Critical Essays on Barack Obama

Critical Essays on Barack Obama: Re-affirming the Hope, Re-vitalizing the Dream

Edited by

Melvin B. Rahming

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To Mother Honora Wells

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword xi
Delores P. Aldridge, Ph.D.

Acknowledgments xv

Introduction xvii
Moving Toward the Void: The Call of Spirit in Barack Obama's Writings and Career
Melvin B. Rahming, Morehouse College

PART I: THE SPIRITUAL FULCRUM OF PERSONAL AND REPRESENTATIONAL SUBJECTIVITY

Chapter One 3
"In No Other Nation is My Story Even Possible": Collective Narrative, Self-Narrative, and Prosthetic Memory in *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*
Albert Turner, Morehouse College

Chapter Two 23
Barack Obama and the Literary Dimensions of His Writings
James Tsaaior, Pan-African University

Chapter Three 41
Obama, The Nobel Laureate of Peace: A Portrait of a Man and His Word
Leah Creque-Harris, Morehouse College

Chapter Four 57
Obama's Autobiographical Writing, Critical Race Theory, and the Racializing Gaze
Ignatius López-Calvo, University of California, Merced

Chapter Five 83
Understanding the Young Obama
Kenton Rambsy, University of Kansas

PART II: DISMANTLING HEGEMONIC STRUCTURES OF WHITENESS

Chapter Six 95
Daring to Hope for a Post-Racial Nation
Stephany Rose Spaulding,
University of Colorado at Colorado Springs

Chapter Seven 109
Barack Obama and the New Black Father
R. L'Heureux Lewis, City College of New York-CUNY
Maria S. Johnson, University of Michigan

Chapter Eight 127
Obama's 'Whiteness' and the Politics of Recognition: Hybridizing
White Spaces and Problematizing Blackness
Emine Lale Demirturk, Bilkent University

Chapter Nine 139
Obama and Africa: "Race" and Reparations
Michael Janis, Morehouse College

PART III: THE SIGNIFYING PRESIDENT?--AXIOMATIC AND AXIOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO OBAMA'S ELECTION

Chapter Ten 165
Revisiting Obama's Proposition of Change: A Structural Perspective
Alexander O. Miller, Independent Scholar

Chapter Eleven 183
Barack Obama's "Blackness"
Brenda Flanagan, Davidson College

Chapter Twelve 193
The Price of the Presidency—At Least for a Black Man
Daniel Omotosho Black, Clark Atlanta University

Chapter Thirteen 201
"I'm LeBron, Baby": Perceptions, Positions and Projections
of the Presidential Election of Barack Obama on African
American Male Identity
Imani Scott, Savannah College of Art and Design

Chapter Fourteen 221
What Does Barack Obama Mean?
Cindy Lutenbacher, Morehouse College

PART IV: BRIDGING INTERSTITIAL SPACES BETWEEN RACISM, CLASS, COMMERCE AND LAW

Chapter Fifteen 235
The Emperor's New Clothes: Identifying Racism in Obama's Post-racial Society
Frederick Gooding, Jr., Georgetown University

Chapter Sixteen 255
Of Second-Class Citizenry and the "*Othering*" of President Barack Obama
Tara A. Miller, Morehouse College

Chapter Seventeen 265
Silent Signifin': The Collision of Fashion and Politics on HBCU Campuses in the Wake of the 2008 United States Presidential Election
Alison Ligon, Morehouse College

Chapter Eighteen 277
Global Trade: A Caribbean Economic Response to Failing Economies
Nicholas Weekes, Cornell University
Alvin Thomas, University of Michigan

Chapter Nineteen 285
Law and American Policy in the Age of Obama
Joseph Whitfield, Washington University

Index 309

FOREWORD

The election of Barack Obama as President of the United States in 2008 was an unprecedented political event that sparked a great deal of interest in the United States and around the world. Because of the election's interdisciplinary and transcultural implications, it is not surprising that the field of "Obama Studies" is rapidly gaining academic force and currency or that much has been written about Obama by both his advocates and his detractors. Without a doubt, Obama's own memoirs (*The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* and *Dreams from My Father: a Story of Race and Inheritance*), both authored before Obama's presidential election, have already assumed their place as the most important works in the field. The reason—apart from the works' literary, philosophical, cross-cultural and socio-political merits—is that the memoirs, especially *The Audacity of Hope*, call for a new kind of politics—a politics that builds upon those shared understandings that bind us together as Americans. In addition, in both books, Obama shares his vision of America's place in the world, his thoughts about his family life, aspects of his political vision, and America's hope for a bright future.

