

## **From the Theopaternal to the Theopolitical: On Barack Obama**

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Political theology has come into vogue as a response to the secularist repression of the religious. This repression makes us forget the theological ancestors of our ostensibly secular political vocabulary. To remember the robustness of religion, its inescapable presences, shadows, and echoes, is threatening to the status quo. Religion has become one difference among many in our variegated world – one box to check next to gender, sexuality, disability, race. Each difference is treated as on par with each other, and so properly managed, and so impotent. The depths of difference that might challenge hegemonic ideology are ignored, leaving difference as preference, as taste, as consumer choice.<sup>1</sup> To remember religion is thus to be critical, to summon those forgotten depths of difference which call into question the necessity of the status quo.

Moreover, to remember religion is to reject an account of the common good as competing preferences to be managed by a neutral arbiter, the nation-state. Religious visions of the common good need not simply be individual beliefs; they are woven into the fabric of a community. The personal can be political, for it was never personal at all. Religious visions of the common good need not be positive, revealed from the heavens. They can be negative, calling into question false visions of the common good advanced by hubristic humans. Our relationship with God and, as this chapter argues, our relationship with our fathers can provide critical leverage for examining how we are to live together. Black experience, the experience of the most marginalized, can be uniquely revelatory, providing access to that critical leverage.

If all significant political concepts today are secularized theological concepts, might it also be that all significant theological concepts are transferred from the domain of the family? The sovereign rules the state as the sovereign God ruled the world – as the sovereign father ruled the family. He imposes law, adjudicates disputes, recognizes who does or does not count as one of his people, and he loves. He deserves respect, and reverence. He is not chosen, and his rule is inescapable. But has this familial provenance of the theological, and the political, also have been forgotten – or repressed?

God the father sounds quaint, just as quaint as worshipping the king. Today, for those who choose to speak of God, we have gender neutral language. A generation of feminist critique has exposed how patriarchy, a human ideology, sullied speech about God.<sup>2</sup> To consider God as father is treated as taboo by the liberal norms governing much theological discourse, the same liberal norms transgressed by speaking of political concepts as fundamentally theological (political theology, for Carl Schmitt, was quintessentially an anti-liberal project; today perhaps it fancies itself anti-neoliberal). My hypothesis: the exploration of the theopaternal lags behind exploration of the theopolitical because the fight against patriarchy lags behind the fight against theocracy. It is only after theocracy becomes entirely implausible that the very real, very potent connections between the theological and the political can be examined clearly, that the theological can be seen as a resource to reinvigorate the political. The grip of patriarchy may have been loosened – that it can even be named shows this – but the struggle continues. This does not, however, mean that investigation of the theopaternal is premature. For if secularism is the management of religion by liberalism or neoliberalism, then it is prudent to suspect the disease affects gender as well. The management of gender and the management of religion may very well go hand in hand, and so political theology as a critical project may need to coordinate

with the theopaternal to enhance the critical force of each.<sup>3</sup> In other words, and echoing the Marxian formulation from the “Jewish Question,” the fight against theocracy and the fight against patriarchy both are struggles for civil rights, for recognition of group autonomy. To achieve our humanity requires critical theory and praxis that cuts deeper. The theopolitical and theopaternal promise to lead us in such a direction.

Political theology does not claim to reduce political concepts to theological ones. Rather, it calls on us to acknowledge and examine the connections, both historical and conceptual, between political and theological ideas. Seeing those connections can allow us to mobilize them to advance justice, and it can allow us to sniff out political mystifications that rely on implicit theological premises. Similarly, observing that religious ideas have affinities with ideas about the family, or that historical evidence points to transference from one domain to the other, is not in itself a reason to dismiss or degrade religious ideas. (Feuerbach and Freud had additional reasons that led them to their skeptical conclusions). Even the conclusion that human ideology (patriarchy) contaminated religious ideas does not seem especially helpful, considering that theology is human words about God, and human words always already bare the taint of ideology. It is not the words that are most important – not that God is called “father” – but the network of concepts that go along with fatherhood, and that inform the theological. They inform the theological, so, by transitivity, they inform the political. They are articulated together: the theopaternal and the theopolitical.

After Freud, the theopaternal might seem exhausted. What more can be said than that longing for God is longing for a fantasy father? But the theopolitical could be similarly queried: what more can be said than that political rulership is modeled on the lordship of God? In each case, there is much more to be said conceptually, historically, and phenomenologically. The

nuances of the theopolitical and the theopaternal can be probed in documents, artifacts, literature, art, and ethnography. Doing so does not reinforce theocracy or patriarchy, but rather explores the continuing relevance of the religious and the paternal: their workings, their continuing presences, their repressions, and their possibilities for transformation.

