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## **Backward Through the Veil: Individual and Group Identity in *Dreams from My Father***

Shep Stearns<sup>1</sup>

This essay proposes that there is a common identity progression that structures the narratives of many works of Afro-American autobiography and fiction. This progression starts with a hegemonic Black group identity designed to contain and constrain a liberated conception of individual identity for the protagonist. After recognizing the falsity of this socially prescribed racist group identity, the protagonist cycles through alternative, ostensibly counter-hegemonic, group identities with the ultimate realization that these too are false and constricting. The affirmation and social recognition of a stable individual identity is seen as impossible in the context of the US racial identification system. Death, exile, or exit from the system in some other form is therefore the common resolution to these narratives. Barack Obama's autobiography *Dreams from My Father* is treated as a negative case in this proposed trend. It is argued<sup>1</sup> that Obama's narrative basically reverses the traditional progression. This claim is based on the idea that Obama's work culminates not with his own affirmation of self-identity *independent* of the constraints of the US's system of racial group identification, but with the affirmation of a self that is *determined by* Obama's choice to identify and be identified with Afro-Americans as a group.

KEYWORDS: AUTOBIOGRAPHY, BARACK OBAMA, IDENTITY, RACE.

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Barack Obama's first autobiography, *Dreams from My Father: a Story of Race and Inheritance* is very much an attempt to reconcile the ambiguities both of the post-civil rights period, and of Obama's own relationship to Afro-Americans as a group. The work traces Obama's search for a frame of reference to allow him, as he puts it, to "embrace my black brothers and sisters... without pretending to speak to, or for, all our various struggles" (xvi). But as the narrative progresses the increasingly apparent diversity and divisiveness of these struggles present Obama with an impediment to articulating his own individual identity within the context of a coherent Afro-American group identity. Growing class divisions in the Afro-American community in the 1970's and 1980's, as well as Obama's own singularity in upbringing and ancestry, trouble his aspiration to discover a unified Afro-American group identity. Hoping to overcome these disparities, Obama uses group identity defined through shared oppression as the constitutive element of his individual identity. In this, he reverses the progression of self realization that structures many of the most prominent works in Afro-American autobiography.

Obama's departure from the formula followed by many earlier works of Afro-American autobiography is obscured by the fact that *Dreams from My Father* certainly does follow the broad outline of Afro-American and minority autobiography. In his article *Black Autobiography: life as the Death Weapon* Roger Rosenblatt defines the parameters of these genres, as he says:

Minority auto-biography and minority fiction deserve their minority status not because of comparative numbers but because of the presence of a special reality, one provided to the minority by the majority, within which each member of the minority tries to reach an understanding both of himself [individual identity] and the reality into which he has been placed [group identity] . (171)

While Obama's autobiography fits Rosenblatt's general template, he deviates from the paradigm often followed by classic Afro-American autobiographers in coming to an understanding of their group and individual identities. To expand on Rosenblatt's observation, this classic progression includes an initial recognition on the part of the protagonist/autobiographer of the falseness of the oppressor imposed "reality" which is designed to support white hegemony. In turn this leads to a struggle against the false group identity through the formation of a new individual identity in the context of a group-identity which is ostensibly counter-hegemonic. From here, the protagonist often discovers that this counter-hegemonic group identity is itself oppressive and false, both because it

tends to reify white supremacy and because it constrains individual identity. Moving through these false group identities the protagonist finally discovers a truly independent individual identity. However, it is also discovered that this individual identity is irreconcilable with the false group identities prevailing in society. The protagonist must therefore exit the system to escape its false realities.

The quintessential example of the formation of an independent individual identity and the subsequent “exit of the system” takes place in Frederick Douglass’ slave narrative. After his fight with a slave breaker named Covey, Douglass rejects his identity as a slave, resolving famously: “however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact” (113). Douglass *literally* exits the system of slavery by eventually fleeing to the North and then England. The novel *Invisible Man*, written by Ralph Ellison as the fictional autobiography of the nameless main character, ends with the same formula. The protagonist quits his position in an organization meant by Ellison to resemble the communist party, finding it ultimately susceptible to the same oppressive construction of Afro-American group identity as society at large. After participating in a Harlem riot, Invisible Man falls into a coal cellar and decides to remain there in exile. The cryptic concluding words of Ellison’s work “who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you” can be interpreted as expressing the character’s dilemma in having successfully formulated an independent individual identity, while finding that this identity is impossible to maintain in the outside world because that world is structured around the pervasive *false* realities of white supremacy (581). The independent Afro-American identity is therefore available only on the “lower frequencies” or absolute margins of American society. The experiences that Malcolm X relates in his own autobiography after leaving the Nation of Islam (NOI) are in many ways strikingly reminiscent of Invisible Man’s dealings with the fictionalized Communists. However, Malcolm’s narrative ends not just with him “exiting the system” by leaving the NOI and traveling to Mecca, but also in his assassination.