I dare say that this current study, edited by Melvin B. Rahming, is one of the most significant works emerging from this rapidly growing field. The volume is itself an inspirational one at a time when there are so many challenges to (and possibilities for) America. Rahming provides an intriguing introduction which grabs the reader's attention by creating within the reader a desire to drink deeply from the wellspring of critical ideas in the book. Moreover, the reader finds an array of dynamic and well written essays that capture the spirit of Barack Obama's writings and career. As one might well expect of a book of this kind, the essayists represent an interdisciplinary and multi-cultural spectrum of thought, condense multiple theoretic perspectives and approaches, interrogate many attributes of the Obama himself, and meditate on the implications of Obama's presidency for America and the world.

The book is divided into four substantive parts and consists of nineteen chapters. In the introductory chapter, Rahming situates the articles against a theoretic backdrop and ascribes to them a collective, though unintended, spiritual function. The other chapters in this section explore the personal and representational subjectivity of Barack Obama as revealed by 1) an

examination of the literary, intellectual and cultural dimensions of his writings and speeches; 2) the application of various critical approaches—including critical race theory—to his oeuvre; 3) meditations on of his sociopolitical vision; and 4) by a probing of Obama's childhood experiences for ways in which these experiences seem to have shaped his adulthood and to have anticipated later theoretical analyses of his career. **Part I**, fascinating in its discursive methodology and in its denunciation of structures of white privilege, is well appointed for preparing the reader for **Part II**, which anticipates the dismantling of such hegemonic structures. Indeed, this book is, at its core, a many-sided insistence that entitlement-based structures of whiteness must be abolished if fundamental "change" is to come to America—if, that is, America is to embrace what I refer to as the status of a cultural democracy. Put another way, the writers of **Part II** generally concede that any hope for a post-racial America resides within this dismantling of hegemonic structures. Such a dismantling would also assist, as one critic argues, Obama's emergence as a new model of black fatherhood. Much of the support for this perception of Obama as a fatherhood model is derived from analyses of fatherhood narratives, Obama's autobiographical reflections, his political observations, his public stands on the issue of fatherhood, and—not to be under-emphasized—his public interactions with his daughters. Interestingly enough, **Part II** ends with a theoretic examination of the possible implications of Obama's presidency on the "Race and Reparations" issue.

The overall import of **Part I and Part II** is that the essays explore Obama's politics of recognition against a backdrop of hybridizing white spaces and problematizing blackness. In the process, they provoke the reader to raise serious political, cultural and psychological questions of individual and national identity, questions that are addressed head-on in the essays in **Part III**: How, for example, can a young African American male understand and embrace the notion of blackness as problematic when, in fact, a black man has ascended to the most powerful political position in the world? Given that popular definitions of black manhood have historically militated against the achievement of his own possibilities, how does a black male accommodate Obama's—and America's—monumental accomplishment within such limiting constructions of black manhood? Moreover, how does this focus on black/white issues illuminate the social and cultural concerns of other races, genders, and classes in and outside of America?

More specifically, the critics in **Part III** clear a space for black men of diverse ages and backgrounds to speak directly to the meaning which Obama's presidency holds for their perceptions of themselves. In so doing,

the critics encapsulate the axiomatic and axiological deliberations of these black men without intruding on their subjectivity. The analyses in this section constitute a major contribution in that they adopt a manner that is often overlooked or under-assessed in scholarly articles. In the past, axiomatic approaches to individual responses have been largely regarded as self-evident. As the interviewers in three of the essays make clear, graphs or charts should not be the only acceptable approaches when one attempts to examine responses to the election of the first Black president of the United States of America.

Like the axiomatic approaches to the election responses, axiological approaches constitute another valuable assessment tool. Essays employing this latter approach focus on the study of the nature, types, and criteria of values and of value judgments surrounding such an approach. Both the axiomatic and axiological approaches, then, seek to broaden and deepen the field of Obama scholarship. It is also worth noting that one critic undertakes a phenomenological analysis of the men's responses while another supplies a structural analysis of Obama's proposition of change. Furthermore, although many journalists have speculated about the emotional or psychological toll of the presidency (before and since the election), perhaps no one has done so as eloquently as Daniel Black does in "The Price of the Presidency—at least for a Black Man."