Thinking about the theopaternal in a narrow sense, the suggestion that God is a substitute for flawed or weak fathers quickly exhausts its initial plausibility. Belief in God while we witness evil seems no different than belief in a strong father when we realize that he is weak. Belief in a God seemingly absent from much of the world seems no different than belief in a father who left during childhood, or who died overseas, or who was never known. Belief in God enfleshed in man seems no different than belief in a son growing up and becoming a father. The father-substitute account of theopaternity seems motivated by a dogmatically atheist dismissal of God, by a need to explain away belief in God. If we acknowledge that divinity and paternity are both in some sense mythological, yet both are still potent, both still find traction in lived experience, then we open ourselves to richer continuities. In other words, just as an inevitable part of growing up is realizing that one's father makes mistakes and yet still recognizing him as father, an inevitable part of theism is realizing that there are aspects of God that we will never understand and yet still recognizing Him as God. God and father mark present absences. To deny this is to deny the reasonableness of a huge number of ordinary people; it is to deny their humanity. To imagine medieval Christians cowering at the threat of hellfire, motivated to act because of the absoluteness of God's power, ignores how ordinary people live their ordinary lives.

Conventional wisdom, or popular psychology, has it that moving beyond an overbearing father involves a dialectic of refusing authority and desiring alternate authority. Once it is clear

that saying no to the father is a live option, it may be embraced by saying no interminably or it may be concealed by finding someone else who does not accept no for an answer. In short, the son may become a hippie or join the military; the daughter may become promiscuous or find an abusive husband. Conventional wisdom further has it that these two options, in the healthy child, are for a time dialectical, and that after a time a healthy middle is established – at which point the child has become an adult, ready to have children of her or his own, with only faint echoes of the father still informing her or his life. In unhealthy individuals, the two options remain polarized, the dialectic blocked, the figure of the father animating all of his child's life. The theopaternal analogues are obvious. Some theists cling to extremes of dogmatic belief or spiritual experience; atheists entirely reject the figure of God, fully immersing themselves in human affairs (or both, for example taking the market as a new God).

But conventional wisdom is always ideological, advancing the interests of the wealthy and powerful. Under the guise of obviousness and reasonableness, conventional wisdom conceals the service it performs to the status quo. So we should be suspicious of a dialectical account of paternity, one that sees youthful indiscretions and strivings as a necessary path out from the shadow of the father, culminating in healthy adulthood. We should be suspicious of accounts of the theopaternal that frame themselves as having overcome dogmatic and antinomian impulses. And we should be suspicious of the theopolitics that results. Moreover, just as the critical leverage attained by political theology is fully exercised not only by exposing religious concepts lurking beneath political concepts but also by pointing to alternative theopolitical concepts, the critical leverage of the theopaternal is fully exercised when the conventional wisdom about the paternal is not only explicated but also relativized by presenting alternatives. Conventional wisdom presents us with just one account of paternity. There are others.

I take Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father* (1995) and *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) as examples of the co-articulation of the theopaternal and the theopolitical.<sup>4</sup> Obama's first book is an example of the theopaternal: father and God are effectively interchangeable, and the young Obama is on a dialectical quest for both. Obama's second book is an example of the theopolitical consequences of his underlying account of the theopaternal. The much praised and much maligned pragmatism that characterizes Obama's politics is, I claim, the direct consequence of his account of fatherhood / divinity. An alternative account of theopaternity presents itself when the position of fatherhood is put under erasure: when the father is black. Tragically, despite his black father, Obama rejects this theopaternal alternative, instead aligning himself with the interests of the wealthy and the powerful.

According to Obama's account in the Introduction, *Dreams from My Father* grew out of interest from publishers generated by his election as president of the Harvard Law Review. Originally he had intended to write a book about policy. When he started work on the manuscript, however, "longings leapt up to brush my heart" and "[d]istant voices appeared, and ebbed, and then appeared again" (xiv). A policy book seemed "premature": first Obama needed to grapple with his past. In other words, Obama self-consciously presents the narrative of his search for a father, a spiritual search, as the background against which his politics should be read. This background is one of remembering and desiring, the affects animating *Dreams from My Father* – and, I claim, animating Obama's theopaternal dialectic.

The book starts with Obama receiving a phone call telling him that his father, who he barely knew, had died. We learn: "At the time of his death, my father remained a myth to me" (5). It ends with a 28 page long block quotation from a relative in Kenya describing his family history, culminating in an explanation of who Obama's father truly is. In between are three

roughly equal parts, the first describing Obama's childhood in Hawaii and Indonesia, with a few pages on his early college years in California. The second part chronicles – better, dramatizes – Obama's community organizing work in Chicago. The final part describes the trip Obama takes to visit his relatives in Kenya the summer before law school. An epilogue notes that his life has been fairly stable and uneventful in the six years since – “a relatively quiet period, less a time of discovery than of consolidation” (437). In other words, *Dreams from My Father* is a coming of age tale, a story about a boy becoming a man. That process is animated by a quest for his father. When he finds his father, his life stabilizes. He becomes a man. Indeed, the final pages of the epilogue demonstrate his manliness: after more than 400 pages almost devoid of romance, Barack marries Michelle. (In *The Audacity of Hope* we learn that after Michelle's father died, while the couple was still dating, Obama stood at his grave and promised to take care of his daughter).

