or obligation, no longer a construct of words. I saw that my 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, connected by more than the accident of a name or the color of my skin. The pain I felt was my father's pain. My questions were my brothers' questions. Their struggle, my birthright. (430)

Barack's meditation is narratively succeeded by a return to the forward action. A light rain begins to spread and as Barack absent-mindedly begins to light a cigarette he says: "I felt a hand on my arm" (430). Bernard, one of Barack's half-brothers, has come to check on him. The surprise touch is reminiscent of the Trinity Church scene where a boy placed his hand on the hand of Barack. It is in this subtle narrative gesture that the foundational affirmation that takes place within Barack here in Home Squared is figuratively linked to Reverend Wright's sermon and Barack's subsequent epiphany in Trinity Church. These joined elements of Barack's life are not simply mapped in geographical or historical terms. Though he says that his identity "was no longer just a matter of intellect or obligation, no longer a construct of words," the subject of his memoir is unmistakably called into presence through the fictional force of its story-binding capacity. Written

into place, Barack's identity emerges textualized at the crossroads of reflection and imagination, a junction that is as real as it is invented.

Postscript

Nearly a year before the November 4, 2008 U.S. presidential election, Shelby Steele published *A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited About Barack Obama and Why He Can't Win*. In contrast to the clarity of Steele's previously published work on affirmative action and race relations, the forecast contained in the title of Steele's book is an indelible stain on a reader's sensibility. But beyond this marketing miscue, Steel does outline a number of provocative issues that have arguably structured the cultural imagination of a nation earlier unprepared to embrace its political ideals. Referring to Barack Obama's presidential candidacy, Steel asks: "Can a black ask for power at the level of the American presidency without wearing a mask, without reassuring whites that they will be given the benefit of doubt—without lessening the anxiety inherent in being white today?" (129).

Steele's pre-election pessimism is informed by what he believes is an emotional asymmetry between U.S. politics and racial relations. He regards Obama as an adroit mediator, who flatters whites with trust by "granting them racial innocence" (121) rather than donning the fiery challenges posed by Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton. Consequently, it is Obama's political persona of blamelessness and black invisibility that Steele finds suspicious. In the concluding chapter of *A Bound Man*, Steele caustically scrutinizes the imagery of black invisibility by comparing Obama to Tod Clifton, a character in Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952). The comparison is grim, not least because Tod Clifton devolves from a charismatic black organizer for the Brotherhood (Ellison's satire of a communist party organization) to a street hawker of black Sambo dolls. Clifton's life is terminated when he is fatally shot by a policeman after a meaningless scuffle on a New York City sidewalk. Steele suggests that Clifton's failure is due to his "plunge outside of history" and implies that Clifton is largely a figure in the political discourse of the Brotherhood and when he attempts to gain a separate identity by stepping outside of that discourse, Clifton discovers he lacks authenticity. Steele goes on to explain that the dilemma of authenticity for blacks is not yet fully resolved and concludes his comparison by stating that Barack Obama needs to be visibly distinct: "Unless we get to know who he is—what beliefs he would risk his life for—he would become a cautionary tale

in his own right, an iconic figure who neglected to become himself" (134).

The November 2008 election returns, according to the logic formulated by Steele, indicate that Barack Obama did indeed remain visible and that the American electorate did believe enough in the Illinois Senator to send him to the White House as their 44th president.¹¹ As a tale of becoming, *Dreams from My Father* is the compelling saga of a subject that wrote itself not only into history but into the unfolding present.

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11 David Remnick's essay "The Joshua Generation: Race and the Campaign of Barack Obama" does an outstanding job of summarizing and contextualizing a number of key factors that link Obama's biography to the changes in the culture of U.S. politics, resulting in an analysis and outcome distinctively different from the one Shelby Steele sketches.

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