Appropriately, the essays in **Part IV** further extend the field of our associations with regard to the Obama presidency, while at the same time bridging some of the theoretic and disciplinary gaps exposed by the previous essays—gaps between issues of racism, class, commerce, and law. In pursuing a nexus between fundamental societal structures, **Part IV** emphasizes the nature of national consciousness and the Obama Administration's potential for re-vitalizing the American Dream—the potential, that is, for reorganizing American space. While the essayists in this collection vary in the degree of attention given to the issue of white privilege, all concur that the issue of race, despite its historical and fallacious invention as a dehumanizing ideology, must be factored into any serious discussion of ways to defeat racist agendas and to issue in a the much-envisioned cultural democracy.

The titles of the Chapters included in Part IV—for example, "The Emperor's New Clothes: Identifying Racism in Obama's Post-racial Society" and "Of Second-Class Citizenry and the 'Othering' of President Barack Obama"—are particularly indicative of the discursive nature of the collection itself and suggestive of the essays' ability to speak to each other over the divides of age, race, and class. Of particular interest in this regard is "Silent Signifyin': The Collision of Fashion and Politics on HBCU

Campuses in the Wake of the 2008 United States," which appropriately focuses attention on Obama's influence on black male and female undergraduate students. This article made me recall the occasion, one week following Obama's election, when I presented the *Benjamin E. Mays Distinguished Lecture* at Morehouse College. My lecture, which was entitled "Cultural Democracy: The Promise and Challenge in a Changing America," was met with a litany of questions, most of which centered on responses to and perceptions of the Obama phenomenon and its impact on the students' dreams and aspirations. **The occasion is worth mentioning here not only because of the dynamic nature of the students' involvement but also because, in retrospect, the student's questions underscored the need for and merits of a collection of essays like this one.**

The conclusion of Rahming's introductory chapter, "Moving Toward the Void: The Call of Spirit in Barack Obama's Writings and Career," is most important in that it also suggests a critical framework that is not necessarily spiritual (or spirit-centered), thus freeing the reader from any previously implied concessions to a specific or discrete mode of interpretation. Thus, despite Rahming's successful attempt to impute to the essays a spiritual function, his spirit-centered approach is only one of many other approaches that can be applied to the text, even to the individual essays. As Rahming concludes, the essays also encourage dual, simultaneously conflicting perspectives as the critic probes for meaning by trying to negotiate and cohere "the very structures that would appear to render such meaning problematic and elusive."

As a social scientist who has focused on race, class, and gender issues for decades and who has given much thought to the life and career of Barack Obama (and to his influence throughout the globe), I find this to be a fascinating work that should attract the attention of intelligent readers from a broad range of traditions and disciplines—from history to literature, social sciences, philosophy, religion, spirituality, politics, culture studies, and critical race theory. The book should also be of interest to people of all ages, classes, cultures and political traditions—anybody who wishes to be more knowledgeable about the national and global dialogue focusing on Obama. More than most other books (about Obama) that I have read, this book manages to speak boldly to the reader's mind without asking her or him to ignore the impulses of the human heart.

—Delores P. Aldridge, PHD
Grace Towns Hamilton Distinguished Professor of Sociology and African American Studies
Emory University

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Finally, I wish to say "Thank you!" to Barack Obama himself for awakening me from my political somnolence.

INTRODUCTION

MOVING TOWARD THE VOID: THE CALL OF SPIRIT IN OBAMA'S WRITINGS AND CAREER

MELVIN B. RAHMING, PH.D.
MOREHOUSE COLLEGE

For millions of people in the United States and in other parts of the world, the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States teems with spiritual significance. This realization came to me and, simultaneously, I think, to about fifteen other people as we participated in the 10th International Conference on Caribbean Literature (ICCL), which was being held in Buea, Cameroon on November 4-6, 2008. Following the events of the first evening of the conference, we had gathered around midnight to monitor the USA presidential election returns from the intimacy of the lobby of the Capitol Hotel, nestled snugly at the foot of the Cameroonian mountain range. Ours was a small but fairly diverse gathering, there being among us persons from Asia, Africa, North America, South America, and the Caribbean. Not surprisingly, we were avid Obamaphiles. Despite the six-hour time difference, we were not even *thinking* about leaving that hotel lobby until we knew whether Obama had won.

