

Jelena Šesnić

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Zagreb, Croatia

E-mail: jsesnic@ffzg.hr

New Models of Identity Politics in Barack Obama's Memoirs *Dreams from My Father*

The moment of re-issue of Barack Obama's memoirs, originally published in 1995, could not have been more auspicious for the young Democratic hopeful. At the time, in 2004, he had just been elected a US senator, while it probably never crossed anyone's mind that only a few years thence, Obama would make history as the first ever black US president elect. Lately, however, his term in office has been assessed in a fairly unflattering way (Ryan). This essay will not be concerned so much with exigencies of political promotion and self-promotion, notwithstanding the fact of Obama's second bid for presidency. What will be considered instead is the way his memoirs hark back to the extant tradition of African American life writing even as they inevitably point out new ways of being American, as stated by Obama in the preface to the second edition: "the story of my family ... might speak in some way to the fissures of race that have characterized the American experience, as well as the fluid state of identity ... that mark our modern life" (vii). In addition to some generic considerations that will be reinforced by occasional references to a classical specimen of the genre (notably, Malcolm X's autobiography), what will be touched on are the ways textual and narrative conventions embed many social, historical and psychological signs of personhood, making it indicative of a new form of identity politics.

That a production of a new personhood, and a black, male one at that, is at work but in such a way that confounds the well-known boundaries, becomes evident from early on, as the author makes a required introduction in his prefaces. Several things ought to be registered at the outset. As we have seen above, the narrator is concerned with "the fissures of race" and "the fluid state of identity" (vii), which are not mere figures of speech for him. They materialize in his own life, or rather, that of his protagonist, his earlier self, both as implied or experienced psychological dispositions ("my troubled heart ... the mixed blood, the divided

soul, the ghostly image of the tragic mulatto,” as ironically pointed out by the narrator [xv]), or, more likely, as proceeding directly from “the dangers inherent in any autobiographical work: the temptation to color events in ways favorable to the writer, the tendency to overestimate the interest one’s experiences hold for others, selective lapses of memory” (xvi). One should add to this list, strategically revealing and concealing your intertextual expertise. Additionally, it can be argued that transnational formations, from diasporic family to international and cosmopolitan civic status, play quite a prominent role in Obama’s memoirs, not least because of the fact that the book’s final chapter takes place by way of Obama’s pilgrimage to the point of origin, Africa. Africa is not just the place of refuge, as it portended to a number of his black predecessors (witness DuBois), nor the symbolic navel of African Americans but a literal place of origin, the ancestral land and burial ground for Obama’s forbears.

It stands as a significant revision of the tradition of Afro-American life writing the fact that Africa offers to the crisis-besieged protagonist (Obama in the text has reached the low point in his personal and professional life, and has become alienated both from the family and from his immediate—African American—community) the feel of home, and the way to suture his discreet self-perceptions (for outlines of the classical model, see W. Anderson, Olney). At least in this segment of the text, which is a major departure from the genre, and points towards possible revisions, Africa supersedes the United States as the locus of spiritual nourishment.

Suffice it to illustrate this shift within the continuing tradition of African American life writing by referring to the meaning Africa takes on in a representative, indeed classical work of Malcolm X, co-authored with Alex Haley and published in 1965 (Malcolm X). To remind the reader, Malcolm comes to the idea of an African base for black identity only after numerous turns in the road that is his life. This happens in fact only in the last part of his life

