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Barack Obama and His-Story: Paradox of Hybridity and Masculinity in His Autoandrography¹

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Abstract: This essay, a revision of an oral presentation at NASSS, examines Barack Hussein Obama's 1995 autobiography *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* from literary perspectives as the text introduces not only a postmodern bildungsroman hero of hybridity but the author's paradoxical obsession to paternal heritage. As a result, his autoandrography, a life writing of a man about himself and by himself, represents a familiar story of a man who is trapped by the myth of masculinity. The essay first identifies various postmodern characteristics of autobiography with the text: genealogy, narrative of ethnic identity and community, memoir, trauma narrative, and bildungsroman. Then, it examines the narrator's relation to his father and finds that the text also portrays a man who is molded into an anti-postmodern ideology of manhood. The essay concludes that the text represents postmodern male anxieties. Being a racial minority and gender majority, the narrator finds himself difficult to locate in this world of diversities. Barack Obama's ultimate decision was to rely on what he thought to be definite: i.e. paternity.

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Introduction

Barack Obama and Postmodern Autobiography

"It's in the blood," says his father when ten-year-old Barack Hussein Obama, Jr. finally meets him for the first time in 1971.² This idea had already haunted him and, now vocalized, continues to do so throughout the telling of *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, in which Obama records his search for self, or according to his father, a journey to "know where you belong" (114). He starts the journey as a postmodern bildungsroman hero of hybridity, but by the end settles for a relatively simple identity: that of his paternal heritage. As a result, his autoandrography, a life writing of a man about himself and by himself, represents a familiar story of a man who is trapped by the myth of masculinity.

The term *autobiography* was first coined by Ann Yearsley, a British woman poet, in the

preface to her collection of poems published in the 1780s, though *OED* says it was in the 1797 *Monthly Magazine* that employed the hybrid words, partly Saxon and Partly Greek, *autos* (self), *bios* (life) and *graphe* (writing).³ Before the word's coinage, *memoir* and *confession* were commonly referred to as life writings.⁴

Linda Smith and Julia Watson sum up American autobiography, by saying, "In the Americas, at least, the autobiographical gesture has become endemic" (109), and it is now recognized as one of the major national literary genres in history. Starting with the European explorers of the new continent, to the New England Puritans expressing hope and fear in the new world, the slaves and slave owners of the Southern plantations justifying their identities, and those on the frontiers conveying ambitions, they recorded not only what they witnessed but also what they thought, eventually creating the myth of America. Smith and Watson continue:

Increasingly we incorporate autobiographical genres, modes of address, and consciousness into our everyday lives. This contemporary fascination with life narrative derives in part from the power of the ideology of individualism and its cultural hold on us — Americans in particular are attracted to Horatio Alger-esque fantasies of the self-made individual. We are also witnessing, with this new outpouring of memoirs, the desire of autobiographical subjects to disassemble the monolithic categories that have culturally identified them, labels such as "woman," "gay," "black" or "disabled," and to reassemble various pieces of memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency into new, often hybrid, modes of subjectivity. In this pursuit, life narrative has proved remarkably flexible in adapting to new voices and assuming new shapes across media, ideology, and the differences of subjects. (109)

In academia, autobiography studies is one of the fastest growing fields. The critical climate of recent decades has favored most forms of life writing, and at the start of the new century, literary biography still remains in vogue.⁵ Linda Leavell, in her 2006 introductory essay to the special issue on autobiography in *South Central Review*, refers to Hermione Lee's observation of the rising status of autobiography studies in the past five years.⁶ In fact, Yale University hosted a symposium on literary biography and modernism in 2005. And, in 2008, the English Literary Society of Japan also hosted a symposium "Fiction and Faction in Life Writing."

Smith and Watson divide the history of autobiography studies into three critical periods: before the 1960s, the 1960s and 70s, and the 1980s to present. "First-wave critics were preoccupied with the 'bio' of the autobiographer because they understood autobiography as a subcategory of the biography of great lives and excluded other modes of life narrative. Truthfulness in autobiography meant consistency with the biographical facts of the life" (123). The second wave "opened up the discussion of autobiographical narrating by insisting on its status as an act of creation rather than mere transcription" (128). In other words, there was more interest in the presentation of self-fashioning "auto." The third wave responds to "the diversity of practices of subjectivity and modes of analyzing" (137). As Smith and Watson further explain it, "notions of an authoritative speaker, intentionality, truth, meaning, and generic integrity have been challenged" (137).

Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance was first published in 1995 in

response to public interest in Obama after his election as the first-African American president of the *Harvard Law Review*. The book was re-released in 2004 following his widely acclaimed keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. His newly established fame fuels book sales, and he is perceived as being well-intentioned. The publisher, Random House, introduces enthusiastic reviews on its homepage: “Fluidly, calmly, insightfully, Obama guides us straight to the intersection of the most serious questions of identity, class, and race” (*Washington Post Book World*); and “One of the most powerful books of self-discovery I’ve ever read, all the more so for its illuminating insights into the problems not only of race, class, and color, but of culture and ethnicity” (Charlayne Hunter-Gault).⁷ Joe Klein, another critic, enthuses that the book “may be the best-written memoir ever produced by an American politician”.⁸ The audio book edition was released in 2005, and it earned him the 2006 Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word Album.

The reviews for the 1995 edition, however, were not that positive. R. Detweiler of *Choice* offers a lukewarm review: “Obama writes well; his account is sensitive, probing, and compelling.”⁹ Hazel Rochman of *Booklist* is confused: “Will the truth set you free, Obama asks? Or will it disappoint? Both, it seems. His search for himself as a black American is rooted in the particulars of his daily life; it also reads like a wry commentary about all of us” (1844). A reviewer for *New York Times Book Review* is rather puzzled by Obama’s message:

All men live in the shadow of their fathers — the more distant the father, the deeper the shadow. Barack Obama describes his confrontation with this shadow in his provocative autobiography, *Dreams From My Father*, and he also persuasively describes the phenomenon of belonging to two different worlds, and thus belonging to neither.... At a young age and without much experience as a writer, Barack Obama has bravely tackled the complexities of his remarkable upbringing. But what would he have us learn? That people of mixed backgrounds must choose only one culture in which to make a spiritual home? That it is not possible to be both black and white, Old World and New? If this is indeed true, as Mr. Obama tells it, then the idea of America taking pride in itself as a nation derived of many different races seems strangely mocked.¹⁰

As a result, the initial sales were, in Obama’s words, “underwhelming.” Obama says in the Preface to the 2004 edition, “And after a few months, I went on with the business of my life, certain my career as an author would be short-lived” (vii).

It appears Obama’s story was never fully understood. In 1995, the reader was confused and felt mocked. In 2004, the reputation of the author was so overwhelming that the contradiction of the book was never seriously examined. It was not because he was a failed first-time author unable to make himself understood, but because he was candidly faithful to the dreams of his father.

I. Postmodern Hybridity

Obama calls the book “an honest account of a particular province of my life” (xvii). The text is multifaceted, allowing the reader to examine his life from various perspectives. Among fifty-two modes of life narrative introduced by Smith and Watson, Obama’s autobiography belongs at least to the following five modes: Genealogy, Narrative of ethnic identity and community, Memoir,

Trauma narrative, and Bildungsroman¹¹ with postmodern characteristics.

a. Genealogy

Genealogy is “a method of charting family history, [and it] locates, charts, and authenticates identity by constructing a family tree of decent... Genealogical projects recover the recorded past, which they can verify as an official past”(Smith and Watson 195).

Obama is an only son born on August 4, 1961, to Barack Hussein Obama, Sr. and Stanley Ann Dunham. Later in life, however, he learns that he is actually a descendant of great ancestors and relatives as well as a child of modern American diversity. After divorcing Barack Hussein Obama, Sr., Ann married an Indonesian, Lolo, who had a daughter, Maya. At this point, Obama’s family is taking on the structure of the contemporary American stepfamily. Both horizontal *and* vertical relations make the family distinctly American as well as international. The overall Obama family lineage includes African royalty and relations to American presidents, such as George Bush and Harry S. Truman.¹² He also indicates that his maternal family genealogy may include Native American ancestors as well as showing that he is distantly related to Jefferson Davis. On the paternal side, his research shows a family that goes back twelve generations. Though monogamy was the norm on the maternal side, the paternal side practiced polygamy. Obama’s father was married to three women at the same time and had six sons and a daughter. Mixed marriage was, of course, also common on both sides of Obama’s family, with African, White and Asian relatives. Two religions are also represented among the family members: the paternal religion is Muslim, and the maternal Christian. The introduction of the Obama family genealogy is an encyclopedic illustration of possible marriage styles available in this contemporary world.

b. Narrative of Ethnic Identity and Community

Narrative of ethnic identity and community is a mode of autobiographical narrative, emergent in ethnic communities within or across nations, that negotiates ethnic identification. It may call for a revolution, other times pushing to reform ethnic subjects through autobiographical acts.¹³ In Obama’s book, ethnicity is a central theme. Referring to his mixed blood, Obama sublimates his ethnic identity into a universal “American.” Obama’s identity becomes multi-ethnic. He declares that the image people may have of him as a tragic “Mulatto” is actually a tragedy of all American people who suffer from the troubled heart of who they are regardless of where they come from. He becomes nobody representing everybody.

c. Memoir

Memoir is a mode of life narrative that historically situates the subject in a social environment, as either observer or participant. Obama takes the form of a memoir in which, Obama as subject, looks back on both his personal and public lives.