Obama's father left when he was a baby. In his childhood, in Indonesia, his mother would invoke “the distant authority of my father” (50). (It is tempting to say something about the New Testament resonances of the pious mother affirming an omnipotent, absent father). The image of the father as seat of authority was augmented by his mother's descriptions: “He hadn't cut corners,” “He was diligent and honest,” “He had led his life according to principles” (50). In other words, the little content that Obama was given to fill in the image of his father simply referred to the role of father as seat of authority, doing what is proper. Moreover, Obama's mother makes the father-image eclipse all else: “I would follow his example, my mother decided. I had no choice” (50). This is the quintessential father, or father-fantasy, made ideal through his absence. He was not only idealized, but sacralized. His father's principles might not lead to worldly power, might even lead to worldly hardship, but they “promised a higher form of power”

(50). To identify with the seat of authority, with the source of normativity, is always to be in the right, regardless of the world's initial reaction.

His father returned to visit when Obama was in middle school. Obama describes himself, and his mother, as apprehensive. But not in school: "I explained to a group of boys that my father was a prince," "like the king of the tribe" (63). With no experience of a concrete father, an ideal authority was substituted. "After a week of my father in the flesh, I had decided that I preferred his more distant image, an image I could alter on a whim – or ignore when convenient" (63). For those whose fathers are nearby, the fantasy of the father is necessarily more malleable, able to incorporate the many potential discrediting experiences that arise in an ordinary man's life. But for Obama, the fantasy was shattered abruptly, its status as fantasy revealed. But the fantasy was not exposed to his classmates. For Obama's father was charming, charismatic – and enigmatic (enigma, after all, is the prerequisite for charm and charisma). Obama describes himself as petrified when his father visits his classroom to talk about Africa, but the students and teachers are wowed by him. Indeed, the narrative of *Dreams* is driven by the mystery of Obama's father's charm. "If my father hadn't exactly disappointed me, he remained something unknown, something volatile and vaguely threatening" (63). Obama's fantasy is undone and yet everyone else is entranced: a mystery remains. It is clear that the father has the power to entrance, has charisma – gifts of the gods – so Obama's quest continues.

While Obama describes his encounters with black classmates in his youth, the only black grown-up he encounters is Frank, a drinking buddy and longtime friend of his white grandfather. Frank and his grandfather both grew up in Kansas. After a career as an avant-garde poet, Frank occupies the dark recesses of Hawaiian life, sporting a gray Afro, frequenting the red light district, and haunting dive bars, reminiscing. One night, after Obama's grandfather accuses his



grandmother of racism, the high school-aged Obama seeks Frank out. In a cinematically narrated scene, Obama finds Frank's house: "Inside, the light was on, and I could see Frank sitting in his overstuffed chair, a book of poetry on his lap, his reading glasses slipping down his nose. I sat in the car, watching him for a time, then finally got out and tapped on the door" (89). Frank answers with "Want a drink?" Frank soon reveals that Obama's grandfather, who presents himself as racially enlightened, is from the perspective of a black contemporary like Frank deeply racist. The point is brought home when Frank notes that Obama's grandfather considered his black childhood maid "A regular part of the family" and Frank concludes, "You can't blame Stan for what he is... He's basically a good man. But he doesn't *know* me... He *can't* know me, not the way I know him" (90). Frank goes on to explain that the capacity to know a black man comes from the experience of humiliation, and fear. Where the grandfather might fall asleep in Frank's house, Frank could never fall asleep in the grandfather's house – because of that fear. Obama presents this encounter as a literally earth-shattering revelation. As he returned home, "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" (91). Obama had imagined his grandfather serving as a substitute father, not black but attuned to the problems faced by blacks. Frank reminds Obama of the absence not only of his father but of his black father, a father who could understand and communicate the texture of the social world to his son – that is to say, a father who could fulfill the proper role of father. In the absence of this, Obama is alone in the universe, his belief in anything beyond himself gone, a reluctant atheist, as it were.<sup>5</sup>

The result is self-destructive behavior. Obama gets into drink and drugs. Billie Holiday's music in the background represents the possibility of tragic decline. According to the narration, Obama did drugs not to prove his blackness, but to escape it. He wanted "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” (93-94). From his youthful perspective, all difference was voided in the world of drugs. “Everybody was welcome into the club of disaffection” (94). To illustrate this, Obama adds, “Nobody asked you whether your father was a fat-cat executive who cheated on his wife or some laid-off joe who slapped you around whenever he bothered to come home” (94). Because of his conversation with Frank, Obama realized that his white family didn’t succeed in their role of ushering him into the social order. They couldn’t do that, because they would never understand the experience of being black in America. With the possibility of entering into the social order closed off, Obama turned to an antinomian world, of drink and drugs. In that world, the identity of your father didn’t matter because there was no role for the father, no aspiration to be inducted into the adult order, or to become a father oneself. Without father, or God, there was no need to learn the rules.