story, when he breaks up with his spiritual father, Elijah Muhammad, the founder of the Nation of Islam (305). This separation simultaneously propels Malcolm onto a discovery of the “orthodox Islam,” that can be obtained only in the Muslim world, where we see him travelling in one of the last legs of his life journey. This is mapped onto his pilgrimage to Mecca beginning in Cairo and ending in Jeddah (Saudi Arabia). A change of place enables Malcolm to re-evaluate and revise his previous assessments and judgments (“Despite my firm convictions, I have been always a man who tries to face facts” [345]); he lets us into the way his mind works and his attitudes undergo a change: “My whole life had been a chronology of—changes” (346). One of the changes that his thinking begins to accommodate is an international perspective as he notes abundant analogies between Third World groups and African Americans in the US nation-state. Malcolm’s insight deepens after Saudi Arabia when he undertakes travels in Africa and consequently broadens his appreciation of the possibilities of pan-Africanism (357), which from Nigeria to Ghana has the appearance of a “global black thinking” (358). This comes as a marked difference from the black nationalist perspective in which the text is usually placed bringing it closer to Obama’s point of view.

If then for Malcolm X the issue of Africa is resolved either on a political or on a rather abstract symbolic level, and has been overshadowed by the historical reality of slavery and slave trade, for Obama it rather operates in different terms—as a concrete, lived space and a location that competes with and complements the space of the United States: “I saw that my life in America ... all of it was connected with this small plot of earth and ocean away, connected by more than accident of a name or the color of my skin” (430).

Thus Obama’s self-construct has to be gauged against the backdrop of several national and sub-national formations, while his professed and practised internationalism serves to promote him into a new kind of (black) man and presumably into an all-American political

leader, as we witness these days. This construct, however, is still fraught with tension as we consider further some alternative types of, what Hazel Carby has called “race men” (Carby). Even though it is certainly possible to consider Obama the protagonist and the narrator of his memoirs as following in the long line of black forefathers, starting in Carby’s account with DuBois and ending with Cornel West, still Obama’s strategy is not simply to insert himself into an African American, masculine narrative but is both more encompassing and more post- or transracial, as suggest the latest denominators.¹ For the moment it is less important to consider the ludicrous claims of the “birthers” who deny Obama’s citizenship status due to his “internationalism” or his diasporic family (to say the least; see Bunch 29-54), than to observe how his textual self carefully navigates between a classical, nationally based and revolutionary black masculinity (represented by various historical and quotidian black figures with whom he interacts in the course of the narrative, all the way to Reverend Wright) and a new model, embodied precisely by himself. Paradoxically, then, Obama shows how nowadays you can be an African American by literally ceasing to be one.

This supersession of African American designation in a supposedly postracial environment, however, no longer takes place by way of passing (for white) or whitening of oneself culturally and mentally. It is postracial or transracial arguably because it no longer engages either black-white divide or, alternatively, because nowadays it doesn’t even necessarily play itself out on national stage. Obama’s identity in the text of his memoirs is both within and without the limits set by previous intersecting or separate stories of the colour line, miscegenation, passing, or black nationalism. Even though at times the text teasingly or

¹ The concept of “postracial America” means different things to several different constituencies using it but in all its usages it seems to be tied to the historical precedent of the election of the first black president. First, it might mean that race no longer matters (so much as before); or, in a more congenial explanation, that it comes in different moulds than before Obama’s election branching out into, for example, multiracial identity options (Rodgers). However, in less optimistic renderings, as the one offered by the historian Eric Foner, postracial disposition indicates the nation’s reluctance to remember the underlying role of slavery as a vehicle for the Civil War and its manifold ramifications (Foner). In other words, the meaning of the term has not yet stabilized.

less so evokes and then drops each of these strains, it is confident in its movement away from these textually encoded ideologies of race. (Just one striking example: Obama almost nonchalantly refers to the people's bafflement about his clearly mixed appearance; the idea, of course, being that he is, as is the case with all of his textual predecessors, the result of historical exigencies of slavery and sexual exploitation of enslaved black women. The case, as we know, is quite the opposite: it is Obama's white mother who quite confidently has chosen her partners, first among them Obama's ambitious, overly intellectual and smart African father.) He thus disrupts and inverts the expectations that the genre has accrued in the course of its development.

