

Obama's Identity Crisis

Although he presents himself as a healer of differences, the presidential candidate's own racial struggle paints a conflicted portrait.

by Steve Sailer

When Charles de Gaulle paid his first visit to embattled French Algeria after taking power in 1958, he stepped up to the microphone in front of a vast throng of Europeans and Arabs torn by murderous hostilities, stared out at them, and simply announced, "I have understood you." The crowd exulted. Christians and Muslims alike broke into grateful tears. De Gaulle understands us! What more do we need?

Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) has yet to attain that level of oracular ambiguity, but his bestseller *The Audacity of Hope* shows this wordsmith's facility at eloquently restating the views of both his liberal supporters and his conservative opponents, leaving implicit the suggestion that all we require to resolve these wearying Washington disputes is to find a man who understands us—a reasonable man, a man very much like, say, Obama—and turn power over to him. The politician has elicited such fervor among many white voters that *Slate.com*'s Timothy Noah runs a regular feature entitled "The Obama Messiah Watch" quoting "gratuitously adoring" articles. (Blacks have tended to be relatively more level-headed about him.)

Early in his run for the U.S. Senate in 2004, Obama's pollsters discovered that women loved him, especially nice white ladies who like personalities more than politics and definitely don't like political arguments. Why can't we all just get along?

Obama has molded himself into the male Oprah Winfrey, the crown prince of niceness, bravely denouncing divisiveness, condemning controversy, eulogizing unity, and retelling his feel-good life story about how he, the child of a black scholar from Kenya and a white mother from Kansas, grew up to be editor of the *Harvard Law Review*.

Gaullism worked out fairly well in France, and so might Obamaism in America. His opposition in 2002 to invading Iraq was sensible and forcibly stated. And Obama was a broadly respected Illinois state legislator from 1997-2005 because he searched out minor good government issues and forged bipartisan alliances with technocrats in the Republican ranks. But a president can't pick and choose his issues with the exquisite selectivity Obama displayed as a backbencher—especially not with judicial nominees. So his record as chief executive would likely prove far more liberal.

As we've seen with George W. Bush, however, pre-election platforms, such as Bush's promise to pursue a "humble" foreign policy, matter less than the inner man. Obama is a particularly complicated personality, so he, and the country, deserve a more frank analysis than he has received thus far at the hands of a starstruck press.

Beneath this bland Good Obama lies a more interesting character, one that I like far better—the Bad Obama, a close student of other people's weaknesses, a literary artist of considerable power in plumbing his deep reservoirs of self-pity and resentment, an unfunny Evelyn Waugh consumed by indignation toward his own mother's people. He has been hiding out on the bestseller lists for the last two years in his enormously revealing, but little understood, 1995 "autobiography"—a more accurate term might be "autobiographical novel"—*Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*.

When Obama briefly surfaced in the media in 1990 as the first African-American editor of the *Harvard Law Review*, Random House handed him a book contract. Originally, he intended to write a disquisition on race relations, but the puerility of his theorizing discouraged him. He turned instead to writing about what he finds truly fascinating: his relatives and himself.

Obama's gift for restructuring the past into emotionally and aesthetically satisfying patterns made for an uneasy hybrid of fact and fiction, with composite characters, clearly made-up dialogue, and even preposterous dream sequences. Recently, the *Los Angeles Times* revealed that the tale of his one triumph during his four years as a young ethnic activist in Chicago—getting asbestos removed from a public housing project—excluded all mention of the veteran local agitator, Hazel Johnson, who might deserve more of the credit.

Nonetheless, *Dreams*

is an impressive book. The abstract lessons he claims to draw from his life aren't memorable, sapped as they are by the pervasive insincerity about race that America demands of its intellectuals, but Obama has a depressive's fine eye for the disillusioning detail. His characters, real or synthetic, are vivid, and he has an accurate ear for how different kinds of people speak. The book's chief weakness is that its main character—Obama himself—is a bit of a drip, a humor-impaired Holden Caulfield whose preppie angst is fueled by racial regret. (Obama has a knack for irony, but of a strangely humorless flavor.)

Why haven't many grasped the book's essence? First, Obama's elegant, carefully wrought prose style makes *Dreams* a frustratingly slow read, which may explain why the book was remaindered in 1995, and why so few of the many who have purchased it following his famous keynote address at the 2004 Democratic convention appear to have read much of it.

