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Post-Soul President: *Dreams from My Father* and the Post-Soul Aesthetic

Bertram D. Ashe

Three o'clock in the morning. The moon-washed streets empty, the growl of a car picking up speed down a distant road. The revelers would be tucked away by now, paired off or alone, in deep, beer-heavy sleep, Hasan at his new lady's place—don't stay up, he had said with a wink. And now just the two of us to wait for the sunrise, me and Billie Holiday, her voice warbling through the darkened room, reaching toward me like a lover.[1]

—Barak Obama, Dreams from My Father

A twenty-year-old Barack Obama sits alone in the darkness of the small hours, as he and Lady Day "wait for the sunrise." The party is over, his roommate and the guests have gone, and as chapter 5 of *Dreams from My Father* opens, Obama recalls the evening as one in which he not only surveys his postparty house, but also looks critically at his life. One of the things on which he's reflecting is his relationship with Regina, a young student who had angrily left the party earlier. But in a more expansive way, he's also likely ruminating on three additional Occidental College students: Joyce, Tim, and Marcus. Chapter 5 is the culmination of the period of his life I'm calling "The Barry Era," and it focuses intently on these students' sometimes vexed and sometimes voluntary relationship with the black community.

The last section of the chapter begins, "I rose from the couch and opened my front door, the pent-up smoke trailing me out of the room like a spirit. Up above, the moon had slipped out of sight, only its glow still visible along the rim of high clouds. The sky had begun to lighten; the air tasted of dew."[2] A page and a half later, Obama ends the chapter by circling back to Billie Holiday: "For a few minutes more I sat still in my doorway, watching the sun glide into place, thinking about the call to Regina I'd be making that day. Behind

[1]Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004), 92.

[2]Ibid., 110.

me, Billie was on her last song. I picked up the refrain, humming a few bars. Her voice sounded different to me now. Beneath the layers of hurt, beneath the ragged laughter, I heard a willingness to endure. Endure—and make music that wasn't there before."[3]

The entire chapter, then, takes place in a thought bubble hovering above Barry's head as he sits and thinks. That early morning, he's about contemplation, about assessment, and even though the chapter informs and explains to his reader his life at Occidental College and his views on everything from the difference between being ambitious and being a "good-time Charlie,"[4] to the difference between being "educated" and being "trained,"[5] the surface-level narrative action for the balance of the chapter is this: twenty-year-old college student sits alone in the late-night/early-morning hours, thinking about his life. It is Barack Obama, the writer, however, who actually fills the narrative space with his own mature retrospective of what young Barry must have been thinking in that moment. It's true that he kept a journal,[6] and it's certain that he consulted it, but the wisdom and wide-ranging knowledge that he brings to this crucial chapter belies that of the deepest and most self-aware twenty-year-old. And anyway, Barry Obama didn't write *Dreams from My Father*—Barack Obama did. Early in chapter 6, having transferred to Columbia University, Obama will sharply correct his new New York roommate: Instead of answering to "Barry," he will insist on "Barack."[7] In a narrative that widely tracks Obama's search for self, chapter 5 focuses as narrowly as possible on his attempt to find a stable, workable black identity.

I use the words "black identity" advisedly. Genetically, of course, Barack Obama is biracial. By no means am I blithely ignoring this fact. But the familiarity of his identity journey, a journey made by countless post-civil-rights-movement blacks who, like Obama, were born or came of age after the civil rights movement, suggests that while his biracial status was an important factor in his quest for identity, the search itself is one that is less about being biracial and more about being bicultural. Here's the way Obama put it early in that fifth chapter: "Grow up in Compton and survival becomes a revolutionary act. You get to college and your family is still back there rooting for you. They're happy to see you escape; there's no question of betrayal. But I hadn't grown up in Compton, or Watts. I had nothing to escape from except my inner doubt.

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[3]Ibid., 112.

[4]Ibid., 95.

[5]Ibid., 97.

[6]Ibid.; In his introduction, Obama writes, "much of this book is based on contemporaneous journals or the oral histories of my family ..." (xvii).

[7]Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, 118.