In terms of Obama's textual self-construction, it is interesting to pursue further the not marginal distinction between autobiography and memoirs within the purview of life writing, as suggested in the taxonomy offered by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Smith and Watson). Importantly, memoirs stipulate that Obama cast himself not simply as a private, secluded persona, bent on his self-serving pursuit but to cast his net much wider—to pose as a public persona for a number of reasons. Some of these, arguably, have to do with the possible political implications of his self-presentation as he is being groomed for major political functions. I am more interested in tracing those that should not be put down just to cases of political advertising, and will therefore attempt to look at those elements in the text.

I would argue that it is indispensable to consider Obama's life story under the heading of memoirs, while in the course of the argument I will try to show what repercussion this assumption then carries for the ideology of the text and the model of the self that it promotes. On the whole, it would seem, the subject of memoirs suffers under a greater strain than the subject of autobiography; in as much as it carries a lot less authority, it is more fractured and

more reliant on his/her relationship with others, and is less internalized than the “I” of autobiography. As suggested by Lee Quinby,

The “I” or subjectivity produced in memoirs is externalized and, in the Bakhtinian sense overtly dialogical The subjectivity of autobiography ... is presumed to be unitary and continuous over time, memoirs ... construct a subjectivity that is multiple and discontinuous. The ways that an “I” is inscribed in the discourse of memoirs therefore operate in resistance to the modern era’s dominant construction of individualized selfhood, which follows the dictum to ... know thy interior self. In relation to autobiography, then, memoirs function as counter-memory. (299)

So the author perceives that the “resistances” and blocks to the full, unimpeded knowledge of the self are best approached through a more fractured, more loosely conceived and executed form of memoirs. Initially, however, Obama’s disclaimers, offered in the Preface and the Introduction to the second edition of the memoirs, serve precisely to mitigate the professed sense of shame and unwillingness at exposing himself, even while making him a representative and news-worthy individual (ix, xiv, xvi). The edge of individualism is gradually blunted in the text as a more relational model of the self emerges at some key points that will be touched on in the analysis.

As for the inherent dialogism of memoirs, it is worth remarking that the generating point of (the son’s) discourse is the father’s death, so that repeatedly the text enacts the personification (the address) of the father, with whom the son seems to be locked in muted Oedipal struggle. In line with standard specimens of the genre, the voice and the personhood of the subject are contingent upon the relationship with, first, the living and, later, the dead father, but this gets complicated as the father’s side of the family comes in. The Oedipal model is further diluted as the father is several times absent (first, spatially, in Africa;

secondly, psychologically, as a lack; thirdly, literally, at the point of his death) so other elements must step in to replace it. Seen in this light, as a continuing dialogue with the absent (and deceased) father, the text's plot of movement, travel and transfer also foreshadows a certain psychomachia, working through for the protagonist of the clearly psychic implications of the function (even in the sense of the Lacanian cultural "Law") of the father (Easthope). Thus we see him measuring himself all the time against the father's standards set down in his patronizing letters to the young Barry, and we understand that the last stage in that implied conflict is successfully surpassed by the protagonist as he feels he has outgrown the father's shadow, finding out the not always flattering truth about "the Old Man" (220-221).

Furthermore, what is intriguing in Obama's memoirs is that self-discovery, even though cast as the search for the father, in fact repeatedly bumps against women in the father's huge extended family and outside of it. Thus even though apparently the narrator's aim is to show his younger self engaged in a dedicated pursuit of the Old Man, as the father is called both endearingly but also disparagingly, that pursuit would be stalled were it not for the repeated ministrations by Obama's half-sister on his father's side, his paternal and maternal grandmothers, aunts, female friends and acquaintances both in the States and during his stay in Africa. It is one of Obama's Kenyan aunts who informs Obama, then living and studying in New York City, that his father has died. Not only that, but in a replay of another possibly archetypal situation, Obama is visited in New York City by his half-sister Auma, whom he sees for the first time, and is once again urged by her to put himself back in touch with his African roots. These urgings then materialize in Obama's subsequent, if initially delayed, extended visit with his African family.

