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## Review Essay: The Audacity of Barack Obama

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Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, Three Rivers Press, New York, 2004. ISBN: 978-1400082773.

Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, Three Rivers Press, New York, 2006. ISBN: 978-0307237705.

Robert Kuttner, *Obama's Challenge: America's Economic Crisis and the Power of a Transformative Presidency*, Chelsea Green Publishing, White River Junction, VT. 2008. ISBN: 978-1603580793.

(1) Near the end of his autobiography, *Dreams from My Father*, Barack Obama tells us what he learned from his long journey of self-discovery. He sits beside the graves of his father and grandfather and reflects on their fate. His grandfather was a prosperous farmer who also worked as a cook for the British. His father was a brilliant scholar who left Kenya and managed to get a PhD from Harvard. Father and son were smart, strong, skilled, and diligent men. Yet they were never able to escape from their heritage of inferior racial status and both were finally trapped in Kenya, living lives very different from the ones they hoped for. Obama recognizes their lives as tragic, especially since his father had all that was necessary to succeed – “the degree, the ascot, the American wife, the car, the words, the figures, the wallet, the proportion of tonic to gin, the polish, the panache.” At the same time he understands that his forbearers succumbed to an inner flaw that was far more damaging than white prejudice. In attempting to escape from servitude and colonialism, they relied too much on themselves and their own achievements. They forgot that nobody makes it by himself; they “lost their faith in other people.”

(2) Obama's autobiography shows that he shares his father's dreams – for success and position, for acceptance, and even for political power. At the same time the message of the autobiography and his later book on American politics, *The Audacity of Hope*, is that we must not lose our faith in other people, that we must understand our “own self-interest as

inextricably linked to the interests of others.”

(3) The story that Obama tells has its origins in two well-known literary forms, both of which explore the nature of modern identity: the African-American autobiography which focuses on the search for roots; and the prototypical narrative of the nineteenth-century novel about “the young man (or woman) from the provinces.” Modernity and slavery are complementary. The latter is one aspect of a global economy that arose out of sixteenth-century European exploration. Slavery provided the workforce to exploit the agricultural wealth of the New World. Deprived by slavery of connection to their past, African-Americans lacked mooring in modernity and, when successful, felt disconnected from their “blackness,” from both their racial identity and their families and communities. In a larger sense, as portrayed in the nineteenth-century novel, modernity is a condition that we all suffer, in that each individual must navigate from innocence to sophistication in a modern “world of strangers.” Modernity is the process by which we all become unmoored, deracinated and must undergo what has been described as an “ordeal of civility” – learning to behave correctly in a society where nothing is ascribed and where we must necessarily create ourselves.

(4) Obama is aware that his “story” is important to his politics and his political career, because not only he chose to write an autobiography but also because, during the campaign, he made much of the fact that people would vote for him once they knew his story. When I was trained as an Obama volunteer, we were constantly told to underscore the importance of Obama’s “story” in appealing to the electorate. And for good reason. The Obama who emerges from the autobiography has the qualities of a mythical figure. He connects with his roots in Africa – indeed discovers and becomes part of a large extended family. He likewise traverses the various hurdles by means of which immigrants are transformed by opportunity, education, and elite American institutions into citizens with the capacity to lead the country. After Obama, the African-American search for roots no longer matters so much because slave history is no longer preemptive and African-Americans can reach the top in our civil society. After Obama, the trials and tribulations of the young man from the provinces are resolved at the highest level of our society in the figure of the president of the United States, a role model for both civil behavior and civil politics.

(5) *Dreams from My Father* is divided into three sections: origins in Kansas, Hawaii, and Indonesia; Chicago, where Obama becomes a community organizer and a politician; and Kenya, where he makes contact with his father’s other family – his half-sisters and brothers, aunts and uncles. The first part is about a child who doesn’t know who he is, who is confused by not having a father, by a mother who leaves him with his grandparents, by grandparents whose flaws he sees but does not understand, by the oddity of foreign cultures, and by an unfathomable connection between black men he reads about – people who try to change the color of their skin – and himself. His entire early life is really a life lived in a world of strangers – first in Indonesia where he is befriended and taught how to be a man by his stepfather, then in Hawaii where he describes his grandparents as strangers, and finally at college (Columbia) in New York where he feels out of place, incapable of making choices and, in reaction to the city’s amorality, begins to live like a monk. “Where did I belong?” he writes, “two years from graduation I had no idea what I was

going to do with my life or even where I would live. . . . What I needed was a community. . . . A place where I could put down stakes and test my commitments.” The child who lives among strangers seeks a home.