Second, the plot isn't that interesting: his first three decades are too lacking in incident to make a page-turning story. Obama has led a fairly pleasant existence, with most of its suffering and conflict taking place within his own head as he tries to turn himself into an authentic angry black man.

Third, there is the confusing contrast between the confident, suave master politician we see on television and the tormented narrator of *Dreams*, who is an updated Black Pride version of the old "tragic mulatto" stereotype found in "Show Boat" and "Imitation of Life."

Which Obama is real? Or is that a naïve question to ask of such a formidable identity artist? William Finnegan wrote in the *New Yorker* of Obama's campaigning: "... it was possible to see him slipping subtly into the idiom of his interlocutor—the blushing, polysyllabic grad student, the hefty black church-pillar lady, the hip-hop autoshop guy." Like Madonna or David Bowie, he has spent his life trying on different personalities, but while theirs are, in Camille Paglia's phrase, sexual personae, his specialty is racial personae.

Fourth, his is "a story of race and inheritance," two closely linked topics upon which American elites have intellectually disarmed themselves. In an era when fashionable thinkers claim that race is just a social construct, Obama's subtitle is subversive. Although his expensive education—prep school, an Ivy League bachelor's degree, and then a Harvard professional diploma—has not equipped him with a conceptual vocabulary adequate for articulating the meaning behind his life's story, the details deliver a message that white intellectuals have all but forgotten: the many-faceted importance of who your relatives are.

A racial group is a large extended family, and Obama's book is primarily about his rejection of his supportive white maternal extended family in favor of his unknown black paternal extended family.

For the few willing to read all 442 pages, he offers important testimony about the enduring glamour of anti-white anger. It's a bitter counterweight to the sunny hopes so widely invested in his candidacy as the man whose election as president would somehow help America finally "transcend race."

In reality, Obama provides a disturbing test of the best-case scenario of whether America can indeed move beyond race. He inherited his father's penetrating intelligence; was

raised mostly by his loving liberal parents in multiracial, laid-back Hawaii, where America's normal rules never applied, and received a superb private school education. And yet, at least through age 33 when he wrote *Dreams from My Father*, he found solace in nursing a pervasive sense of grievance and animosity against his mother's race.

Even his celebrated acceptance of Christianity in his mid-20s turns out to be an affirmation of African-American emotional separatism. As I was reading *Dreams*, I assumed that his ending would be adapted from the favorite book of his youth, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which climaxes with Malcolm's visit to Mecca and heartwarming conversion from the racism of the Black Muslims to the universalism of orthodox Islam. I expected that Obama would analogously forgive whites and ask forgiveness for his own racial antagonism as he accepts Jesus.

Instead, Obama falls under the spell of a leftist black nationalist preacher, Jeremiah A. Wright, who preaches African-American unity through antipathy toward whites. Reverend Wright remains a major influence on the presidential candidate. (The title of Obama's second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, is borrowed from one of Wright's sermons.) Ben Wallace-Wells notes in *Rolling Stone*: "This is as openly radical a background as any significant American political figure has ever emerged from, as much Malcolm X as Martin Luther King Jr."

The happy ending to *Dreams* is that Obama's hard-drinking half-brother Roy—"Actually, now we call him Abongo, his Luo name, for two years ago he decided to reassert his African heritage"—converts to teetotaling Islam.

Although the biracial Obama is frequently lumped with the multiracial golfer Tiger Woods as evidence of the socially healing power of interracial marriage, their attitudes are quite different. Woods turned down Nike's suggestion that because African-American celebrities are so popular today, he should identify himself solely as black. He didn't want to disown his mother. Woods instead calls himself black and Thai, or, at times, "CaublinAsian," in tribute to his Caucasian, black, American Indian, and Asian ancestors.

From the age of ten onward, though, Obama desperately wants to be black: "I was trying to raise myself to be a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance, no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant." Honolulu's paucity of African-Americans means he has to learn to be black from the media: "TV, movies, the radio; those were places to start. Pop culture was color-coded, after all, an arcade of images from which you could cop a walk, a talk, a step, a style."

