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‘The past isn’t dead and buried’
'The past isn’t dead and buried'
Obama’s memoir in the tradition of African-American autobiography writing

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Uitgave van Jonge Historici Schrijven Geschiedenis, Amsterdam
Publicatienummer 40
Redactie: Lothar van Riel
Afbeelding voorblad: Young Obama (posterized)
Ontwerp en opmaak: Daan van Schijndel

www.jongehistorici.nl
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In 1990, when Barack Obama was in New York to discuss his plans about writing a memoir, one publisher told him that he ought to write a “typical black” story about being poor and rising from the ghetto of Chicago. ‘I never did take that trip’ Obama replied, ‘but I would like to write about the trip I have taken.’  

Five years later, Obama published his memoir, called *Dreams from my father*. In the introduction of the book, Obama quickly tempered any expectations about his life story being a typical African-American narrative: ‘What has found its way onto these pages is a record of a personal, interior journey – a boy’s search for his father, and through that search a workable meaning for his life as a black American. The result is autobiographical, although... I can’t hold up my experience as being somehow representative of the black American experience (“After all, you don’t come from an underprivileged background,” a Manhattan publisher helpfully points out to me). Indeed, learning to accept that particular truth... is part of what this book’s about.’

Later, in a 2008 interview with New Yorker reporter David Remnick, Obama said that he was “quite conscious” of the tradition of the African-American autobiography at the time that he wrote *Dreams*, but felt that he had a more modest story to tell than earlier black writers. Unlike most of his literary predecessors, Obama has lived a privileged life, benefiting from laws of affirmative action and access to elite institutions. In that sense, he has always been hesitant to place himself in line with earlier black autobiographers. Still, *Dreams* contains many features that are common in black autobiographies, such as the impact of an absent father, the search for a racial identity and the search for a community. The question that arises is: where does *Dreams* stand in the tradition of African-American autobiography writing? In this

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3 Remnick, *The bridge*, 234.
essay, I shall try to answer that question, and find out how Obama has incorporated and rejected ideas in his memoir that were laid out by his literary precursors.

The autobiography is one of the oldest and richest genres of African-American literature. The literary tradition started in the late eighteenth century with slave narratives. Books like *A narrative of the uncommon sufferings and surprising deliverance of Briton Hammon, a negro man*, which was published in 1760, or the 1789 bestseller *The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, written by himself*, sowed the seeds for black autobiography writing. In the nineteenth century, the number of slave narratives started growing as the country became more and more divided over the question of slavery. Slave narratives were used as a political pamphlet, written for a white audience, and aimed at building a wide support for the overhaul of slavery in America. Just before the outbreak of the Civil War, the slave narrative was one of the best-selling literary genres in America.¹

After the Civil War, black autobiography writing entered a new phase. The prototypal patterns of slave narratives continued to dominate black autobiographies for a long time as black autobiographers had the same type of social motivations as slave narrators before them. They wrote to oppose racist oppression, to advocate universal voting rights and to improve working conditions for blacks. But unlike earlier slave narratives, black autobiographies did no longer move in any definite direction. Black autobiographers had different thoughts about how to achieve emancipation, and sometimes even wrote pieces in which they directly confronted each other. Also, black autobiographies started changing in style. Whereas slave narratives dealt with the issue of oppression mainly on the level of politics and religion, black autobiographies after the Civil War dealt with it mainly on the level of culture. The central motive of the former works

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was to fight a social system; the central motive of the latter was to resolve an identity crisis, to answer the question “who am I?”

The third and last distinctive period of African-American autobiography writing was in the 1960's. As the Civil Rights Movement was well on its way, as Martin Luther King had already been assaulted and jailed for leading demonstrations in the South, and as all the race issues left unsettled by Reconstruction were coming back to the surface, black autobiography writing entered a period of revolution. No longer was the black autobiography a plea to a white audience to absolve blacks from their constraints in American society. Instead, it became a pamphlet of revolt. Black autobiographers tried to activate the black masses and initiate a mass militant reaction against racism in America by putting their life stories on paper and providing an example of how blacks could mobilize themselves. Since the 1960’s black autobiographies have kept this rebellious spirit, although after the passage of Civil Rights laws in 1964 the black struggle has become more internalized, and black writers have gone back to the “identity crisis” theme in their works. 

Against this rich and impressive backdrop of black autobiography writing, Obama has written his memoir as a modern narrative of defining blackness in the post-Civil Rights era. *Dreams* tells the life story Barack Hussein Obama Jr., born in 1961, in Honolulu, Hawaii. Obama was a child of Ann Dunham, a woman born in Kansas, and Barack Hussein Obama Sr., a Kenyan who had met Dunham in a class at the Hawaii University in 1960. Dunham and Obama Sr. married in the same year that Obama Jr. was born, and divorced three years later. In 1965 Dunham remarried, this time with an Indonesian student, Lolo Soetoro. In 1967 she took her son to Jakarta, Indonesia, and from ages six to ten, that was the place where Barack Obama lived. He returned to Honolulu in 1971 to live with his grandparents until he graduated from high school in 1979.

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After high school Obama decided to continue his studies at the university. He first visited Occidental University in Los Angeles, and two years later transferred to Columbia University in New York, where he majored in political science and graduated in 1983. He stayed in New York for another year to work at a law firm, but then decided to move to Chicago and engage in something totally different: community organizing. For three years long he worked on the South Side of Chicago, organizing job trainings, college preparations and all sorts of other things that were meant to help people out of poverty. In 1988 he chose to leave Chicago and continue his studies at Harvard University in Boston. His election as president of the *Harvard Law Review* in his second year at the university gained nationwide attention, and it got him a publishing contract to write a book about race relations, which eventually would evolve into the memoir that he published in 1995.\(^7\)

Obviously, I am not the first person who has thought of comparing *Dreams* to earlier black autobiographies. Since its publishing there have been countless academics who have tried to evaluate the standing of Obama’s memoir in the tradition of black autobiography writing. Some authors, like Tara T. Green, state that *Dreams* is in direct line with the literary tradition because of its time-crossing themes like paternal loss and the search for a community. Others, like David Mendell, David Remnick and James T. Kloppenberg, acknowledge that the themes in Obama’s memoir are typical for an African-American autobiography, but emphasize that Obama has partly picked these themes as an act of self-creation, not just as a pure recollection of his past. Still, others like Shelby Steele and David Mastey, believe that the entire connection between Obama and the black autobiography tradition is fraught. They state that Obama made a forged connection with white readers by plunging into stereotypical black themes, thereby trying to gain political capital for his later career in politics.

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7 For general information on Barack Obama’s background, I used three books:  
a) Obama, *Dreams*.  
c) Remnick, *The bridge*.  

In this essay, I will elaborate on the abovementioned interpretations of *Dreams*, and supplement them with my own primary research on Obama’s memoir and earlier black autobiographies. The prime objective of this research, however, will not just be to categorize *Dreams* to a certain literary genre. Rather, with the background information of the black autobiography tradition, my goal is to achieve a deeper understanding of Obama’s memoir in its own time. Therefore, I shall mainly use references to earlier black autobiographies as a tool to place certain themes in Obama’s memoir in their proper context. Also, while not directly related to the black autobiography tradition in a literary sense, I will make an analysis of the role that *Dreams* has played in Obama’s later political career, as I believe that most of the book’s importance has come through the political rise of its author.

In the first chapter of this essay, I will discuss the first section of Obama’s memoir, “Origins,” and analyze how the problems raised in this part of the book are related to earlier black autobiographies. In the second chapter, I will discuss the second and third section of Obama’s memoir, “Chicago” and “Kenya.” What I will mostly focus on in this chapter is how both Chicago and Kenya have played an important role in Obama’s search for a community and a racial identity. In the third chapter, I will discuss what role *Dreams* has played in Obama’s later political rise, and how Obama’s life story has worked to his advantage and to his disadvantage.

As a last note, I have some brief remarks regarding the terminology. First, there has been some confusion among scholars about whether to use the word “autobiography” or the word “memoir” for *Dreams*. Actually, the two terms have almost the same meaning. Both are told in the first person and are, where possible, a true account of the author’s life. However, while the autobiography is a sketch of the author’s entire life, from birth until the time of writing, the memoir focuses only on a select few aspects of the author’s life. The memoir’s main purpose is to draw the reader’s attention to one specific theme or
I believe that *Dreams*, with its heavy emphasis on themes like race and paternal loss, fits more into the second category, and I shall therefore refer to it as a memoir. Second, to make a clear distinction, I shall refer to the character Barack Obama in the book as “Barack,” and to the writer and politician Barack Obama as “Obama.” The same rule applies to Jeremiah Wright: “Jeremiah” for the character in *Dreams*, and “Wright” for the pastor in real life.

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1 The enslaved state

Although slavery was over after the Civil War, the prototypal patterns of slave narratives have continued to dominate black autobiography in America up until today. In his book *Behind the veil*, Robert Stepto argues that after the Civil War, many black autobiographers have embarked upon a literary tradition that was already laid out in the time of slavery. Narratives by Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison and many others, are what Stepto calls “narratives of ascent,” a type of storytelling that is directly linked to the tradition of slave narratives. The narrative of ascent starts in a state of deprivation, something Stepto names the “enslaved state.” Then, throughout the book, the narrator follows a journey to find himself and to gain a state in which he is increasingly literate and increasingly free. During this journey, the narrator struggles, reads, studies and learns. And, as he accumulates more and more knowledge about himself, he begins to discover his own identity.\(^9\)

In this chapter, I will argue that the first section of Obama’s memoir, “Origins,” follows the patterns of Stepto’s narrative of ascent.\(^10\) Symbolically, the story of the young Barack is the story of a slave. First, it portrays the larger part of Obama’s childhood and adolescence as a time in mental bondage: the “enslaved state.” Barack, from his childhood in Indonesia until his time as a student in New York, is someone who is trying to break away from the restraints that are being placed upon him by society. Second, Origins serves to show how Barack tries to accomplish a successful break-away from this enslaved state. In order to achieve his escape, he plunges into books written by black autobiographers, and tries to find salvation in literary themes that have recurrently dominated the genre of the black autobiography over the last century.

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\(^9\) Stepto, *From behind the veil*, 164-167.
\(^10\) This opinion is also expressed in: Remnick, *The bridge*, 229-232.
Narratives of ascent traditionally start off with a state of deprivation, oppression and an almost depressive state of mind. Obama seems to have understood this rule, and starts his memoir with a grim scene. He is 21, and lives in New York on East Ninety-fourth Street. Obama paints a gloomy picture of his surroundings. He lives in an ‘uninviting block, treeless and barren, lined with soot-colored walk-ups that cast heavy shadows for most of the day.’ His apartment is ‘small, with slanting floors and irregular heat and a buzzer downstairs that didn’t work,’ and outside is a ‘black Doberman the size of a wolf...in vigilant patrol, its jaws clamped around an empty beer bottle.’ To complete that picture with the immediate suggestion of race inequality, Obama adds that ‘white people from the better neighborhoods walk the dogs down our block to let the animals shit on our curb.’

With one paragraph, the show is put. Barack is situated in hostile surroundings, a perfect bleak background for his narrative of ascent to begin. His life is lonely. He has grown “comfortable in solitude,” the “safest place” he knows. Obama mirrors his student life in New York to a solitary neighbor who lives alone. Barack does not ever speak to the man, but there is a silent mutual recognition, an understanding that they are alike. One day, the old man dies. Barack’s roommate finds him, with his eyes wide open and his limbs all curled up. The young Barack is affected by the old man’s death, and feels that the dead man had kept some untold story, something that Barack prefers not to hear. One paragraph later, Barack is informed of the death of another “Old Man”, namely his father, Barack Hussein Obama Sr. Obama probably uses the death of his neighbor to herald his own great untold story: the story of his father, and the effect that his absence has had on Obama.

In the opening of the book, and as the set-out for the rest of the story, the extensive emphasis on the role of the absent father has prompted some commentators to doubt whether Obama has been

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12 Ibidem.
13 Ibidem.
14 Idem, 4.
truthful to his past. In his book *Obama*, Chicago Tribune journalist David Mendell names the chapter in which he describes Obama’s memoir: “Dreams from his mother.” He writes that ‘even if the spine of the narrative involved his absent father, it was Obama’s mother who played the most vital role in shaping the crux of his character.’\(^\text{16}\) Editor of the New Yorker David Remnick, reaches the same conclusion in his book *The bridge*, and notes that a lot of Obama’s present-day qualities can be attributed to the good parenting of Ann Dunham.\(^\text{17}\) Even Obama himself, tragically confronted with his mother’s death in 1995, the year of his memoir’s publishing, later suggests that the absent father might have been a more alluring literary subject than the present mother. In the preface to the 2004 re-edition of *Dreams*, Obama writes a small tribute to her, acknowledging her importance to him: ‘I think sometimes that had I known she would not survive her illness, I might have written a different book – less a mediation on the absent parent, more a celebration of the one who was the single constant in my life... I know that she was the kindest, most generous spirit I have ever known, and that what is best in me I owe to her.’\(^\text{18}\)

So the topic of an absent father, without playing down its importance in Obama’s life, should not be read solely as a retelling of past events. It is also a literary theme that Obama uses to guide his story of self-search, race problems and intellectual strife. On the absent father Barack projects hopes, fears and expectations for himself. It might seem that a child with an absent father would not suffer from any grandiose expectations of his father. But as Obama points out in his memoir time and time again, the opposite is true. Obama Sr. becomes larger than life, an idealized figure composed from stories that the young Barack hears from his family, and by his own imagination as a child. At times, Barack’s father becomes almost an obsession for him. He dreams of his father at night, picturing him as a strong African man, a leader of his people. At

\(^{17}\) Remnick, *The bridge*, 239.  
\(^{18}\) Obama, *Dreams*, xii.
the same time, Barack has a constant, nagging feeling of resentment, for he feels that he is somehow betrayed by his father’s absence.\footnote{Imaginations that the child Barack has of his father can be found in: Obama, Dreams, 6-70.}

In \textit{Dreams}, the death of Barack’s father preludes a series of memories of Obama’s youth, in which the reader can already sense that the subject of race will be at the core of Obama’s book. The first couple of chapters, which set out Obama’s youth in Hawaii and Indonesia, are interspersed with grim memories of small incidents that confront the young Barack with the realities of a racially charged society. Especially in Indonesia, shimmers of racial awareness come to the foreground. In one specific account, young Barack is browsing through a \textit{Life} magazine when suddenly he comes across a photograph of a black man who has used a chemical treatment to whiten his skin. While he reads the article, Barack feels his ‘face and neck get hot... As in a dream, I had no voice for my newfound fear.’\footnote{Idem, 30.}

Once again, questions arise about whether Obama has written this specific scene as an accurate recount of past events or purely as a literary tool. The “innocent black,” who gets confronted for the first time with the ugliness of racial inequality is an old literary tool in black autobiography. In the semi-autobiographical \textit{Invisible man} by author Ralph Ellison, there is even a similar passage in which the protagonist is amazed to see an advertisement for the whitening of black skin and does not know how to deal with it.\footnote{Ralph Ellison, \textit{Invisible man} (New York 1974) 199.} Remnick writes that during the Presidential campaign in 2008, a journalist from the \textit{Chicago Tribune} searched for the specific \textit{Life} article that Obama described, but could not find it. In a reaction, Obama stated that it might have been an \textit{Ebony} article as well, but archivists there could not find anything either.\footnote{Remnick, \textit{The bridge}, 238.} In any case, maybe the question about whether the young Barack did actually read such an article at the time is not important. Obama is after an emotional truth here, not a factual one. Just like the black autobiographers Malcolm X and Richard Wright in their books, Obama
places his younger self in a surrounding that is slowly but surely enclosing him, pushing upon the “unsoiled” child the undeniable and inescapable truth of race inequality.