In contrast to these works, Obama follows the progression approximately in reverse. Effectively starting at the endpoint, Obama *begins* his life having already exited the system. He is raised in Hawaii and Indonesia where he mostly escapes the strident and omnipresent racial ideology of mainland US society. His first experiences with Afro-American group identity are not described in the controlling imagery of negative stereotypes, but rather in anti-racist and counter-hegemonic terms. He explains that according to his mother “Every black man was Thurgood Marshall or Sidney

Portier; every black woman was Fannie Lou Hamer or Lena Horne. To be black was to be the beneficiary of a great inheritance” (Obama 51). The advent of the modern civil rights movement totally redefines the nature of Obama’s struggle in relation to the struggles of the classic autobiographies discussed here, whose action takes place mostly pre-civil rights.

The classic works reflect the socially unknown and unacknowledged collective reality of Afro-American consciousness in pre-civil rights America. This externally imposed deficiency forms perhaps *the* constitutive adversity for these authors. Ellison’s *Invisible Man* describes the void eloquently as he reflects:

[Afro-Americans were] birds of passage who were too obscure for learned classification, too silent for the most sensitive recorders of sound; and too distant from the centers of historical decision to sign or even to applaud the signers of historical documents. We who write no novels, histories or other books. (439)

The civil rights movement represents a turning point in Afro-American consciousness whereby counter-hegemonic Afro-American identities reached a critical mass, emerging from “obscurity” and beginning to coexist in a contentious dialectic with the hegemonic white-supremacist imposed image of Afro-American group identity. The civil rights legacy transmitted to Obama through his Euro-American mother defines something that for Douglass, Ellison, and Malcolm had been socially “unknown” and the target of much of their striving.

If not for the fact that reality is always more complex than human constructions of reality, Obama’s memoir and his struggle therein might well end at the beginning with his group identity already fully developed and remaining static. His struggle as an individual would therefore simply be to grow into this group identity. But instead he finds that in some ways his counter-hegemonic group identity (where “every black man was Thurgood Marshall”) is as much a false reality as the white supremacist imposed reality, for as Langston Hughes put it in his magnificent economy of words, “we [Afro-Americans, human beings, (etc.)] are beautiful. And ugly too” (Hughes 694). For Obama, a youthful experience in a waiting room in Indonesia is pivotal in showing him the uglier side of group identity. Here he discovers a *Life Magazine* featuring an article about an Afro-American who is severely disfigured after undergoing a treatment to bleach his skin white. To the young and sheltered Obama, this demonstrates that neither the treatment of Afro-Americans nor

their response to that treatment are always as beautiful as the idealized narrative of civil-rights and Afro-Americanism he had received up to that point.

It is also significant to note, that Obama's identification with the mainstream Afro-American experience is in many ways problematic from the very outset. Nothing in his highly unique personal history -being the son of an absent Kenyan father, reared in a Euro-American middle-class family, socialized mostly away from Afro-American people in Hawaii and Indonesia, with an Indonesian step-father, and a half Indonesian sister -necessarily binds him to the ancestral and historical experience of slave-descendant Afro-Americans. It is only the malevolent and derogatorily conceived racial ideology of the United States with its binary construction of "black" and "white" that brings Obama into the fold of Afro-American group identity. Even though Obama's antecedents were not the subjugates of slavery or the second-class citizens of Jim Crow, he looks "black" and in that sense at least, he is heir to the group oppression and group identities (hegemonic and counter-hegemonic) of America's darker skinned people.