He cherishes every cause for complaint he can discern against white folks. He is constantly distressed at being half-white. Obama says he "ceased to advertise my mother's race at the age of twelve or thirteen, when I began to suspect that by doing so I was ingratiating myself to whites," even though he surely realizes that his media-sensation status stems from how much white people love highly accomplished blacks who speak with white accents. He wouldn't be a serious candidate for president at age 45 if he weren't part black.

Obama's teenage self-consciousness is perpetually crucified by contact with stereotypes about blacks. When his grandmother wants a ride to work because the day before, while awaiting the bus, she was threatened by a black panhandler, he is outraged—at his grandparents. "And yet I knew that men who might easily have been my brothers could still inspire their rawest fears." In high school, he gets upset when "a white girl mentioned in the middle of conversation how much she liked Stevie Wonder; or when a woman in the supermarket asked me if I played basketball; or when the school principal told me I was cool."

The great irony of the book is that so many of the stereotypes about African-Americans and Africans turn out, in his troubling experience, to be true—which doesn't make Obama happy at all: "I did like Stevie Wonder, I did love basketball, and I tried my best to be cool at all times. So why did such comments always set me on edge?" (When he moves to the South Side of Chicago, he eventually discovers that, like his grandmother, he's sometimes scared of black males on the street, too.)

Even the seemingly unique marriage of Obama's parents turns out to be a stereotype, one that was eerily paralleled in John Updike's 1978 novel about a hyper-intellectual African dictator, *The Coup*.

The year before Obama's birth in 1961, his Kansas-born mother Ann Dunham, an 18-year-old student at the University of Hawaii, may have wed fellow student Barack Hussein Obama Sr. Just like Updike's narrator, Felix Ellellou, who bigamously marries a white Midwestern co-ed at their American college in 1959, the senior Obama already had a wife back home in an African village. Obama writes, "In fact, how and when the marriage occurred remains a bit murky, a bill of particulars that I've never had the courage to explore."

Upon graduation, his father was offered a generous scholarship by the New School for Social Research in New York City that would have paid for his family to come with him. Instead, wanting the most famous diploma, he chose Harvard's scholarship offer, even though it provided only for him. And so he abandoned the little boy who would grow up idolizing him from afar.

Just as Updike's Ellellou returned from America to embark on a governmental career in Africa, where he added two more wives to his collection, Obama's polygamous pop went back to Kenya. Obama Sr. took up again with his first wife, married another white American woman, and added a mistress, eventually siring approximately eight children by four women. (The precise number of his offspring remains uncertain as some of his potential heirs long litigated each other's true paternity in probate court.)

Obama's mother married an Indonesian student, and when he was six, they moved to Jakarta. In his account, she was shocked to discover how her new husband reverted to chauvinist Indonesian ways as soon as he left America and that Indonesia was a nasty right-wing dictatorship (although the latter doesn't jibe with her spending much of the rest of her life in that country). She divorced and sent 10-year-old Barack to live with her parents in Honolulu, while she and his half-sister stayed, off-and-on, in Indonesia.

Despite Obama's relentless efforts to mold himself into an African-American, his overwhelmingly white upbringing is apparent in his coolly analytical depiction of his mother, a portrait that most black men would find disrespectful. To Obama, his mother is a Kumbaya-era liberal. I suspect he feels that she messed up her life due to naïve faith in Third World countries and Third World men; but if she had been wiser, where would he be? This is one of life's conundrums that's hopeless but not serious, and yet Obama can't help being serious about himself.

Years later, when he's working on Wall Street, he's creeped out by his visiting mother's insistence on seeing her favorite film, the 1959 Brazilian art-house classic "Black Orpheus." He belatedly realizes that his very fair-skinned mother is sexually attracted to dark men. He pompously intones, "The emotions between the races could never be pure; even love was tarnished by the desire to find in the other some element that was missing in ourselves. Whether we sought out our demons or salvation, the other race would always remain just that: menacing, alien, and apart."

Wallace-Wells mentions in *Rolling Stone*:

There is an amazingly candid moment in Obama's autobiography when he writes of his childhood discomfort at the way his mother would sexualize African-American men. 'More than once,' he recalls, 'my mother would point out: "Harry Belafonte is the best-looking man on the planet."' What the focus groups his advisers conducted revealed was that Obama's political career now depends, in some measure, upon a tamer version of this same feeling, on the complicated dynamics of how white women respond to a charismatic black man.