Another racial incident in Obama’s retelling of his youth happens back in Hawaii, where Barack returns at the age of ten to be raised by his grandparents. Thanks to the diligent efforts of his mother and grandparents, the ten-year-old Barack gets to attend Punahou Academy, which Obama recalls as a ‘prestigious prep school, an incubator for island elites.’\(^{23}\) For the first time, Barack feels truly out of place, solitary in his Indonesian experiences and thanks to his “strange looks.” He does not practice football like all the other kids do, and can find no buddies to play soccer, badminton or chess with. Still, Barack is not worse off than other children who are placed in the category of “misfits”: the girls who are too shy, the boys who are slightly hyperactive and children with asthma who are excused from gymnastics. So even if Barack’s situation is bad, it is not worse than what many children have to endure in their time at school.

In Barack’s class, there is one child, a girl named Coretta, who together with Barack is the only black person in his grade. In each other Barack and Coretta find some sort of mutual understanding, a silent bond in their loneliness. One day, their mutual liking transforms into actual contact and Barack finds himself playfully being chased by the girl on the playground. After a flirtatious game of teasing and dodging, Coretta catches Barack, and the two children fall to the ground in an embrace. When they look up, they see their white peers looking over them, exclaiming bullying statements such as ‘Coretta has a boyfriend!’ Barack immediately denies the charge, and stands up from the ground. ‘I’m not her boyfriend,’ he shouts, and he gives Coretta a push. Then, to Coretta, Barack shouts: ‘leave me alone!’ The girl runs away, and Barack is left with the appreciative laughter of his classmates. For the rest of the day, Barack feels the ache of his betrayal towards Coretta agonizing him, and knows that he has failed an important test.\(^{24}\)

\(^{23}\) Obama, *Dreams*, 58.  
\(^{24}\) Idem, 60-61.
In my opinion, incidents like Barack’s reading of the *Life* article or his betrayal of Coretta are literary introductions to questions that will be asked later in the book. In the description of Barack’s reading of the *Life* article, the reader can sense the coming of Obama’s delineation of self-hatred in the African-American community, a theme that will pop up in the second part of the book, “Chicago.” The betrayal of Coretta shows a tension that is tangible throughout the whole memoir, namely: how can Barack be part of the black community without betraying his past? But most importantly, events like these serve to show the child Barack as already surrounded by an environment in which he is un-free, in which he threatens to become a symbolic slave. With the help of colorful recollections from his childhood, Obama prepares his readers for the tragedy that is about to emerge.

The recollections of Obama’s childhood end with a visit from Barack’s father in Hawaii, when Barack is ten years old. The short presence of his father gives Barack a short glimpse into what it means to have a role model. Obama Sr. gives a talk at Barack’s school, telling the children and teachers about Kenyan history. He shows Barack how to use his voice, telling Barack that using the voice to provide knowledge can not only empower the listener, but also the speaker. He gives Barack dancing lessons, showing off an impressive dance to the “sounds of your continent, Barry.”

The young Barack is impressed with his father’s presence, and tries to emulate his behavior, like clapping when his father does at a concert, or holding a book as his father holds it. These acts show Barack’s growing attachment to his father, and a thirst for belonging. But tragically, after a month his father is gone, and Barack is left alone to construct his identity with nothing more than the scraps of memories his father has left him with.

The story continues six years later. Barack is attending Punahou College and has made some thorough efforts to align himself in the African-American community. Looking back, Obama writes self-critically:

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25 Idem, 71.
'I was living out a caricature of black male adolescence, itself a caricature of American manhood. Yet... at least on the basketball court I could find a community of sorts, with an inner life of its own... It was there that I would meet Ray and the other blacks close to my age who had begun to trickle into the islands, teenagers whose confusion and anger would help shape my own.'

On the basketball field, Barack finds his first place of belonging, a place where he is accepted as a true black. Utterly grateful, he is even willing to condone some of the dismissive talks of his new friends about “white folks,” suppressing images of his mother or his grandparents to the back of his mind. Somewhat naively, Barack slips 'back and forth between black and white world... convinced that with bit of translation from my part the two worlds would eventually cohere.'

Barack's newfound blackness comes at a price though. Outside the basketball field, he finds that the status of blacks in American society is thoroughly problematic. His “all-black” friend Ray introduces him to the problem, when he and Barack are having an argument about the sincerity of a white football player, named Kurt, on the Punahou campus. Kurt wants to greet Ray and Barack with a low high-five, a typical black greeting. Ray slaps Kurt’s outstretched hand enthusiastically, but Barack waves the guy off and walks away. Catching up to Barack a few minutes later, Ray asks what the problem is. Barack answers that Kurt is only making fun of them, and that he does not want to participate in a “yo baby, give me five' bullshit.”

Suddenly with anger, Ray looks at Barack and says: 'Look, I’m just getting along, all right... It’s their world, all right? They own it, and we in it. So just get the fuck out of my face.'

In this short passage, Obama touches upon one of the oldest and most famous themes in the African-American autobiography. Ray’s statement, that blacks are nothing more than part of a white society, is a thought that has prevailed in African-American autobiographies since

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27 Obama, Dreams, 80.
28 Idem, 82.
29 Idem, 83.
30 Ibidem.
the Civil War. This idea is the leading theme throughout memoirs written by W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. The problem that all these authors encountered and describe in their autobiographies is that a black man in America would not be recognized as a full human being. Blacks were struggling to find roots in a country that was for the most part unwilling to accept them. If they, in reaction to that rejection, identified only with black people, to the exclusion of white America, then they were running a risk of being alienated in their own homeland, forced to be part of a group that was shut off from the rest of society. That is the truth that Ray confronts Barack with before he walks away from him. It is a white man’s world, Ray says, and there is no escaping it without excluding yourself from American society.

There is probably no single author who has expressed the problem of this “double identity” as clearly as the black intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois. In Souls of black folk, published in 1905, he writes in the opening chapter: ‘One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, an Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the Negro is the history of this strife, - this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the other selves be lost... He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly into his face.’

The sixteen-year-old Barack feels Du Bois’ two-ness. A day after he has been shouted at by Ray, he experiences an event that deeply depresses him at a party on the Punahou campus. With Ray as one of the organizers of the party, most of the people present are black. The only two whites in the room are friends of Barack, named Jeff and Scott, who have come along to join the party. However, the two boys feel so

uncomfortable in the presence of mostly black people, that after an hour they ask Barack to drive them home. Back in the car, Jeff lets out a sigh of relief and tells Barack: ‘You know man, that really taught me something. I mean, I can see how it must be tough for you and Ray sometimes, at school parties... being the only black guys and all.’ Barack, irritated and feeling a lash of rage building inside him, answers Jeff shortly: ‘Yeah. Right.’

As historian Tara T. Green rightfully notes in *A fatherless child*, the fact that Jeff admits that his brief experience as a minority has made him sympathize with Barack’s and Ray’s everyday experiences makes Barack furious. Without probably even knowing it, Jeff in his confession reveals an unspoken power that he has as a white man. While he can choose to return to the safety of his life in the majority without thinking much more about the incident, Barack and Ray are doomed to struggle with their minority’s status forever. There is no escape for them, no car that can drive them back to the safety of their lives in the majority of America. There is only the harsh reality of America’s present-day status. ‘We were always playing at the white man’s court... by the white man’s rule,’ Obama writes. ‘If the principal, or the coach, or a teacher, or Kurt, wanted to spit in your face, he could, because he had power and you didn’t. If he decided not to, if he treated you like a man or came to your defense, it was because he knew that the words you spoke, the clothes you wore, the books you read, your ambitions and desires, were already his... In fact, you couldn’t even be sure that everything you had assumed to be an expression of your black, unfettered self, had been freely chosen by you.’

At this point in the book, *Dreams* enters the first phase of a typical narrative of ascent: the enslaved state. Just like a slave narrator, Obama describes his former enslavement. The only difference from a slave narrative is that the restraints that were put upon Obama in his earlier life were not physical, but mental. In *Dreams*, Barack lives in an

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32 Obama, *Dreams*, 84.
33 Green, *A fatherless child*, 118.
34 Obama, *Dreams*, 85.
oppressive surrounding that forbids him his authentic selfhood. He does not even know for sure whether the person who he thought he was is truly of his own making. Barack sees no way out of his enslavement, and threatens to succumb to the imprisonment that he has found himself to be in: “The only thing you could choose as your own was withdrawal into a smaller and smaller coil of rage, until being black meant only the knowledge of your own powerless, of your own defeat. And the final irony: Should you refuse this defeat and lash out at your captors, they would have a name for that, too, a name that could cage you just as good. Paranoid. Militant. Violent. Nigger.”

According to historian James T. Kloppenberg, author of Reading Obama, Obama has always been a devoted reader of Du Bois. It shows in Dreams. Barack’s somber thought experiments are filled with ideas that are directly linkable to Du Bois’ Souls of black folk. The notion that blacks have no clarity to see themselves outside of what white America prescribes for them is what Du Bois in 1905 already labeled as “the veil.” In the first chapter of Souls of black folk, one can find the roots of Barack’s contemplations, as Du Bois writes: ‘the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of the other.’

To counter his nightmare vision of America’s race relations, Barack reaches for the bookshelves. Obama writes: ‘At night, I would close the door to my room, telling my grandparents I had homework to do, and there I would sit and wrestle with words, locked in suddenly desperate argument, trying to reconcile the world as I’d found it with the terms of my birth.’ In books Barack tries to find liberation from his enslavement. Obama is not afraid to share with his readers from what

37 Du Bois, Souls, 3.
38 Obama, Dreams, 85.

There is a reason why Obama makes such a point of having read the abovementioned authors, and it is not that he wants to show his readers how literate he is. By having read those books as a way out of his misery, Obama claims a place in the African-American memoir writing. Reading as a way of becoming is in itself a feature of African-American autobiographies. Writers like Ellison, Wright and Du Bois all devote a substantial part of their memoirs to their early twenties and the inner struggle that they tried to overcome by reading earlier black authors. Malcolm X for example gives an extended account of this self-education. In his autobiography, he states that by reading black authors like Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson, he gained pride in his blackness, and was able to assert himself more confidently as a black man.

So Obama’s namedropping of black intellectuals reveals an aggressive tactic to position himself among black autobiography writers. First, he suggests that the intellectual problems that he faced in his early twenties are similar to problems that writers like Du Bois or Ellison faced in their lifetime. Then, secondly, by extensively addressing some black literature that helped him get through this rough period, he lets the reader know that his way of dealing with those problems is also typically black. Despite these rigid efforts, however, Obama is also doubtful about his place in the black literary tradition, as he is doubtful about his place in the black community. He lets this doubt shimmer through in a conversation that Barack has with a couple of friends. Speaking with them about Malcolm X, Barack gets confronted with his fragile position in the African-American community by Ray. When a third person in their company makes a joke about Malcolm X's

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39 Idem, 86.
abstinence from sex, Ray has a heartily laugh. Barack looks at him and says: ‘What are you laughing at? You’ve never read Malcolm. You don’t even know what he says.’ Ray walks away and shouts over his head: ‘I don’t need no books to tell me how to be black.’

Ray (or Obama, in his self-criticism) exposes one of the most vulnerable sides of Barack’s black identity. After all, Barack does not have the underprivileged background that is so common in the experience of the average African-American man. What white man’s society does he have to cope with, what oppressive scene does he have to escape from, apart from the one in his head? Is it the chic private school Punahou in the multicultural state of Hawaii, where racial struggle is pretty much confined to the schoolbooks? Or does he suffer severely from the loving and diligent upbringing that he receives from his white grandparents and white mother? In A bound man, the conservative author Shelby Steele states that there is an untruthfulness in Obama’s endless quest for a black struggle. Obama, with his racial identity lost, makes up a struggle that does not exist in his nearby surroundings, Steele states. In Steele’s eyes, Obama’s black struggle is about as false as his idealized father: both are non-present.

What Steele fails to understand however, is that Obama’s description of struggle is not the traditional account of a black man in poverty, but rather the modern account of a black man in confusion. Obama is quick to point out that his Hawaiian experience was nothing like ‘some heatless housing project in Harlem or the Bronx. We were in goddamned Hawaii. We said what we pleased, ate what we pleased; we sat at the front of the proverbial bus. None of our white friends, guys like Jeff or Scott from the basketball team, treated us any differently than they treated each other. They loved us and we loved them back. Shit, seemed like half of ‘em wanted to be black themselves… Perhaps if we

41 Obama, Dreams, 87.
42 Shelby Steele, A bound man. Why we are excited about Obama and why he can’t win (New York 2008) 42.
had been living in New York or L.A., I would have been quicker to pick up the rules of the high-stakes game we were playing.'