I was more like the black students who had grown up in the suburbs, kids whose parents had already paid the price of escape. You could spot them right away by the way they talked, the people they sat with in the cafeteria."[8] The suburbanite black kids Obama refers to aren't biracial, but they are bicultural, and it is with those young blacks Barry identifies. I won't be talking much, here, about Obama's biracial status as such; I'm more concerned about why and how Obama both lived, as a youth, and represents, as an adult writing about his youth, a peculiar and particular aspect of the post-civil-rights-movement era called the *post-soul aesthetic* (or PSA).

The term "post-soul," as I define it, generally refers to art produced by African Americans who were either born or came of age after the civil rights movement. I limit the post-soul aesthetic to artists or writers of the post-civil-rights-movement era for one important reason: These artists were not adults—or adolescents, for that matter—during the civil rights movement. Mark Anthony Neal, in *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, sums it up nicely: "The generations(s) of black youth born after the early successes of the traditional civil rights movement are in fact divorced from the nostalgia associated with those successes and thus positioned to critically engage the movement's legacy from a state of objectivity that the traditional civil rights leadership is both unwilling and incapable of doing."[9] Post-soul artists such as memoirist Obama explore the hazy, ill-defined blackness of the post-civil-rights era, a blackness that stands in marked difference from the raised-clenched-fist, say-it-loud, I'm-black-and-I'm-proud conception of blackness from the 1960s, or even the purposeful sense of presumed monolithic blackness in the 400 years before that.

Obama's memoir in general—and more specifically his fifth chapter—is an example of post-soul "blaxploration" (I'm intentionally signifying the "blaxploitation" term of the previous era).[10] Obama and his fellow post-soul artists and writers are recognized by their embodiment of the "cultural mulatto" archetype, to use a term Trey Ellis coined in his seminal 1989 essay, "The New Black Aesthetic." Here's Ellis's definition:

> Just as a genetic mulatto is a black person of mixed parents who can often get along fine with his white grandparents, a cultural mulatto, educated by a multiracial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world. And it is by and large this rapidly growing crop of

[8]Ibid., 99.

[9]Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 103.

[10]For a thorough discussion of blaxploration and the PSA, see Bertram D. Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction," *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 609–23.

> cultural mulattoes that fuels the NBA. We no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black. The culturally mulatto *Cosby* girls are equally as black as a black teenage welfare mother. Neither side of the tracks should forget that.[11]

Ellis possesses an unabashed enthusiasm for his conception of the cultural mulatto, but it is important to balance Ellis's upbeat view of the post-civil-rights-movement possibilities of blackness with, say, novelist Reginald McKnight's far less encouraging use of the term "cultural mulatto" in his short story "The Honey Boys," published a year before Ellis's essay: "Black was nothing more than a color to me. I was a cultural mulatto.... My color was a nuisance. I was too black to be white, too white to be black."[12] McKnight's literary photograph of the "cultural mulatto" seems to have had no flashbulb; it's a much darker portrait of this post-civil-rights-movement phenomenon than Ellis's. As Madhu Dubey writes in *The Black Scholar,* "For McKnight, 'mulatto' signifies the tragic plight of 'victims' of the Civil Rights movement, caught between two worlds and burdened by anxieties about their racially ambivalent status."[13]

Obama's blaxploration begins with Barry similarly "burdened" by anxieties about his "racially ambivalent status." Indeed, the set of five characters (including a younger version of himself) Obama discusses in chapter 5 of *Dreams from My Father* illustrate well the three-pronged definition of the cultural mulatto to which Ellis refers in his essay: "Today's cultural mulattoes echo ... 'tragic mulattoes' only when they too forget they are wholly black. Most self-deluding cultural mulattoes desperately fanaticize themselves the children of William F.

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[11]Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," *Callaloo* 12, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 189.

[12]Reginald McKnight, "The Honey Boys," in *Mustapha's Eclipse* (New York: Ecco Press, 1989), 86.

