

The Political Psychology of Personal Narrative: The Case of Barack Obama

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Guided by theories of narrative identity, racial identity development, and Freire's (1970) notion of conscientização, this paper presents an interpretive analysis of Barack Obama's personal narrative. Obama's narrative represents a progressive story of self-discovery in which he seeks to develop a configuration of identity (Erikson, 1959; Schachter, 2004) that reconciles his disparate contexts of development and the inherited legacy of racism and colonialism. A major theme of his story centers on his quest to discover an anchor for his identity in some community of shared practice. Ultimately, he settles on a distinctly cosmopolitan identity in which he can foster conversation across axes of difference both within himself and among diverse communities. I discuss the extent to which election of a candidate with this personal narrative of cosmopolitan identity reflects a shifting master narrative of identity politics within the United States, as well as implications for Obama's policy platform and governance style.

Introduction

As the 2008 U.S. presidential election approached in the late summer and early fall, there was much talk about the contrast in “narratives” between John McCain and Barack Obama (Renshon, 2008). The two campaigns had constructed central storylines about security, economy, and political philosophy that offered clear, if polarized, choices to the electorate. But the 2008 presidential election was also, like other elections before it, marked by a particular emphasis on the *personal*

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narratives of the two candidates, as reflected in their biographies, presented in numerous forms during and prior to the campaign. In the campaign narratives promulgated as the election approached, personal narrative assumed primacy, as the public was presented with two distinct *characters* who would lead the nation on a new trajectory of economic, political, and cultural revival.

In this paper, I analyze the personal narrative of Barack Obama, primarily guided by McAdams's (1988, 1996, 2001) life story theory of identity and an interpretive, hermeneutic approach (Dilthey, 1923/1988; Ricoeur, 1981; Tappan, 1997). I focus my analysis on his 1995 memoir, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, adopting a *personological* approach in which I seek to maintain the integrity and context of Obama's narrative. This approach can be linked to the significant resurgence of narrative research in personality, social, and developmental psychology (e.g., Hammack, 2008; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007; Singer, 2004).

Using evidence from his personal narrative, I argue that Obama's personal narrative reflects a life story characterized by a distinctly post-ethnic (Hollinger, 2006) quality, in the sense that his narrative challenges the stability of a received taxonomy of identity. Though I do not mean to suggest that either Obama's narrative or his election prove "the declining significance of race" (Wilson, 1980) or a "post-racial" (e.g., Gilroy, 2000) era in American politics, I do argue that his election reflects the instability of a multicultural master narrative characterized by essentialism about identity (see Verkuyten, 2007). Characterized by multiplicity, experimentation, and improvisation, Obama's personal narrative reveals the dubiousness of essentialized notions of culture and identity (Gjerde, 2004), leading us away from a categorical approach to culture. I suggest that the consistency between this evolving master narrative of American national identity and Barack Obama's biography represent the embodiment of a new discourse on pluralism, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism that has recently proliferated among American historians and political philosophers (e.g., Appiah, 2006; Hollinger, 2006), even as the legacy of white hegemony and its endurance will certainly create unique challenges for Obama's presidency (Asante, 2007). An analysis of Obama's personal narrative challenges idealized notions of cosmopolitanism in intergroup relations by revealing the psychological challenges of continued racial subordination and the legacy of colonialism. Thus, I suggest that narrative psychology provides much needed empiricism to the utopian theses of cosmopolitanism and post-ethnicity increasingly common in other disciplines.

Theorizing Obama's Identity

My analysis of Obama's life story is informed by (1) narrative theories of identity (e.g., McAdams, 2001), (2) theories of racial identity development among

African Americans (e.g., Cross, 1971, 1991), (3) Freire's (1970) notion of the development of *conscientização* among members of oppressed groups, (4) theories of *cosmopolitanism* (e.g., Appiah, 2006) and "post-ethnicity" (e.g., Hollinger, 2006), and (5) the notion of *intersectionality* and its psychological consequences (e.g., Cole, 2009). Though the application of a narrative approach represented an *a priori* selection prior to my analysis, the remaining four theoretical perspectives emerged in salience as a consequence of my hermeneutic analysis. That is, my analysis of the text called for these particular theories to allow for interpretation. It is important to note that many of the theories I call upon in my analysis are rich and multi-layered. I focus on particular aspects of the theories that best aid in the interpretation of Obama's narrative, which may necessitate an emphasis on some theoretical elements over others. In this section, I briefly review these theoretical perspectives employed in my analysis of Obama's life story.

The central idea of narrative psychology is that we make our identities through a process of life-story construction (e.g., McAdams, 2001). Our personal narratives become cognitive and affective *anchors* for the life course—filters through which we make sense of the social world and our experience within it. The personal narrative provides us with a sense of coherence, unity, and purpose in life, thus providing essential psychological functions (e.g., Cohler, 1982; McAdams, 1997). A narrative represents a personal *reconstruction* of the past and thus may or may not be accurate (Mishler, 2004). For narrative researchers, the accuracy of a personal narrative is of less interest than the *meaning* and *function* of a constructed story for an individual (Bruner, 1990).

Narratives, however, do not exist solely at the individual psychological level. Groups construct "master" narratives that provide their members with the necessary *discourse* to understand collective experience (e.g., Hammack, 2008; Liu & Hilton, 2005; McLean, 2008; Wertsch, 2008). These master stories are accessible through cultural products and practices, including media, educational materials, and life-course rituals. They include central messages about the nature and meaning of social categories, including gender, race, and ethnicity. Fundamental to the concept of narrative, then, is the idea of *language* and its connection to a larger community of cultural participation (Bruner, 1990). Collective and individual narratives provide *tools* that are used as discursive resources in human development (see Vygotsky, 1978) and as resources for community empowerment (Rappaport, 1995). In the case of Barack Obama, a key question centers on the relation of his personal narrative to the larger narratives to which he is exposed in his life—narratives about race, nationality, and identity in diverse settings such as Hawaii, Indonesia, Chicago, and Kenya. How does Obama engage with stories accessible in these settings to construct a coherent and purposive personal narrative?