The excitement, increasing exponentially with the intermittent announcements of poll returns, became almost palpable as the enormity of the occasion gradually incited, then eluded, our collective attempt to grasp it. Indeed, each poll announcement changed our interior landscape as individuality seemed gradually to melt in the late-night warmth of our psycho-spiritual oneness. Even our voices, polyvalent and distinctive at the beginning of our vigil, merged into one pregnant, anticipatory sound. As the hours went by, that sound began to morph and shift into shape before our very eyes, and we began to feel vibrations of the Spiritus Mundi. Surely some new epoch was at hand. Surely some other dispensation

was at hand. And, behold, what Yeatsian rough beast, its death imminent at last, slouched allotropically away from light and sight, leaving in its blank and pitiless wake a space for wonderment and hope, the cosmic scent of morning time?

And morning time it was, for as the words pierced through the thick of our collective consciousness—"Barack Obama has been elected the President of the United States"—I just happened to glance out of the lobby's window; and, verily, with the kind of poetry resonant only in the most convenient cliché, the sun was just beginning to peak over Mount Cameroon. "Look, everybody!" I heard myself shouting. "Look through the window!" Suddenly, as we looked, an awesome apprehension dawned on us, and all the singing and praying and laughing and crying and clapping and hugging and kissing and hollering and jumping and dancing—the entire kaleidoscope of movement and emotion—ceased. All distinctions of persons and personalities completely dissolved as, following one autotelic impulse of surrender, we laid all our burdens down.

It seems, in retrospect, that we were caught in the throes of a holy hush, an epic, wondrous silence. I do think that, at that moment, our awareness of ourselves as separate from the mountain that hid us and the sun that found us, dissolved, leaving a consummate, all-consuming void that was simultaneously redolent with powerful possibilities and blissfully aware of its utter lack of need. For that one fleeting, shapeless and exquisite instant, we were at one with All That Is. We were complete. And knowing was like being born again.

When this metaphysical vision faded—or, just as true, when this mystical experience ended, returning us to a state of finite awareness—we found our individuations once again, located ourselves once more in time, place, and circumstance. But now we could revel in the knowledge that each of us had touched, momentarily and eternally, a memory of wholeness and completion, a future that was resurrected from the tomb of our collective memory, the face of infinitude. We had moved beyond the illusion of ego and personality, had rented the thick-thick veil of time and space, and had been issued into the realm of spirit. With a certainly too deep to question, we had witnessed our own transfiguration and had lived to tell the story. That the experience took place in the continental cradle of civilization added to its primordial essence.

Now, admittedly, this is not the kind of introduction that one might predictably expect in a book of critical essays: it has about it, one may well argue, too much aura, a contrived sensibility, an insistent editorial presencing. Too much poetic potential for obfuscation and controversy. I

would contend, however, that my approach is justified by the caliber, tenor, charisma, controversy, and complexity of the man who is here the focus of discussion. Indeed, there can be no denying that Barack Hussein Obama was a source of game-changing, spiritual inspiration; no intellectually honest undermining of the powerful influence he exerted on global consciousness; and no obliteration of the fact that, with his ascendance to the Presidency of the most powerful nation on earth, he added a unique and compelling chapter to the epic saga of race relations throughout the globe and did so in a manner that was empowering on individual and communal levels.

Moreover, his global influence aside, the imaginative tone of these introductory comments is justified, even anticipated, in the poetics of his autobiographical work, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, through which Obama is ever conscious of the role of his imagination in the construction of his history and identity—in his coloring and cohering of the details of his domestic and ancestral circumstance. Indeed, in this work Obama seems to intuit that one of the most salient tests of an autobiography's worth is its ability to reveal the role of the imagination in the organic recreation of a personal, recognizable and demonstrable history, the pact made between memory and necessity in the revelation of an ever inchoate subjectivity. Thus *Dreams from My Father* is propelled by Obama's awareness of a universal imperative, that of negotiating the space between recollection and desire, of consciously implicating the self in the discovery and production of meaning.