[13]Madhu Dubey, "Postmodernism as Postnationalism?," *The Black Scholar* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 11. Indeed, Trey Ellis himself, writing fifteen years later in a book on interracial friendships, presents a startlingly different take on his own bicultural youth: "Since leaving Detroit, I had metamorphosed from a regular old black kid into what I would refer to, in a 1988 article entitled 'The New Black Aesthetic,' as a 'cultural mulatto.' I was equally uncomfortable in the world of pizza parlors and duckpin bowling alleys of southern Connecticut as I was visiting my grandparents in either Dayton or West Philadelphia. Back in Hamden at my new elementary school, it was not unusual for me to be called 'Oreo,' by some black kid who was bused to school, and 'nigger,' by some 'Italian Stallion' wannabe in the same week. Deracinated and adrift, I was a wreck. After reading Hamlet, I knew that I had found my literary soul mate, and alone at night in my room, I luxuriated in the self-pity of calling myself 'The Melancholy Black Dane.'" Trey Ellis, "Repellent Afro," in Some of My Best Friends: Writings on Interracial Friendships, ed., Emily Bernard (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 86–87. Clearly, in order for Ellis to write so enthusiastically about cultural mulattos in "The New Black Aesthetic," he must, like Obama, have emerged from his own identity journey sound and intact, but it's also as clear that the difficulties Obama discusses in his book had their analogue with Ellis, as well.

Buckley. However, a minority affect instead a 'superblackness' and try and dream themselves back to the ghetto."[14]

Given these two poles—blacks either unnaturally tending toward attributes traditionally associated with whiteness or pointedly adopting a "superblackness"—the implication is that the optimal PSA standpoint is somewhere in the middle. Indeed, a "healthy" cultural mulatto is one who realizes that the goal is not to stand firm on either pole, falsely conforming to black or white society's ideals, but to enjoy surfing the midrange, riding the always-shifting center of the cultural mulatto teeter-totter. Obama refers to this himself, echoing Ellis's words from "The New Black Aesthetic," when he writes of learning to "slip back and forth between my black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and structure of meaning, convinced that with a bit of translation on my part the two worlds would eventually cohere."[15] Obama learns, eventually, to feel a sense of multifaceted cultural comfort, even as—especially as—one is fully embodying a bicultural status. Novelist Zadie Smith, for example, writes that the tale Obama tells "is not the old tragedy of gaining a new, false voice at the expense of a true one. The tale he tells is all about addition. His is the story of a genuinely many-voiced man. If it has a moral it is that each man must be true to his selves, plural.... For Obama, having more than one voice in your ear is not a burden, or not solely a burden—it is also a gift."[16]

For healthy cultural mulattos, the idea, in the end, is to *embrace* cultural difference: Lisa Jones, in *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair*, employs "difference as pleasure," and almost seems to be envisioning a future, mature Barack Obama as she explains her phrase: Not difference "as something feared or exotic, but difference as one of the rich facts of one's life, a truism that gives you more data, more power, and more flavor."[17] Jones, in her book, articulates a critically informed stance that is, indeed, shared by writers such as Obama, and not just because both of them are biracial. Eventually, as cultural mulattos move through the sort of black identity journey Obama tracks in his book, many do—eventually, self-consciously—adopt a "difference as pleasure" view toward blackness. A hybrid, fluid, elastic sense of black identity marks *Dreams from My Father*, and authorial blaxploration seems a critical part of Obama's goal: the decentering, destabilizing, expansive exploration of black identity.

"Difference as pleasure" is merely a destination, however; the road to get there is marked with painful trial and difficulty. And our readerly access to

[14]Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," 190.

[15]Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, 82.

[16]Zadie Smith, "Speaking in Tongues," *New York Review of Books* 56 (Feb 26, 2009), 24.

[17]Lisa Jones, *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex and Hair* (New York: Anchor, 1994), 33.

that road is focused and shaped by the writer. Certainly, there's Obama's life-as-lived, breathing and moving, second by second, from his birth through this very moment, as you read this. But more importantly, for our purposes, there's Obama's life as represented through the narrative *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. As with all autobiographical writing, as we read his narrative we straddle an interpretive fence: through the power and skill of his writing we're immersed in the world of young Barry Obama—yet it's always the mature Barack Obama who's constructing that world, who's making that very immersion possible. He gives us a vivid, compelling view into his formative years, but the *way* he does it is indicative of the end-result of those very same years. In other words, his successful maturation into a healthy cultural mulatto—the standpoint from which he writes—greatly informs his tale of how he came to attain that health.[18]