With this general perspective on narrative as a theoretical anchor for my analysis, I call upon theories of African American racial identity development and psychological responses to oppression and subordination to make meaning

of Obama's narrative. Theories of Black racial identity development particularly highlight the developmental response to racism, subordination, and white racial hegemony, with powerful implications for cognitive, social, and personality development (e.g., Baldwin, 1984; Du Bois, 1903/1994; Cross, 1971, 1991; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998; Smith, 1980). I also utilize Freire's (1970) notion of the development of *conscientização* among members of oppressed groups to interpret the chronology of Obama's narrative. *Conscientização* refers to a process of increasing awareness of social injustice, coupled with action or *praxis* associated with social change and liberation from oppression (see also Martín-Baró, 1994; Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003). Thus, my analysis is grounded in theories that emphasize the two salient contexts related to identity politics for Barack Obama—the American context of race relations, grounded in the extensive history of slavery and oppression of African Americans¹ (Pettigrew, 2008; Sellers et al., 1998; Smith, 1980), and in the global context of postcolonialism (Okazaki, David, & Abelman, 2008). The application of these frameworks to Obama's narrative reveals its location in historical and political context and reveals his own development as a process of *engagement* with a particular sociopolitical reality (Watts et al., 2003).

While theories of Black racial identity development and *conscientização* aid in the interpretation of Obama's confrontation with systems of social injustice, theories of cosmopolitanism and intersectionality speak to the intrinsic *multiplicity* of Obama's identity. Guided by a search for a *singular* community of social practice (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998), Obama's identity exploration ultimately results in the embrace of a distinctly *cosmopolitan* identity—a narrative that embraces multiplicity and that seeks to encourage conversation across diverse sources of influence (see Appiah, 2006). The election of a candidate with this personal narrative, I suggest, might reflect the influence of a shifting master narrative of American identity in the 21st century.

From an original narrative of ethnic hegemony during most of the nation's history (Frederickson, 1999) through the multicultural narrative of the late 20th century (Hollinger, 2006), the master narrative of American identity politics might be shifting away from a categorical approach toward a "post-ethnic" perspective (e.g., Hollinger, 2006). The concept of post-ethnicity does not seek to negate the claims of ethnic or racial groups, who have been systematically oppressed in American history. Rather, a post-ethnic perspective challenges us to move beyond the "solitarist" view of identity (Sen, 2008) toward a notion of multiplicity—to see individuals not as embodiments of static notions of "race" or "ethnicity" but as always in a process of dynamic *engagement* with these social categories (Gjerde, 2004). In other words, a post-ethnic perspective encourages awareness

¹ Although Obama is not himself the descendant of African American slaves, the legacy of slavery and oppression remains highly relevant to his life story because it continues to structure Black–white relations in American society (Pettigrew, 2008).

of the multiple identities that individuals inherently embody as they negotiate the discourse of their surround (e.g., Brewer, 2001). A concrete example of this shift in American identity politics is the change in options on the U.S. Census to allow an individual to select more than one race or to identify as multi-racial (Hollinger, 2006).

The post-ethnic perspective can be linked to the emphasis in race, gender, and ethnic studies on *intersectionality*—the central insight that forms of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism) *intersect* in ways that create intragroup distinctions with social and legal implications (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991). Thus, for example, white women and women of color relate to subordination in distinct ways (Hurtado, 1989, 1996). Both privilege and subordination *intersect* along various indices of identity, such as gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Intersectionality is thus a broader thesis than post-ethnicity in that it challenges all forms of identity essentialism, rather than just essentialism about race or ethnicity. Intersectionality forces us to consider the ways in which a single individual embodies multiple identities with *varying* relations to a social structure of domination and subordination for some groups. Thus, we cannot *reduce* Obama's identity to a story of Black racial identity development, for his male identity indexes certain forms of privilege, just as his Kenyan identity introduces distinct experiential pathways in his narrative linked to a postcolonial consciousness of power relations.

Intersectionality and post-ethnic perspectives have gradually made their way into literature in psychology (see Cole, 2009). Hurtado's (1989, 1996) work has highlighted the intersections of race and gender in subordination, providing a critical perspective on the differential relation to power between white women and women of color. More recent work has focused on intersections of race and class in educational settings (Cole & Omari, 2003), race and gender in psychotherapy and counseling (Burman, 2003), gender and sexual identity in public health discussions and interventions (Dworkin, 2005), class and race in the criminal justice system (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008), and race, class, and gender in police encounters (Dottolo & Stewart, 2008). Both intersectionality and post-ethnicity have destabilized essentialized notions of social identity, rendering dubious the previously monolithic notions of "race," "ethnicity," and "gender" (Warnke, 2005). The increasing recognition in the social science literature of the multiracial identity experience is a case in point of this process with regard to race (e.g., Shih & Sanchez, 2009).

Fusing fundamental insights from the literature on intersectionality, my analysis focuses on Obama's self-constructed *cosmopolitan* identity and the relation of this *personal* discourse of identity to the larger context of identity politics in the United States and beyond. Cosmopolitanism has emerged as a central idea in moral and political philosophy (e.g., Appiah, 2006; Benhabib, 2006), as well as political science (e.g., Ypi, 2008) and education (e.g., Hansen, 2008; Unterhalter, 2008), as a response to the identity threats of globalization (Arnett, 2002) and

a corrective to the potential essentialism of multiculturalism (Verkuyten, 2007). As an ideology of ideal intergroup relations, cosmopolitanism seeks to cultivate conversation across distinct human communities, coupled with recognition of the *legitimacy* of that distinctiveness.

[Cosmopolitanism] is the idea that we have obligations to others . . . that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kin, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship. [It is the idea] that we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance. People are different, the cosmopolitan knows, and there is much to learn from our differences. (Appiah, 2006, p. xv)

Thus, cosmopolitanism is concerned with the cultivation of “global citizens” who appreciate difference but hold their transcendent ethic of conversation as a universal value. Obama’s life story, I will argue, is representative of this kind of “humanist” ideology (Sellers et al., 1998) of identity politics.

An Interpretive Method

My analysis of Obama’s life story relies upon an interpretive, hermeneutic analysis. Following Dilthey’s (1923/1988) original articulation of hermeneutics as the analysis of *lived experience* embodied in a text, Tappan (1997) argues that psychology benefits from this type of analysis because it is consistent with the larger “interpretive turn” in the social sciences (e.g., Rabinow & Sullivan, 1987). Interpretive social science resists a natural science approach to human development and behavior, arguing instead for an approach that can elucidate the *meaning* individuals (and groups) make of their experience (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1987). A narrative approach is inherently linked with this movement toward *interpretation* because it advocates the study of human speech as a text that reveals *intention* and the *meaning* of acts (Bruner, 1990).