Thus the use of my Cameroon experience as a point of departure for the reader's intellectual engagement with this collection of essays reflects, I hope, the spiritual ethos which is the matrix of *Dreams from My Father* and within which literary criticism finds its most potent and most elusive relevance. The titular excavation of ancestral dreams and their conflation with his own dreams label Obama's text as spiritually concerned. As with autobiography, so, in this case, with criticism: the act of signification is, at its core, a spiritual enterprise, or, rather, an enterprise of spirit. In fact, it is the (re)generative power of spirit that activates both the artistic endeavor and the critical search for meaning within the artistic product.

Given the ever burgeoning evidence of the inseparability of science and spirit, even in—perhaps because of—this age of technological ascendancy, the attempt to foreground critical responses to the Obama phenomenon in an exigency of spirit should come as no surprise once it is allowed that spirit is the substratum of all things, the inscrutable and infinite energy or force that drives and interrelates everything in the universe, and is therefore the source of all intent, creative and otherwise.

Still, the attempt to claim spiritual space in a critical enterprise is problematic not only because of the impossibility of adequately defining what we mean by "spirit"—indeed, definition is by its very nature an act of objectification; hence the attempt to objectify spirit is unavoidably an instance of ontological subversion—but also because academia has promoted the illusion of separateness between artistic and critical space. While it is true that the failure to allow such separation potentiates confusion on the part of both the artist and the critic, for the latter such confusion may be but prelude to a fuller apprehension of the power, purpose, range, limitations, clarity and, ultimately, the mystery of language.

The most compelling aspect of criticism, then, may well be its facility to probe the inextricable interrelatedness of everything the critic encounters in the pursuit of textual meaning and intent, an interrelatedness explicit in my attempted definition the word "spirit." Arguably, both the artist and the critic yearn ultimately toward a moment that suspends the reader, ever so momentarily, in a place where all conflicts are resolved, in an all-embracing void, releasing her or him from the bittersweet tyranny of context, so that the *insperience* of the void utterly consumes both the *experience* and the meaning that makes it possible. This void is, of course, everything and nothing. It is the light whose absence makes the darkness possible. It is spirit. By pursuing the interrelationship between ideological and aesthetic features of a text, criticism, at its best, advances the reader toward the brink, if not the depths, of this void.

It would seem, then, that my Cameroon experience was not entirely unrelated to this critical endeavor. Let me point out, however, that the seed of this book was not planted that night, though the experience might well have fertilized the conceptual soil, thereby preparing the way for the cross-pollination of ideas witnessed here. The initial idea had come months before my euphoria in Cameroon, and months before the discursiveness that characterized the pre-election discourse had become the *sine qua non* of the election's aftermath. Indeed, the book was inspired by my simple desire to document that, for the first time in my more than six-and-a-half decades of living, I felt personally implicated in a presidential campaign, awakened from my political somnolence by Obama's revile for change. It was a call that resonated in my mind and heart, translating my thoughts into feelings, my feelings into moods that modulated into an insistent cosmology of hope. Suddenly political detachment could no longer be my wont. Rather, I would enter the ideological fray, engage the emotional flow, enjoin my colleagues to do the same, and let the referential chips fall where they may.

With the articulation of his experience of the world in *Dreams from My Father* and his vision of (and for) the world in *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, Obama has carved a deep imprint on the labyrinth of human affairs and, consequently, has joined the ranks of American trail-blazing activists like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, William Edward Burghardt DuBois, Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin Luther King, Sr.—and, yes, Malcolm X—in "daring to hope," as one of the contributors to this book points out, "for a post-racial nation." In his narration of every significant event of his life and in most of the rationalizations he offers in support of "the audacity of hope," there breathes a sense of something missing and a corresponding longing for something more, something at once prescient and ancient, substantial and chimerical, enlightening and penumbrous, and always beyond the grasp of cerebral fingers—his as well as ours. No important event or discussion in Obama's two books remains disassociated from this lack. This sense of want and longing, I think, emblematizes the universal ache of consciousness and testifies to a pulsating vulnerability that all but ensures the reader's empathic response to Obama's psychical condition. It is this sense of something missing—or, rather, the journey to this awareness of lack—with which scholars must grapple if the nature and integrity of Obama's political and literary visions are to be rendered transparent.