So Steele is rightly critical of Obama’s assertive positioning within the black autobiography tradition, in the sense that traditional problems of earlier black autobiographers are not comparable to Barack’s situation in Hawaii. He is wrong, however, to dismiss Obama’s struggles altogether, and fails to see the degree of self-criticism that Obama has inserted in his reflective writings. Probably closer to the truth is Remnick, who writes in *The bridge* that ‘he (Obama) is well aware that he is no Richard Wright, who made the classic migration from Mississippi to the South Side, nor is he Malcolm Little, whose father... was killed in Lansing. Also Kloppenberg states that ‘he (Obama) knows that neither of them (nor his father, nor he himself) was ever enslaved, so he is careful not to exaggerate the obstacles they faced.’ Nevertheless, the teenager Barack is lost, and he has almost no African-American adolescents around him to help him figure himself out. In the works of black writers he hopes to find answers that his father has never been able to give him.

Yet Barack cannot find the salvation that he is looking for. In all the books he reads he keeps finding ‘the same anguish, the same doubt; a self-contempt that neither irony nor intellect seemed able to deflect... each man finally forced to doubt art’s redemptive power, each man finally forced to withdraw... all of them exhausted, bitter men, the devil at their heels.’ The great exemption to the rule is Malcolm X’s autobiography. Despite the differences of time, religion, and political ideas, it is not impossible to figure out why the young Barack is so taken with Malcolm X. *The autobiography of Malcolm X* is a story of mixed race, a missing father, and self-invention. The narrator starts his life as Malcolm Little, and then transforms subsequently into “Detroit Red” in Harlem, “Satan” in prison, Minister Malcolm X, and finally El-Hajj Malik

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43 Obama, *Dreams*, 82.
44 Remnick, *The bridge*, 240.
45 Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*, 250.
46 Obama, *Dreams*, 86.
El-Shabazz.\textsuperscript{47} ‘His repeated act of self-creation spoke to me,’\textsuperscript{48} Obama writes.

What might also have been appealing for the young Barack, apart from the sheer resemblance between Malcolm X and himself, was that Malcolm X was one of the few writers who could offer an outcome for the problems that Barack was dealing with. ‘The blunt poetry of his words, his unadorned insistence on respect, promised a new and uncompromising order, martial in its discipline, forged through sheer force of will,’\textsuperscript{49} Obama writes. What Barack finds in Malcolm X’s book is the unapologetic black pride of a “revolutionary” memoir, so typical of the 1960’s. After Obama became President in 2008, he told Remnick in a private interview: ‘I think what Malcolm X did... was to tap into a long-running tradition within the African-American community, which is that at certain moments it’s important for African-Americans to assert their manhood, their worth... that affirmation that I am a man, I am worth something, I think was important. And I think Malcolm X probably captured that better than anybody.’\textsuperscript{50}

More than just offering a sense of manhood and pride, Malcolm X’s autobiography also promises solutions to the problems of two-ness and the white man’s veil, by forcefully articulating a new awareness of the self for African-Americans. In his memoir, Malcolm X tries to heighten the self-esteem of African-Americans by “cleansing” their history of the white man’s influence. He describes that at the bottom of society, in prison, he realizes this truth through a religion that his brother introduces him to. The Nation of Islam, an organization of black Muslims, makes him realize that the white man has robbed the black man of his identity. ‘You don’t even know who you are’, Malcolm X’s brother tells him. ‘You don’t know, the white devil has hidden it from you, that you are of a race of people of old civilizations.’\textsuperscript{51} Through Allah and his mentor Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X finds out what it means to

\textsuperscript{47} Malcolm X, \textit{The autobiography of Malcolm X} (New York 1965).
\textsuperscript{48} Obama, \textit{Dreams}, 86.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{50} Remnick, \textit{The bridge}, 234.
\textsuperscript{51} Malcolm X, \textit{The autobiography}, 252-253.
be a true black man. To him, a black man is someone who resists the oppressive definition put on to him by the white man, and is able to develop an ideology that is independent from the white man's society. Very directed, Malcolm X responds to the problem of the veil, which Du Bois laid out more than sixty years earlier in Souls. Malcolm X rejects the notion that blacks are only able to identify themselves in relation to whites. Blacks must re-invent themselves in American society, and set out their own discourse in understanding themselves. In order to do that, blacks must create a new understanding of themselves by digging into their history. For example, in his autobiography Malcolm X makes a clear distinction between the terms “Negro’s” and “blacks.” According to him, a Negro is one who identifies himself on the white man’s terms, one who accepts the definition of himself that was given to him in a white society. To get to the root of the black identity though, blacks need to resist this oppressive notion of “Negro” and develop their own identity outside the white man’s framework. When they achieve that, when they can re-invent themselves on their own terms, then they are truly free, and the veil is lifted.

The only thing that Malcolm X does not offer is a solution to Barack's struggles with his mixed descent. Malcolm X's talk of the “white devil” and the intense hatred of his own white blood is something that Barack can not integrate with a clear conscience, although he does recognize that Malcolm X seemed to have safely abandoned these principles towards the end of his life. Obama writes: 'And yet, even as I imagined myself following Malcolm’s call, one line in the book stayed with me. He spoke of a wish he’d once had, the wish that the white blood that ran through him, there by an act of violence, might somehow be expunged. I knew that, for Malcolm, that wish would never be incidental. I knew as well that traveling down the road to self-respect my own white blood would never recede into mere abstraction.' Of course, there is no denial for Barack that his loving white mother and white

52 Idem, 402-442.
53 Idem, 421-422.
54 Obama, Dreams, 86.
grandparents are part of him. He must acknowledge these persons as
being essential to his making.

The story of Dreams continues with Barack at Occidental College,
where the anxiety about his mental enslavement really comes to the
foreground, and Obama’s writing reaches a level of somberness that is
not matched in any other part of the book. Chapter five, which covers his
year at Occidental, opens with Barack stretched out on the couch,
listening to Billy Holiday’s “I’m a fool to want you.” Barack thinks back
over the last two years, in which he has stopped writing to his father,
has set aside his books and has given up on the search for his true
identity. In pot and alcohol, Barack has found a way of escaping his inner
strife, to ‘push questions of who I was out of my mind, something that
could flatten out the landscape of my heart, blur the edges of my
memory.’ As he pinches the flame dead on a match that he uses for his
smoke, he asks the reader: ‘what’s the trick?’ and answers the question
himself: ‘the trick is not caring that it hurts.’ Barack, so it seems, has
given up on his battle for freedom, and resides in his un-free status.

Looking back at the last days before his transfer from Hawaii to
Occidental, Barack remembers having a conversation with his mother,
who accuses him of being a “good-time Charlie, a loafer.” She senses
that Barack is slowly giving up on something, but she does not know
what. Barack gives her a reassuring smile, pats her hand and tells her
not to worry, because he is not going to do anything stupid. Obama
describes this attitude towards his mother as ‘an effective tactic, another
one of those tricks I’d learned: People were satisfied so long as you were
courteous and smiled and made no sudden moves. They were more than
satisfied, they were relieved – such a pleasant surprise to find a well-
mannered young black man who didn’t seem angry all the time.’

What Obama describes here, is an old black survival tactic called
“masking.” In her book Where I’m bound, historian Sidonie Smith writes

55 Idem, 92.
56 Idem, 93.
57 Idem, 95.
58 Ibidem.
that slave narratives defined three dominant responses of the black slave to his oppressive environment that were to continue in black autobiography after slavery was officially abolished: conciliation, rebellion, and apparent acquiescence facilitated by conscious masking.\textsuperscript{59} Barack does not rebel openly, and although he flirts with conciliation with his “the trick is not caring that it hurts” remark, his ultimate survival mechanism is masking. He does not let his mother know what his real feelings are. Instead, he hides his true self behind a façade that he knows to be effective with white people. He is like the character Dr. Bledsoe in Ellison’s \textit{Invisible} man, a black man who has climbed up in a white man’s society by constantly ‘composing his face like a sculptor, making it a bland mask’\textsuperscript{60} in his contact with whites.

Another conversation that Barack remembers is the one with Frank, an old black friend of “Gramps,” Barack’s grandfather. Frank, whom Obama describes as an “old-time Black Power, dashiki man,”\textsuperscript{61} Frank asks Barack what he expects to get out of college, a couple of days before Barack leaves Hawaii. Barack answers that he does not know. ‘Well,’ Franks says, ‘that’s the problem, isn’t it? You \textit{don’t know}... All you know is college is the next thing to do... And the people who are old enough to know better... they won’t tell you the truth.’ Barack asks: ‘and what’s that?’ ‘Leaving your race at the door,’ Frank replies. ‘You’re not going to college to get educated. You’re going there to get trained... Until you want to actually start running things, and then they’ll yank on your chain and let you know that you may be a well-trained, well-paid nigger, but you’re a nigger just the same.’\textsuperscript{62}

Just like he does with Ray, Obama uses an archetypical black man to confront the protagonist Barack with the vulnerabilities of his being black. In contrast to Ray however, Frank is not attacking Barack’s mixed descent or his privileged background. This time, Barack’s intellectual status is being held up against him. The problem of

\textsuperscript{59} Sidonie Smith, \textit{Where I’m bound. Patterns of slavery and freedom in black American autobiography} (Westport 1974) 49.
\textsuperscript{60} Ellison, \textit{Invisible man}, 79.
\textsuperscript{61} Obama, \textit{Dreams}, 98.
\textsuperscript{62} Idem, 97.
intellectual status in the black community is something that has haunted African-American writers since the end of slavery. During slavery, class and race were no clashing identities for black writers, as all blacks had gains with the abolition of slavery. Even middle- and high-class blacks were ferociously on the defense for slaves, for they understood that their status could easily be undermined by a law such as the Fugitive Slave Act, or destroyed by a band of kidnappers. After the Civil War, however, black intellectuals felt that they had to choose between the white bourgeoisie and the black masses. By attending white universities, absorbing knowledge from whites, speaking to white audiences, and advancing their own career in a white surrounding, black intellectuals felt that they were removed from their black cultural roots. So now did they face not only the contradiction between being black and American, like every African-American did; they were also threatened by their status as intellectuals.63

Again, there is no other author who can present the problem of black intellectuals as eloquently as Du Bois does in Souls of black folk, in the tale of the coming of John. In this short story, John Jones, a black boy living in the Southern village Altamaha, is sent away to the North to a college. A white John, who lives in the same village as the black John, gets sent away at the same time to study. Several years later, both Johns come back to Altamaha. Their reception is quite different. The white John comes back entirely at one with his family and his culture. The black John comes back a haunted man; he has seen what the white world has to offer, without having had the opportunity to enter it. Meanwhile, his education has made him slightly contemptuous of his own people, their religion and their acceptance of poverty and subordination to the white race. When he tries to teach at a black school, he gets fired because of the enlightened ideas that he tries to convey to his students. It is only a matter of time before black John is pushed into open rebellion. When he sees his sister being raped by the white John,

63 Mostern, Autobiography, 57-82.
the black John picks up a stick and beats his white counterpart to death. Not long after that, the black John gets lynched.\textsuperscript{64}

The real tragedy presented in the story of the coming of John lies in the fact that the black John, by receiving education and asserting himself as an intellectual, is alienated from both worlds, black and white. He gets a good taste of what the white world has to offer, but he cannot actually participate in that world. In a dramatic scene, John gets admitted to a white theater by accident, where he is totally overwhelmed by all the beauty and wonderful music that he is surrounded with. Very soon though, he is told that his seat was sold to him by mistake, and a white employee throws him out. Now that he has seen that white world, with all its riches, John cannot go back to the black world and just defenselessly accept his inferior status.\textsuperscript{65} Clearly, the alienation from both worlds and the solitary bitterness that Du Bois describes are aspects that the young Barack also fears. Looking back at his last days in Hawaii, Obama lets Frank express these doubts about going to college.

The accusation of deceit by black intellectuals is also present in other black autobiographies. In his autobiography, Malcolm X solves the problem by actively presenting himself as the anti-intellectual. He writes: ‘For generations, the so-called “educated” Negroes have “led” their black brothers by echoing the white man’s thinking – which naturally has been to the exploitive white man’s advantage.’\textsuperscript{66} The last crude words that Frank speaks out to Barack, “you may be a well-trained, well-paid nigger, but you’re a nigger just the same,” are almost reminiscent of a phrase that Malcolm X describes in his autobiography as having used to scold a black student. The student calls Malcolm X a “reverse racist” and a “divisive demagogue.” Malcolm X, infuriated by this black student and thinking of him as an intellectual traitor, asks him: ‘Do you know what

\textsuperscript{64} Du Bois, \textit{Souls}, 228-249.
\textsuperscript{65} Butterfield, \textit{Black autobiography}, 120-121.
\textsuperscript{66} Malcolm X, \textit{The autobiography}, 373.
white racists call black Ph.D.s?’ When the student says he does not, Malcolm X lays out the “truth” on him: ‘A nigger.’

At Occidental, however, Barack finds out that his fears and doubts about going to college are not at all shared by his black peers. Obama writes: ‘I had stumbled upon one of the well-kept secrets of black people: that most of us weren’t interested in revolt; that most of us were tired of thinking about race all the time.’ But Barack himself is not able to let it go. ‘I didn’t have the luxury, I suppose, the certainty of the tribe... I had nothing to escape from except my inner doubts.’ The question is whether a person with a mixed heritage is doomed to have these internal struggles. Joyce for example, a girl who Barack meets in college, does not seem to think so. In a casual conversation with Barack, she insists that she is not black, but “multiracial.” There is nobody telling her to choose for anything, except for black people. ‘It’s black people who always have to make everything racial...They’re the ones making me choose. They’re the ones who are telling me that I can’t be who I am...’ Joyce complains to Barack.