Concretely, an interpretive approach views a text as data from which to draw meaning. In the case of Obama’s story, I analyzed the text through an iterative sequence of reading and interpretation, fusing a grounded-theory approach to qualitative data analysis in which categories emerge through this analytic process (e.g., Charmaz, 2006). Thus, the key concepts of racial identity development, *conscientização*, intersectionality, and cosmopolitanism all provided interpretive vocabularies to make meaning of the content of Obama’s text. This approach is anchored in a holistic narrative methodology (Gergen & Gergen, 1983; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998), in which a single narrative is analyzed for both formal properties (e.g., progressive, tragic, etc.) and thematic content. This analytic process resulted in a massive number of nuclear episodes in Obama’s life story which could be presented as illustrative. In this paper, I limit my presentation to select portions of the text that are representative of the salience of key themes, focusing on a chronological analysis that considers Obama’s identity *development*.

It is important to note that interpretive methods make the position of the analyst explicit. That is, “an interpreter understands by constant reference *to her own perspective*” (Tappan, 1997, p. 649), thus suggesting the need to know something of the analyst. This *reflexivity* is, of course, beneficial in all forms of knowledge production, for the producers of knowledge always occupy some position vis-à-vis an object of study. In my case, it is important to know that my own personal narrative, while differing substantially from that of Barack Obama, places me in a position to appreciate his identity complexity. This position stems from my own sensitization to issues of social injustice, intersectionality, and cultural pluralism, as well as a strong personal and political stance against racism, colonialism, and oppression of any form. I view the parallels in personal and political position as beneficial in the case of this analysis, as my own sensitization to some of the same issues facilitates my interpretive ability.

Using Obama’s own chronology, I chart the course of his narrative from the early sensitization to *difference* and *race* to the development of a workable configuration of identity that provides a sense of unity and coherence. Providing illustrative data from his narrative, I suggest that, as Obama struggles with this *social inheritance* of identity politics, he engages in *conversations* across axes of multiplicity and difference, thereby allowing him to construct a narrative of cosmopolitan identity. I conclude the paper by highlighting the implications of this personal narrative for (a) the larger context of identity politics in the United States, and (b) Obama’s public policy platform and governance style. My central argument is that Barack Obama embodies, in his own autobiography, larger social and political conversations that are deeply relevant to the 21st century world order, such as cultural inclusion and the recognition of identity diversity (e.g., Taylor, 1994; United Nations Development Program, 2004), understood beyond the traditional categorical paradigm of multiculturalism (Hollinger, 2006; Verkuyten, 2007) and identity politics (Crenshaw, 1991).

Stories and Social Inheritance: The Origins of an Identity

Obama’s narrative is a romantic story of the search for self-understanding through exploration. It assumes a progressive form, as each step toward his ultimate self-actualization involves the accumulation of new lessons and insights. His narrative begins and ends with his father, who represents the most significant character in Obama’s life story at this time of its telling. Obama divides his life story into three clearly marked phases or “chapters,” according to McAdams’ (1988) life story theory: (1) “Origins,” which details his life from childhood in Hawaii and Indonesia through college in California and New York; (2) “Chicago,” which details his time between college and law school as a community organizer on Chicago’s South Side; and (3) “Kenya,” which details his journey to Kenya prior to beginning law school.

The first chapter of Obama's life story centers on the concept of *social inheritance*—both in terms of his family and the larger context of race and identity politics in the United States. His narrative begins with the story of a phone call from his Aunt Jane in Nairobi, calling to inform Obama of his father's death in a car accident. He is 21 years old and living in New York City, studying at Columbia. Obama's account of this report of tragedy reveals the central role his father will assume in his own quest for identity, for the series of stories that follow—stories told during Barack's childhood in Hawaii by his mother and maternal grandparents—construct an image of a confident, sophisticated, mysterious man, whose influence on Obama's life story is marked mostly by his absence.

Though his personality traits, like confidence, assume an important role in these accounts of his father, another, extremely significant trait emerges immediately out of these early stories: *race*. His father's Black² identity is at the foreground of the stories told by Barack's white grandparents, with his father's bravery at confronting racism in a bar. Obama's understanding of his origins is thus framed immediately by a recognition of *difference* and *subordination*—that he, like his father, could be the subject of discrimination in a political and social context ruled by European Americans.

Obama suggests that these early stories about his father, transmitted by his mother and grandparents, serve their own need to make meaning of the social changes in American society and their own role in these changes. As a consequence, Obama perceives the role of his father as more of a “prop” in their own narratives, and thus these stories fail to address the central question of his absence.

... All the stories of my father . . . said less about the man himself than about the changes that had taken place in the people around him, the halting process by which my grandparents' racial attitudes had changed. The stories gave voice to a spirit that would grip the nation for that fleeting period between Kennedy's election and the passage of the Voting Rights Act: the seeming triumph of universalism over parochialism and narrow-mindedness, a bright new world where differences of race or culture would instruct and amuse and perhaps even ennoble. (Obama, 1995, p. 25)

Obama's interpretation of this early story-making about his father directly links politics and personal narrative. As he suggests, the stories his family told themselves about his father say more about the family's engagement with the shifting identity politics of American society (and perhaps a new master narrative of white identity) than anything particularly illuminating about the man himself. This awareness of his father's role in the collective family story sensitizes Barack early on to the politics of race, and this particular passage of his own personal

² I capitalize the term *Black* throughout this article, consistent with other scholars who argue that the term refers to more than skin pigmentation (e.g., Hurtado, 1996). The word is not, however, capitalized in Obama's (1995) autobiography. Thus, when quoting directly from Obama's (1995) narrative, *black* is not capitalized.

narrative reveals a romantic account of “universalism” inherited from his maternal family.

The “origins” in Obama’s life story center decidedly on a concern with his own racial identity. He describes an early encounter in childhood in Indonesia while perusing photographs in what he had recalled were a collection of *Life* magazines.

Eventually I came across a photograph of an older man in dark glasses and a raincoat walking down an empty road. . . . On the next page was another photograph, this one a close-up of the same man’s hands. They had a strange, unnatural pallor, as if blood had been drawn from the flesh. . . . He must be terribly sick, I thought. A radiation victim, maybe. . . . Except when I read the words that went with the picture, that wasn’t it at all. The man had received a chemical treatment, the article explained, to lighten his complexion. . . . There were thousands of people like him, black men and women back in America who’d undergone the same treatment in response to advertisements that promised happiness as a white person. (pp. 29–30)

This early account of the discovery of internalized racism is tragic in its tone and produces a highly emotional, visceral reaction: “I felt my face and neck get hot. My stomach knotted; the type began to blur on the page. Did my mother know about this?” (p. 30).