And yet, inexplicably, Obama did move on; this was only a phase. He offers no explanation. He records his mother’s concern that nothing would come of him (he was in high school, apparently uninterested in college). Then, suddenly, things change. “I had graduated without mishap, was accepted into several respected schools” (96). It seems significant that, in a narrative driven by posing and answering questions, a transformation occurs that is not even allowed to present itself as in need of explanation. Even though Obama hedges, saying that he was “just going through the motions” at first at college, the antinomianism he had just described instantly vanishes. The implicit response to the unasked explanatory question seems to be: he found black people. At Occidental College, he found black friends, who he vividly describes in the narrative, and he was involved in black student life. By the end of his studies, he begins to resemble his father. Obama’s mother and sister come to visit him during college, and he

precisely re-enacts the behavior of his father during his father's only visit to the youthful Obama (although the narrative voice is curiously silent on the resemblance). When Obama's father visited, he tells the youthful Obama to stop watching *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (!) and "Go in your room and study now" (67) – causing much protest from Obama's mother and grandparents, and the implicit realization that his father's authority was precarious and contested. A decade later, Obama relates that he "scolded Maya [his younger half-sister] for spending one evening watching TV instead of reading the novels I'd bought for her" (123). He also told his mother that the NGO she was working for perpetuated neo-colonialism. In short, he was struggling to become his father, or to occupy the role of father, to not only be an authority but to represent the normative order.

Yet at that point, in college, Obama was only striving to imitate the human father he vaguely knew; he was still distant from a divine father, from the theopaternal. For that, he had to become an instrument of justice, to make right the whole world, not only his family – and so bring redemption. According to Obama, the "idea of organizing" he held "was a promise of redemption" (135). Through bringing members of a community together to build power that would allow community members themselves to address their collective problems Obama envisioned making the world right – that is, fulfilling the theopaternal role. Moreover, Obama's college encounters with youthful black nationalists and radicals had left him empty and unfulfilled, still at a distance from the African American community. Obama presents organizing as a means to understand African American identity in a way that rejects crude ancestral or blood ties. "Through organizing, through shared sacrifice, membership had been earned" (135). Sacrifice leads to redemption, and for Obama this means both upholding the normative order (i.e., advancing justice) and claiming his biological father's legacy. As yet, however, this

sacrifice and redemption goes unnamed; it remains thoroughly secularized, just as Obama's desire for his father remains fully sublimated.

The longest section of *Dreams from My Father* chronicles Obama's experiences as a community organizer in Chicago. The final pages of the previous section, about Obama's childhood and young adulthood, are taken up with a dream about his father that makes Obama awake in tears. In the Chicago section of the book, again narrated cinematically, Obama faces obstacles, learns lessons, and has his heart warmed by seeing ordinary people realize that they can wield power to advance the interests of their communities. In particular, he surrounds himself with practical, working class black women – though he shyly denies any romantic entanglements (in his epilogue, he describes Michelle as similar to these women). The women he meets have common sense and good hearts; the men he meets are powerful but tragically flawed. The women need saving; the men fail to save them. The final chapter in Part Two revolves around two such men, Harold Washington and Jeremiah Wright. In both Obama seems to find potential father substitutes (at this point his biological father had died in Kenya, his story still largely un-narrated). In both, Obama sees flawed paths to redemption, one through electoral politics and one through Afro-Christian religiosity. Both are implicitly contrasted to the redemption Obama is pursuing through community organizing. By the end of the chapter, Obama aligns himself with Wright, and he decides to leave his community organizing work to pursue law school, which he understands to be a stepping stone to electoral politics. In other words, Obama understands himself to be growing up: he realizes that the men he admires are flawed, but he gains the courage to move away from the good-hearted women of “the community” to become a man himself, to become religious and to become political, knowing

that it means embracing his imperfections, knowing that redemption is only possible in a fallen world.

Harold Washington, the first black mayor elected in Chicago, had captured the hearts of Chicago's black community, with fantasy. Or at least that is how Obama depicts him. His image – much like Obama's today – graced the walls of barbershops, a point of unity in a difficult, gloomy black world. Washington's election had offered "these people a new idea of themselves." Obama concludes, "Like my idea of organizing, [Washington] held out an offer of collective redemption" (158). While Obama does not say much about Washington the man (an opacity reminiscent of the way Obama himself is now depicted), the effects of Washington's ascendancy are mixed. It makes Obama's organizing work harder because some of the individuals who Obama aspires to gather together to build community now defer to Washington and the black officials he appointed. When Washington visits a project that Obama's ordinary-women leaders had put together, the women are so star-struck by Washington that they forget to ask for his commitment for continuing assistance in their work. When Washington dies, the coalition of ostensibly social justice-minded political leaders that supported him quickly collapses. Obama explicitly relates Washington to his own father: "More than anything, I wanted Harold to succeed; like my real father, the mayor and his achievements seemed to mark out what was possible; his gifts, his power, measured my own hopes" (230). Like Obama's father, Washington is charismatic – "full of grace and good humor." Like a spiritual leader, "Harold's presence consoled, as Will's Jesus consoled, as Rafiq's nationalism consoled." But ultimately, the father-figure is charismatic because lacking: "Beneath the radiance of Harold's victory ... nothing seemed to change... I wondered whether he, too, felt a prisoner of fate" (231).