And so we come face to face again with the perpetual absence of that which we perpetually seek, even when we are not conscious of the seeking. Follow to its logical conclusion almost any substantive argument that Obama pursues in *The Audacity of Hope* (or, for that matter, in many of his pre-election and post-election speeches), and you will see that, despite his sustained attempts to weigh conflicting, seemingly irreconcilable, sides of a given issue and to rationalize a nexus, he is ultimately blessed—and cursed—by a sense of irresolution. His axiological attempts to locate a fulcrum for his beliefs and values are always challenged, sometimes contradicted, by his awareness of difference. I submit that this sense of irresolution, of incompletion—sometimes vague, sometimes acute—is a reification of the possibility that we might yet (re)discover the immanent source of all the contradictions that we know. Put another way, this sense of irresolution is but the beckoning of a metaphysical void in which all is resolved, an iteration of the call (of spirit) to enlightenment, an impulse to engage and be engaged by the universal flow of consciousness. Without such an impulse, enlightenment—even progress toward enlightenment—is impossible.

While the writers of the essays in this collection make no self-conscious declarations that they are attempting to negotiate spiritual terrain, their aggregate perspectives seem to lead one inexorably toward such negotiation. Thus I have arranged the essays in a manner intended to capture the contraction and expansion of meaning, the undulations and fluctuations of the writers' consciousness, and the interrelatedness of critical perspectives—all buoyant with the energy of spirit. Furthermore, as the reader engages the individual essays, he or she will find that each, although self-contained, ricochets off, takes issue with, elaborates on, or illumines the figurations of the other. The result is a converging, diverging, contrapuntal interplay that hints at the profundity of Obama's appeal to the critical imagination.

For good or ill, however, the critical imagination is tethered to context, and Obama's life and writings, like those of major revolutionary thinkers like Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr., combine to offer, even generate, an expansive contextual landscape—so expansive, in fact, that we need to pay careful attention to the signposts he constructs along the way so that we may not lose sight of him (or he, us) during the course of his multicultural meandering. Although the various aspects of his vision might not be as tightly cohered, as consistent or as urgent—and certainly not as clearly deliberated or as ideologically fermented—as those of Gandhi, Mandela, or King, Obama does share with these transformative leaders a compelling, global gaze—a fact that has implications for our understanding of his relationship to the nation he leads and the world he envisions. And, like them, he affords us glimpses into his personal cosmology.

In a manner that is probably more reminiscent of King than of Gandhi, Obama tethers us, sometimes tightly, sometimes loosely, to a wide range of ideas and emotions. Especially in his writings, he binds us also to his historicity, his philosophical globe-trotting, his multi-racial (as opposed to "post-racial") matrix, and to the nature of his oratory. The field of his associations is so dense and problematic that we deceive ourselves when we think that we have arrived at a decisive and conclusive assessment of his purview—partly because Obama himself is a site of multiple shifting identities and partly because, like him, we have to deal with the ironies, contradictions, and paradoxes implicit in our perceptions of reality.

In this collection of essays, then, we can expect multiple, sometimes conflicting, readings of Obama's life and writings. As one deliberates these articles, one will see that, the honorific nature of many of the deliberations notwithstanding, the essays are generally characterized by discursive intent and grounded in scholarship. Hence conclusions, no

matter how convincing, reductive or expansive, are tentative at best. Thus the book is not intended to be a paean to Obama; it is not a monolithic attempt to align his life and his vision with any specific political, ideological or aesthetic pre-supposition or agenda—unless, of course, one considers as an agendized matrix my attempt to argue that the collective achievement of these essays is ultimately spiritual in nature. Nor is the book intended as an emotional waterfall or escarpment. Its goal is merely to document some of the scholarly responses to issues and concerns fecundated by Obama's life and career.

I. The Spiritual Nucleus of Personal and Representational Subjectivity

Focusing on Obama's literary achievements, the first five essays expatiate and problematize the interrelatedness of Obama's artistic and political visions—an intimation of the spiritual implications of this collection. In the opening essay, Albert Turner expounds on the role of Obama's "prosthetic" memory in cohering seemingly disparate elements of his consciousness. The simultaneity of Obama's personal and imagined recollections; the reverberations of self in the halls of collective representation, the ever-inchoate construction of Obama's worldview (promoted and contradicted by the oscillations of his hybrid consciousness); the transformative potential inherent in his attempts to situate the American dream within national, global, historical, literary, political, racial, spiritual and philosophical contexts; and his participation in "mutually incommensurate" intellectual and prophetic traditions—all of these combine in Turner's essay to demonstrate the "fusion" of intercultural narratives "that attend the on-going construction of 'a more perfect union.'" Seen from a spiritual perspective, this fusion, I suggest, is but the adumbrations of a soul in motion, indications of the interrelatedness of personal and national identity, and demonstrations of each as a tenuous but tenacious process of becoming.