This growing sense of awareness—this realization of a cruel and unforgiving social inheritance of racism—results in some of Barack’s earliest skepticism in the received wisdom of his social ecology.

. . . Seeing that article was violent for me, an ambush attack. . . . But that one photograph had told me . . . that there was a hidden enemy out there, one that could reach me without anyone’s knowledge, not even my own. When I got home that night. . . , I went into the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror with all my senses and limbs seemingly intact, looking as I had always looked, and wondered if something was wrong with me. The alternative seemed no less frightening—that the adults around me lived in the midst of madness. (pp. 51–52)

This encounter with the magazine photograph assumes such a significant place in Barack’s narrative that we can consider it a *turning point*—a nuclear episode that suggests a transformation in the life story or that marks a considerable shift in self-understanding (McAdams, 1988; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001). In terms of his racial identity development, this incident marks a clear shift from what Cross (1971, 1991) refers to as the *pre-encounter* stage to the *encounter* stage. In the encounter stage, individuals experience events that increase the *salience* of their racial identity in consciousness (Sellers et al., 1998). They begin to understand the world as racially divided, and they become sensitized to the implications of this matrix of identity for how others perceive them.

Interestingly, beyond his own personal sense of racial identity, the photograph seems to awaken a strong sense of social injustice in Obama’s narrative—a sense that it is not he, by virtue of his “complexion,” who is somehow inferior but rather that the world of adults, his *social inheritance*, is one of “madness.”

His relationship to the world of adults thus transforms from safety and security to one of distrust. This sense of injustice at the received value matrix of identity shifts his life story from the curiosity and innocence of childhood in Indonesia to the rebellion of his adolescence in Hawaii with his grandparents. That he begins this process of awareness in the context of (a) having been raised by whites, and (b) Indonesia, where matters of power and structural violence were readily apparent to Obama, is significant for the trajectory of his narrative.

During adolescence, Barack struggles with the anger that derives from his realization of social injustice based on race.

I was living out a caricature of black male adolescence, itself a caricature of swaggering American manhood. Yet at a time when boys aren't supposed to want to follow their fathers' tired footsteps, when the imperatives of harvest or work in the factory aren't supposed to dictate identity, so that how to live is bought off the rack or found in magazines, the principal difference between me and most of the man-boys around me . . . resided in the limited number of options at my disposal. Each of us chose a costume, armor against uncertainty. (pp. 79–80)

This excerpt from his narrative reveals that Obama views his adolescence as a time of significant internal conflict, as he seeks to reconcile this social inheritance of injustice with a plan of action for his own life—and he recognizes that, by virtue of where he stands in the larger matrix of racial identity, his options are more limited. It is also clear that Barack recognizes that it is not his *father* against whom he rebels, for his father remains mysterious, but this inheritance of an unjust social order, made palpable to him *because of* his father's race.

Obama's early life story is characterized by solitude—a solitude that he himself acknowledges as “the safest place I know” (p. 4). These internal battles related to identity and the politics of his own social inheritance appear to take the form of a deep self-consciousness about self, other, and interaction—a classic case of Du Bois' (1903/1994) “double consciousness.” Within the diverse social ecologies he inhabits as a child and adolescent, he becomes adept at navigating the expectations of others. In this appropriation of a particular repertoire for social interaction, we see the development of Obama's principled pragmatism—his style of action intended to “work” within the context of its emergence, his commitment to a way of being and relating that favors a thoughtful practicality. As opposed to a single *generalized other* (Mead, 1934), Obama identifies several communities from which to draw a set of norms and ideals for social interaction. A good example of this pragmatism can be found in his adolescent relationship with Ray, one of the few African Americans in his Hawaiian high school.

In his interactions with Ray, Barack adopts a particular discourse about “white folks.” In his narrative, Barack acknowledges his own discomfort with this discourse and the complications its appropriation brings for his own sense of identity.

White folks. The term itself was uncomfortable in my mouth at first; I felt like a non-native speaker tripping over a difficult phrase. Sometimes I would find myself talking to Ray

about *white folks* this or *white folks* that, and I would suddenly remember my mother's smile, and the words that I spoke would seem awkward and false. Or I would be helping Gramps dry the dishes after dinner and Toot would come in to say she was going to sleep, and those same words—*white folks*—would flash in my head like a bright neon sign, and I would suddenly grow quiet, as if I had secrets to keep. (pp. 80–81)

In his adolescent friendships, then, Barack's solitude maintained its necessity, for he had "secrets to keep." Just as Du Bois (1903/1994) describes the process of double consciousness as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (p. 2), Obama develops a deep and necessary self-consciousness to manage his social interactions. In recognizing the shifting discourses of his multiple worlds—the language of Ray, of Gramps and Toot, of Hawaii and Indonesia—Barack comes to appreciate the unique place he occupies in a complex social world, and he practices his skills at navigating these multiple worlds, mastering the art of pragmatic social interaction. This type of mastery is a hallmark of successful adolescent development, particularly for ethnic minority youth (Cooper & Denner, 1998; Cooper, Jackson, Azmitia, & Lopez, 1998).

Yet mastery of these multiple worlds is perhaps best understood as a long-term outcome of a process of social interaction for Obama. In the final two years of high school, he confesses that this feeling of utter solitude is accompanied by a rebellion *against* the effort of this kind of complex social navigation, against the possibilities of embracing a "protean self" (Lifton, 1993). Thus, he withdraws into his solitude and experiments with substance use, seeking to quiet the inner voice necessary to resolve these disparate messages about identity.

Junkie. Pothead. That's where I'd been headed: the final, fatal role of the young would-be black man. Except the highs hadn't been about that, me trying to prove what a down brother I was. Not by then, anyway. I got high for just the opposite effect, something that could 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. (pp. 93–94)

In order to escape the *demands* of identity exploration, for the inevitable questions and mysteries they involved, Barack enters a period of admitted "withdrawal" or diffusion (Erikson, 1959). For him, it is a short-lived but necessary moment of avoidance, for the next chapter in his life story will place the search for identity at the forefront.