Who could escape the confines of fate if not a minister of the Lord? Obama's religious conversion marks the finale of Part Two of *Dreams from My Father*. It marks the end of Obama's quest for redemption through community organizing and the transition to his journey to Africa, to finally find his human father. Obama acknowledging his relationship with his heavenly father is curiously positioned as the prerequisite for establishing a relationship with his deceased human father. The conversion is foreshadowed by the narrative's depiction of Obama realizing that he is faithless; in his words, "I was a heretic" (163). He reflects further, "Or worse – for even a heretic must believe in something, if nothing more than the truth of his own doubt." Surrounding himself with the good-hearted, common sense women of his community organization was not enough. It was love without risk, affirmation without critique – critique that could only come from a representative of the normative order, from a male minister, who turned out to be Jeremiah Wright. In Wright's church, Obama found a mix of reverence for African heritage, black spiritual sensibility, and progressive, critical reflection on issues affecting blacks in Chicago and beyond. But Obama was still skeptical, even after talking to Wright one on one. It is not until after Harold Washington dies that Obama decides to attend a service at Wright's church, the departure of one substitute father fueling the quest for another. The topic of the sermon was "The Audacity of Hope," and Wright, according to Obama, described various places of suffering and despair, but adds that some (in this case the biblical Hannah) look upwards to the heavens – "She dares to hope ... She has the audacity ... to make music ... and praise God" (293). As Obama narrates it, the congregation begins to shout and clap, performing their hope. "I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians in the lion's den, Ezekiel's field of dry bones. These stories – of survival, and freedom, and hope – became our story, my story" (294). The chapter concludes

with Obama realizing that there are tears on his face. He realizes this after a boy sitting next to him hands him a tissue. Obama has accepted a heavenly father, and he has also accepted his own capacity to be a father.

In Kenya Obama meets his father's family, and he hears stories about his father – or rather, in the narrative construction, he discovers the truth about his father, for the first time gaining solid knowledge about him rather than just fleeting images and dreams. One of his first experiences in Kenya, at the airport, is the pleasure of hearing his family name pronounced correctly, and recognized. An airport employee searching for his lost luggage knew his father: their families were friends. Obama meets various relations and quasi-relations. When he learns that the paternity of his half-brother Bernard is less than certain, he wonders if his feelings towards him should change. Then he looks at the masses of young black men at a bus stop: “I suddenly imagined Bernard's face on all of them, multiplied across the landscape, across continents. Hungry, striving, desperate men, all of them my brothers...” (336). In Africa Obama does not find a living father; he finds a national father, or a racial father, and so a nation, or race, of brothers. He also learns that his father was himself a son, that the only person that Obama's father (“the Old Man”) feared was Obama's grandfather. This was the grandfather who had worked for the British and alienated the rest of his family, who had been strong and opinionated - perhaps, like Obama's father, more strong than wise. “What your grandfather respected was strength. Discipline. This is why, even though he learned many of the white man's ways, he always remained strict about Luo traditions. Respect for elders. Respect for authority. Order and custom in all his affairs” (407).

The father of his father, too, was a locus of normativity. This grandfather had converted to Christianity for a time, but found that it undermined his sense of order and authority with

“such ideas as mercy towards your enemies, or that this man Jesus could wash away a man’s sins” (407). The grandfather wanted a purer God, a closer unity of God and father, and this he found in Islam. Father and grandfather Obama purified the role of the father pathologically, and so caused problems for themselves. Each saw the father figure as unequivocal seat of authority, disregarding social norms that would temper this authority. Obama’s father purified this role even further, abandoning Islam for atheism. As Obama’s half-sister puts it, the Old Man (their father) never understood the role of Big Man. The Big Man accumulates authority through social networks, favors, relations, and so on; the Old Man imagined that authority could be had with a Harvard degree. His downfall came when he did not respect his bosses while he was working for the government, and the quintessential Big Man, Kenyatta, the ruler of the country, banished him from government employment.

The first chapter of *Dreams* in some ways parallels the last. A family history is told, of personalities and relationships and migrations. But the first chapter is a transparent history, a white history: the story of Obama’s mother’s family, told in the narrator’s voice. In the final chapter we finally learn of Obama’s father’s family, not from the narrator but in the words of a relative, reconstructed as if from the mouth of an authentic Hollywood African. But one example: “Well, this was a very serious matter, especially when your grandfather refused to return the shaman’s potions. The next day, the council of elders gathered beneath a tree to resolve the dispute” (411). Ironically, what Obama attempts to frame as the climax of his story, the moment when the mystery is revealed, his prose performs as American fantasy. A few pages later, in the Epilogue, Obama reports a conversation with a Kenyan teacher who says that Americans are always disappointed in Africa because they come seeking a fantasy. The teacher shares that she wants her daughter not to be “authentically African,” a fantasy, but to be



“authentically herself” (435). However, the performance of Obama’s narration suggests that the two are one: the fantasy of the authentically African, with a council of elders resolving disputes under a tree, makes it possible for Obama to be authentically himself, or what he takes to be authentically himself. The whirlwind of the theopaternal dialectic is complete, but its completion is in fantasy.