(6) Obama is committed to improving the fate of blacks who are less fortunate than he is. Since he is not interested in making money, he leaves New York and finds a job as a community organizer in Chicago. He comes to Chicago as a stranger: the kid from the Ivy League school who is only hired because white community organizers need a black face to represent them; “a high-talking college-educated brother” among black folks who don’t know him and don’t necessarily like him; a young man with no connection to Chicago or its byzantine politics and with no clear set of beliefs – “I realized that I was a heretic. Or worse, for even a heretic must believe in something, if nothing more than the truth of his own doubt.” He works with people who live in a run-down public housing project on the Southside, Altgeld Gardens, and manages to accomplish a few things: he gets the city to remove asbestos from the buildings and establishes a youth counseling group. He comes to Chicago when Harold Washington has just been elected mayor and he leaves soon after Washington dies. Without Washington as mayor, he knows his job will be harder, the city government less easy to deal with. He also begins to feel that community organizing is not fruitful, that you need to be in politics, have power, know the law, to achieve anything substantial. Accordingly, he applies to law school and is accepted by Harvard. No one is surprised that he is leaving; indeed, most of his flock in the Altgeld houses are surprised that he has not left earlier. They understand the need to escape from poverty and injustice, but they have not the means, whereas Obama “has options.” He promises them he will come back but he doubts his own convictions. He is still homeless when he leaves Chicago.

(7) And then Obama really does go home, to Africa. The trip to Africa is important to Obama’s story because it is there that we see him in the midst of intimate connections and responsibilities. His concern for the residents of the Altgeld houses was real but self-conscious, something he chose purposefully because he needed to honor the commitments he made to himself. But his concern for his family is naïve and spontaneous, if sometimes painful. They have needs he cannot satisfy and in many ways his relative good fortune as an American estranges him from their squabbles, their poverty, and their highly communal African sensibility. Yet Africa provides him with the self-understanding he has long sought. He sees that his beliefs, ideas, commitments are not merely “matters of intellect or obligation, no longer a construct of words,” but rather something deeply connected to who he is – to his nature, to his father’s dreams and troubles, to his fate as both an American and an African in a highly complex global world. It is in Africa that he begins to see himself as part of a larger modern universe in which all of us, every individual – Americans, Kenyans, others – must undergo an ordeal of civility in which we learn to make choices between competing goods, family, ambition, friendship, success, talents, desires, priorities, options, institutions, values, etc. We are all different but we are alike in a common struggle and in the questions that derive from this struggle – “What is our community, and how might that community be reconciled with our freedom? How far do our obligations reach? How do we transform mere power into justice, mere sentiment into love?”

(8) The questions that conclude the autobiography are the subject of the

second book, *The Audacity of Hope*. The connection between the two books is clear; they are companion volumes. The complexity of experience described in the autobiography gives rise to the most noticeable aspect of the book on politics: Obama's nuanced understanding of the world or, put another way, his dialectical mind. He admires Lincoln as not only a man of principle who believed that a house divided against itself cannot stand, but also even more as a man who was able "to maintain within himself the balance between two contradictory ideas." Obama is often described as bipartisan, but it is not just that he sees two sides of a question, but that he sees the two sides as part of the same reality and understands that all things contain their opposite. For him, accordingly, the worst of all sins is the belief in absolute truth, "any tyrannical consistency that might lock future generations into a single, unalterable course."