Barack's dialogical self, to pursue the metaphor further, is awakened in other situations of crisis and again nurtured by female agency. The moment comes just before and

precipitates a momentous decision by Barack to move from Los Angeles, where he attends college somewhat desultorily, to the East Coast and so to gain control of his life. The change that occurs inside him is conveniently marked by an act of physical mobility and transfer but is also elucidated by Regina, his African American friend who denounces his alienation and his self-serving attitude (111). She pushes him into considering the web of relations he has been trying to escape, primarily in terms of his ambivalent racial identity. The lesson he learns from Regina is two-fold: he needs to develop his relational self, and, importantly, he has to give dues to his “racial” identity. We shall see how Barack finds a way to connect the two impulses.

Even as we observe the young Obama’s persistent urge to search for and to reach to his father, such an impulse is fraught with complexity and ambiguity. The question should be posed, what kind of a father does Barry go in search for? Interestingly, what occurs in the first out of the three sections of the book entitled “Origins,” and goes on until his father’s death, is that Obama’s younger self is desperately and eagerly trying to locate a usable father figure or figures, not even making a connection between his adolescent pursuit and his real and living father resident in Africa. The young Obama, thus, needs a father, and not necessarily the real, African father. Thus a series of surrogate fathers or father figures come in to enable Barry’s functional development, among them his step-father, Indonesian Lolo, who indeed acts as a mentor or teacher (38).

In another twist, however, it is when the protagonist finally manages to locate the father, both literally and figuratively, that he finds how the obsessive, desperate and psychologically charged focus of his search for the father must be and in fact has been diluted and diverted into multiple directions of self-journey. It is interesting to see how Obama’s memoirs insist on one type of a plot of self-discovery, only in the second and third parts

(entitled “Chicago” and “Kenya” respectively) to swerve into alternative modes of questing. This self-fulfilling branching-out occurs in the Chicago section of the book, where Barack, now fatherless, embarks on the project of fathering and ministering to others, the disadvantaged black residents of the city's South Side district. His motivation for the move to Chicago is not self-evident as it shifts from necessity (“I can see that my choices were never truly mine alone...” [134]) to a more flamboyant gesture: “That was my idea of organizing. It was a promise of redemption” (135).

It is in this section that the sense of collectivism and communalism begins to prevail over more individualist concerns previously preoccupying Barack. As the Chicago section progresses, his identity becomes so entangled with those of his *protégés*, and narration refocuses on the plotlines of various community members so much so that, firstly, it displaces Barack's self from the centre of the narrative, while, secondly, it gradually empowers Barack's charges into more active, self-reliant individuals, who end up redeeming him instead of just waiting to be saved. Not surprisingly, perhaps, this section ends up with Barack's finding and confirming his belonging, his bond of affiliation, in another key institution, the black church, represented by Trinity United Church of Christ led by Reverend Jeremiah Wright (274). It is another quite powerful and effective mold of identity politics especially in urban America, a form of “Christian fellowship” superior both to a possibly failing program of black nationalism and to Barack's secular “brand of organizing” (286). Appropriately for the book's dialogical approach, the second part ends in Barack's experience of transcendence (of the self) as he immerses himself into, and is swept away by, a communal act of worship: “As I watched and listened from my seat, I began to hear all the notes from the past three years swirl about me” (294). A similar narrative logic, that of breaking away (from the past, your former self and the circle of people inhabiting it), moving not simply for its own sake but

in order to reach a specific location or to achieve a certain goal, permeates the third part, which opens up by another scene of transfer (Barack starting off for Africa after a brief, deflating stay in Europe [301]) and culminates in another family and communal ritual of bonding, that of marriage (of Barack and Michelle).