The act of narrative construction, then, is Obama's key blaxploration gesture in *Dreams from My Father*. Like all writers of memoir, Obama's past life lay before him, ready to be compiled and organized into words, paragraphs, and chapters (one can imagine him sitting and reflecting about what to write, in much the same way he describes a scene of such reflection in the epigraph above). The (re)construction of that life, on the page, required him to sift through his youth and the events and people he encountered therein, ordering and structuring those events into narrative, recalling and emphasizing certain experiences—and relaying those experiences in a certain way—while "forgetting" others, deemphasizing them, in order to present a coherent narrative, one that does what all memoirs do: present a constructed version of past reality, from a specific, present-day perspective. That's why, from the beginning of this essay, I've made a distinction between the two Obamas: I call him "Barry" when describing a scene in which the younger Obama appears, but refer to him as "Obama" when talking about how the mature writer is constructing that scene.[19]

[18]*Dreams from My Father* was first published in 1995, during a boomlet of several PSA nonfiction narratives, including *Black Ice*, by Lorene Cary (1991), *Bourgeois Blues: An American Memoir*, by Jake Lamar (1991), *White Bucks and Black-Eyed Peas: Coming of Age Black in White America*, by Marcus Mabry (1995), *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*, by James McBride (1996), and *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks It Down*, by Joan Morgan (1999). Each book wrestled, in its own way, with PSA issues attendant to being born or coming of age in the post-civil-rights-movement era.

[19]Obama speaks directly to this requirement of autobiography in his introduction: "Finally, there are the dangers inherent in any autobiographical work: the temptation to color events in ways favorable to the writer, the tendency to overestimate the interest one's experiences hold for others, selective lapses of memory.... I can't say that I've avoided all, or any, of these hazards successfully. Although much of this book is based on contemporaneous journals or the oral histories of my family, the dialogue is necessarily an approximation of what was actually said or relayed to me. For the sake of compression, some of the characters that appear are composites of people I've known, and some events appear out of precise chronology. With the exception of my family and a handful of public figures, the names of most characters have been changed for the sake of their privacy" (*Dreams from My Father*, xvi–xvii).

These five characters, then, are as much constructs as characters, set in motion by a mature Barack Obama not only to describe his life, but also to execute an incisive bit of blaxploration as he recalls attending Occidental College for the first part of his undergraduate education. Novelist and poet Paul Beatty, one of the most noteworthy of PSA artists, wrote an essay in 1994 called "What Set You From, Fool?" Deep into the essay, he constructed the Beatty Scale of Quintessential African-American Blackness. During the culmination of Obama's Barry Era, I see him metaphorically locating these students on the Beatty Scale. The four categories Beatty employs on his scale are "Jet Black," with people like Billie Holiday and Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X), and Charles Barkley; "Flat Black," with people like Wynton Marsalis, Thurgood Marshall, Rosa Parks, and Charles Barkley; "Glossy Black," with people like Public Enemy, W. E. B. Du Bois, The Congressional Black Caucus, and Charles Barkley; and "Gray," with people like Bill Cosby, Clarence Thomas, Rae Dawn Chong—and Charles Barkley.[20] Clearly, as with much of Beatty's writing, one can see the humor at work here. And yet, one can easily see the political impulse at work, as well. Charles Barkley's presence on all four lists is certainly humorous, but also speaks to the fluidity of categorizations of blackness. After all, there is an important, telling asterisk attached to the title of the Scale itself: "*Degrees of Blackness are subject to change without prior notice."[21]

Obama skillfully executes his blaxploration gesture by figuratively locating these five students (including his earlier self) on what is tantamount to his own version of the Beatty Scale. Joyce, for instance, would certainly fall under Gray. "In his memoir," writes Zadie Smith, "Obama takes care to ridicule a certain black girl called Joyce—a composite figure from his college days who happens also to be part Italian and part French and part Native American and is inordinately fond of mentioning these facts."[22] Obama introduces Joyce as "a good-looking woman," possessing "green eyes and honey skin and pouty lips."[23] But when Barry asked her one day if she was going to the Black Students' Association meeting, she looked at him funny and then shook her head. "I'm not black," Joyce said to Barry, "I'm *multiracial*.... Why should I have to choose between them?" While I've been careful, here, to suggest that Barry's bicultural status plays a bigger role in his journey than simply being biracial, Obama's treatment of Joyce is one of the moments in his identity narrative that brings the question of genetic racial composition to the fore. On a single page early in his fifth chapter, Obama first states that he is "more like the black

[20]Paul Beatty, "What Set You From, Fool?," in *Next: Young American Writers on the New Generation*, ed. Eric Liu (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 47.