The spiritual implications of Obama's writings are more discernible in James Tsaaior's "Barack Obama and the Literary Dimensions of His Writings." In documenting Obama's "strong kinship with the long tradition of Black idiom, speech patterns, improvisational or experimental quality and cultural sensibilities," Tsaaior not only reifies Obama's "literary afflatus" but also deliberates the "vatic insights" that vivify Obama's connection to African griots, to the spiritual dimensions of slave narratives, to abolitionists, civil rights leaders, purveyors of the Black Aesthetic tradition, to the "poetics of American literary sensibility" and to

Western canonical practices. The intersection and conflation of these attributes endow Obama's oeuvre with what Tsaaior calls an "elemental energy." Similarly, in "Obama, The Nobel Laureate of Peace: A Portrait of the Man and his Words," Leah Creque-Harris probes Obama's Nobel Lecture and his two books for their "revelatory nature and visionary reach." Having situated Obama firmly and securely within the Nobel Laureate tradition and having contemplated the contradiction implicit in Obama's simultaneous pursuit of peace and affirmation of "morally justified" violence, Creque-Harris proceeds to expound on Obama's pre-Nobel accomplishments, specifically the contribution of his two books to the field of humanities. Her findings militate against the notion that Obama's Nobel Prize was pre-mature, substantiate her contention that Obama is the literary, if not the literal, embodiment of the "vision" of Alfred Nobel, and associate Obama's victory with the world's longing for a "messianic" personage.

The significance of Obama's autobiographical narratives looms even larger when they are viewed through the ever-widening lens of critical race theory. Ignatio Lopez-Calvo not only supplies such a lens but also ruminates the relevance of random accounts of the national and international reactions to Obama's victorious presidential campaign. The value of Lopez-Calvo's samplings resides not only in what they reveal about Obama's cautious attitude toward "race," not only in "what they say about today's racializing gaze," but also in "what they mean for the possibility of a domino effect in Europe and other regions of the world." Moreover, taken as a whole, these samplings (which cover a wide range of printed and oral responses from the United States, Mexico, Peru, Cameroon, Poland, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Africa), suggest that the global reaction to the Obama phenomenon is deeply emotional and profoundly spiritual.

While the title of Kenton Rambsy's "Understanding the Young Obama" may not seem at first glance to indicate a meditation on issues of spirit, when it is considered in conjunction with the previously mentioned essays, its psycho-spiritual nucleus is gradually perceived. In light of the fact that Rambsy focuses on Obama's childhood, one grants this essay's potential for laying a foundation on which later theories about Obama may be constructed. Indeed, Rambsy's insists that Obama's sustained pursuit of resolutions to the psychocultural and psychological tensions that characterized his coming of age, functions as a useful point of departure for discussions pertaining to Obama's personal and political visions. Such discussions would inevitably suggest that resolutions for Obama are always on-going processes, for "neither the progenitors nor the purveyors

of the cultural conflicts that Obama witnessed or experienced could enable him to completely untangle" the mnemonic and existential threads that continue to bind him to an ever-shifting consciousness.

II. Dismantling Hegemonic Structures of Whiteness

If there is one overriding imperative signaled by this collection, it is that the conceptual and structural bastions of white privilege—the hegemonic structures of whiteness as evidenced throughout America and the West—must be dismantled if the world is to reflect and accommodate an egalitarian view of the human condition. With specific regard to the United States, Stephany Spaulding interrogates the pervasive and inescapable nature of "Neo-racialism" even as a 'post-racial" discourse seeks traction and currency in the Age of Obama. Fundamental to the abolition of this hierarchical system of power, then, is the individual and collective acknowledgement of "race" not merely as a social construction but also as a lived experience. If, as Spaulding posits, race functions as a "river" that supplies "all other tributaries such as class, gender, and sexuality," the concession that race also colors religious, theological, and spiritual practices requires no great leap of faith.