However, even as we make due notice of these departures from a stricter generic pattern, signs of an out-going self, there are concomitantly articulations at crucial junctures in the text of the by-now standard motifs of black or ethnic life writing. This pertains in particular to the hero's traumatic discovery of race and racial difference ("seeing that article was violent for me, an ambush attack" [51]), and gets amplified in the trials of Obama's young manhood, as he struggles with what Du Bois has perceptively described as both a curse and a blessing of the double-conscious vision (85, 86, 89). He always sees himself as straddling the two worlds and having to reckon with both of them. One of the ways Obama's narrative revises the extant tradition of black life writing, is that the denial or more active and conscious disavowal of dual heritage is not an option: whereas for Malcolm it raises his stature as a heroic, self-made black man, for Obama it is only likely to worsen the already ambiguous situation of an adolescent living with his "white" grandparents. The well-rehearsed concept of double-consciousness goes global so to speak; it is still a liability but also increasingly a capability, epitome of the state of the modern (and postmodern) subject.²

My argument insists on the fact of Obama's text participating in a larger generic tradition of African American life writing even as it takes it a step further. In order to illustrate this dialectics, what Deborah McDowell in a somewhat different context has called "the changing same" (McDowell), I will point out some of its innovations reflecting the

² Modern is here taken to encompass the age ushered in by bourgeois revolutions, industrialization and the attendant colonialism and imperialism, as well as the ideology of the Enlightenment, as suggested in broad strokes painted by Paul Gilroy (Gilroy). For the idea of the postmodern subject see Smith and Watson 1992: xiii-xxxi and L. Anderson 12-17, 79-91.

changing fate of the genre. In the last section of my argument, the reference will be made to what some recent readers of Obama's strategies of self-presentation have termed "geographical imagination" (Kruse 221-39; see Hornung's contribution in Lenz et al.). To begin with, Obama's claim to citizenship is itself a parable of the changing aspects of black experience in the United States. He was born in Hawaii, the last state to join the Union (in 1959), not part of the US mainland, and also not complying with the mainland's racial roster and the colour line: not a single racial formation claims power and majority on the islands, as Obama makes clear (23-24).

Staggering spatial mobility and wide geographical compass are hallmarks of Obama's formation. While through his mother's line he is firmly embedded in the American heartland (Kansas and later on Texas; the European immigrant stock), on his father's side he claims African, Kenyan roots. Even though a painful interrogation of his identity is his lot both as an adolescent and as a mixed-blood person, this is not part of the tragic mulatto motif, and the mixing in his family decisively evades historical implications of miscegenation, which apply, for instance, in the case of Malcolm X's immediate ancestors. Furthermore, Obama's extended stay in Indonesia, where he moves with his mother and step-father as a boy, marks a decisive step in his developmental narrative: what for Malcolm comes lamentably so late in his short life journey, provides Obama, so early on, with a wider perspective, a global take: this becomes obvious when he is able to integrate as a community worker the situation in Altgeld and comparable white working-class Chicago neighbourhoods with the impact of predatory capitalist economy worldwide, first in Indonesia and then also in Africa. Everything is entangled, nothing works in isolation as the images from the ghettos of Chicago are juxtaposed with the images of third-world slums (314).

Also, we should note how Obama's African journey of self-discovery bears some resemblance to Malcolm's travels in Africa; again, the latter was not able to translate that into a more coherent idea, while for Obama this is yet another crucial step and a stage in his internal development. This is how he achieves an imprimatur of his father's side of the family, so that he could be initiated into manhood, as appropriately signalled by his subsequent marriage soon after his return from his travels.

To sum up, Obama undertakes other movements which integrate in the space of a single life the expanse of the whole continents: taken collectively, his Hawaiian birthplace, Indonesian childhood, and, later on, Californian young manhood portend what is increasingly theorized as the "Pacific Rim" (Wilson 2000). His subsequent move to the East Coast, specifically New York and Boston, where his education proceeds, marked also by a significant gesture of self-naming (it is at this point that Barry becomes Barack), alerts us to the inherent links between internal and external mobility. The next stage of Obama's self-fashioning proceeds as he almost loses himself in the corporate world, but is appropriately called back from this dead-end by another removal, this time to Chicago and its black neighbourhoods.