Through Joyce, Obama portrays a typical conservative theory that was prevalent among a growing group of black intellectuals at the time that Dreams was published. At the end of the 1980’s and through the 1990’s, black intellectuals like Thomas Sowell, Clarence Thomas, Walter Williams, Robert Woodson, John McWorther and Shelby Steele heavily criticized the black community for its “racialization.” Their main critique was that African-Americans were excessively enjoying the benefits of positive discrimination and their “victim status” in American society. These conservative authors claimed that blacks, instead of asking to be judged on the basis of their qualities, were now increasingly demanding from white America a privileged status on the basis of the color of their skin. So instead of grasping liberty with both hands and finally having the opportunity to be assessed as an individual, blacks

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67 Idem, 392.
68 Obama, Dreams, 98.
69 Idem, 99.
were falling back into the old divisions along racial lines, so stated the black conservatives.\footnote{Marius Jucan, 'Shelby Steele and the criticism of the American postliberal racial policies', \textit{Studia universitatis Babes-Bolyia, Studia Europaea}, vol. 53, no. 3 2008, 33-62.}

Joyce, with her clear refusal to think along racial lines, seems to be Obama’s literary equivalent of the abovementioned black authors. She, to use the words of Steele in \textit{A bound man}, is Barack’s “troublesome and conservative double.”\footnote{Steele, \textit{A bound man}, 58.} While Barack is constantly trying to assert an identity through blackness, she is the one telling him that he is taking the wrong path. She tells him that racial self-acceptance is not to be found in blackness, but only in mainstream America, in the mostly white surrounding that he has been raised in. Joyce thinks that if Barack chooses to be all-black, he must betray a part of his heritage, because that blackness demands certain forms of authentication that are not his, one of them being a hostile attitude towards whites. Only in white society can he be who he truly is, can he really be his self: an individual, free from obligations to any race.\footnote{Idem, 59.}

Barack is most certainly not willing to accept this theory, and he rejects “people like Joyce.”\footnote{Obama, \textit{Dreams}, 99.} ‘They talked about the richness of their multicultural heritage and it sounded real good, until you noticed that they avoided black people,’ Obama writes. ‘Only white culture could be neutral and objective. Only white culture could be nonracial, willing to adopt the occasional exotic into its ranks. Only white culture had individuals.’\footnote{Ibidem, 99.} Barack “unmasks” the black people who do not want to be judged on the color of their skin, who think they can escape the harsh realities of racial relations in America. According to him, race is a fact that is undeniable, and Joyce is a stubborn denier of this truth. It seems almost as if Barack is taking the harsh Malcolm X standpoint about blacks who have come to believe in true integration in America. In his autobiography, Malcolm X writes that these “integration-mad” people
are ‘token-integrated Negroes who flee from their poor downtrodden black brothers - from their own self-hate.’

But Barack is not Malcolm X, and he knows that he is being too hard on Joyce. In fact, he recognizes pieces of himself in people like her, and it scares him: ‘Their confusion made me question my own racial credentials all over again... I needed to put distance between them and myself, to convince myself that I wasn’t compromised.’ So, “to avoid being mistaken for a sellout,” Barack chooses his friends very deliberately, and he surrounds himself with other minorities on the campus, like politically active black students, Chicanos, and foreign students. However, this strategy alone cannot provide the full distance that he seeks from his past and from Joyce’s remarks, which still nag in the back of his head. ’No,’ Obama writes, ‘it remained necessary to prove which side you were on, to show your loyalty to the black masses, to strike out and name names.’

Then, all of a sudden, salvation is coming for Barack, and it is a woman who offers it to him. Obama calls her Regina, and she is a delight to him. She lives on the South Side of Chicago with her mother, and the memories of her youth make Barack dizzy with romanticized and simplified ideas of blackness: ‘Her voice evoked a black life in all it’s possibility, a vision that filled me with longing – a longing for place, and a fixed and definite history.’ Regina, like no other personage in the book, provides him with a place to go in America, mentally, and maybe physically as well, as I shall come to discuss later on. She helps him to find his own voice: ‘I could feel it growing stronger, sturdier, that constant, honest portion of myself, a bridge between my future and my past... it was a discovery that made me hungry for words.

Barack’s revelation that he is “hungry for words” is almost an exact quote from Wright’s *Black boy*, in which Wright describes his first

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76 Obama, *Dreams*, 100.
77 Ibidem.
79 Ibidem, 104.
80 Ibidem, 105.
literary accomplishments as a “release from prison, a satisfaction to my hunger and to my life.”\textsuperscript{81} Both in Wright’s and Obama’s autobiography, as in many other black autobiographies, finding a voice marks a turning point in the life of the writer. In the year after his talk with Regina, Barack is trying to satisfy the longing that she has invoked. He joins an anti-apartheid movement, and begins to enjoy the sense of fulfillment that he gets from being part of a larger African-American undertaking. Slowly but surely, through his new efforts and initiative, Barack is turning his back to the “coil of rage” that he found himself locked in the last couple of years. He comes to understand that he has a part in changing the world as he encounters it: ‘You might be locked into a world not of your own making... but you still have a claim on how it is shaped... my identity might begin with the fact of my race, but it didn’t, couldn’t end there.’\textsuperscript{82}

At this point in the book, almost at the end of Origins, the reader can feel Barack starting to escape his enslaved state. Barack decides that he cannot let his destiny be determined for him by the color of his skin. Remnick suggests that Barack’s positive turn might be caused by the fact that he is at this point a student who is coming of age in the era of multiculturalism and postmodernism. Barack learns that race is a fact, a matter of genetics and physical attributions, but it is also a matter of linguistic structures and social self-conception. As a result of these theories, Barack can choose to be more than just a product of his family’s history. He has to make sense of his inheritance and circumstances, and then he can decide what he wants to make of it all. In the end, Barack can be whoever he wants to be. Identity and race are matters over which he has influence.\textsuperscript{83}

Kloppenberg agrees with Remnick, stating that Obama’s memoir at the end of Origins turns into a story of positivism. Barack does plunge into the anger of Baldwin or Wright at first, Kloppenberg writes, but

\textsuperscript{81} Richard Wright, \textit{Black boy} (Chicago 1945) 135.
\textsuperscript{82} Idem, 111.
\textsuperscript{83} Remnick, \textit{The bridge}, 242.
eventually chooses an optimistic turn for his story. The change of tone at the end of Origins echoes the last chapter of Ellison’s *Invisible man*. Despite repeated setbacks and deepening disillusionments in his life as a black man, Ellison’s protagonist refuses to despair. ‘Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat,’ Ellison writes in epilogue of his book. And like Ellison’s invisible man, Barack is starting to realize that he can only survive if he can transcend hatred, if he continues in the face of difficulties. Finally, he has found a reason to resist Ray’s earlier outrage, and to shape his own destiny, regardless of the societal constraints that hold him back.

Barack is on the move, and in the last chapter of Origins in which he describes his student’s years in New York, the reader can sense his changing. Barack is getting focused. He stops getting high. He runs three miles a day and fasts on Sunday. He finally dedicates himself to his studies and starts keeping a journal of daily reflections and poetry. Barack is lifting himself out of despair, preparing himself for the symbolic flight to the North, to freedom. However, he still does not know where he is heading for. Somewhere deep, Barack knows what he needs, namely a community, ‘a community that cut deeper than the common despair that black friends and I shared when reading the latest crime statistics, or the high fives I might exchange on a basketball court.’ The only question remains: where exactly can Barack find this place of comfort and belonging?

That question remains unanswered in Origins, and is postponed to the next sections of *Dreams*. The only thing that does become certain is where Barack can not find a place of belonging, and that is with his mother. When Barack’s mother and sister come by to visit him in New York, Barack is once again reminded of the fact that the veil surrounds him, even in his own family. One night the three of them visit the cinema to watch an old movie, “Black Orpheus,” which Barack’s mother

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84 Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*, 251.
86 Obama, *Dreams*, 120.
87 Idem, 115.
remembers having seen when she was sixteen years old. Before going to the theater, she tells Barack and his sister that at the time she thought it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.\footnote{Idem, 123.} Seeing the film for himself in the cinema though, Barack disagrees with her. On the screen he sees nothing but stereotypes of happy black and brown Brazilians, and halfway through Barack wants to leave the theater. But when he turns to his mother to ask if she might be ready to go, he is struck to see that she is thoroughly enjoying herself. And at that moment, he realizes that ‘the childlike blacks on the screen… was what my mother had carried with her to Hawaii all those years before, a reflection of the simple fantasies that had been forbidden to a white middle-class girl from Kansas.’\footnote{Idem, 124.}

In line with that newfound fact about his mother, Barack also has second thoughts about his parents falling in love with each other so many years before. Did Ann Dunham and Barack Hussein Obama Sr. really see each other at the moment they met? Or did they merely find in the other some element that was missing in their own life? Barack seems to lean to the latter conclusion: ‘The emotions between the races could never be pure; even love was tarnished… Whether we sought out our demons or salvation, the other race would always remain just that: menacing, alien, and apart.’\footnote{Ibidem.} For the first time, Barack sees his parents’ lives revealed to him as separate and apart, reaching out beyond the point of their union or his birth. His mother was just a girl with the movie of beautiful black people in her head, seeing in his father something that she had been missing in her own life. And his father, what did he find in Ann Dunham? He found the excitement of “the other,” a plunge into America, a temporary break-away from the constraints of his homeland.

Barack’s father and mother are like the invisible man and Mr. Norton in Ellison’s \textit{Invisible man}. In the beginning of this book, the invisible man gets admitted to a college where Mr. Norton is one of the
greatest financers. After a couple of months, the invisible man gets the honor of being Mr. Norton’s driver. The two men find pleasure in each other’s company, but there is a veil separating them, for they only like each other as complementary to their own lives. ‘Poor stumblers,’ a black man says in a bar to them, ‘neither of you can see the other. To you (Mr. Norton) he (the invisible man) is a mark on the scorecard of your achievement, a thing and not a man; a child, or even less – a black amorphous thing. And you, for all your power, are not a man to him, but a God, a force!’ Mr. Norton and the invisible man are invisible to each other, just like Barack Hussein Obama and Ann Dunham were in their longing for the other.

Origins ends where it begins. Barack is in his apartment in New York, and he has just heard that his father has died. At night, Barack dreams of his father. In his dream, he sees his father coming out of prison, with nothing more than a cloth wrapped around his waist. “Barack,” the old man says, “I’ve always wanted to tell you how much I love you.” The father and son embrace each other, and Barack wakes up, weeping for the first time over the death of his father. He realizes ‘how even in his (Barack’s father’s) absence his strong image had given me some bulwark on which to grow up, an image to live up to, or disappoint... I needed to search for him.”

There are a couple of academic interpretations available of Barack’s dream of his father, but I find none of them satisfying. In my opinion, there are two points that are relevant. First, Barack’s dream is in line with the more optimistic ending of Origins, as he shows that he is able to forgive his father for his absence. After his father’s release from prison, the two men embrace each other as a sign of mutual recognition, and Barack even cries in the presence of his father, showing that he can confront his feelings over his father’s death. Second, the dream preludes Barack’s search for a racial identity and a community. By seeking his father and setting out a path for himself, he hopes to find a new posture and eventually find a place of belonging.

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92 Obama, *Dreams*, 129.
2 Finding one’s self

In this chapter, I will argue that the second and the third part of Obama’s memoir, “Chicago” and “Kenya,” are the accounts of a young man looking for black kinship and for his lost father. In “Chicago,” Barack tries to find tribal knowledge that he thinks is necessary to validly identify himself as a black man. In order to illustrate this, I will discuss three topics that I think are crucial to Barack’s black self-making in Chicago. The first topic is politics, as Barack in the city becomes acquainted with black politics and Black Nationalism. The second one is the topic of love, a subject that is rarely touched by scholars who review Dreams, but something that I find to be of importance in the debate about Barack’s search for a black identity. Thirdly, I shall discuss Barack’s acquaintance with religion, and why his “conversion” in the black Trinity United Church of Christ is of relevance in Barack’s search for a black identity. Regarding the third section, “Kenya,” I will shortly discuss how Barack’s trip to Africa stands out in the genre of African-American autobiography, and how in Kenya Barack finds answers to the questions about his identity that were raised by the absence of his father.

As to Obama’s stance in the tradition of black autobiography, the sections Chicago and Kenya both have numerous scenes that directly and indirectly link to black autobiographies previously written. However, it is important to note that the Barack in Chicago and Kenya is different from the Barack in Origins. This change manifests itself in the story line. Whilst the section Origins strictly follows black prototypal patterns of narrative structure and literary themes, Chicago and Kenya are more of Obama’s own. He seems to be romping with his literary predecessors, sometimes concurring with them and sharing their

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93 Some might say that the characteristics of Barack’s search for kinship in Chicago match the prototypal patterns of Robert Stepto’s black “narrative of immersion,” in which the protagonist returns to an oppressive surrounding to seek those aspects of tribal knowledge that ameliorate the conditions imposed by his solitude. However, I felt that I would deprive some of the elements of Obama’s Chicago narrative by placing it in a too narrow definition as described by Stepto: Stepto, Behind the veil, 167.
thoughts, sometimes being more critical towards them. In the second and third section of his memoir, Obama tries to lay out his own independent thoughts about blackness and identity making, and if those thoughts differ from earlier black autobiographers, he is willing to break away from the literary tradition.

After his studies at Columbia University in 1983, Barack decides to become a community organizer in Chicago. A decision like this could be interpreted in multiple ways. A reader might think that Barack’s interactions with Regina and her memories of Chicago, a city that he has identified as a place of belonging for black people, made the prospect of community organizing in Chicago appealing. Also, Barack’s experiences as an activist on campus, a place where he found his voice, could have inspired him to look for such work. The reader does not know what has triggered him to move to Chicago. What can be said though, as most biographers of Obama agree on and as I will argue in this chapter, is that Barack’s needs to find his blackness and to know what it means to belong are the underlying reasons for him to go to Chicago’s South Side.\(^\text{94}\)

One of the problems that Barack faces in his decision about going to Chicago is characteristic of many post-Civil Rights Movement intellectuals and young professionals. It is the typical black concern of balancing professional aspirations with community solidarity. Barack has a desire, one that none of his Columbia peers seem to understand, to become involved in community work. Of course, this desire clashes with the opportunities that graduating from an Ivy League school brings him. Trying to convince his friends that he is making a valid decision, Barack tells them that there is a need to ‘change the mood of the country, manic and self-absorbed. Change won’t come from the top… Change will come

\(^{94}\) This reason is implicitly given by Obama himself in: Obama, Dreams, 135.
And explicitly given by scholars who have studied Obama’s life in:
Green, A fatherless child, 125.
Remnick, The bridge, 243-244.
Mendell, Obama, 65.
Steele, A bound man, 48.
from a mobilized grass roots.’ His words draw a response of ‘skepticism’ from his Columbia friends. Even older black people whom Barack meets are amazed at his decision. Why, they ask, would someone who has the chance to do better than people from the previous generation not take advantage of it?

Nobody understands Barack’s sudden decision, nor does he himself, as he is ‘operating mainly on impulse.’ Looking back at the decision at the time of writing, Obama acknowledges that his move to Chicago was caused by personal questions of identity and belonging rather than by his desires to “change the mood of the country.” He writes: ‘I saw the African-American community becoming more than just a place where you’d been born or the house where you’d been raised. Through organizing, through shared sacrifice, membership had been earned... That was my idea of organizing. It was a promise of redemption.’ Barack thinks that, though he did not grow up in the poverty that earlier black autobiographers describe as their “black” experience, he can at least locate himself in the experience of blackness.