However, memory itself is fallible.¹⁴ Therefore, the autobiography has to be recognized as a literary form of self-invention rather than an “ultimate” truth of private fact, as Obama justifies his memoir, by saying:

[There] are 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 the others, selective lapses of memory. (xvi)

d. Trauma Narrative

It is no exaggeration to call *Dreams from My Father* a story of trauma, a mode of writing about the unspeakable. Obama's traumatic shock of his lost racial identity that overshadows Obama's life was experienced when his mother took him to the US Embassy library in Indonesia, where he found a collection of *Life* magazines and came across a photograph of an older man. He describes:

He must be terribly sick, I thought. A radiation victim, maybe, or an albino — I had seen one of those on the street a few days before, and my mother had explained about such things. Except when I read the words that went with the picture, that wasn't it at all. The man had received a chemical treatment, the article explained, to lighten his complexion. He had paid for it with his own money. He expressed some regret about trying to pass himself off as a white man, was sorry about how badly things had turned out. But the results were irreversible. There were thousands of people like him, black men and women back in America who'd undergone the same treatment in response to advertisements that promised happiness as a white person.

I felt my face and neck get hot. My stomach knotted; the type began blur on the page. (30)

What he experiences here is the self-hate of an African American who, wanting to be white, tries to peel off his skin with bleaching cream. Intuitively, Obama learns this is something unspeakable, even to his mother.

Obama remembers the photograph even after he comes to Chicago over ten years later, especially when he tries to pin down the idea of self-esteem. He questions the man in the magazine, "Did you dislike yourself because of your color or because you couldn't read and couldn't get a job? Or perhaps it was because you were unloved as a child — only, were you unloved because you were too dark? Or too light?" (194).

e. Bildungsroman

Traditionally regarded as the novel of development and social formation of a young man, Bildungsroman recounts the youth and young manhood of a sensitive protagonist who is attempting to learn the nature of the world, discover its meaning and pattern, and acquire a philosophy of life and an 'art of living'.¹⁵

His youth at Occidental College represents a period of storm and stress. He is trapped by his race:

I had grown tired of trying to untangle a mess that wasn't my making.

I had learned not to care.

I blew a few smoke rings, remembering those years. Pot had helped, and booze; maybe a little blow when you could afford it." (93-94)

The angry youngster transfers to Columbia University in 1981, and the turning point comes when he receives a letter from his father, a letter asking him to visit Kenya and get to know himself and his people. Thereafter, Obama stops getting high, runs three miles a day, fasts on Sunday, and

starts keeping a journal. In 1983, after graduation, he decides to become a community organizer. The excited Obama says, “That’s what I’ll do, I’ll organize black folks. At the grass root. For change” (133). For change, he changes. He moves to Chicago in 1985 and learns to be a successful community organizer. And then, in 1990, he becomes the first African-American president of the *Harvard Law Review*. Needless to say, he has experienced continued success since.

Examining Obama’s life story through the five genres of Smith and Watson’s life narratives reveals Obama’s work as a hybrid postmodern autobiography. By dramatizing his life using the Bildungsroman motif Obama ensures that the memoir of family, race, and trauma is not only his any more. As Julia Swindells says;

The autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness — women, black people, working-class people — have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via the autobiography, via the assertion of a ‘personal’ voice, which speaks beyond itself. (7)

Because of “graphing beyond,” literary biography becomes a hybrid art in which a body of facts is crossbred with the art of narrative.

The text illustrates pictures of postmodern hybridity that weaves issues of race, ethnicity, religion, and marriage. Obama portrays his life as shared experiences with many other people and makes the pictures more universal than personal. This is why *Dreams from My Father* deserves serious literary attention as a representation of contemporary America.