This means that in order to identify as Afro-American in the traditional sense, Obama must subsume his individual identity into the chaotic mix of the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic group identities he has "inherited". An impossible circular logic holds his identities together. Obama is "black" because he suffers "black" group oppression. But if he could somehow escape the false reality of the oppressor invented hegemonic identity, then his membership in the "black" group would become groundless due to his lack of slave ancestry. Thus, while group oppression is of course the thing that *stifles* individual identity for the classic Afro-American autobiographers, it is also the very thing that paradoxically *enables* Obama's group identity. Perhaps for this reason, Obama is highly defensive of the binary construction of race that has helped to undergird white supremacy for centuries. Attending college in California, Obama recounts the experience of asking an attractive co-ed named "Joyce" with "green eyes and honey skin" if she was going to a meeting of the Black Students' Association (99). Her response, that she is not "black" but "multi-racial" seems to incense him. Responding to the tendency of "people like Joyce", as he sees it, to avoid socializing with Afro-Americans, he comments: "It wasn't a matter of conscious choice, necessarily, just a matter of gravitational pull, the way integration always worked, a one way street. The minority assimilated into the dominant culture not the other way around" (99-100).

Obama's critique of "people like Joyce" might easily have been lifted from Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee chairman Stokely Carmichael's quintessential meditation on Black Power, entitled "Toward Black Liberation". Similar to Obama, Carmichael maintains that "integration had to be based on the assumption that there was nothing of value in the Negro community" he continues "you can integrate communities but you assimilate individuals" (645). Obama concludes similarly: "Only white culture had individuals" (100). For Carmichael and Obama alike, individuality is a luxury exclusive to white privilege. The monolithic definition of Afro-Americans community espoused in Black Power as "black solidarity", informs the unitary imagining of group identity that Obama defines himself in relation to. This construction is threatened by individuality among community members because it relies upon the assumption that Afro-Americans share similar interests due to a common history and continuing reality of oppression.

In the classic biographies explored here, individual identity is also viewed as problematic under most circumstances. In these works, the only individuals who are recognized in "white" society are compelled to play "Uncle Tom." Uncle Toms receive rewards for their self-effacing portrayal of a hegemonic "black" identity and serve to undermine any self-respecting counter-hegemonic Afro-American group identity that might arise. In return for their "services" these individuals receive a kind of preferential oppression with differential benefits enjoyed as compared with the rest of the group. In a scene from Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy*, Wright agrees to fight another Afro-American man for money and the amusement of his Euro-American employers. Rosenblatt has noted many similarities in another scene from *Invisible Man* where the protagonist is awarded a scholarship to a black college, but must first participate in a blindfolded "battle royal" with a group of his classmates (Rosenblatt 172). Rosenblatt explains that the significance of these scenes "is repeated regularly; [showing that] a black man seeking recognition in the white world must be brutalized to the extent that when recognition comes, it will be to him as to an animal" (172-173). This is to say that in the classic works of Afro-American autobiography written before the end of the civil rights movement, the only socially recognizable Afro-American individual identity is one that reifies society's white supremacist false reality of the "black" group.

Black solidarity as observed by Carmichael and Obama tends to incorporate this classic understanding of the implications of differential oppression and public individuality among Afro-Americans. The Uncle Tom paradigm is used by Obama to describe his middle-class Afro-American classmates who suffer a different and economically gentler kind of oppression as compared with the

sufferings of poorer Afro-Americans. The differential oppression of the emerging Afro-American middle-class poses an implicit threat to black solidarity because a group defined in terms of shared oppression is bound to become fractured when that oppression begins to be shared at different degrees among individuals. For this reason Obama strikes out against yet another of his classmates. This time an Afro-American named Tim, who adheres to a decidedly middle-class (and in Obama's view "white") aesthetic in behavior and dress. Obama describes Tim as "wearing argyle sweaters and pressed jeans and talk[ing] like Beaver Cleaver. He planned to major in business" (101-102). Referring to the Uncle Tom formulation of those who escape some of the harshness of race discrimination, Obama jokes that his upwardly mobile classmate should "change his name from Tim to Tom" (102). Like Joyce, who violates Obama's binary construction of black racial solidarity, Tim disturbs black class solidarity. Both highlight serious inconsistencies in the Afro-American group identity Obama attempts to situate his individual identity within.