[21]Ibid., 47.

[22]Smith, "Speaking in Tongues," 25.

[23]Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, 99.

students who had grown up in the suburbs,"[24] and, continuing, says, "You could spot them right away by the way they talked, the people they sat with in the cafeteria. When pressed, they would sputter and explain that they refused to be categorized. They weren't defined by the color of their skin, they would tell you. They were individuals."[25] The next paragraph begins, "That's how Joyce liked to talk."[26]

Obama, then, explicitly links Joyce, the *multiracial* young woman, with the rhetoric of black individualism—even though he explicitly places "I'm not black" solidly in her mouth. Indeed, three-quarters of the way down the page, he writes that she got almost tearfully emotional as she complained, "[I]t'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...."[27] His repetitive use of italicized emphasis only intensifies Joyce's outpouring. But his examination of Joyce, whether he intended it or not, emerges as a key blaxploration moment in his text, since he has seamlessly moved, textually, from comparing his biracial self to suburban blacks who call themselves "individuals," whom he then compares to Joyce, a woman who promptly *rejects* the very blackness that Obama says she resembles! To further complicate matters, at the bottom of the page, Obama, echoing his italicized use of "*They're*" above, begins the next paragraph with, "They, they, they. That was the problem with people like Joyce. They talked about the richness of their multicultural heritage and it sounded real good, until you noticed that they avoided black people."[28]

This entire short passage is unintelligible unless one looming reality is considered: in Barry's life, and in the complicated, post-soul, post-civil rights movement era in which he came of age, "black" means markedly different things to different people, whether they're black, biracial, or multiracial. It's during moments like this that his oft-quoted sentence from *Dreams from My Father* seems most apt: "I was trying to raise myself to be a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance, no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant."[29] In the original context, "no one around me" refers to his white mother and grandparents. But it seems an appropriate quotation for the present context, as well: no one introduced, referenced or described on page ninety-nine seems to know "exactly" what it means to be black in America, either. His narrative-long search for where he fits is, indeed,

[24]Ibid., 99.

[25]Ibid., 99.

[26]Ibid., 99.

[27]Ibid., 99.

[28]Ibid., 99.

[29]Ibid., 76.

a journey that can't be told without the realization that his exploration is, as well, a blaxploration—an attempt to reveal, for perhaps a largely unknowing readership, the vast complexities of blackness.

Of the five characters Obama examines, "Tim" is perhaps the least closely described. Likely one of the suburban blacks Obama describes above, he's another composite who would easily show up as "Gray" on the Beatty scale:

> Tim was not a conscious brother. Tim wore argyle sweaters and pressed jeans and talked like Beaver Cleaver. He planned to major in business. His white girlfriend was probably waiting for him up in his room, listening to country music. He was happy as a clam, and I wanted nothing more than for him to go away.[30]

Tim asks to borrow an assignment from Barry, and leaves after receiving it. "Tim's a trip, ain't he," said Barry to some friends in a dorm room. "Should change his name from Tim to Tom."[31] He got some laughs after his cruel quip, but not from Marcus, who called Barry out on his comment: "Seems to me," replied Marcus, "we should be worrying about whether our own stuff's together instead of passing judgment on how other folks are supposed to act."[32]

Marcus, at first glance, is Jet Black. Obama describes Marcus as "the most conscious of brothers," saying, "He could tell you about his grandfather the Garveyite; about his mother in St. Louis who had raised her kids alone while working as a nurse; about his older sister who had been a founding member of the local Panther party; about his friends in the joint. His lineage was pure, his loyalties clear...."[33] In fact, Barry called Tim a Tom after the latter interrupted Marcus's latest pronouncement on his "authentic black experience."[34] (It certainly appears as if Barry, in that moment, was dancing closer to the "superblackness" pole of Trey Ellis's cultural mulatto construct.)