My late mom was also a big fan of Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier back in the 1960s. To her, they embodied an admirable combination of black masculine charm and white gentlemanliness. (In contrast, she thought Muhammad Ali, who is now the more popular representative of 1960s black manhood, an uncultured blowhard.) It sorely disappointed her when blacks burned down Watts in 1965. They were not following the fine example for their race set by Harry and Sidney. She would have liked Barack Obama, too, and for the same reasons.

Nobody uses the term “example for his race” anymore. Today, we say “role model.” Even so, what many whites hope, deep down, to accomplish by electing the well-mannered Obama as president is to make him the supreme role model for all African Americans, eclipsing such deplorable bad examples as Al Sharpton, Snoop Dogg, and 50 Cent. Stuart Taylor Jr., a white critic of affirmative action, exulted in *The Atlantic*: “The ascent of Obama is the best hope for focusing the attention of black Americans on the opportunities that await them instead of on the oppression of their ancestors.”

The message much of white America hopes to send to black America by electing Obama is: Don't Be So Black. Act More Barack. Perhaps this explains why blacks haven't been all that enthusiastic.

But will the man from Honolulu, who has always worried whether blacks think him black enough, tirelessly demand that African-Americans reform their behavior? And would it make any difference if he did? Few now remember that Jesse Jackson devoted the 1970s to preaching moral self-improvement to blacks, with little evident impact, before moving on to the more lucrative business of denouncing whites in the 1980s.

Back in Hawaii, Obama's grandparents enrolled the fifth grader in the famous Punahou prep school (current tuition \$14,725). With 3,750 students from K-12, it enrolls a high proportion of all the young elites in Hawaii. Illustrative of its financial resources, *Sports Illustrated* ranks it as having the fourth-best high-school sports program in America.

In Obama's book, Punahou was a nightmare of racial insensitivity, with one of his fellow students even asking to touch his hair. What he doesn't reveal is that Punahou was quite possibly the most racially diverse prep school in America. It officially opened its doors to all races in 1851. Sun Yat-sen, the first president of China, attended it in the 1880s.

In Obama's eighth grade class picture, at least seven and perhaps as many as ten of the 21 students are non-white. Brian Charlton of the AP threw some cold water on Obama's adolescent alienation fantasies: “He was known as Barry Obama, and with his dark complexion and mini-Afro, he was one of the few blacks at the privileged Hawaiian school overlooking the Pacific. Yet that hardly made him stand out. Diversity was the norm at the Punahou School, one of the state's top private schools.” His classmates say he was a popular and cheerful figure, the opposite of the tortured personality described in *Dreams*, in which he rationalizes his teenage drug use as “something that could push questions of who I was out of my mind . . .”

When Barack was in high school in the later 1970s, no whites held Hawaii's top elected jobs as U.S. senator or governor. Indeed, as his father pointed out in a 1963 newspaper interview, whites were sometimes the victims of discrimination in Hawaii. Obama also fails to note the charming local custom of calling the last day of school “Kill *Haole* Day.”

Like Obama, many Hawaiian residents are the products of mixed marriages: in 1956-57, interracial marriage rates ranged from 22.0 percent for professionals to 43.5 percent for farm workers. There's not much of a one-drop-of-blood rule for defining racial membership in Hawaii that mandated that Obama call himself black and only black.

Why was Obama so insistent upon rejecting the white race?

Perhaps because we all (especially young men) want to belong to something we see as bigger and stronger than us, a winning team. And conquest, who rules whom, is the ultimate team sport.

From adolescence onward, Obama wanted a race to belong to, a team whose accomplishments would reflect well upon him. Of course, it was unthinkable in his liberal white family to take pride in the achievements of his mother's race, so Obama gloried in being part of his absent father's race.

Obama was accepted into posh Occidental College in Los Angeles, which then had a black mayor, Tom Bradley. But Oxy wasn't black enough, so in search of a community to belong to, he transferred to Harlem . . . well, to be precise, to that prestigious university on the edge of Harlem, Columbia. (A recurrent theme in Obama's career is Power to the People gestures and Ivy League results.)