During his time as a community organizer in Chicago, Barack starts getting more and more political. As a man who came to age in the decade after the Civil Rights Movement, he poses questions about where blacks are and where they hope to go. In an important scene, a good friend of Barack, Ruby, comes by his office to see him. Looking at her when she enters his office, Barack is surprised. Ruby’s eyes, normally brown by color, have turned a shade of blue. ‘What did you do to your eyes?’ Barack asks in shock. Ruby laughs at his awe: ‘They’re just contacts, Barac... You like them?’ Barack answers offensively: ‘Your eyes looked just fine the way they were.’ Ruby becomes ashamed of herself, and does not know what to say after Barack’s lash-out.

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95 Obama, *Dreams*, 133.
96 Ibidem.
97 This question is being posed by an old black security guard, named “Ike,” in a consulting house where Barack temporarily works, in:
98 Idem, 134.
99 Idem, 135.
Awkwardly, the two of them say goodbye, and Barack is left with a feeling of guilt about making Ruby feel ashamed for a small vanity.\textsuperscript{100}

In Ruby's contacts, Barack sees black self-hatred, just as he did as a small boy in the bleaching creams advertisement in the \textit{Life} magazine. The scene echoes a famous moment in Malcolm X's autobiography, when Malcolm X as a young adolescent gets a "conk," which is a hairdo for blacks that straightens out the frizz of the hair with a mixture of lye and potato. Looking back in his autobiography, Malcolm X writes that his conk is one of the most embarrassing remembrances of his life: "This was my first really big step towards self-degradation: when I endured all that pain, literally burning my flesh with lye, in order to cook my natural hair until it was limp, to have it look like a white man's hair."\textsuperscript{101}

Ruby shakes up the predisposition that Barack has of the black community. He realizes that despite all the talks he hears about black self-esteem and black progress, most African-Americans are still embroiled in an ambivalent relation with their own race. After all, Ruby is not the only one who shows signs of self-hatred. On a daily basis, Barack is amazed at the distrust that black Chicagoans have towards one another. One day, a black leader casually explains to Barack that he never deals with black contractors, because a black man would just mess it up. Another time, a church leader explains that she cannot mobilize people in her church because black people are lazy. On the streets, Barack hears the word "nigger" time and again being used by blacks, not as an inside joke, but as it was meant in its original meaning: condescending and racially charged.\textsuperscript{102}

So, Barack finds out, there is more needed than just socio-economic progress to advance the African-American cause. There is also the matter of black self-esteem. However, black self-esteem is something that Barack has problems with. As he listens more pointedly to black nationalists and popular black leaders who talk about self-esteem,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item Idem, 192.
\item Malcolm X, \textit{The autobiography}, 138.
\item Obama, \textit{Dreams}, 195.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Barack notes that their stories of struggle, courage and overcoming are always implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) pointed at white people. ‘The hate hadn’t gone away,’ Obama writes. ‘It formed a counternarrative buried deep within each person and at the center of which stood white people…. I had to ask myself whether the bonds of community could be restored without collectively exorcising that ghostly figure that haunted black dreams. Could Ruby love herself without hating blue eyes?’

Could black self-esteem really exist, Barack seems to be asking himself, without a hatred of white people?

If there is one person in Barack’s life who has a clear-cut answer to that question it must be Rafiq al-Shabbaz, whom Barack starts meeting regularly after the incident with Ruby. Rafiq is a Black Nationalist, unaffiliated with the Nation of Islam, but very rigid in his conceptions of race relations in America. To him, there is no redemption for white people, as they are forever bound to be the oppressor of blacks. Rafiq is like Malcolm X, who at a certain point in his career rejects his American identity and chooses his black identity as the only true identity for an African-American. Just like Malcolm X, Rafiq sympathizes with black and brown people all over the world, from Africa to India, more than he does with the white American majority.

‘It’s about blood, Barack, looking after your own,’ Rafiq says at a certain point. ‘Black people the only ones stupid enough to worry about their enemies.’

But Barack does not agree with Rafiq. On the one hand, he sees the advantages of Black Nationalism. A steady attack on the race’s history and the other race’s oppression can prevent blacks from falling into despair. In that sense, Black Nationalism can provide a certain kind of grip for people, especially when they are out of hope. On the other hand, Barack also recognizes that in the blanket indictment of everything white lies an almost obsessive dependence upon whites. And, even worse, blacks gain nothing from it. Anytime something has to be put into action, blacks fail to insert the ideas of Black Nationalism into

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103 Ibidem.
104 Mostern, Autobiography, 152.
105 Obama, Dreams, 197.
their daily practice. Malcolm X’s voice, a wake up call and summon to pride, has now become a delusion, “one more excuse for inaction,” Obama concludes.106

With these comments, for the first time in the book, Obama makes a clear break from the African-American autobiography tradition. Ever since the ending of the Civil War, the assertion of blackness as a subject of pride has been one of the most important features of black autobiography writing. Even Booker T. Washington, probably the most conservative black author of his period, wrote in his *Up from slavery* that he would ‘rather be what I am, a member of the Negro race, than be able to claim membership with the most favored of any other race.’107 W.E.B. Du Bois writes that he discovered his black pride through black music, which is ‘full of the voices of my brothers and sisters.’108 In the autobiography of Ruby Berkley Goodwin, *It’s good to be black* (1953), pride in black identity is the central motif. The same may be said of Richard Wright’s *Black boy*, and especially of Malcolm X’s autobiography.109

In Obama’s description and, ultimately, his rejection of Black Nationalism, he distances himself from the viewpoint that pride in racial identity can serve as a tool for social progress. In this rejection, Obama dismantles himself as a political moderate. He is a man who, according to David Remnick in an interview110, stands not far left from the political center. There are certain conservative values that he cherishes, values like self-reliance and a politics of common sense. He cannot agree with an ideology that depends on racial hostility, because for Obama, that ideology suppresses the necessary standards of individual responsibility and hard work in a community. Moreover, the ideology of Black Nationalism does not fare well with Obama the pragmatist, as Kloppenberg describes him in *Reading Obama*. If community organizing

106 Ibidem, 197-204.
insists on anything, it is pragmatism. And, since Black Nationalism lacks “a workable plan”\textsuperscript{111} and depends on nothing more than “just talk” and “magical thinking,”\textsuperscript{112} Barack starts looking elsewhere for a coherent ideology.

So if Malcolm X’s black pride and Black Nationalism do not form workable formats for modern black progress, then what does? The answer, Barack thinks, lies in the stories by individuals in the black community, all with their own hopes and dreams of building a better future. Salvation for blacks lies not in massive and anonymous action as promoted by the Black Nationalists, but in the virtues of individual achievement, engagement and understanding. This also counts for Barack himself. Only by engaging in the life of the community is he able to have any kind of idea about where its people, his people, stand. So instead of embarking upon abstract ideas of racial pride and black self-esteem, Barack wants to become part of the black community, for only therein can he fulfill a useful role. It seems that Chicago’s South Side can gain from his leadership, just as he can gain from what the black community offers him by way of experience.

Fortunately for Barack, an essential part of his job in Chicago coincides with his becoming part of the black community. He must canvass the whole South Side and ask for every personal problem that occupies the minds of its people. And there is no better way for his lessons to begin than with a visit to a black barbershop, an experience that Obama describes with great pleasure. Visiting the shop, Barack learns about blacks’ feelings about the newly elected black Mayor of Chicago, Harold Washington, whom the men in the barbershop lovingly refer to as “Harold.”\textsuperscript{113} Barack, in search of his own proper role within the black community, witnesses firsthand the sense of empowerment that a black leader can bring. He sees a sort of black pride movement that he has never witnessed growing up.

\textsuperscript{111} Obama, \textit{Dreams}, 204.
\textsuperscript{112} Idem, 203.
\textsuperscript{113} Idem, 146-149.
Another crucial scene is at a meeting that Barack and his peers from the community organizing agency have set up for the residents of Altgeld, a poor neighborhood on the South Side where crime and poverty have made inroads for the last couple of decades. At a certain point in the meeting, a man called Will bursts out in tears, as he recalls the happy days of his childhood in Altgeld, noting how different the neighborhood was in his youth. ‘I don’t see kids smiling no more,’ Will says sobbingly. ‘That just ain’t the way things supposed to be... kids not smiling.’ After Will’s outburst, the other people in the meeting start telling their own stories, recalling memories of their childhood, when everything was better. In their stories, Barack hears “the sound of a shared loss.”\textsuperscript{114} And, emphasizing how intense this communal black experience was, Obama concludes: ‘A feeling of witness, of frustration and hope, moved about the room from mouth to mouth, and when the last person had spoken, it hovered in the air, static and palpable.’\textsuperscript{115}

As sentimental as it may be, this scene is important. Barack, as the organizer of the meeting, is nearby witnessing a group of blacks outing their deepest frustrations, showing themselves from a more vulnerable side. What makes it even better is that Barack has organized this gathering, and is therefore responsible for this exchange of life stories. A place like this is where Barack gains his tribal knowledge, and he is thoroughly absorbing it. One of the co-workers in the group, Mary, later confronts Barack with his role as an observer, noting that she did not hear him share anything with the group. He makes up a pretext and says that an organizer is supposed to keep a low profile. Later on, when Barack drives her home, he tells Mary the truth: ‘You know what you were asking before. About why I do this. It had something to do with the meeting tonight.’\textsuperscript{116}

Chicago, apart from being a learning school for black political opinion, is also a place where Barack tries to figure the theme of race

\textsuperscript{114} Idem, 178.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{116} Idem, 179.
into his life as a man.\textsuperscript{117} He dates both white and black women, and makes that also a part of his narrative. In his contact with women Barack seems to pursue the same results as he does in his political contacts: to gain tribal authenticity. In one account, when his half sister Auma is visiting from Kenya, Barack tells her about a relationship that he had when still studying in New York. She was a white girl, whom Barack dated for a year. The two of them were in love, and one weekend, the girl invited Barack to her parents’ house, which apparently was a beautiful manor house in the middle of the woods. Standing in the library of the girl’s father, Barack realized that ‘our two worlds, my friend’s and mine, were as distant from each other as Kenya is from Germany. And I knew that if we stayed together I’d eventually live in hers. After all, I’d been doing it most of my life. Between the two of us, I was the one who knew how to live as an outsider.’\textsuperscript{118}

Barack knew how his future with the New York girl would end up. If they would push their relationship to the next level, maybe end up marrying each other, Barack would be right back at were he was during his time at Punahou and Occidental.\textsuperscript{119} He would again be the black man in the white man’s world, doomed to live out a life of “double consciousness,” a life behind the veil. As Barack was building up a new black self, he could not bare that prospect. So he started pushing the girl away. One night, Barack took the girl to a play by a black playwright. The play was permeated with typical black American humor, angry and aggressive. After the play, the girl asked Barack why black people were so angry all the time, and said that anger ultimately resulted in nothing. Barack felt offended, and started having a big fight with her, right in front of the theatre. Back in the car, the girl cried and said she couldn’t be black. She would if she could, but she could not. And was she being herself not enough for Barack?\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{117} Remnick, \textit{The bridge}, 244.
\textsuperscript{118} Obama, \textit{Dreams}, 211.
\textsuperscript{119} Steele, \textit{A bound man}, 61.
\textsuperscript{120} Obama, \textit{Dreams}, 211.
Strangely enough, apart from Steele, there are few commentators of *Dreams* who have linked Obama’s account of his interaction with women to the tradition of black autobiographies. Problems in love due to racial difficulties are essential to the making of black autobiographies. In *Souls of black folk*, Du Bois writes that the first time he realizes that he is “a problem” in American society, is when on his school a white girl rejects him for the color of his skin. Malcolm X, in his autobiography, writes that in his adolescence there was always a wall between him and white girls. What these men have in common with Obama is that through interaction with white girls, they feel their different status in American society.

There is one important difference though. Unlike his predecessors, Barack is not forced to end his relationship with the New York girl. His wounds are self-inflicted. The white girl wants to be with him, but now he rejects her for the color of her skin. Looking back on the whole affair, Barack admits to Auma that ‘whenever I think back to what my friend said to me... it somehow makes me ashamed.’ Barack admits to Auma having rejected somebody on the basis of race. The guilt, as Steele points out, comes because Barack admits that he has let race, something he as a well-read student knows to be partially self-constructed and metaphysical, determine his decisions. In his quest for tribal certainty, even a loving relationship had to make way. Barack is not fully prepared to plea guilty though, as he reluctantly adds to Auma: ‘Maybe even if she’d been black it still wouldn’t have worked out. I mean, there are several black ladies out there who’ve broken my heart just as good.’ Nonetheless, it looks like this particular account is

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123 Obama, *Dreams*, 211.
124 At least, this is what Kloppenberg and Remnick presume Obama to be at this point in his life: a well-read student who is influenced by postmodern and multicultural notions of race.
126 Obama, *Dreams*, 211.
written down by Obama to show that his endless quest for identity has not only affected him, but also the people around him.

At the end of the Chicago section, Obama writes about his discovery of the “Trinity United Church of Christ,” a black church led by the pastor Jeremiah Wright. Obama heralds his finding of religion by describing his ambivalence towards religion in his youth. In both the Muslim and the Catholic schools that he attended in his youth, Barack was uninterested in religion. The teacher of his Muslim school wrote to Ann Dunham to tell her that Barack made faces during Koranic studies. On the Catholic school, when time came to pray, Barack was also rebellious: ‘I would pretend to close my eyes, then peek around the room. Nothing happened. No angels descended. Just a parched old nun and thirty brown children, muttering words. Sometimes the nun would catch me, and her stern look would force my lids back shut. But that didn’t change how I felt inside.’

Throughout history, black autobiographers have had changing views of religion in their writings. In slave narratives, Christianity was generally embraced as a tool for the abolitionist cause. In The narrative of Frederick Douglass for example, Frederick Douglass defines slavery not only as an inhumane system to those who are being oppressed by it, but also as an astray from Christianity in America. Already on the third page, he asserts that because of the countless American slaves who are born from mixed parents, the old Biblical justification for slavery does not withstand: ‘It will do away the force of the argument, that God cursed Ham, and therefore American slavery is right. If the lineal descendants of Ham are alone to be scripturally enslaved, it is certain that slavery at the south must soon become unscriptural; for thousands are ushered into the world, annually, who, like myself, owe their existence to white fathers, and those fathers most frequently their own masters.’