(9) He finds fault with the Republican Party precisely because it espouses absolutism, because it obliges us to choose market over state. He defends capitalism as a dynamic system that allows for individual freedom and rewards individual effort, but he also argues, along with Hamilton and Lincoln, that government supports rather than supplants the market. In American history we swing back and forth between predominance of market or state, depending upon the changing nature of capitalism which, he stresses, is always in transformation. Relative market freedom suits times when we need more competition or enhanced productivity, whereas government is important when we need public investment in infrastructure – highways, education, transportation, energy – or when market failure or capital-labor conflict require government intervention. The administration of George W. Bush failed because it lacked a sense of history and an understanding of capitalist transformation. It continued to fight old wars – against the New Deal and the Great Society – even as our financial system was crumbling because of deregulation and when Americans, because of the volatility and insecurity of the global economy, had to have more rather than less social supports. Bush pushed Reagan's conservative revolution to its logical conclusion with even lower taxes, even fewer regulations, and an even smaller safety net.

(10) Obama is against absolutism because he is a pragmatist in both the conventional sense – he wants to do "what works" – and in a more profound sense rooted in the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey and William James. He believes that the world is open and full of possibility, but what is knowable or doable is never preconceived because the world is in flux. We can, indeed we should, have values, but whether these values are realized or not depends upon on the following: our ability to understand the options offered by history and reality; our will and motivation in promoting what is favorable to our values; and, finally, on our capacity for experimentation. We know by doing as well as thinking. Which is another way of saying that Obama is an activist: as a community organizer, as a politician and now, as president, initiating an activist government.

(11) Obama is anti-ideological and pragmatic because he sees things historically and history teaches him that there are only relative rather than absolute truths. *The Audacity of Hope* is a complex book, full of all sorts of ideas and arguments set forth in a historical context that graphically illustrates the contradictory, dialectical character of reality. Obama argues, for example, that our foreign policy is simultaneously farsighted and misguided, the product of a host of "warring impulses" that preclude any

fixed position. He then proceeds to make his point historically. One impulse derives from George Washington and his isolationist views of “entangling alliances.” Another impulse, contradicting our isolationism, is our lust for expansion – the Louisiana Purchase, the Monroe Doctrine, manifest destiny, late nineteenth-century imperialism in Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. He sees Wilsonian internationalism as a new but benign form of manifest destiny – America’s mission to make the world safe for democracy.

(12) With World War II and the attack on Pearl Harbor isolationism is finally discredited, as the United States assumes world leadership and is entangled in the Cold War with the Soviet Union. There was something of the old Wilsonian idealism in our struggle against the Evil Empire, but there was also a large dose of realism because we understood that, while we might “contain” the Soviets, we could not control the world on our own. Post-war foreign policy was therefore multilateral and cooperative; we needed allies and friends to fight the Soviets and we initiated many policies and programs – the Marshall Plan, NATO, Bretton Woods, the World Bank and the IMF, support for the United Nations – to create a world in which cooperation was the order of the day. But containment of the Soviet Union also had a negative side: defense buildup and the creation of the military-industrial complex; fear that Third World anti-colonialism in China, Vietnam, and Latin America would lead to Communist takeover; Cold War spying, secrecy and infringement of civil liberties. The negatives led to Vietnam, a disastrous war which Obama blames for the end of post-war bipartisanship.

(13) Reagan railed against the Evil Empire but ignored misery elsewhere in South Africa, the Middle East and Central and Latin America. When the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, foreign policy and economic policy came together in American initiatives relating to globalization – GATT, the WTO, NAFTA, etc. And then came the attacks of September 11, 2001. George Bush wasted an historic opportunity to create a new blueprint for American policy. Instead, he revived the Cold War as the War on Terror, invaded Iraq, acted unilaterally, curtailed civil liberties, justified torture, and destroyed America’s reputation in the world.

(14) The standard strategy of *The Audacity of Hope* is to use this kind of historical analysis to establish the nature of the problem and then quickly follow with Obama’s “new politics” solutions. The book may have been written with a presidential campaign in mind, but it is much better than most campaign documents. It is a rich, dense book that gives people a clear sense of who Obama is – he makes good use of his own experience as a politician and he devotes many pages to his family life – and also how he thinks. It is no surprise that Hillary Clinton and John McCain got nowhere with their arguments about Obama’s inexperience. Anyone who reads this book will see Obama as a man who is informed, highly intelligent and capable of clear, reasoned, and solid judgment.