II. Anti-Postmodern Masculinity

According to Bret E. Carroll and Annette Richardson, the “challenge to the conventional notion of boyhood emotional suppression gained momentum during the 1960s and 1970s, when a growing youth counterculture, and increasingly powerful feminist movement, and an emerging men’s movement all questioned traditional models of masculinities” (67–68). Despite these radical changes that have occurred in postmodern gender politics, Obama admirably describes traditional manhood.¹⁶ He is obsessed with the old values that his father practiced. Paternity is a central issue in the formation of Obama’s manhood.

This may confuse the reader who has read the book as a success story of a postmodern liberal hero, but the fact is that the book also portrays a man who is molded into an anti-postmodern ideology of manhood.

a. Myth and Resurrection of Manhood

Obama grew up learning his fathers’ stories from his white grandparents and mother, and his father remained a myth” (5). However, after the “bleaching cream” photograph in *Life* magazine, his gender perspective changes and his recognition of racial differences starts to distance him from his mother and her family. And then, Obama feels closer to his father, idealizes him, and finally realizes that he is the one he can truly trust. When Obama meets his father for the first time and listens to his speech at school, the son is impressed with “the power of my father’s words to

transform” (106).

The conventional gender ideology is reproduced in Obama’s mind as he learns more about his father. As a member of the African-American minority, he stands for the oppressed, but as a man of the gender majority, he doesn’t question the right of men to possess power over women. This attitude of his toward men and women makes him a gender essentialist, while he strongly recognizes himself as a constructionist against other social issues. Obama doesn’t practice this essentialist ideology of gender, but he accepts it in order to accept his father.

b. Father Absence and Father Presence

So it was something sacred for him to visit Kenya after he read the letter from his father: “The important thing is that you know your people, and also that you know where you belong” (114). Six years after the death of his father in 1982, Obama finally visits Kenya and becomes overtly fulfilled by his father’s omnipresence. Obama is not alone:

I feel my father’s presence as Auma and I walk through the busy street. I see him in the schoolboys who run past us, their lean, black legs moving like piston rods between blue shorts and oversized shoes. I hear him in the laughter of the pair of university students who sip sweet, creamed tea and eat samosas in a dimly lit teahouse. I smell him in the cigarette smoke of a businessman who covers one ear and shouts into a pay phone;...The Old Man’s here, I think, although he doesn’t say anything to me. He’s here, asking me to understand.” (323)

Obama now looks for something he should inherit from his father and finds a recommendation letter written for his father to take a position at an American university, which says “[G]iven Mr. Obama’s desire to be of service to this country, he should be given a chance.” Immediately, the son says, “This was it, I thought to myself. My inheritance” (427). Obama then concludes that this “service to this country” equates to his career as a community organizer, that he comes full circle, and irrationally, he concludes his journey in search of his father:

Oh, father, I cried. There was no shame in your confusion. Just as there had been no shame in your father’s before you. No shame in the fear, or in the fear of his father before him. There was only shame in the silence fear had produced. It was the silence that betrayed us. (429)

Meanwhile, throughout his interior journey, Obama encounters potential “male role models” who demonstrate manhood of their own. Lolo and Rev. Wright play father figures. Lolo teaches him the importance of self-protection, and Rev. Wright becomes Obama’s religious mentor. Obama’s brothers, Mark and Roy, present opposing characters. Over the foundation of homosocial network of these brotherhood, Obama particularly favors the one who is closer to his father; i.e. Roy Obama.

Roy is the eldest brother, and Obama’s intimate response is immediate:

Auma had been right, though; his resemblance to the Old Man was unnerving. Looking at my brother, I felt as if I were ten years old again. (263)

Therefore, when Roy decides to return to Africa, Obama praises Roy highly again. Roy now has an African name Abono, has decided to assert his African heritage, and has converted to

Islam. Obama says, “His heart is too generous and full of good humor, his attitude toward people too gentle and forgiving, to find simple solutions to the puzzle of being a black man” (442). Roy becomes an ideal figure not only for the Luo tribe but for Obama who finds him ideal because Roy inherits their father’s dream. Roy becomes Obama’s living father.

c. Hierarchy of Patriarchy

Dreams from My Father is a paradoxical work of postmodern hybridity with traditional gender perspective. During the stay in Kenya, Obama learns that his father was in fact abusive, an alcoholic, a racist, and a sexist after all. However, having already fantasized his father unconditionally, Obama remains uncritical of him, especially even when Auma refers to his tyranny at home and his decision not to give her any education. Roy also feels that his life was ruined by his father, saying, “I don’t think I really like myself. And I blame the Old Man for this” (264). Obama’s faith in his father is so deeply rooted that his father’s masculinity, which is anachronistic and therefore anti-postmodern, becomes a part of his (un)conscious identity inscribed to inherit.