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127 Idem, 154.
128 Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave. Written by himself (Boston 1845) 15.
After the Civil War, ambivalence towards the Christian faith began to slip into black autobiographies. While in the autobiographies of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois the Christian faith is still looked at with relative positivism, although sometimes ambivalent, it is viewed with distance in J. Saunders Redding's autobiography and with outright hostility and cynicism in the work of Richard Wright. In a significant scene in *Black Boy*, Wright describes how he rejects his faith contrary to the will of his family, his friends, and his community members. ‘I'll never feel God’, he tells his grandmother when she begs him to embrace the Christian faith. ‘It’s no use.’ Religion (at least, Christianity) does not offer Wright a way of coping with the oppression in his environment. Rather, it reinforces the obstacles on his way to self-discovery: ‘While listening to the vivid language of the sermons I was pulled towards emotional belief, but as soon as I went out of the church and saw the bright sunshine and felt the throbbing life of the people in the streets I knew that none of it was true and that nothing would happen.’

Barack, during his first years in Chicago, does not make clear how he feels about religion. When asked about his congregational affiliation by a black pastor, he dryly answers that he visits churches. Barack has a rather cynical view of black male preachers on the South Side, casting them as men who seem more concerned with themselves and their reputation than with their congregation or with the black community. Reverend Smalls is one of those people. Smalls is a black preacher who is not willing to join forces with any rival forces of black congregations. He seems more concerned about the question which one of the black churches has the biggest influence in Chicago’s South Side. There is bitterness in Obama’s description of the preacher, implicitly blaming the black clergy for not helping people to cope with the problems of economic deprivation and social injustice.

However, at a certain point Barack realizes that in order to fit in the black community, he can not afford himself to remain stuck in

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129 Wright, *Black boy*, 126.
130 Idem, 110-11.
cynicism towards the church congregations. Obama writes: ‘To be right with yourself, to do right by others, to lend meaning to a community's suffering and take part in its healing – that required something more… It required faith.’ Apart from an earthly connection with the black race, Barack also needs a spiritual one. He finds this at the end of the Chicago section, as he discovers Jeremiah’s Trinity United Church of Christ on a Sunday morning service. In that sermon, Barack for the first time finds his life story spiritually connected to the larger story of the African-American experience. Right there, just like Malcolm X in prison, Barack has his “leap of faith.”

The sermon that Barack listens to is called “The Audacity of hope,” which is also the title for Obama’s second book, published in 2004. The sermon, Obama writes in Dreams, is “a meditation on a fallen world,” an exposition of people from various classes, with black people becoming the primary subject of experience. And in the ‘stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians and the lion’s den, Ezekiel’s field of dry bones,’ he hears the stories of all the people he has been listening to for the past three years. Barack imagines black people in churches across the city, and wonders how their different stories merge together, bound by a common history and a shared hope for the future. ‘Those stories – of survival, and freedom, and hope – became our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood.’

Just as in the end of “Origins,” Barack finds himself crying at the end of the second part of the book. This time however, the tears are not caused by sorrow, but by release and joy. For the first time in his life, Barack feels that he has achieved wholeness. Through faith, there is a connection and sense of belonging to the black race that he felt

132 Idem, 279.
133 The term “leap of faith” for Barack’s religious moment in the Trinity church is used in the following works:
   1. Remnick, The bridge, 245.
   2. Green, A fatherless child, 131.
134 Obama, Dreams, 293
135 Idem, 294.
136 Ibidem.
disconnected from for most of his life. Although in the three years preceding this leap of faith he has already achieved connection with several people of the community, the spiritual connection that he makes in the Trinity Church is with the whole race. Finally, Barack can claim to have the certainty of tribe, and he is ready to make the next step in the discovery of himself, which will be connecting with his lost father and visiting Kenya. Obama lets a woman sitting next him utter his words of thankfulness for this important moment in his life. ‘Oh Jesus,’ she says, ‘thank you for carrying us so far.’

The third section of Obama’s memoir, “Kenya,” covers the trip that Barack makes in the summer of 1988, when he decides to visit his father’s homeland, Kenya. Barack goes to Africa intent on learning more about his father and his father’s culture. As a result of that, he hopes to heal the scars left by his father’s abandonment. He feels that in Kenya, he can “come to terms with the Old Man,” and alleviate the sense of emptiness that he has felt since his father left him. ‘Would this trip to Kenya finally fill that emptiness?’ Barack asks himself. ‘The folks back in Chicago thought so… For them, as for me, Africa had become an idea more than an actual place, a new promised land, full of ancient traditions and sweeping vistas, noble struggles and talking drums.’

In the tradition of black autobiographies, a trip to Africa has been prevalent among several writings. In his two memoirs The Big Sea and I wonder as I wander, author Langston Hughes writes extensively about his visit to Africa in 1923, emphasizing that in the continent of his forefathers he truly found himself as a black man. In his semi-autobiographical Black Power, Wright describes his trip to the Gold Coast in 1954, delineating the schisms within himself that the trip causes. His movement from America to Africa gets him in closer contact with his African descent, and leaves him feeling the need to define his American identity all over again. Malcolm X, especially in the last years of his life, asserted an identity for himself as an American who had roots

137 Idem, 295.
138 Idem, 301.
139 Idem, 302.
in Africa. In *The autobiography*, Malcolm X describes how he tried to establish a world African movement of blacks under the Organization of Afro-American Unity.\(^{140}\)

Generally, African-Americans who visit Africa have no direct familial connections with the continent. The information about their heritage is lost in the years of slavery, with the surnames of their forefathers changed to reflect the old white master’s possession. Hughes, Wright and Malcolm X visited Africa to embark upon an exploration of the African self and, as a consequence of that, establish a deeper understanding of their racial identity in America.\(^{141}\) For Barack the situation is different. He has no slave blood within him, and knows exactly where his roots lie. His father and grandfather are members of the Luo people, the third largest ethnic group in Kenya. There are relatives to greet him at the airport, and the name Obama has a specific history in Kenya. So in contrast to earlier black autobiographers and the majority of African-Americans who visit Africa, Barack returns to a literal home, and not a metaphorical one in Africa.

Upon his arrival in Kenya, Barack has the same shock of familiarity that appears in the writings of his literary predecessors. At Nairobi Airport, he encounters a woman who helps him with his lost luggage and who recognizes the name Obama when he introduces himself to her. It turns out that Obama Sr. was a close friend of her family. Barack is filled with joy, and tries to prolong the conversation with the woman as long as he can, not so much because of her, but because of the fact that she has recognized the name Obama. ‘That had never happened before,’ Obama writes. ‘For the first time in my life, I felt the comfort, the firmness of identity that a name might provide, how it could carry an entire history in other people’s memories, so that they might nod and say knowingly: “Oh, you’re so and so’s son.”’\(^{142}\) Barack leaves the woman with a sense of great satisfaction and meets up with Auma, who is impatiently waiting for him in the arrival hall.

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\(^{141}\) Green, *A fatherless child*.
\(^{142}\) Obama, *Dreams*, 305.
The first couple of days, Barack is bedazzled with the illusion of a new home in Africa. He begins to imagine how his life would be in Kenya: the rhythm of his days unchanged, the certainty that everyday things would remain just the way they were the day before, and no more doubts about his identity or tribe. For a short span of time, Barack understands the blissful stories about Africa from his friends in Chicago: ‘And all of this... made me understand the transformation Asante and other black Americans claimed to have undergone after their first visit to Africa. For a span of weeks or months, you could experience the freedom that comes from not feeling watched, the freedom of believing that your hair grows as it’s supposed to grow and that your rump sways the way a rump is supposed to sway... Here the world was black, and so you were just you; you could discover all those things that were unique to your life without living a lie or committing betrayal.’

Slowly but surely though, Barack’s perception of Kenya starts to change. He comes to see that also in Kenya, there is a color line dividing the people. Barack becomes irritated with all the white tourists on the streets, taking pictures and wearing safari suits as if they were “extras on a movie set.” Their lack of self-consciousness in an utterly strange country amazes him. How could they be so confident of themselves? Also, Barack has a bad experience with a Kenyan waiter in a restaurant, who refuses to serve Barack and Auma as long as there is a white family sitting in the restaurant. Through these incidents, Barack realizes that his initial excitement with the “true blackness” of the country was naïve. Obama writes: ‘Kenya, without shame, offered to re-create an age when the lives of whites in foreign land rested comfortably on the backs of the darker races... he could be served by a black man without fear or guilt, marvel at the exchange rate, and leave a generous tip.’

Barack’s biggest deception in Kenya however comes not because of the country’s persistent racial problems. After all, he did not come to Africa to assert an African identity. He came to get in touch with his lost

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143 Idem, 311.
144 Idem, 312.
145 Idem, 314.
father, whom he still feels rejected by, and wants to know better. In Kenya, Barack meets many relatives from several generations, through whom he gets to know his father closer and closer. The relations of the Obama family are complex. Barack’s father and his sister, Sara, were raised by Granny, the second wife of Obama’s grandfather, Onyango. Kezia is Obama Sr.’s first wife. She and Barack’s half-siblings Roy and Auma were left behind when Obama Sr. went to the United states in pursuit of an education. Also there is Akuma, Barack’s biological grandmother, who reportedly abandoned her son, Obama Sr., and her daughter, Sara, when they were small.146

Barack, through his relatives, comes to know his father for who the man really was, and the picture is not pretty. Obama Sr. was a miserable husband to all his wives, and a lousy father to his children. Auma tells Barack memories of her childhood, of times when the “Old Man” staggered into her room at night, drunk. She tells him about Obama Sr.’s paranoia, his decline in Kenyan public life and his addiction to alcohol. Grannie tells Barack of the strenuous relationship between Obama Sr. and his father Onyango, about how the two of them both were constantly disappointed with each other and never stopped fighting. Barack quickly realizes that when he was ten and his father came to visit him in America, Obama Sr. was already in his decline. The revelations of his sister and Granny are the straight opposite of the stories that he had heard as a kid from his mother and grandparents, when he was still living in Hawaii. The image of his father that they had raised was a myth, Barack now understands.147

In A bound man, Steele suggests that Barack’s search for an absent father is an old literary theme, and that its development throughout Dreams, and especially in the section “Kenya,” follows the narrative structures of this literary theme. According to Steele, stories that centre on a search for a father always start off with the son’s (or daughter’s) illusion that his father will play out a meaningful role in the child’s life. The son believes that the father’s offer of this meaningful role

146 Idem, 315-346.
147 Remnick, The bridge, 246.
is the son’s birthright, something he can assume to be provided. Then, somewhere in the story, the inevitable existential shock comes, and the son is confronted with an explosion of events that take away all of his illusions. All of a sudden there is nothing standing between him and the cruel truth, no more protection, no more wisdom that can guide him the way. The search for a father always ends with such a realization. The son looks up to his father and realizes that the man is nothing more than a human being with limitations, not capable of saving his child, even if he would have wanted to do so.  

In *Dreams*, Barack’s search for his father ends precisely as set out in Steele’s book. Barack is deprived from all the illusions that he had about his father, and is left with a reality that he initially did not seek in Africa: he is alone, and he is the only one that can give meaning to his world. At the end of “Kenya,” Barack stands at his father’s and his grandfather’s graves, weeping, just as in the endings of the first two sections. He grieves his father’s death, and the silence that has accompanied his absence in Barack’s life. However, now that he knows his father’s history, and the family’s history before that, Barack also finds a new freedom and can finally craft an identity on his own: ‘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.’ Despite the pain that it has caused, Barack’s trip to Africa has helped him achieve his aim. He leaves having answered the questions about his identity that were raised by his father’s absence from his life.  

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149 Obama, *Dreams*, 430.
150 Green, *A fatherless child*, 160.
In this essay, I could have chosen to leave out the political context of Obama’s memoir, since the book has sufficient substance to be investigated on its own standing. However, to analyze *Dreams from my father* without looking at the role that it has played in Obama’s further political career is to leave out one of the book’s most important assets. Surely, without Obama’s political rise, his memoir would have faded away from public memory, as it sold only a couple of thousand copies after its initial publishing. Only through political circumstances after its publishing did the book become important. In this chapter, I will argue that *Dreams* is not as politically focused as earlier black autobiographies, but that it gained political relevance as Obama pursued a career in public office. Ultimately, I will show that the role and meaning of Obama’s memoir has gradually changed to suit the political narrative of its author.

Looking at the history of black autobiography writing, it is not inappropriate to ask whether Obama’s memoir can be regarded as a political book. From earliest times on, black autobiographies have possessed great political relevance as they have offered an insight into the racial inequalities of American society. The first black autobiographies, slave narratives, were basically political pamphlets, written for a white audience and aimed at converting as many people as possible to the abolitionist cause. Frederick Douglass justified his second autobiography, *My bondage and my freedom*, on the basis of its political usefulness when he wrote the following in a letter to his editor: ‘It (the autobiography) is not to illustrate any heroic achievements of a man, but to vindicate a just and beneficent principle, in its application to

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151 Both Butterfield and Stepto argue that slave narratives are written for a white audience in:

the whole human family, by letting in the light of truth upon a system, esteemed by some as a blessing, and by others as a curse and a crime... Any facts, either from slaves, slaveholders, or by-standers calculated to enlighten the public mind, by revealing the true nature, character, and tendency of the slave system, are in order, and can scarcely be innocently withheld.¹⁵²

In Douglass’s autobiographies and other slave narratives, politics were not only discussed, but they were also felt and tested as subjective experience. By intensely describing the horrors of their personal enslavement, slave narrators tried to give their readers a firsthand witness of a system that was unjust. Their personal experience gave them the authority to speak out on slavery and claim a place in the political debate that surrounded the issue. After the Civil War, when slavery was over, black autobiographers continued to use their personal experiences as a license to address racial matters in America. With their autobiographies they wanted to “unveil the truth” behind America’s political system, and provide a counter-narrative for mainstream political rhetoric that justified discrimination, segregation and the Jim Crow laws. These “post-bellum” autobiographies were no longer written solely for a white audience, as black writers had different views on how to reach emancipation, and sought to convince both whites and blacks of their view on racial inequality. In the 1960’s, black autobiographers addressed their writings primarily to blacks, and tried to activate them into a mass militant reaction against white racism.¹⁵³

On the whole, the self of a typical African-American autobiography is not an individual with a private career, but rather a fighter in a historic, political battle toward freedom for all blacks in America. The “I” is a member of a politically oppressed group, with ties and responsibilities to the other members. What makes him part of that group is a racist society that has determined who he is. The story of a black autobiographer is a rebellion against that society, an attempt to break free from any political or social constraints. It is also, historically,

¹⁵² Frederick Douglass, My bondage and my freedom (New York 1855) vii.
¹⁵³ Mostern, Autobiography, 165-169.
an attempt to communicate to white America what whites have done to blacks, and fill in the blank spaces that have been left by white writers, critics and historians. In short, the black autobiographer is traditionally an inside narrator of African-American oppression, and uses his work as a vehicle for a more racially egalitarian America.154

It would appear that Obama has succeeded in reshaping the traditional African-American autobiography, as struggle against racism is not the main focus of his memoir. Of course, Dreams was written in a time when slavery was far-gone and segregation was over. Obama had never witnessed the unfairness and blunt racism that he had read about in earlier black autobiographies. His book, therefore, does not contain a fight against any political system. Nonetheless, I would argue that there is a political component in his memoir, although it is not as clear-purposed as in earlier black autobiographies. The “I” in Dreams, Barack, takes on a conscious political identity, relying heavily on the past experience of the group as a whole, but also posing modern questions about where African-Americans should go from here. With the Civil Rights era over and equal rights under the law attained by African-Americans, Barack seems to be asking the question: ‘What is next?’155

Barack’s political identity is primarily shaped during his time as a community organizer in Chicago. On the South Side, he observes how the old ideas of the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement and the Black Nationalist Movement can no longer provide a coherent plan for the next generation of African-Americans. One of Barack’s biggest concerns are the younger men on the streets, men who easily resort to violence and leave other residents fearing for their lives.156 Part of what Barack sees as the problem with these men is something that he can identify with himself, namely the absence of a black father. In a 1995 interview with book reviewer Connie Martinson, just after the publishing of his book, Obama confided that this was one of his biggest concerns in Chicago: ‘Nobody’s tending to them, and I guess, in part, I

154 Butterfield, Black autobiography, 3.
155 Green, A fatherless child, 106.
156 Obama, Dreams, 251-254.
identify with these young men, because they don’t have fathers either, and I’m thinking, nobody’s looking after them.’