But while Marcus, at first, seemed comfortably black at Occidental, he was eventually revealed to be struggling, too: "He became more demonstrative in his racial pride," writes Obama. "He took to wearing African prints to class and started lobbying the administration for an all-black dormitory. Later, he became uncommunicative. He began to skip classes, hitting the reefer more heavily. He let his beard grow out, let his hair work its way into dreadlocks."[35] Finally, he left school. The last thing Obama says about Marcus is this: "I realized

[30]Ibid., 101–02.

[31]Ibid., 102.

[32]Ibid., 102.

[33]Ibid., 101.

[34]Ibid., 101.

[35]Ibid., 117.

that Marcus needed my help as much as I needed his, that I wasn't the only one looking for answers."[36] So while Joyce and Tim would likely rate as Gray on the Beatty scale, and Marcus originally seemed Jet Black, he ended up considerably less than that, ending up fronting "superblackness" after all.

So Barack Obama's construction of these five characters (with the other four as likely composites) features Barry Obama in the throes of his identity quest, quarreling with a quartet of college kids on the Quintessential African-American Blackness scale; when Joyce cried "multiracial," Barry said, "The truth was that I understood her, her and all the other black kids who felt the way she did. In their mannerisms, their speech, their mixed-up hearts, I kept recognizing pieces of myself. And that's exactly what scared me."[37] Similarly, Tim represented precisely the sort of the deracinated black male from which Barry desperately wanted to distance himself. It was "fear," he said later, that caused him to ridicule Tim in front of his friends. "The constant, crippling fear that I didn't belong somehow, that unless I dodged and hid and pretended to be something I wasn't I would forever remain an outsider, with the rest of the world, black and white, always standing in judgment."[38]

Poor Barry, then, was getting it from all sides. Desperate to avoid the Gray, he overcompensated, flirting with superblackness. "To avoid being mistaken for a sellout, I chose my friends carefully," writes Obama. "The more politically active black students. The foreign students. The Chicanos. The Marxist professors and structural feminists and punk-rock performance poets. We smoked cigarettes and wore leather jackets.... We were alienated."[39] Certainly that cohort included Jet Black Marcus, "lean and dark and straight-backed and righteous,"[40] representing everything Barry could imagine wanting in a "pure" black lineage.[41] But it surely also included Regina, Flat Black, wise, centered, and conscious, possessor of a checklist Chicago childhood that contained "the absent father and struggling mother," and the "South Side six-flat that never seemed warm enough in the winter and got [too] hot in the summer."[42] Obama's ability to cram these differing versions of blackness, plucked from the various aspects of the Beatty scale, into a cultural blender and hit "start" speaks to the vivid blaxploration occurring in Barry's world—and in Obama's narrative.

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[36]Ibid., 118.

[37]Ibid., 100.

[38]Ibid., 111.

[39]Ibid., 101.

[40]Ibid., 107.

[41]Ibid., 101.

[42]Ibid., 104.

In the end, the events Obama relayed in chapter 5 of *Dreams from My Father* suggest that Regina was perhaps the most important student Obama came to know as an undergraduate. It was Regina, after all, who, after learning his first name, asked, "So why does everybody call you Barry?" She received his answer—"So I could fit in"—and then asked if she could call him Barack. As they got to know each other at that first meeting, her voice, writes Obama, "evoked a vision of black life in all its possibility, a vision that filled me with longing—a longing for place, and a fixed and definite history."[43]

These words are familiar to students of the post-soul aesthetic. "There was talk in 1986 of the arrival of a new way of looking at the world by young black artists," writes Lisa Jones in *Bulletproof Diva*. "This aesthetic ... was said to embrace, among other things, irreverence, profit-making, an elastic view of 'black' art, ideas of integration and nationalism, a yen for tradition (or at least the apparel), and the usual questions about who we are and where is our home."[44] The mature Obama's authorial perspective, from which he writes *Dreams from My Father*, both reenacts Barry's search as well as symbolically represents its' successful completion—to the extent that identity quests can ever be fully "completed," at any rate.