The end of his high school years is marked by another turning point in his narrative, again moving him toward a new phase in his racial identity development. The story of his grandmother's panic at a bus stop at the sight of a Black man whom she fears might rob her provokes a strong reaction for Barack. He seeks out his father's friend, Frank, an older African American man. Frank says to Barack,

"What I'm trying to tell you is, your grandma's right to be scared. . . . She understands that black people have a reason to hate. That's just how it is. For your sake, I wish it were otherwise. But it's not. So you might as well get used to it." . . . The earth shook under my feet, ready to crack open at any moment. I stopped, trying to steady myself, and knew for the first time that I was utterly alone. (pp. 90–91)

If Obama's early experience with the magazine photograph initiated a clear turning point in his racial identity development—from the pre-encounter to encounter stage in Cross's (1971, 1991) model—this incident with his grandmother represents the next turning point for Barack. In the Cross model, the encounter stage leads to the *immersion/emersion* stage in which individuals immerse themselves in an insular Black culture and adopt “anti-white” attitudes. Barack's personal narrative reveals just such a transformation in his identity development. This turning point in his life story clearly marks a movement toward *immersion* into a more singular Black community (first in college, then in Chicago) in order to locate a *place* for his identity exploration, accompanied by *emersion* from the predominantly white context of his upbringing. According to the model developed by Sellers and colleagues (1998), this turning point marks the movement from racial *salience* to *centrality*, though Sellers and colleagues do not claim that these processes are always linear.

In his personal narrative, Obama's years in university, first at Occidental College in Los Angeles, then at Columbia University in New York City, represent more a transitional period of his life story than their own distinct chapter. He deliberately includes these accounts in the “Origins” section of his narrative, for the nuclear episodes that comprise this period of his life say more about its direction—toward a greater understanding of his identity as an African American and his participation in the Black community. This period thus represents his early experiments in immersion, gradually shifting his source of primary location for his identity from the white to the Black community (Cross, 1991).

Obama's experiences in college sensitize him further to racial politics and his own unique place within them. In college, the avoidance of his adolescent years erodes into his own personal history as he begins to directly confront the task of consolidating his identity (Erikson, 1959).

Where did I belong? . . . Whatever my father might say, I knew it was too late to ever truly claim Africa as my home. And if I had come to understand myself as a black American, and was understood as such, that understanding remained unanchored to place. What I needed was a community. . . . A place where I could put down stakes and test my commitments. (p. 115)

Consistent with Cross's (1991) theory of racial identity development, Barack's life story has led him toward a strong self-understanding as a “black American.” His feelings of difference and subordination in Hawaii, characterized by his own quiet process of identity exploration, have led him to this self-understanding within the larger American identity matrix. But such an identity is, in his own words, “unanchored”; it exists only in his inner voice and lacks connection to a community of shared practice (e.g., Holland et al., 1998). What Obama now seeks is a rescue from his solitude—evidence that his story might find a home beyond his head, a physical anchor from which to locate memory.

Organizing Communities, Organizing Identity: From Solitude to the South Side

The “Chicago” chapter of Obama’s personal narrative represents this effort to link his narrative to a specific place and to ground his sense of Black identity in a community. Thus, his entrée into the world of community organizing reflects an attempt to organize his own identity, to secure a tangible anchor for future tellings of his evolving life story *as an African American* (Cross, 1991). What the first chapter of his narrative lacks is a grounding in the Black community, an opportunity to develop a set of practices consistent with his own self-understanding. This chapter of his life story might, he acknowledges, offer *redemption* from the confusion, ambivalence, and uniqueness of his own narrative.

Communities had to be created, fought for, tended like gardens. They expanded or contracted with the dreams of men—and in the civil rights movement those dreams had been large. In the sit-ins, the marches, the jailhouse songs, I saw the African-American community becoming more than just the place where you’d been born or the house where you’d been raised. Through organizing, through shared sacrifice, membership had been earned. And because membership was earned—because this community I imagined was still in the making, built on the promise that the larger American community, black, white, and brown, could somehow redefine itself—I believed that it might, over time, admit the uniqueness of my own life. That was my idea of organizing. It was a promise of redemption. (pp. 134–135)

Becoming a community organizer was thus for Barack an opportunity to work toward a new identity politics in American society, and in his own contributions to secure a place for his “uniqueness” in the matrix.

The Chicago chapter of Obama’s story is also very much about establishing a redemptive narrative in which the challenges of identity integration in childhood and adolescence can be surmounted. In this way, Barack constructs a life story common to many highly *generative* Americans—individuals committed to a concern for promoting the welfare of future generations (McAdams, 2006). Adults who report a strong commitment to investment in the future of the society beyond their life course typically construct personal narratives in which they confronted a major challenge early in life and overcame or persevered, thus finding a sense of meaning and purpose in life’s challenges (McAdams, 2006). Their personal narratives present stories of redemption from the possibility of tragedy caused by significant challenges. Like these Americans, Obama constructs a redemptive sequence in his personal narrative to re-orient his story toward progress and resilience, rather than tragic decline.

Beyond its role in his own identity exploration, though, Chicago represents an opportunity for identity *synthesis* for Barack, as he begins to link the social injustice he encounters on the South Side more generally to his encounter with poverty and political corruption in Indonesia. Thus, an important trope continues to develop in his personal narrative—his recognition of and concern for social

injustice. And perhaps even more significant for its link to Obama's eventual *political* identity, he links matters of economic development, social and cultural change, and policy in his integration of the Chicago and Indonesian contexts.

I tried to imagine the Indonesian workers who were now making their way to the sorts of factories that had once sat along the banks of the Calumet River, joining the ranks of wage labor to assemble the radios and sneakers that sold on Michigan Avenue. I imagined those same Indonesian workers ten, twenty years from now, when their factories would have closed down, a consequence of new technology or lower wages in some other part of the globe. And then the bitter discovery that their markets have vanished; that they no longer remember how to weave their own baskets or carve their own furniture or grow their own food; that even if they remember such craft, the forests that gave them wood are now owned by timber interests, the baskets they once wove have been replaced by more durable plastics. The very existence of the factories, the timber interests, the plastics manufacturer, will have rendered their culture obsolete; the values of hard work and individual initiative turn out to have depended on a system of belief that's been scrambled by migration and urbanization and imported TV reruns. Some of them would prosper in this new world order. Some would move to America. And the others, the millions left behind in Djakarta, or Lagos, or the West Bank, they would settle into their own Altgeld Gardens, into a deeper despair. (pp. 183–184)

In his attempt to construct a coherent link in his own personal narrative from Djakarta to Chicago, Obama comes to a political consciousness or what Freire (1970) calls *conscientização*—the ability to recognize political, social, and economic contradictions and to challenge oppression (see also Hurtado, 2003; Martín-Baró, 1994). Barack has entered the *critical* stage of his sociopolitical development (Watts et al., 2003), in which he seeks to learn more and to make connections about power asymmetry and injustice.