So there is definitely a political dimension in *Dreams*, but it is not a political book in its essence, and Obama does not offer the same type of political rhetoric as earlier black autobiographers have done. Whereas in earlier black autobiographies the “I” is a black person in a position of political oppression, in *Dreams* the “I” is a black person who struggles to belong. Barack’s biggest problem is not a racist society, but the absence of his father. His ultimate goal is not to attain political freedom, but to craft an identity. More than that, Barack connects his own struggles to other African-American men. He rejects the “old” political movement of the 1960’s and suggests that there is a need for a new plan if the next generation is to reap the fruits from the victories of the past.

Whilst politics may not be the main focus of Obama’s memoir, there have been numerous commentators who have attributed a political purpose to the book, especially when Obama entered the scene of national politics. David Mastey, professor in African studies at the Carleton University, is one of those commentators. In a much-cited article in *The Journal of Black Studies*, Mastey claims that Obama’s memoir was written as a preparation for his later political career. According to Mastey, *Dreams* was aimed almost entirely at whites. The book provided them the opportunity to “slum” alongside Obama in Chicago’s South Side. For whites, slumming is a means of racial self-making, an opportunity to have controlled contact with black people. Mastey argues that Obama, by giving this opportunity to slum, created a pool of future white voters who were thankful to him for giving them an inside account of the “other” America. Mastey writes that in return for that, Obama gained a solid base of political capital among liberal white voters; political capital that would turn out to be indispensable in his

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later runs for public offices in the State of Illinois and eventually in his run for President.158

Today, after the 2008 Presidential elections, it is tempting to accept Mastey’s reasoning as the hidden truth behind Obama’s memoir. But his article does not do justice to the facts. While today Obama’s rise may seem like the smooth and pre-arranged travel that Mastey sketches, the reality is far different. In *Obama*, David Mendell writes that Obama’s political career was never a paved way to victory. After winning a practically unopposed race in 1997, Obama was a State Senator for three terms, representing Hyde Park, Chicago. In 2000, when he ran for Congress, his opponent Bobby Rush easily defeated him by two to one, and Obama almost decided to quit politics. Then, in his last attempt to gain political fame, Obama ran for the U.S. Senate in 2004. Again, his chances were slim. He would have probably lost again in the primary, had it not been for the fact that his opponent’s messy divorce records came out a couple of weeks before the voting. In the general election, the same thing happened to his most competent Republican opponent. Obama ended up running against Alan Keyes, who was no match for him. Three years later, he announced his candidacy for the Presidency.159

So Obama’s political rise to the Presidency was not at all a predestined path to victory. He had an enormous amount of luck in the Illinois elections, and could have never guessed in 1995 that he would come as far as he eventually did in 2008. That is why, in my opinion, interpreting *Dreams from my father* as a tool to woo white voters as a preparation for the Presidential election, or even for the Congressional or Senate elections in Illinois, is misguided. It is more likely, as David Remnick points out in an interview, that Obama did not have a specific political goal or specific audience with his memoir, but saw the power of his story afterwards, and then infused it into his campaign rhetoric.160 In *The bridge*, Remnick writes: ‘After Obama’s emergence as a national

159 Mendell, *Obama*.
160 ‘David Remnick – The bridge.’
politician, it was difficult to read it \textit{(Dreams)} solely in the spirit in which it was written; the book became a sourcebook of stories endlessly called upon for use in politics. But \textit{Dreams from my father} is important precisely because it was written when Obama was young and unguarded.\textsuperscript{161} Mendell reaches the same conclusion and writes: ‘Obama wrote it \textit{(Dreams from my father)} before firmly deciding to run for public office. That is why the remarkably candid memoir is much rawer than the typical book from a politician.’\textsuperscript{162}

So \textit{Dreams} was not written with any political intentions. I do believe, however, that the book became politically relevant as soon as Obama started running for public office. In \textit{Obama}, Mendell recalls that during election times, Obama often used \textit{Dreams} as a political selling point to journalists. Mendell writes: ‘In covering his state senate campaign for the \textit{Chicago Tribune}, I would consistently ask Obama questions about his life. When he would grow weary of these personal inquiries, which was often, he would brush them aside by referring me to his book for answers. “I wrote four hundred pages about myself,” he would say. “What more could you want from me?”’\textsuperscript{163} In the beginning of his political career, Obama understood that \textit{Dreams} was a powerful tool to introduce himself to the larger public. It would be the first thing that reporters would look at when they covered him in an election. In that sense, Obama would always have the first story on himself.

After six years in office, Obama was fed-up with his life as a State Senator and decided to take his political career to the next level. In 1999, he announced his candidacy for Congressman in the first Congressional district of Illinois, which was an overall black district. He took up arms against sitting Democratic Congressman Bobby Rush, who had been representing the district since 1993. Rush was a 1960s Civil Rights veteran, and had later been the head of the Illinois Black Panther Party. Under Mayor Harold Washington, he had served on the city council of Chicago. Rush had a strong black political résumé and enjoyed a solid

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\textsuperscript{161} Remnick, \textit{The bridge}, 230.
\textsuperscript{162} Mendell, \textit{Obama}, 17.
\textsuperscript{163} Idem, 18.
\end{flushright}
support. The first Congressional district of Illinois did not only include the multicultural and progressive neighborhood Hyde Park, where Obama lived, but also places with far less wealth, like Englewood and Woodlawn. Obama knew that he would have a tough time reaching black voters who lived in low-income areas like these particular neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{164}

Still, Obama thought that he could take on the sitting Congressman. In 1998, Rush had made a very unsuccessful run for Mayor of Chicago and was defeated by sitting Mayor Richard M. Daley. During six years in office, he had also achieved little in Congress. For those reasons, Obama saw Rush as an aging politician ready to be replaced by a fresh face. Obama figured that if he would talk about his community organizing experience, he would soon gain the credibility to speak out as an authentic black leader, someone who knew about the disadvantages that many in the black community routinely experience. Also, pointing at his mixed heritage, Obama could make the case that his background allowed him to live in more than one world; that he could build the kind of coalition that would ultimately get a lot more things done than the protest-based type of black politics that Rush represented.\textsuperscript{165}

But Obama was wrong in his calculation. The promotion of his racially mixed background did not fare well among the black electorate. Instead, there were immediate voices that questioned Obama’s black credentials. State Senator Donne E. Trotter, another candidate in the contest, accused Obama of being influenced by white interests. He pointed at Obama’s “white” personal résumé, which included two institutions of “white power,” Harvard and University of Chicago. Trotter’s accusations quickly rooted on the South Side of Chicago. A lot of black voters did not see Obama’s mixed heritage as an advantage. They distrusted him for it. They saw Barack as a “white man in blackface,” as Trotter once characterized Obama. At one point in the election, the black newspaper \textit{Chicago Reader} said: ‘There are whispers

\textsuperscript{164} Remnick, \textit{The bridge}, 313-317.
\textsuperscript{165} Idem, 317-319.
that Obama is being funded by a “Hyde Park mafia,” a cabal of University of Chicago types, and that there’s an “Obama project” masterminded by whites who want to push him up the political ladder.’

More than anyone else, Rush was the master of using Obama’s past against him. He dismissed Obama as an elitist newcomer, someone who was out of touch with the African American community. ‘Obama went to Harvard and became an educated fool,’ Rush was quoted in the Chicago Reader. ‘We are not impressed with these folks with these eastern elite degrees.’ When Obama tried to depict him as an old black leader from a previous generation, Rush turned the generational talk on him. ‘Barack is a person who read about the Civil Rights protests and thinks he knows all about it. I helped make that history, by blood, sweat, and tears,’ Rush said. The way he framed it, Obama seemed unknowing and ungrateful for all the work that had been done by Civil Rights activists. Obama’s experience as a community organizer did not make a whole lot of impression. In an interview with Remnick in 2007, Rush said about Obama’s community organizing: ‘You can’t portray yourself as an activist if you are only a pale reflection of the real thing. You have to admit the truth – especially when you are running against the real thing.’

So Obama saw his past being used against him. The absence of slave blood in his family, his white mother, his growing up in multicultural Hawaii, his attendance of Ivy League universities and his easy relation with the white upper-class: all was being used to make Obama suspect, to make the case that somehow he was not “black enough.” Eventually, it was this charge that made Obama lose the election to Rush. And from this time forward, the issue of black authenticity would stick to Obama. It came back in his race for the U.S. Senate and then again during his Presidential bid. Therefore, Obama had to find a way to make his life story politically attractive again.

166 Mendell, Obama, 131.
168 Ibidem.
169 Remnick, The bridge, 317.
The first lesson that Obama learned from his defeat was that his background did not allow him to be a credible all-black political candidate. He could never claim the personal and historical authenticity that older black leaders like Rush could. Instead, Obama had to present himself as more than black, and appeal to a broader constituency than just the black electorate. If he wanted to achieve success in future elections, he would have to reach out to white liberals, students and elite institutions in America. So in the 2004 election for the U.S. Senate, Obama stopped trying to prove his blackness. Instead, he began to use his biography to claim a new kind of political leadership that transcended black politics. Obama asserted that because of his mixed background, he was able to affiliate with all Americans, no matter what their ethnicity was.\(^\text{170}\)

Apart from claiming a transcendent political leadership on the basis of his mixed heritage, Obama did something much more subtle. He began to present his life story as a typical American Dream, as an account of someone who against all odds could achieve success in America. Obama started talking about his parents as humble people; maybe more humble than they actually were. He often remarked that his father grew up herding goats, while leaving out the fact that Obama Sr. would later belong to the absolute elite of Kenya. He depicted his mother as an ordinary woman from small-town Kansas, but did not overemphasize the fact that she was also a remarkable student and a skillful anthropologist. Putting his life forward as the successful melting of such different origins, Obama presented himself as an example of what America could be: a nation that could live up to its own ideals, a nation that could come together and bridge the divides.

It was this message of progress and interconnectedness that Obama carried to his moment of national breakthrough, the 2004 Democratic Convention in Boston, where he was invited to speech as the Keynote Speaker. For the first time, Obama was given the chance to tell his life story to millions of Americans nationwide. He delivered the

\(^{170}\text{Mendell, Obama, 192-205.}\)
speech as he had done many times before in the U.S. Senate election, by weaving his diverse biography into an account of America. ‘Let’s face it,’ he told the crowd at the beginning of his speech, ‘my presence on this stage is highly unlikely.’ Then, after giving a short summary of his origins, he said: ‘I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story… that in no other country on earth is my story even possible. Tonight, we gather to affirm the greatness of our nation.’ And at the end of his speech, he wrapped it up by returning to that biography, to that American Dream, insisting that America’s greatness lay in its ability to bring hope and opportunities for everyone, even for “a skinny kid with a funny name” like himself.171

From the Democratic Convention onwards, Obama’s fame skyrocketed, as did the sales of Dreams. Whilst his rise to the Presidential elections is not the topic of this essay, it is worth remembering how much force Obama’s memoir added to his successful political message. Dreams became the testament of a new kind of politician who rejected America’s polarization, someone who believed in America’s ability to reclaim a sense of unity. At a 2004 book presentation of Dreams in New York, just a couple of months after his speech at the Democratic Convention, Obama reiterated this message of unity: ‘When I see the progress that’s been made in my family in terms of understanding, in terms of a spirit of communion, then I think the country can do the same… In some ways the themes of this book are very much the project of my life right now, which is to figure out how in fact can we live as one people effectively, what does that mean, what does that require? What is the nature of our commitments to each other, and what is the scope of our challenges? Our politics so often functions as painting as one side painting a caricature of the other side… When we simplify our politics and we caricature each other, then I think that we

are actually going in a direction that is entirely contrary to the best spirit of this country.'

Less than three years after he was elected to the U.S. Senate, Obama decided to run for President. In the history of black Presidential candidates, Obama’s candidacy was unique in the sense that it was organized in the broadest terms. Unlike Jesse Jackson in 1984 and 1988, Obama did not rely solely on African-Americans and far-left voters white voters. Instead, he aimed at a limitless coalition of voters, gathered around a central-left politics, just as he had done in the U.S. Senate election in 2004. In terms of his campaign rhetoric, Obama tried to avoid the subject of race as much as possible. He referred to it in speeches, but only implicitly. According to his campaign manager David Plouffe in a later interview, the initial plan was to keep it that way. The more racially charged type of black leaders like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton were systematically kept from platforms with Obama, to keep up his trans-racial appeal to white voters.