Obama has solved the riddle of his paternity, or so he thinks, just as the finale of Obama’s community organizing narrative was to solve the riddle of theology. In both cases, Obama traverses the fantasy: acknowledging fantasy as fantasy, impure and adulterated, while also acknowledging the continuing force and practical importance of the fantasy. And this theopaternal dialectic has political consequences. *Dreams from My Father* includes scattered references to policy positions anticipating the political future of Obama; more often it contains broader suggestions about the political. In his epilogue he concludes that law is, on the one hand, “glorified accounting that serves to regulate the affairs of those who have power – and that all too often seeks to explain, to those who do not, the ultimate wisdom and justness of their condition” (437). On the other hand, “law is also memory; the law also records a long-running conversation, a nation arguing with its conscience” (437). This precisely encapsulates the theopolitical consequences of the theopaternal for Obama. Law, which is normativity abstracted and institutionalized, is at once disappointingly hollow and warmly robust. The father or God is absent and flawed but also embracing and potent. To fixate on either extreme is a mark of immaturity.

This dialectic animates *The Audacity of Hope*, the book Obama wrote to consolidate the “rising star” status that the media offered him after his keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention – and to further his presidential ambitions. A mix of policy prescriptions

and anecdotes, the book presents each issue as eliciting two extreme responses, one that kills the father and the other that recreates him. Obama, unlike myriad other politicians, has grown up: he has looked for and found his father, and his God, so that theopaternal fantasies no longer skew his political vision – or at least this is what he wants the reader to believe.

In a chapter on “Values,” Obama presents his time living with his white grandparents as a lesson in the proper relationship to authority. His grandfather would impose “an endless series of petty and arbitrary rules,” which at first Obama would try to argue against (with his “talent for rhetoric”). The young Obama would have better reasons than his grandfather, and his grandfather would become “flustered” and “angry.” But then the high school-aged Obama “started thinking about the struggles and disappointments [his grandfather] had seen in his life” and “started to appreciate his need to feel respected in his own home” (67). He realized that there are times when it is best to defer to authority even when one thinks one has the best reasons; there are times when tradition requires reverence. As Obama notes, such realizations are “what we all must go through if we are to grow up” (67). And they are what we must bring to politics. A few pages later Obama writes of the necessary reverence for the Constitution, exemplified by Senator Byrd. Obama is dismissive of both “the comfort offered by the strict constructionist” and the freedom offered by critical legal theorists, for whom the original text does not serve as an anchor (on his account). The latter entails “the freedom of the relativist, the rule breaker, the teenager who has discovered his parents are imperfect and has learned to play one off of the other – the freedom of the apostate” (92). Here we find the theopaternal co-articulated with the theopolitical: the desires and pathologies elicited by divine and human fatherhood, rejection (the young Obama’s rebellion) and substitution (the grandfather’s petty rules), are exactly mirrored in the realm of politics (the relativist and the strict constructionist, respectively).

This is also how Obama narrates his loss in the 2000 Congressional election, and his ultimate victory in the 2004 Senate race. He had been over-confident, perhaps elevating himself into the role of fantasy father (now he was a father, with two young daughters). Afterwards there was “denial, anger, bargaining, despair” and, eventually, “I arrived at acceptance – of my limits, and, in a way, my mortality” (4). Mortality and immortality slip easily between the personal and the political here. Acceptance and mortality lead to growth: “it was this acceptance, I think, that allowed me to come up with the thoroughly cockeyed idea of running for the United States Senate” (5). As a member of the Senate, what Obama particularly admires is the general atmosphere of collegiality among his more senior colleagues – which, it would seem, is premised on the sort of mortal acceptance that Obama himself attained. There were friendships between Democrats and Republicans of this older generation, which Obama reports (from an “old Washington hand”) was caused by the shared experience of the Second World War, an experience of mortality and acceptance if ever there was one. Without that shared experience of war, Washington has become bitterly partisan. Obama pauses to note what was elided in the “old days” by this collegiality, such as stalled civil rights legislation, McCarthyism, the absence of women, and income inequality. But as he does so often, Obama notes hesitations and objections only to inoculate his narrative from their force: the tone remains one of nostalgia. Indeed, this is a characteristic rhetorical strategy of the theopaternal dialectic, making explicit its limitations as part of its positive claim. This older generation of politicians functions as a god-father to be revered but also to be contextualized.