(15) But now that he is president, what will he do? He comes to power at a dire moment in America’s history: two wars (Iraq and Afghanistan); an explosive conflict between Israel and the Palestinians; a financial system that is wholly broken and the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. David Axelrod, Obama’s principal political strategist, has said that crises are also times of great opportunity and it may be that Obama

will respond to trouble with great authority and achievement. This is certainly the hope expressed in a book that appeared even before Obama was elected – Robert Kuttner’s *Obama’s Challenge*.

(16) Kuttner thinks it likely that Obama will become what he calls a “transformative president,” meaning a president who puts the country on a new course and who asserts bold, innovative leadership. The program that Kuttner sets forth seems more or less in step with what Obama has recently outlined in his plans for a massive stimulus package once he is inaugurated – public investment in infrastructure, energy, science and technology, deficit spending on a large scale, unemployment insurance reform, some form of universal health insurance, etc. It is less clear that Obama will initiate labor reforms of the kind that Kuttner envisages, such as professionalization of human services occupations (Janitors, hospital orderlies, food service and hotel workers) or worker-retraining coordinated with economic transformation and the introduction of new technologies (an active labor market policy).

(17) The most interesting aspect of Kuttner’s book is the comparison he makes between Obama and other transformative presidents such as Lincoln, FDR, and Lyndon Johnson. There are similarities between Obama and some of his predecessors, but Kuttner overstates these while his differences with them are understated. Obama resembles Lincoln in that he is trying to unite the country and believes in a government “of the people, by the people and for the people.” It is also true that sectionalism is still a problem in the United States; the South continues to be a drag on American progress. Lincoln forged the union and assured the predominance of the industrial North; within twenty years of the Civil War we were the foremost industrial power in the world. Obama has a different problem. He has to unite the country in order to deal with relative economic and political decline.

(18) Obama resembles FDR in that he comes into office at a time when American capitalism has broken down and the world is in economic crisis. Doubtless his stimulus package reproduces in many ways the public investment for which FDR is famous: the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which electrified the South; the many public works programs (WPA and PWA), which built schools, roads, and public buildings (courthouses, post offices) all around the country and provided people with employment; Social Security, the key program of the New Deal, which provided social supports that Americans had heretofore lacked. But Obama is not so much Roosevelt of the New Deal as Roosevelt of the Second World War. What he is called upon to do is rebuild the country from the ground up, as in many ways Roosevelt did during the war. Our car companies need more than bridge loans; they have to be retooled for the twenty-first century. The only equivalent for the public investment that must now be undertaken is the billions of dollars (now trillions) invested by the government in the private sector during World War II. And Obama, like FDR, must reorient our foreign policy, but not in order to take responsibility for the entire world as we did during the war and its aftermath, but rather to relinquish responsibility gracefully and share it with other powerful nations. FDR initiated the era of American world hegemony; Obama must initiate the era of global multilateralism.

(19) Lastly, though Obama resembles Lyndon Johnson in his efforts to

create a substantive social democratic society, most of what Johnson tried to do (but did not achieve since the Great Society was too soon aborted), was to fill in the holes and provide minorities with ways to acquire the opportunities of those in the mainstream. The civil rights bills assured political equality; programs like Head Start, affirmative action and policies aimed at overcoming poverty in slum communities were meant to enfranchise minorities so that they could participate fully in the industrial society of mid- twentieth-century America. In 1968, deindustrialization was just beginning. Capital and production had not as yet been exported abroad. A paper economy had not replaced a manufacturing economy. And if minorities were badly off relative to upper-class whites, the entire postwar period was one in which all elements of the working and middle classes were gaining ground. None of this is now true. Obama has to reindustrialize the country via new “green” industries and build a much more substantial safety net which will include universal healthcare, affordable housing, worker retraining and a totally different system of unemployment insurance. In many ways Obama may realize what FDR envisaged but could not implement: a socially-oriented second Bill of Rights.

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