With black voters, the issue of Obama’s black authenticity initially came back to haunt him again. In the first couple of months after Obama’s announcement for candidacy, the fast majority of African-Americans were still supporting his Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton. It took them some time to get used to Obama. He was not a typical black leader with a typical black agenda, and his seeming ease with whites was unprecedented. But Obama’s potential of not being limited by black votes was something that struck at the heart of black America. Unlike earlier black leaders, he offered the possibility of making a real impact in the white world and achieving a new level of emancipation. So when Obama proved his potential by winning the first primary in Iowa, a state with more than ninety percent of white inhabitants, blacks steadily started to move in his direction. Later, after

his win in South Carolina’s primary, Obama had secured the full black vote, without making race inequality a primary issue in his campaign.\footnote{David Remnick, ‘The Joshua generation’, \textit{The New Yorker}, November 17, 2008.}

However, Obama’s successful hands-off approach to race was not going to last. In March 2008, he saw himself confronted with a troubling inheritance from his past, which forced him to address the issue directly. Old videotapes of his pastor Jeremiah Wright had emerged. In the footage, Wright was seen preaching sermons full of anti-white and anti-American statements. ‘Not God bless America, God damn America,’ Wright uttered in the footage that went viral on American news cables. Very quickly, the videos started poisoning the Obama campaign. Up till then he had presented himself as a unifying political leader, someone who proposed a new politics that would transcend the old divides. Now, with one of the most important characters of his memoir coming out swinging against white America, Obama was in trouble. Wright’s sermons associated Obama with an angry black radicalism, and that could potentially cost him a huge amount of voters.\footnote{Jeremiah Wright – Obama’s mentor – hate speech’, \url{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdJfB-qkFUhC}, March 13, 2008.}

Among scholars who have analyzed Obama’s biography, there has been a debate about how to interpret the Wright videotapes. On the one hand there are academics like Steele and Mastey, who both say that the sermons proved Obama’s two-sidedness, that he is a different man among blacks than among whites. In \textit{A bound man}, Steele writes: ‘Although Obama charmed white Americans by not confronting them with the sordid history of racism in America, he also proved his commitment to a church that was dedicated to the discrimination of whites. Wright was the first true crack in the mask that Obama wears.’\footnote{Darryl Pinckney, ‘Obama and the black church’, \textit{The New York review of books}, July 17, 2008.} Authors like Remnick on the other hand tend to play down the severity of Wright’s statements. In \textit{The Joshua generation}, Remnick writes: ‘There was, of course, a context to “God damn America.” Like Bishop Henry

\footnote{Steele, \textit{A bound man}, 8.}
McNeal Turner, who fought the rise of Jim Crow laws after Reconstruction and told his black parishioners that they had every right to believe that God was a Negro, Wright saw himself – and Obama understood him to be - as an inheritor of the prophetic tradition, not an accommodationist, and hardly a politician. His jeremiads were meant to rouse, to accuse, to shake off dejection."178

In my opinion, both Steele and Remnick fail to put the Wright episode in its proper context. Steele’s depiction of Wright is one-sided, because he bases all of his presumptions about the pastor and his church on nothing more than a couple of videotapes. His definition of the Trinity church as a place “dedicated to the discrimination of whites” is therefore ungrounded. At the same time though, I think it is insufficient to just explain the sermons away as a harmless tradition of the African-American church, like Remnick does. Wright’s statements did not come out of nowhere. They were rooted in an anti-white sentiment, something that Obama must have known his pastor harbored. In Dreams, Obama presents himself as someone who explicitly rejected the radicalism and anti-white sentiment in the Black Nationalist movement in Chicago, stating that this type of thinking was outdated, racist and above all useless for the black community. While Wright may not be an official member of the Black Nationalist movement, in the video footage he does use the anti-white rhetoric that is characteristic of Black Nationalism. So if Obama was so outspokenly against these ideas as he describes, then why did he want to associate himself with someone like pastor Wright?

The answer to this, I believe, lies in recognizing that when Obama met Wright, the pastor had a lot more going for him than just the anti-white, conspiracy-thinking rhetoric that was singled out during the Presidential elections. Wright was a community-oriented church leader, much more concerned with the fortunes of his congregation than the average black pastor whom Obama met in Chicago. Opposite to movements like Black Nationalism, the Trinity church did not focus on

anonymous action or abstract rhetoric in uplifting the black community, but rather on concrete and individual projects. It organized communal projects that focused on H.I.V. prevention, better housing and better schooling in some of the poorest neighborhoods in Chicago. When talking about Wright in the abovementioned interview with Martinson, Obama emphasized that this was what he most admired in Wright: ‘The black church... is probably the main pillar around which a lot of inner city communities are going to be built and I think Reverend Wright represents the best of what the black church has to offer.’\footnote{Barack Obama on Connie Martinson talks books.}

On March 18\textsuperscript{th} in Philadelphia, Obama reacted to the excerpts of Wright’s sermons in a speech, called “A more perfect union.” As he had done many times before, Obama began by using his own biography as a testament for the fact that he knew both white and black America. ‘I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas,’ he said. ‘I’ve gone to some of the poorest schools in America and lived in one of the poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave-owners – an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles, and cousins, of every race and every hue.’\footnote{Transcript. Barack Obama’s speech on race, New York Times, March 18, 2008.} So far so good for Obama’s race credentials.

Then, Obama turned to his relationship with Wright. In contrast to what many commentators had thought he would do, Obama decided not to distance himself from Wright. Instead, he took on the occasion to nuance the rage that was visible in Wright’s speeches and lay out his vision of race relations in America. Obama used Wright as an example of the contradictory qualities that he had come to know in the black community. He dismissed Wright’s comments from the clips “in unequivocal terms,” but emphasized that his pastor had also done major good for his country and for his community in Chicago. ‘Wright contains within him the contradictions – the good and the bad – of the community that he has served diligently for so many years,’ Obama said. ‘I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can
no more disown him than I can my white grandmother, (...) who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe. These people are part of me. And they are part of America, this country that I love.” 181

In Philadelphia, Obama was, as Remnick put it, a “racial Everyman.” 182 Obama disagreed with Wright’s hateful language, but could not disown the pastor who had awakened him to his Christian faith. Nor could he disown his grandmother, who had made several racial comments that had “made him cringe,” but had always unconditionally loved him. On a broader scale, Obama said that he understood blacks who still felt anger for their underprivileged status in America, but that he also sympathized with white workers, people who had seen their ‘their jobs shipped overseas or their pension dumped after a lifetime of labor.’ 183 For many of them, it seemed like African-Americans took unfair advantage of welfare programs and affirmative action. So to people of every color in America, Obama indicated that he had heard their stories, had seen their trouble and understood their anger.

Despite all these strains in racial relations, and this is where he took up his old message of unity, Obama said that he believed that America’s union could be perfected. He stated: “The profound mistake of Reverend Wright’s sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It’s that he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress has been made; as if this country is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past. But what we know -- what we have seen - is that America can change.” 184 In the end, the speech was all about this unfinished character of America’s union, about the progress of America’s race relations. And although he did not mention it, Obama’s own standing in that Philadelphia constitution centre was the implicit proof of that optimistic

181 Ibidem.
182 Remnick, The bridge, 524.
184 Ibidem.
message. Once again, Obama put himself forward as an example of what America could be.

While Obama’s Philadelphia speech garnered him widespread praise in the media and stabilized his stance in the polling, the Wright episode was not over yet. Wright was furious with the way the media had portrayed him, and he also did not particularly like Obama’s speech. He made a national media appearance on April 28 at the National Press Club in Washington, trying to rescue his reputation. Wright’s performance was disastrous for the Obama campaign. He did not apologize for any comments he had made, and said that Obama had only said what he had said out of political reasons. The next day, Obama had no choice but to finally distance himself from his pastor: ‘If Reverend Wright thinks that that’s political posturing (referring to his speech in Philadelphia), as he put it, then he doesn’t know me very well. And based on his remarks yesterday, well, I may not know him as well as I thought, either.’

The clash between Obama and Wright and the tragic ending of their friendship, showed that Obama’s will to reach beyond racial lines could damage him in the black community. This problem has haunted him up till today, as during his Presidency more and more blacks have started to resent the fact that Obama does not pursue a more aggressive race-uplifting agenda. In a way, Obama is like a modern-day version of Booker T. Washington, someone who also presented his life as the American Dream, who also had the ability to reach beyond racial lines and who also received critique from prominent black leaders. It shows that some problems in the black community always resurface, even if today the conditions for blacks in America are so much different than they were a hundred years ago. It shows, as Obama likes to quote so often, that “the past isn’t dead and buried. In fact, it isn’t even past.”

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185 'Barack Obama finally distances himself from Rev. Wright', http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4NvQ_A0O0Wg4, April 29, 2008.
186 One of the most outspoken critics of Obama on this issue is Princeton professor Cornell West.
188 See for example:
Indeed, for Obama, the past has never been dead and buried. It has constantly surrounded him, sometimes playing to his advantage, sometimes working against him, but always right there, at the center of his political profiling.

1. ‘Transcript. Barack Obama’s speech on race.’
2. ‘Dreams from my father at Barnes & Nobles.’
Conclusion

Barack Obama is not sure how to classify his own book, *Dreams from my father*, as he writes in the preface that it may be labeled as an “autobiography, memoir, a family history, or something else.” Indeed, in the first sense, it seems that *Dreams* can be all of the above. Only by looking closer at the book’s narrative, set-up and themes, it becomes clear that the text is written in one of the oldest and probably richest genres of African-American writing: the autobiography. While Obama’s privileged background and professional accomplishments make his memoir significantly different from earlier works in this literary tradition, *Dreams* contains many features that are common in black autobiography writing. In this essay, I have investigated where Obama’s memoir stands in the tradition of African-American autobiographies; not just to place the book in a literary genre, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of *Dreams* by analyzing it against the backdrop of the tradition that it belongs to.

Obama’s memoir is divided into three large sections. The first one, “Origins,” tells the story of the young Barack growing up in Indonesia, Hawaii, Los Angeles and New York. It starts off with Barack living in New York and hearing about the death of his father. The event preludes a series of memories that guide the reader through Obama’s youth and adolescence, his child years in Indonesia and Hawaii, and his student years at Occidental College and Columbia University. Throughout the narrative, the young Barack is increasingly burdened by questions of race and belonging. He struggles with the absence of his father and with his place as an African-American in mainstream society. Only at the end of the section, when Barack decides that he cannot let his identity solely be shaped by his race, Origins turns into a more positive story. The story ends where it starts, with Barack in New York, determined to find himself a new community and identity.

189 Obama, *Dreams*, xvii.
I have argued that Origins both structurally and thematically follows typical patterns of black autobiography writing. Structurally, it can be read as a “narrative of ascent,” a type of storytelling that is directly linked to the tradition of slave narratives. The story of the young Obama is not an actual story of enslavement, but it does portray the larger part of Obama’s childhood and adolescence as a time in mental bondage, as society puts upon him the typical restraints of a black man in America. Thematically, Origins contains many old ideas of African-American autobiography writing. The intellectual problems that the young Barack faces are similar to problems that earlier black autobiographers faced in their lifetime, and at several points, Obama explicitly refers to some of them as being of great influence in his life.

After the relatively somber description of Barack’s youth and adolescence in Origins, the second and third section of Dreams, “Chicago” and “Kenya,” discuss how Barack pulls himself together after his difficult teenage years. In Chicago and Kenya, Barack comes to realize that he can only deal with his internal struggles if he is able to links his story to a larger story; the story of African-Americans struggling in poor neighborhoods or the story of impoverished people at the other side of the world. This desire to be connected with a larger group, to be part of a community, is what first leads him into community organizing in Chicago, and ultimately into taking a trip to Kenya. In both places, Barack finds answers to questions of his identity raised by the absence of his father and his mixed heritage.

Whilst the section Origins strictly follows prototypical patterns of black narrative structure and black literary themes, Chicago and Kenya are more of Obama’s own. It seems that Obama is in constant dialogue with his literary precursors, sometimes sharing their ideas, sometimes rejecting them. In Chicago, Barack tries to find his own way in several issues that are crucial to his black self-making, like black politics, love and religion. Sometimes, his experiences and ideas on these matters are contrary to what a typical black narrative would impose him to have. In Kenya, Barack is equally firm to set out his own path, and not to let his experiences be determined by what is “common” in the typical black
experience. The result of this attitude is a nuanced narrative, both in Chicago and in Kenya, with a self-governing storyline that stands out in African-American autobiography writing, while paying tribute to it at the same time. Obama modernizes the portrayal of the black struggle and poses contemporary question about defining blackness in a post-Civil Rights era. In Chicago and Kenya, he does not break with the literary tradition of African-American autobiography writing, but he does recognize the new challenges of a black man in an increasingly integrated America.

*Dreams* would have probably faded away from public memory, had it not been for its author’s later political rise. The book was not written as a political work in itself, but it gained huge political relevance due to Obama’s political career, sometimes playing to his advantage, sometimes working against him. In the 2000 Congressional elections in Illinois, political adversaries of Obama used his mixed heritage and privileged background against him, portraying Obama to the black electorate as “not black enough.” It cost Obama the election, and the issue of black authenticity would stick to him from that time forward. However, Obama learned from his defeat and remodeled his life story to make it politically attractive again. In the 2004 U.S. Senate election, he reached out beyond black voters and claimed a transcendent political leadership based on the account of his mixed heritage. Obama started presenting his life story as the American Dream, as an account of someone who against all odds could achieve success in America. This earned him widespread attention, not only on a state level, but also nationally, as he was invited to speak at the 2004 Democratic Convention. From that moment on, selling numbers of *Dreams* skyrocketed, and all of a sudden the whole nation was interested in Obama’s life story.

In the 2008 Presidential elections, Obama still used his life story as an important campaign tool, but he was cautious with the topic of race and tried to avoid the subject as much as possible. However, in March 2008, he was forced to deal with the issue directly, as old videotapes of his pastor Jeremiah Wright had emerged, in which Wright
was seen making downright anti-American and anti-white remarks. Obama reacted to the videotapes with a speech, called “A more perfect union,” which garnered him widespread praise and approval for his nuanced attitude towards Wright and towards race relations in America. Nonetheless, a few weeks later, Obama still had to distance himself from Wright, after the latter had given a press conference in which he dismissed Obama’s speech as political posturing. Remarkably, the clash between the two showed that Obama’s will to rise above racial lines could cost him favorability in the community where he once so desperately ached to belong.
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