After the World War Two generation, according to Obama, U.S. politics became polarized because of what happened during the sixties. The critique of the “Establishment” leveled by youth during that decade was either embraced by politicians or it was rejected by

politicians who attempted to create a new Establishment, a new god-father. This is the psychodrama played out by Democrats and Republicans today, in Obama's telling. The future president assures us that he can appreciate both sides because the psychodrama occurred in his life as well. He "sought justification" for his "adolescent rebellion" in the Black Panthers and the Rolling Stones. "If I had no immediate reasons to pursue revolution, I decided nevertheless that in style and attitude I, too, could be a rebel, unconstrained by the received wisdom of the over-thirty crowd" (30). But this was just a phase, Obama assures the reader, and he grew out of it. He writes, "[B]y the time I enrolled in college, I'd begun to see how any challenge to convention harbored within it the possibility of its own excesses and its own orthodoxy" (30). He now considers that rebellious phase one of "self-indulgence and self-destructiveness." He was able to overcome it by returning to "the values my mother and grandparents [i.e., his white relatives] had taught me" (30) – a return to orthodoxy, as it were. In this way Obama was able to understand why Ronald Reagan and his "*Father Knows Best* pose" appealed to many voters. Obama could remember before his rebellion how he had liked the Hawaii military bases "with their tidy streets and well-oiled machinery, the crisp uniforms and crisper salutes" (31). He, too, had been susceptible to the appeal of father substitutes, to the wisdom (fantasy) that father knows best.

In addition to chapters on such topics as the Constitution, economics ("Opportunity"), foreign affairs, values, and family, *The Audacity of Hope* includes a chapter on faith and a chapter on race. In this framing, Obama precisely mirrors the contemporary tendency, which I asserted has its origins in neoliberalism, to treat religion and race as two differences among many. Of course each difference is different, with specific choices available and specific tints to those choices, but each can be assembled in rows of boxes to choose, choices for the contemporary consumer of difference and identity – where identity is composed of a certain

pattern of chosen differences. Faith is important to Obama, and is important to the image of Obama. He is a Democrat who is not afraid to speak about religion: this is the image he embraces. Presenting the usual theopaternal dialectic, Obama frames liberals as rejecting the god-father, conservatives as uncritically affirming His authority. In doing so, he overlays his own parents' religious convictions: his father was raised Muslim but turned atheist; his mother was a spiritual seeker, taking the young Obama to Christian churches, Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines, "and ancient Hawaiian burial sites" (204). But Obama went to Catholic and then Muslim schools, encountering religiosity with stronger commitment. Obama rejects all of these options, including his mother's "professed secularism." He does, however, find in his mother a spiritual sense which she herself was unable to articulate. Obama writes that "she possessed an abiding sense of wonder, a reverence for life and its precious, transitory nature," and "she worked mightily to instill in me the values that many Americans learn in Sunday school: honesty, empathy, discipline, delayed gratification, and hard work" (205). It was her spiritual nature that "sustained me despite the absence of a father": it was worship for God in everything but name. And it was her spiritual nature, according to Obama, that made him study "political philosophy, looking for both a language and systems of action that could help build community and make justice real" (206). At the same time, Obama affirms, "My fierce ambitions might have been fueled by my father – by my knowledge of his achievements and failures, by my unspoken desire to somehow earn his love, and by my resentments and anger towards him" (205). Here again we have a co-articulation of the theopaternal and the theopolitics, spirituality and fatherhood jointly making a certain politics possible.

The chapter on race in *The Audacity of Hope*, like the rest of the book, contains little unexpected or controversial. There are still problems facing racial minorities in America,

according to Obama, but those problems need carefully tailored, smart solutions, not solutions that simply continue past practice or are fueled by resentment. In this text, as in a number of speeches, Obama calls for the black community to take responsibility and to embrace certain values – a position that Obama associates with the mainstream of the black community, as found “around kitchen tables, in barbershops, and after church” (254).<sup>6</sup> Neither the position of white liberals nor of white conservatives, according to Obama, this middle road appreciates the difficulties faced by black Americans but also recognizes the importance of a work ethic, two parent households, and sexual restraint. Obama’s prescription: “Community-based institutions, particularly the historically black church, have to help families reinvigorate in young people a reverence for educational achievement, encourage healthier lifestyles, and reenergize traditional social norms surrounding the joys and obligations of fatherhood” (245). (He continues, writing that deeper than these considerations is the need for a robust American economy, and this would benefit people of all races).

At this point the theopaternal dialectic strains so much as to become little more than raw ideology. The account of human-divine fatherhood that seemed natural, that was so engrained in conventional wisdom, loses plausibility when considered against the background of race in the United States. With more than a million black men in prisons, with many more under the supervision of the criminal justice system in some way, with many more unable to work, vote, or find places to live because of criminal convictions, with many more under the supervision of the court system through child support proceedings, with many more terrorized by police harassment on a daily basis, commending the “middle path” of healthy fatherhood seems absurd. Instead of moderation there should be righteous indignation. Such a temperament does not force a choice of

one of two extremes. Such a temperament asks why the issue is framed in a way that presents these two options. Then it clears the table, and ponders new ways of framing the conversation.