Perhaps most important, though, for the development of Obama's political philosophy and pragmatic style of governance, the Chicago chapter of his life story sensitizes him to the relationship between *talk* and *action*, thus moving him from a *critical* perspective on social justice to a *liberation* approach (Watts et al., 2003). The cruel history of slavery and oppression has, in Obama's estimation, created a fatalistic narrative of social (in)action for African Americans. Central to his community organizing during these years is a desire to challenge this dominant narrative in the Black community.

The continuing struggle to align word and action, our heartfelt desires with a workable plan—didn't self-esteem finally depend on just this? It was that belief that led me into organizing, and it was that belief which would lead me to conclude, perhaps for the final time, that notions of purity—of race or of culture—could no more serve the basis for the typical black American's self-esteem than it could for mine. Our sense of wholeness would have to arise from something more than the bloodlines we'd inherited. It would have to find root . . . in all the messy, contradictory details of our experience. (p. 204)

Obama's own quest for personal coherence, his need to locate a "sense of wholeness," will not, he confesses, emerge out of a solitary identification with a master narrative of ingroup identity (Hammack, 2008), grounded in essentialized notions of racial or cultural "purity." Rather, as this excerpt from his narrative suggests, it

is through the *consolidation of contradiction* into a workable plan of *action* that a strong sense of identity—and thus “self-esteem,” as he calls it—might emerge. The connection between *word* and *action* is key here, for Obama will *make* his identity through social practice (Holland et al., 1998; cf. Cohler & Hammack, 2006), be it as community organizer, lawyer, or political *actor*. It is precisely this shift from rhetoric to *praxis* that reveals a process of *conscientização* (Freire, 1970) in Obama’s narrative.

Chicago thus represents for Obama not only the opportunity to integrate his multiple identities but also his perception of the political world. In this way, it affords a step toward confronting and challenging his social inheritance. A major part of this social inheritance, beyond the psychological legacy of slavery, oppression, and racism (Smith, 1980), is the unjust social structure that maintains racial oppression (e.g., Kimble, 2007) and perceived discrimination (Seaton, Caldwell, Sellers, & Jackson, 2008). Thus, a major part of his Chicago narrative includes his own discovery of the pervasiveness of these structural injustices—inequalities in housing, education, and jobs. With this discovery, though, comes a sense of social *responsibility* through action. And a major task he assumes is to navigate *how* precisely to work for social change through action. The necessary pragmatism that emerges—a recognition of the need to mediate competing interests and include multiple parties to get a job decidedly *done*—will carry Barack toward a political philosophy of inclusion and conversation. This pragmatic cosmopolitanism that becomes embodied in his politics can be linked to the need for reconciliation of the disparate elements of his identity, but it also clearly stems from the narrative he constructs to make sense of the social injustice inherent in his encounter with the world.

Recovering Roots: Myth and Meaning in the Making of Identity

In his life story theory of identity, McAdams (1988) argues that we make our identities through the crafting of personal myths. It matters not whether such myths have their basis in an actual reality of lived experience, for the experience *becomes* lived as it is narrated. In other words, personal myths serve a psychological *function* in their provision of *meaning* and *coherence* to the larger narrative of self we construct over the life course (Cohler, 1982).

The central myth or set of myths in Obama’s life story centers on his father. Throughout his life, Obama’s father remains a figure of mystery, yet the stories transmitted to Barack (as well as their one meeting) present the image of a strong, confident, intelligent African man. This image becomes encoded into Obama’s own sense of self as a Black man, particularly during his Chicago years. And his father’s *African* identity provides Obama with a sense of authenticity as he works closely with the African American community, many of whose members seek to ground themselves in an African heritage (e.g., Asante, 1998).

The myth of his father, though, becomes destabilized over the course of his life. Though it serves him well for some time, he reaches a point in the development of his story where the mystery must be confronted. Obama comes to believe that only through the exploration of his roots in his father's family can he come to integrate his disparate selves and craft a workable identity configuration (see Schachter, 2004). Though his *immersion* into the Black community in Chicago provides him with a sense of purpose and meaning for his sociopolitical identity development, Barack cannot fully reach what Cross (1991) calls a place of *internalization*—a complete sense of security in one's Black identity—without experiencing Kenya. Motivated by his encounters with half-siblings in the United States, along with the sentiments of many of his African American colleagues in Chicago, Obama makes a transformational journey to recover his roots and thus further locate and anchor his identity.

A pivotal early moment in the Kenya chapter of his life story illustrates the sense of *location* that Obama comes to experience in this search for his roots. Upon his arrival in Kenya, he realizes that his luggage has not accompanied him, and he seeks help from an airline agent. As he gives his form to the agent, she says, "You wouldn't happen to be related to Dr. Obama, by any chance?" Suddenly, Obama experiences the feeling of what it might be like to be *known* by one's name, to be clearly embedded in a community so strong that the name itself confers significant meaning.

That had never happened before, I realized; not in Hawaii, not in Indonesia, not in L.A. or New York or Chicago. 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 are so and so's son." No one here in Kenya would ask how to spell my name, or mangle it with an unfamiliar tongue. My name belonged and so I belonged, drawn into a web of relationships, alliances, and grudges that I did not yet understand. (p. 305)

In this experience of being recognized by name, Obama comes to experience a sense of identity security unknown to him throughout his life. With this comfort, though, comes a new understanding of identity as connected to a "web," as he calls it, of commitments over which any single individual has little control.

Obama's initial experience of Kenya is liberating, with this encounter of *sameness* in identity, rather than the constant sense of *difference* that has accompanied him from Hawaii to Chicago—never fully "at home" in any one of these locales or their communities.

... You could experience that 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. (p. 311)

More than in Chicago, where the hegemony of a majority white social order persisted, Kenya at last offers Obama the opportunity to experience a sense of

sameness and continuity (Erikson, 1959)—a place where phenotype finally converges with social and political surround to create a context in which one’s identity can be perceived as *common* to others.

Obama’s account of Kenya offers formal continuity for his overall narrative of progressive self-discovery, as he navigates encounters with new family members. He accumulates new stories of his family—stories of his grandfather’s encounter with the colonial regime, his father’s struggles to live up to his own father’s expectations, the death of one of his half-brothers, the alienation of another half-brother from the larger family.