The dig at Tim inspires a surprising reprimand from one of Obama's more radical Afro-American classmates, who comments, "Tim seems all right to me... Seems to me we should be worrying about whether our own stuff's together" (102). This hints that Obama's understanding of Tim's individual aspirations is problematic in an era of mutating racial group oppression. Certainly it would be difficult to maintain that the benefits gained by middle-class Afro-Americans starting in the 1970's and 80's –the period in which much of Obama's narrative is set –were won merely through the self-inflicted brutalization of a lot of "Uncle Toming" individuals (Wilson 136). Rather the ascendance of the Afro-American middle class in the post-civil rights period is reflective of shifts in the structure of American racial oppression in response to civil rights legislation. In his controversial 1978 study of the then emerging economic divide in the Afro-American community, *The Declining Significance of Race*, sociologist William Julius Wilson explains:

The passage of the 1964 civil rights bill... and the civil rights bill of 1968... were particularly relevant to the growing black middle class that was not concerned about the problems of day to day survival. However this legislation did not sufficiently address the unique problems of de facto segregation and social class subordination confronting ghetto blacks. (Wilson 136)

Thus, in economic terms black solidarity was in the process of becoming an increasingly false reality at precisely the time when Obama's group and individual identities depended on it most.



This is another point where the reverse order of Obama's identity progression becomes especially apparent. The other autobiographers discussed here adopt a counter-hegemonic group identity (Abolitionism for Douglass, Communism for Invisible Man, the NOI for Malcolm) hoping to travel out of their oppression and affirm their individual identity. Obama also defines himself in relation to a counter-hegemonic group identity in the form of his own brand of black solidarity. But unlike the others, he adopts this group identity in order to *cover up* his unique individual history and its inconsistencies with the mainstream Afro-American experience. And in an effort to reaffirm the validity of his group identity Obama even travels deeper into Afro-American oppression. The growing middle-class versus ghetto poor oppression differential convinces Obama that the ghetto experience is the only genuine Afro-American experience. His romantic and naïve understanding of ghetto oppression is as follows: "grow up in Compton and survival is a revolutionary act. You get to college and your family is still back there rooting for you. They're happy to see you escape; there's no question of betrayal" (99). With this as his motivating narrative, he quits a promising position working at a New York investment firm and moves to the South Side of Chicago to become a community organizer "to start off at ten-thousand dollars the first year" (142).

But Obama's conception of black solidarity falters in the ghetto. He travels there with the understanding that the same false reality and controlling imagery are used to oppress both himself and the ghetto poor, "as when a cabbie drives past [him] or the woman in the elevator clutches her purse" (100). But even though this is true, he also finds that the differences between their origins and his own are very real and have real consequences. The construction of an identity encompassing both experiences is deeply fraught with contradiction. A late night encounter with some young men listening to loud music in the street in front of Obama's apartment results in the following internal dialogue: "As much as I might tell myself otherwise, we are breaking apart, these boys and me, into different tribes, speaking a different tongue, living by a different code" (271). This passage illustrates Obama's finally dawning realization that group identity loses its meaning or becomes oppressive if it is too rigidly defined.

This is the very paradox arrived at when Invisible Man and Malcolm X discover that their respective groups, the Communists and the Nation of Islam, are too constrictive to encompass their own individual experiences. A problem they solve by finally exiting these groups in order to forge an unrestricted definition of their individual identities. But posed with the same problem, Obama's reversed progression brings him to a kind of inverted solution. For him group identity must be

preserved as the primary means of defining his individual identity. Yet the definition of that identity becomes highly amorphous as it encompasses the disparate experiences of the Afro-American middle-class, the ghetto poor, and his own. The language he relies on to achieve this projection of unity is rendered in enough eloquence to mask its vagueness. And indeed vagueness is the only thing that can unite the disparate experiences of the group Obama envisions. He claims “Those (Afro-American) stories –of survival, and freedom, and hope –became our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears our tears” (249). The rhetorical gymnastics of these lines is telling. Obama’s individual identity (“my story”) is quickly subsumed into a group identity (“our story”) reflecting myriad oppressions and conflicting histories. Obama finally becomes the notably absent quantity in his own autobiography. The identity he articulates encompasses both all Afro-Americans and none of them, perhaps not even himself.

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