While a typical revolutionary autobiography (for example, Malcolm X's) relies heavily on the exclusiveness of black US identity, for Obama there is something inherently stultifying about such a concept, so that quite early on he has to contend with the issue of "pure" blackness, and further down as a black organizer and a lawyer in Chicago's South Side, he repudiates the stance of implacable black nationalism, here exemplified by Afrocentrism and carried on by black Muslims (180, 198). He thus acknowledges, but also significantly revises Malcolm's perspective, while his qualified criticism of these practices chimes with Paul Gilroy's and Anthony Kwame Appiah's dismissals of ethnic absolutism and

particularism. The challenge to these is at least two-fold, as Obama makes clear, since in order to escape the grip of, in Gilroy's words, "African American exceptionalism" (4), Obama in the role of a South-Side community organizer has to bring in both a wide, transnational impact of the Third World anti-colonial and anti-neoliberal struggles, as well as keep open communication lines with other pan-ethnic Chicago neighbourhoods.

Undeniably, Obama's movements and transfers have had a huge impact on the way he defines and enacts the standardized ideas of patriotism and nationalism, and the contents of citizenship as a complementary concept. Rob Wilson, in a recent essay collection on these and related topics, invokes "a new cosmopolitanism" as a shift away from older forms of affiliation, such as, notably, "nationalism," "patriotism," and their less palatable companions "xenophobia" and "chauvinism" (Wilson 1998). For Wilson, cosmopolitanism would be appropriate mode of enacting civic forms of interaction for a "postnational condition" (put simply, a facet of postmodern political thought which anticipates the end of the nation-state). Seen in these terms, Obama might be construed as a postmodern cosmopolitan or a type of "a new world citizen," ever less in thrall to the old nationalist, tribal or state loyalties, as the type is defined by Wilson (1998: 353). However, we need to pause here and see if that kind of detachment actually has taken place in Obama's memoirs. The answer is not really, or only in part. The obvious departure, to take but one example, is the urgency Obama feels to make a journey to Africa, in order precisely to reclaim his roots. He senses that if everyone is a family, then no one is a family—you have to draw the line somewhere.

Perhaps, then, he is involved in some other kind of "cosmopolitics" (Cheah and Robbins). It is well illustrated in ways of affiliation that Barack encounters in his extended family in Africa, especially with his male cousins, Sayid in particular. Sayid makes clear how his loyalties are firmly local, rooted in customs, binding him to his family and kin, but he also

professes to broader connections, amounting to a sort of pan-Africanism proceeding from the sense of shared experience (382). Sayid's position can perhaps be understood as, in the words by the philosopher and political scientist Appiah, "rooted cosmopolitanism" (91).

Another Appiah's category might be applicable to Barack's civic sense, and that is what Appiah terms "cosmopolitan patriotism," which is fuelled by physical mobility, migrancy, nomadism and diaspora, but is still realized and enacted within the bounds of a nation-state, such that is committed to liberal political principles (Appiah 93-95). Unlike some other commentators, Appiah (and this seems to approximate Obama's position) doesn't write patriotism off as "morally deficient" but as a starting point for extending the similar sympathies and investments to other structures and greater number of individuals (96).

Arguably, thus, Obama's trajectory works within the categories of "rooted cosmopolitanism" and "cosmopolitan patriotism" (Appiah). While this position clearly proceeds from and hinges on physical mobility, and is celebrated in such sub- or supra-national formations as diaspora and minorities, there is a clear sense that in order for the subject to be responsive to different collective forms of affiliation, one has to know where one is coming from, and where one's family is, as witnessed by Obama's revelatory, enlightening journey back to his African roots, and by his "promise of redemption" (135) sought in various US-American places. As we follow him down the path of his quite extraordinary life narrative, we begin to get a notion of new forms of individual and, possibly, collective identities in the twenty-first century.

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