The institution of fatherhood for black men is systematically undermined by state apparatus which treat black men as incapable of fatherhood. Black fatherhood is always already under erasure, for it is incapable of fulfilling its paternal function of bringing a child into a world of social norms. If the father himself is but a second class citizen, if that (the Thirteenth Amendment prohibiting slavery makes an exception for prisoners), the father can never be an authority, can never fulfill his role as representative of the social order for his son. Or, in theopaternal terms, if God is a black father, God is always qualitatively different from a world that can only recognize white fatherhood. To recognize God as black father is to recognize an authority illegible to worldly authorities, to acknowledge the provisionality of all worldly authorities. It is to refuse the comfort offered by the array of options presented with such confidence by the world. As it happens, that is precisely the way that a major strand of the Christian tradition understands God, qualitatively different from humans – we might say: not as a father, but as a black father.

This is what Obama tragically misses in his self-narrations. He is searching for a black father but can only accept a white father, contaminating his theopolitical vision. He is looking for a figure who cannot exist, because black fatherhood is continually undermined, illegible. But for his story to have a happy ending, for the quest to be fulfilled, he must find a father. The father he finds gives satisfaction, gives meaning to his existence, simplistically. Believing that fathers can be found, that it just takes persistent searching and cathartic tribulations, Obama's desire and rage become quietude, become cold and critical analysis of the options on the table. Such is the white theopaternal-theopolitical, the God-father whose normative force is in continuity with the

authorities of the world, where piety involves practical wisdom towards better justice rather than a leap of faith in the midst of terrible injustice. Here is a stark difference concerning how to envision movement towards the common good.

This is what Frank, Obama's black Hawaiian sage, understood, so unsettling the young Obama. What Frank thinks makes people capable of knowing, of understanding, is that "They've seen their fathers humiliated" (90). That nugget is what makes Obama feel alone, what makes him turn to drink and drugs. An absent father, or a reconstituted father, is not a humiliated father. The white paternal dialectic, of rejection and re-embrace, is premised on a father who is flawed, but flawed because the world is flawed, his tragedy mirroring the tragedy of the world. The humiliated father, in contrast, is humiliated not because of his flaws but because of his race, and so offers no straightforward path to redemption (such as acceptance of the world as it is). Obama takes this nugget of wisdom from Frank, but then ignores it, returning to the embrace of his white mother, searching for his father through her eyes. From this white perspective, Obama's father and his father's father can only be understood as pathological in their response to the Americans and the British, respectively. These men's apparent stubbornness, their apparent commitment to their own authority over social norms, appears vicious. From Frank's perspective, in contrast, it appears as the reality of black manhood, of black fatherhood. Obama's father and father's father express, rather than repress, the oxymoronic status of the black father, the way fatherhood is always put under erasure for black men. The result that Obama is unable to see: the wisdom of the world, from this black theopaternal perspective, is idolatrous, a systematic distortion of what is actually the case – just as the black father and the white world are always out of sync. The humiliated God, crucified on the cross, is always out of sync with social norms of the day. The idolatry of the theopaternal is the ideology of the theopolitical. Obama's



misunderstood theopaternity results in pragmatism; understood rightly, it would result in ideology critique.

What does this mean for practical politics, or for the presidency of Barack Obama? Rather than criticizing Obama's advocacy of a certain position, this chapter questions how Obama goes about approaching a policy issue. For example, regarding the health care debate of Obama's first term, some liberals were frustrated that Obama did not pursue a nationalized, "single payer" option. However, the path Obama chose was perfectly reasonable: after much advice, analysis, and political calculation, Obama concluded that it was the most likely path to ensuring universal access to health care. But relying on advice, analysis, and political calculation does not necessarily move towards justice, does not necessarily advance the common good. Many people think that it does. These are comfortable people, well trained at swimming in ideological waters. Polemically, these are *white* people. Obama has resources to approach politics differently, but he has ignored those resources. *Black* experience, religious and paternal, would motivate bracketing even the best reasons in the service of justice. It would motivate stepping back from political questions for a moment to ask moral questions, and using those moral questions to frame a new political debate. Obama has refused such an approach.

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<sup>1</sup> See Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 2004) and Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), though both neglect religion.

<sup>2</sup> Most notably Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973) and Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983). See also *God as Father?* Eds. Johannes Baptist Metz and Edward Schillebeeckx (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Janet R. Jakobsen, "Sex + Freedom = Regulation," *Social Text* 23:3-4 (2005): 285-308.

<sup>4</sup> Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004); Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> On this mourning for an absent black father, or absent black past, and on the ideology critical potential of its refusal, see Stephen Best, "On Failing to Make the Past Present," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73:2 (2012): 453-474.

<sup>6</sup> Obama made this point most famously in a Father's Day address to an African American church in Chicago in 2008: <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0608/11094.html>.