After graduation, he moved to Chicago in 1983, finally finding a home where at least some whites reciprocated his antagonism. He worked as an ethnic activist, helping the impoverished black community wring more money and services from the government. That government money was wrecking the morals of the housing-project residents seems obvious from his book, but Obama never comes out and says it. Numerous white moderates assume that a man of Obama's superlative intelligence must be kidding when he espouses his cast-iron liberalism on race-related policies, but they don't understand the emotional imperative of racial loyalty to him.

Even his one triumph, mau-mauing lazy Chicago Housing Authority bureaucrats into removing asbestos from Altgeld Gardens, is tinged with irony. The timeservers at the CHA are all black, and asbestos would fall comically low on any list of problems plaguing inner city African-Americans.

After four years there, the South Side is worse than ever, with youth violence ratcheting upwards. Obama applies to Harvard Law School (and eventually becomes a discrimination lawyer). Upon acceptance, he makes his first visit to Kenya, where *Dreams from My Father* finally achieves a frankness worthy of its artistry.

Obama immediately appreciates the sweetness of African life in the bosom of his newfound family—“For family seemed to be everywhere . . . all of them fussing and fretting over Obama's long-lost son”—but soon discovers its discontents, including how polygamy generates convoluted conflicts too intricate for even the longest-running soap opera. The rival families of his late father—who died in a drunken car crash a half decade before—are still suing each other over his meager estate.

He begins to notice that the intense family ties he'd longed for are not an unmixed blessing for Kenya since they corrupt its culture. Updike makes the same point when the dictator Ellellou visits the French colonial villa that his most traditional wife had seized and which was now populated by an entire village of his extended family from the Salu tribe:

Nephews, daughters-in-law, totem brothers, sisters by second wives of half-uncles greeted Ellellou, and all in that ironical jubilant voice implying what a fine rich joke, he, a Salu, had imposed upon the alien tribes in becoming the chief of this nation imagined by the white men, and thereby potentially appropriating all its spoils to their family use. For there lay no doubt, in the faces of these his relatives . . . that nothing the world could offer Ellellou to drink, no nectar nor elixir, would compare with the love he had siphoned from their pool of common blood.

Most authors who write about African-Americans' social problems appear to know nothing—and don't seem to want to learn anything—about Africans. Our pundits and academics assume that the social history of black Americans traces to that day in 1619 when the first slaves were herded on to that dock in Virginia, but no farther back. We could call it the Black Blank Slate theory.

In refreshing contrast, in Obama's account of race and inheritance, the continuities between Africa and African-America are clear. Kenya seems like an incipient Chicago housing project, preserved only by its inability to afford the welfare state that has ruined the inner city. His aunt's Nairobi home is “just like the apartments in Altgeld, I realized. The same chain of mothers and daughters and children. . . . The same absence of men.”

Unless they can bribe their way into a prestigious office job, most of Obama's male relatives work as little as possible, relying on their womenfolk for food and shelter. And the women are looking for what the author's grandfather and uncle Sayid both call a “big man” to ease their burdens with funds extracted from the government. Obama's father, it turns out, had grabbed for the brass ring but wound up a failed Big Man, undone by President Jomo Kenyatta's discrimination against his Luo tribe and by his own alcoholism. Even when impoverished, Obama Sr. pathetically kept playing the Big Man, dispensing gifts he couldn't afford to his relatives and hangers-on.

Now, Obama Jr. is running for the biggest job of all.

On his trip to Kenya last year, he began by lecturing the frustrated audiences not to expect his prominence in Washington to change their lives—"My time is not my own. Don't expect me to come back here very often." But in the slum of Kibera, the crowd's adulation overcame his intellectual defenses and he began shouting joyously, "You are all my brothers and sisters!"

In his head, Obama surely knows that his becoming the world's biggest man would be bad for the work ethic of Kenyans, some of whom would assume America would support them. But in his heart, none of that matters.

For Americans wondering about his fitness to be president, his latest Kenyan trip symbolizes the inner duality beneath his dapper exterior. He possesses one of the finest minds of any politician, but his personal passions routinely war against his acknowledging unwelcome truths, even to himself.

Whether his head or heart would prove stronger in the White House remains unknown, perhaps even to Barack Obama.

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