What is a family? Is it just a genetic chain, parents and offspring, people like me? Or is it a social construct, an economic unit, optimal for child rearing and divisions of labor? Or is it something else entirely: a store of shared memories, say? An ambit of love? A reach across the void? . . . I drew a series of circles around myself, with borders that shifted as time passed and faces changed but that nevertheless offered the illusion of control. . . . In Africa, this astronomy of mine almost immediately collapsed. For family seemed to be everywhere. . . . (pp. 327–328)

Prior to Kenya, Obama had developed an “astronomy” of identity that worked, but Kenya calls into question his entire understanding of the concept of “family” and its place in his life story. Unlike in Chicago, where other people’s memories became a source of coherence for his evolving life story, these new family stories could become a part of Obama’s narrative with complete authenticity, for they were indeed stories immediately connected to his own. Yet fusing these stories—and his own story of this “pilgrimage” of identity—into a coherent whole proves a challenge.

I’d come to Kenya thinking that I could somehow force my many worlds into a single, harmonious whole. Instead, the divisions seemed only to have become more multiplied, popping up in the midst of even the simplest chores. (p. 347)

Obama’s narrative of self-discovery thus culminates in the ultimate recognition that a sense of unity and coherence is not achieved through the anchoring of identity in a single place, even as the sense of sameness he encounters in Kenya initially suggests such a possibility.

Through his experience in Kenya, Obama comes to appreciate the inherent multiplicity of his identity. In *needing* to craft a coherent narrative of his life, he constructs an identity that serves more than his own psychological needs; he writes a life story that transcends *place* in favor of *activity*. In this way, his personal narrative challenges essentialized notions of culture and identity as anchored in a concrete geography or a “patterned” sensibility (Gjerde, 2004), recognizing instead the link among culture, identity, and practical activity (Hammack, 2008; Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). Rather, Obama’s narrative becomes “made” in the development of an ethic for social practice—an ethic that is decidedly cosmopolitan in its openness to conversation (Appiah, 2005).

Though Obama’s Kenya chapter has its romantic form and tone, culminating in the moment of his own emotional reconciliation at his father’s unmarked grave,

its romanticism is tempered by Obama's recognition of the colonial legacy—a recognition rendered all the more salient by his early experience in Indonesia. As he recounts Granny's narrative of the family history, the role of colonialism is central.

Respect for tradition weakened, for young people saw that the elders had no real power. Beer, which once had been made of honey and which men only drank sparingly, now came in bottles, and many men became drunks. Many of us began to taste the white man's life, and we decided that compared to him, our lives were poor.

Engaging with Granny's narrative, Obama recognizes the relationship among power, culture, and the economy and psychology of a people. In this recognition, we see continuity in his process of *conscientização*—his linking of political, economic, and social factors into a recognition of oppression and social injustice. But as Freire (1970) argues in his classic account, this psychological process calls one to *action* in the service of social justice and liberation from oppression. In providing further continuity for this salient trope of his own personal narrative, Kenya contributes to the evolution of Obama's political identity, grounded in a sensitivity to social injustice and the need for liberation, as well as a *commitment to act* in the service of liberation (Watts et al., 2003).

The Kenya chapter of Obama's life story transforms the grounding of his narrative in primarily the identity politics of American race relations to the larger narrative of *postcolonial* psychology (Okazaki et al., 2008). Thus, the inheritance Obama encounters is not just the legacy of racism in the United States (see Pettigrew, 2008) but also the legacy of European colonialism and its inherent politics of exclusion, oppression, and domination (Fanon, 1967). His actual, tangible inheritance consists of his grandfather's *Domestic Servant's Pocket Register*, issued by Kenya's colonial authority in 1928, and letters to various American universities from his father, expressing his desire to study abroad. These documents of the two most central men in his Kenyan family reveal their own efforts to invent themselves within a larger matrix of power and hegemony, to construct their own workable configurations of identity that might serve the economic interests of their family as well as their own psychological needs for coherence and a sense of integrity (Erikson, 1959).

Obama's final revelation in Kenya, though, centers on the clear sense of *confusion* these two critical men in his life story faced as they came to a workable configuration of their own identity.

Oh, Father, I cried. There was no shame in your confusion. Just as there had been no shame in your father's before you. No shame in the fear, or in the fear of his father before him. There was only shame in the silence fear had produced. It was the silence that betrayed us. If it weren't for that silence, your grandfather might have told your father that he could never escape himself, or re-create himself alone. Your father might have taught those same lessons to you. And you, the son, might have taught your father that this new world that was beckoning all of you involved more than just railroads and indoor toilets and irrigation ditches and gramophones, lifeless instruments that could be absorbed into the old ways.

You might have told him that these instruments carried with them a dangerous power, that they demanded a different way of seeing the world. That this power could be absorbed only alongside a faith born out of hardship, a faith that wasn't new, that wasn't black or white or Christian or Muslim but that pulsed in the heart of the first African village and the first Kansas homestead—a *faith in other people*. (p. 429, italics added)

In this critical monologue in Obama's life story, he speaks directly to his father and grandfather, working through his own identity confusion by understanding the failures of their attempts to reconcile their changing, disparate worlds. For them, it was the influence of colonialism and its fundamental contradictions to a previous way of life. For Obama, it is the African village versus the "Kansas homestead," Chicago versus Hawaii, Black versus white, African versus American. None of this is to suggest a question of divided "loyalties" for Obama, for his story suggests a strong need to integrate the sets of commitments specified by his multiple identities into a workable whole.

Critically, though, Obama's identity *solution*, as emphasized in the passage above, involves cultivating a "faith in other people," akin to a "belief in the species" that Erikson (1963, p. 267) argues is central to the development of generativity. This *ideological grounding* of his life story is encoded very early in the trust he places in his mother and maternal grandparents, in spite of their acknowledged limitations for the coherence of his story. And it is this ideology of identity as fundamentally grounded in the beneficence of other people that liberates Obama from the solitude of his youth, that allows him to embrace the benefit, rather than solely the burden, of a double (or multiple) consciousness. Through the Kenya chapter of his narrative, he comes to see the way in which his father and grandfather both negotiated their own life stories in the depths of a great solitude, and he views the effects of that process as negative for themselves and for their family. Obama's own process, which has gradually evolved from a place of solitude in childhood and adolescence to a place of formidable social engagement in early adulthood in Chicago, will be one in which *faith in others* will assume primacy. It is precisely this ideological anchor for his personal narrative that makes Obama's story reflective of a growing ethic of cosmopolitanism characterizing a new view of identity, beyond the essentialized discourse of multiculturalism (Hollinger, 2006; Verkuyten, 2007; Warnke, 2005).