Obama’s father, whose presence appears inconsistent and contradictory in the postmodern writing, may be a rational figure for a male African-American, who could have lost both male heritage and power as a racial minority, to paradoxically believe in the tradition of manhood. Obama’s strong faith in his father has created the supposition that he is flawless, and his concern becomes more about powerful male heritage than women’s issue. Toward the end of the book, Obama tries to sum up his journey:

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. ... *The pain I felt was my father’s pain. My questions were my brothers’ questions. Their struggle, my birthright.* (429–30 Italic added)

In the Epilogue, Obama rushes to conclude his story, with a masculine triumph. He introduces two of the major male missions he was involved. One is his own marriage with Michelle Robinson in 1992, and the other is about his father-figure brother Roy’s decision to inherit their paternal duties. Obama calls it “a happy ending” (442) and praises himself as “the luckiest man alive” (442). For Obama, patriarchy stands over other values.

Conclusion

Autoandrography: Gender and Comparative

Dreams from My Father is an autoandrography, that represents postmodern male anxieties. Obama values his role as community organizer, as a person who connects people and makes them realize that they are not alone. By doing so, he can unite the people while respecting their diversity.

At the same time, the story can be read as an autoandrography, a life writing of a man about himself by himself. This is a male version of an autogynography, a term first proposed by Domna C. Stanton in 1984, to suggest a centrality of gendered subjectivity to the literary production of self-referential acts. According to her, “women’s gendered narrative involved a different plotting and configuration of the split subject”.¹⁷ In autoandrography, a male author reveals himself as

someone who is trapped by the myth of masculinity as well as the postmodern depreciation of manhood.

In African-American autoandrography, gender is more comparative. Being a racial minority and gender majority, he finds himself difficult to locate in this world of diversities. The ultimate decision for Obama was to rely on what he thought to be definite: i.e. paternity.

“It must be the blood” (209), says Auma, when she connects Obama’s bossy attitude to that of their father’s. Obama laughs but Auma doesn’t — her perception different. For Obama, his father is somebody he wishes to be, for Auma he was somebody she could hardly understand. In the postmodern presentation of Barack Obama’s life story, the paradox we ultimately find is his essentialist stance toward gender that he inherits from his father. Barack Obama tells his-story with paradox of hybridity and masculinity in this autoandrography and become enraptured with the presence of his father, who persistently whispers in the son’s ear, “It’s in the blood.”

Notes

- 1 This article is a revision of an essay presented at NASSS on July 27, 2008.
- 2 Obama, Barack. *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. 1995. New York: Crown, 2004. 65. All references to the text are from this edition.
- 3 Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001. 2.
- 4 For more historical information of autobiography, see Akira Ito’s “Amerika to Jiden [America and Autobiography],” *Hokkaido American Literature* 7 (1991): 2–13.
- 5 Benton, Michael. “Literary Biography: The Cinderella of Literary Studies.” *Journal of Aesthetic Education*. 39. 3 (Fall 2005): 1 and 44.
- 6 Leavall, Linda. “Introduction.” *South Central Review* 23.3 (Fall 2006): 2.
- 7 Rev. of *Dreams from My Father*. Barack Obama. <https://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780307383419&view=quotes>
- 8 Klein, Joe. Rev. of *Dreams from My Father*, Barack Obama. “The Fresh Face.” *Time*. Oct. 15, 2006. 3. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1546362-3,00.html>
- 9 Detweiler, R. Rev. of *Dreams from My Father*. Barack Obama. *Choice* 33 (Feb. 1996): 1012.
- 10 Rev. of *Dreams from My Father*, Barack Obama. *New York Times Book Review* 6 Aug. 1995: 17.
- 11 Smith and Watson. 183–206.
- 12 “The Obama Family — Barack, Michelle, Malia, and Natasha. http://www.makemyfamilytree.com/articles/barack_obama_family_tree.html
- 13 Smith and Watson 194 and 107.
- 14 Holmes, Richard. “Inventing the Truth.” *The Art of Literary Biography*. Ed. John Batchelor. Oxford: Clarendon, 1995. 17.
- 15 Harmon, William and C. Hugh Holman. *A Handbook to Literature*. 7th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996. 59.
- 16 Carroll, Bret E. and Annette Richardson. “Boyhood” *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*. Ed. Bret E. Carroll. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003. 67.
- 17 Smith and Watson. 187.

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