After Barry spoke at an antiapartheid rally, he told Regina, "I'm going to leave the preaching to you. And to Marcus. Me, I've decided I've got no business speaking for black folks." When he called her naïve for believing otherwise, she replied, "If anybody's naïve, it's you. You're the one who seems to think he can run away from himself."[45] It was indeed Regina's role, at least in Barack Obama's carefully constructed identity narrative, to help him understand that there was more than one way to be black, that difference can, indeed, be pleasurable and effective.

The Barry Era was a painful, uncertain time in the life of Barack Obama, but clearly a necessary one, as well. One curious, recurring narrative crutch that Obama uses to discuss the other four characters of the chapter seems to be a holdover from his youth. Visual and historical affectations seem to describe—and define—these characters in a way that recalls narrow adolescent observation. Tim's upscale clothing tastes (likely called "preppy" at the time), use of Standard English, and white girlfriend and the fact that she listens to country music; fatherless Marcus's Panther Party-sister, Marcus Garvey affiliations, and working mother; Joyce's Italian father and part-African, part-French, and part-Native American mother; and Regina's fatherlessness in Chicago, struggling mother, and familial, church-going childhood all seem, at first glance, like questionable narrative shorthand, a quick and easy way for Obama's readers

[43]Ibid., 104.

[44]Jones, *Bulletproof Diva*, 134.

[45]Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, 108.

to instantly "know" these characters based on our own sense of what it must mean, say, to be black and wear argyle socks and date a country-music-loving white woman. But while Barry might have seen the world that way, Obama's maturity—perhaps even as a writer—emerges over the course of *Dreams from My Father*.

As he metaphorically floats, moment-by-moment, from Jet Black to Flat Black to Glossy Black to Gray—and back again—he gains a gradual, fitful understanding that, as a post-civil-rights-movement "healthy" cultural mulatto, "difference as pleasure" is indeed the goal. And as he moves his readers through the rest of the memoir, he loses that narrative crutch, and begins to describe subsequent characters more fully, without cheap descriptive shorthand. Indeed, Obama ends his memoir by describing his cousin Abongo's maturation, a description that sounds as if he could well be referring to himself:

> His conversion has given him solid ground to stand on, a pride in his place in the world. From that I see his confidence building; he begins to venture out and ask harder questions; he starts to slough off the formulas and slogans and decides what works best for him. He can't help himself in this process, for his heart is too generous and full of good humor, his attitude toward people too gentle and forgiving, to find simple solutions to the puzzle of being a black man.[46]

Or, to put it another way, blaxploration is a valuable, never-ending practice, and ultimately, from within this "process" of identity-discovery, incisive presidential candidate Barack Obama emerged. Yes, he goes on to spend time in Chicago as an organizer, grappling with issues of "community"[47] in more ways than one. And yes, it was important for him to travel to Kenya and visit with his father's family to discover that black authenticity—like any other authenticity—is something to which one can aspire but can never quite completely attain.

Unquestionably, his journey is not close to complete as he leaves Occidental for Columbia and New York, but his experiences at Occidental do provide the core of his identity quest, and his authorial, blaxplorative rendering of his experiences solidly mark *Dreams from My Father* as a post-soul aesthetic text—and Barry Obama as a budding post-soul protagonist. His ultimate reconciliation of that essential, adolescent tension between lusting for a Marcus-like "authentic blackness," his fear of an unconscious, suburbanite persona like Tim's or his resistance to a Joycelike multiracialism—a reconciliation aided by the grounded Regina—finally launches him toward ending up as a man who

[46]Ibid., 441–42.

[47]Ibid., 278.

does, indeed, personify "difference as pleasure," a man who is so comfortable in his skin that he can embody both the codes of cultural whiteness *and* cultural blackness in a breathtakingly, almost unbelievably effortless fashion, thereby enabling a large part of the American voting public to believe he's "like them," whether the "them" is black or white or other. As a result of the success of his journey from "Barry" to "Barack," from "racially ambivalent status" to "healthy" cultural mulatto—and the success of his ability to render that journey in narrative fashion—Barack Obama, on January 20, 2009, was not just inaugurated as the first black president. Perhaps more importantly, he was inaugurated as the first post-soul president, as well.