Configuring Cosmopolitanism: Identity, Multiplicity, and a New Politics of Inclusion

Obama ends the telling of his life story in *Dreams from My Father* with an Epilogue that moves forward six years after Kenya. He acknowledges that it is now "less a time of discovery than of consolidation" (p. 437) in his life. This consolidation is characterized primarily by an appreciation of the value of *conversation*, of continued questions, and of dialogue across human communities.

I hear all of these voices clamoring for recognition, all of them asking the very same questions that have come to shape my life. . . . 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 sentiments into love? The answers I find in law books don't always satisfy me. . . . And yet, in the conversation itself, in the joining of voices, I find myself modestly encouraged, believing that so long as the questions are still being asked, what binds us together might somehow, ultimately, prevail. (p. 438)

Obama has, at this point in his life course, come to fuse his own process of personal and social identity development—a process characterized by the *necessity* of conversation across sites of difference—with a *political* commitment to conversation. The ideological setting of his life story has become one that embraces *dialogue* as the fundamental mode of praxis for social change (cf. Tappan, 2005). In this way, his personal narrative embodies a shift in discourse in American society toward a cosmopolitan code of identity ethics and a recognition of the inherent intersectionality of identity politics.

Appiah (2006) views cosmopolitanism as a moral code characterized by conversation: “. . . It begins with the simple idea that in the human community, as in national communities, we need to develop habits of coexistence: conversation in its older meaning, of living together, association” (p. xix). In the development of his personal narrative, Obama comes to embrace cosmopolitanism as a final ideological setting for his life story—a moral and philosophical filter through which he will integrate future life experience (McAdams, 1996). His *racial ideology* assumes a decidedly *humanist* form in its emphasis on the commonality of communities (Sellers et al., 1998). Rather than signaling a “color-blind” view of diversity, however, Obama’s cosmopolitanism is combined with the *conscientização* needed to work for social justice for groups. Thus, Obama’s commitment to conversation across sites of differences does not seek to *neutralize* or to *deny* the role of power and hegemony but to *use* conversation as a strategy of *action*. In this way, Obama’s cosmopolitanism is rooted in a pragmatism that is fused with an ideological commitment to social justice.

In order to construct a coherent identity, Obama has had to engage in multiple conversations across continents, beyond the potential divides of human communities. But in engaging in these conversations, he comes to transcend these divisions as he recognizes the fundamental reliance on others for self-understanding and well-being. Thus, the fatal flaw in his father’s life story centers on his *lack* of faith in others. Obama seeks to redeem himself and his family’s narrative by challenging this response to the confusion and contradictions of an increasingly complex world—a world more interconnected through globalization (Arnett, 2002) but still dealing with the legacy of colonialism (Okazaki et al., 2008).

From the “imagined communities” of 19th-century nationalism (Anderson, 1983) to the continued discourses of ethnic or racial “purity” (e.g., No et al., 2008; Tenenbaum & Davidman, 2007; Verkuyten & Brug, 2004), and essentialist notions of “ethnic conflict” (Brubaker & Laitin, 1998; Kaufmann, 2005),

political orders have often been reluctant to embrace diversity among their subjects. The election of Barack Obama tips the discursive balance away from a concern with intragroup homogeneity toward a recognition of heterogeneity within social orders (see Gjerde, 2004). Obama's personal narrative provides a template of *resilience* in the context of potential fragmentation (Lifton, 1993), thus providing a framework for understanding the *benefits*, rather than the burdens, of multiplicity in identity. Furthermore, Obama's embrace of a cosmopolitan identity locates his life story within larger conversations in political and moral philosophy on identity, culture, citizenship, and recognition (e.g., Gutmann, 2003; Kymlicka, 2001; Taylor, 1994). What these conversations often lack is a grounding in the actual lived experience of individuals, which often leads them to a highly idealized view of cosmopolitanism as a mode of intergroup relations. Obama's narrative reveals the possibilities and the realities associated with constructing a cosmopolitan identity, for his willingness to engage in conversation across sites of difference does not obscure the reality of his struggles in dealing with the legacy of racial subordination and colonialism. Thus, the psychological study of identity can provide much needed empiricism to the political ideal of cosmopolitanism, reflecting both the idealism of its thesis and the limitations of its utopian moral vision.

The purpose of this paper was to present a social psychological analysis of the personal narrative of President Barack Hussein Obama, using his own autobiographical account. Rooted in theories of narrative identity (e.g., McAdams, 2001), racial identity development (e.g., Cross, 1991), and the development of a critical consciousness about social injustice (e.g., Freire, 1970), I offered an interpretive analysis of Obama's 1995 life story. One of my primary aims was to reveal the relationship between Obama's personal narrative and a shifting master narrative of identity politics, both in the United States and abroad, as societies negotiate the legacies of racism and colonialism. Though it is tempting to argue that Obama's election signifies a clear shift in the history of social injustice, I do not make such a claim. Rather, I suggest that Obama's rise to power might, by providing a narrative template for the reconciliation of conflict through *conversation*, inspire a new pragmatism in intergroup relations both in the domestic and international spheres.

The implications of Obama's personal narrative for his own political psychology and style of governance suggest a leader whose commitment to conversation, sensitivity to difference, and belief in action might foster a new era of pragmatism in American politics. At the same time, the ability of Obama's personal narrative to ultimately transcend essentialized divisions within American identity politics suggests a potential shift in the American master narrative. For example, his well-received speech in March 2008 on race relations suggests new possibilities for the transcendence of racial conflict through mutual recognition and legitimization. This paper was limited by its focus on Obama's autobiography, but future studies

might analyze Obama's speeches and his policy agenda to further examine the implications of the analysis presented here.

Obama's life story provides a template for understanding culture and identity as fluid and constructed (Gjerde, 2004; Nagel, 1994), even as the psychological legacy of racism, colonialism, and ethnocentrism endures. In his personal narrative, we witness firsthand the way in which the structural violence of racism and colonialism (Galtung, 1971) nests within the lived experience of an individual and creates psychological challenges. But Obama's narrative reveals the way in which an individual can actively engage with this violence to construct a workable configuration of identity committed to action in the service of social justice. That this action is fundamentally characterized by *conversation*, rather than *confrontation*, by *negotiation* rather than *negation*, and by *words* rather than *war*, says much about the way in which the politics of an Obama administration might deeply alter America's own political psychology and its master narrative of intergroup relations at home and abroad. Obama's political inheritance of war and economic challenge, coupled with his penchant for pragmatism, might moderate the possibilities of this new vision, even as his very election alters the national narrative of political possibility.

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