Whereas the influence of Obama on religious and spiritual beliefs and values may be regarded as a vague and distant postulation, his effect on notions of black fatherhood rings, as R. L'Heureux and Maria S. Johnson demonstrate, with a certain immediacy, even urgency. Through L'Heureux's and Johnson's analyses of fatherhood narratives, Obama's autobiographical reflections, and his political observations, Obama emerges as a new model of black fatherhood. Although Obama "does not serve as a complete corrective to the mythos of the failure of black fathers," he does challenge contemporary narratives that promote the image of the black father as unattached and uncommitted. We infer from L'Heureux's and Johnson's research that such a challenge is a crucial component of any attempt to engage black men in multiracial discourse in a manner that places them on equal footing with society as a whole, thereby further potentiating the kind of cross-cultural understanding that energizes the spirit of the nation.

Also crucial to the dismantling of hegemonic structures of white privilege is "a disruptive moment of the white imaginary" as far as the nature and aesthetics of the black body are concerned. According to Lale Demirturk, such a disruption occurred the moment Obama entered the White House as "a non-threatening, black *individual*," whose bodily text revises the discourse on, and redefinition of, hybrid identity and who, consequently, "does not fit into the white normative frame of recognition."

Thus Demirturk contends that Obama, in contradiction of the stereotyped historicity of the black body, "employs a discourse that takes black life as a subject and not as the object of discursive practices." The performance of his radical otherness "opens a space where everyone can recognize the profoundly human beyond what his black body represents to the white public imaginary." Hence Obama "crosses the line between white hegemonic discourse and black action" and acts as "a trans-discursive body in a society in which race still operates as 'the norm of recognition.'" Moreover, his hybrid identity anticipates and celebrates the moment when a "'perfect union' of *souls* in and outside the United States will change the meaning of race" (emphasis mine).

Further complicating the call for the abolition of the structures of white privilege is the highly controversial conjunction of race and reparations. In "Obama and Africa: Race and Reparations," Michael Janis conducts a "speculative investigation into the possibilities an internationalist, even pan-Africanist, ethos would bring to the White House." Underscoring that blatant racism of the eminent European philosophers like Hume, Kant and Hegel "reflects the enigmatic and multifarious presence of psychopathology in Western thought," Janis declares that, while it is not yet clear whether the Obama's election "has sounded a prelude to reparations," such assumptions will be made, "whether in the name of resentment or in the name of hope." Janis also speculates that if the world were to assume Obama's interest in a program of reparations, "the reactions would be diverse … and the debates torrid." Still, because slavery and colonialism constituted a "crime against humanity," the gesture of reparations clears the path not only to cross-cultural reconciliation but also to "a political recognition of the significance of the African diaspora as a cultural entity and as a repository of intellectual history." It would seem, then, that Obama's presidency triggers serious discussion not only about the dismantling of hegemonic structures in the United States but also about the global healing which these structures make exigent.

III. The Signifying President?: Axiomatic and Axiological Responses to Obama's Election

Beginning with O. Alexander Miller "Revisiting Obama's Proposition of Change: A Structural Perspective," this section both isolates and bridges a diverse range of responses, visceral and cerebral, by black individuals of varying ages to Obama's tenure in the White House, responses that trumpet both the hopes and the fears of the black public. The data resulting from Miller's comparative study of features of two

public institutions of higher learning—one historically black, the other very predominantly white—strongly suggests that, because of the entrenched social and academic structures that dictate American economic and political realities, the end of Obama's term "will be characterized by the same kind of stratification that existed when he first took office; that is, a few whites will continue to have the largest amount of valued resources while the black masses will be denied fair access to scarce resources." That his controlled study reveals this denial to be prefigured into the very structures of American society, especially in its institutions of higher learning, prompts Miller to caution that "any meaningful change in the U.S. will have to be effected by whites and non-black power-elites"—not a hopeful sign of any kind of progress, be it material, psychological, or spiritual.

Whereas Miller's work raises serious questions about Obama's potential for catalyzing structural changes, Brenda Flanagan, using her own experiences as an authentic reference point, debates whether Obama is capable of appreciating the profound difference between "being Black, which is one thing, and *feeling* Black in its most powerfully negative and positive attributes, which is a whole other game." Risking—and ultimately defying—the notion that her posture may be perceived as essentialist, and allowing for the possibility that Obama may be participating in the African American tradition of "signifying," Flanagan calls into serious question whether, given the facts of his biography, Obama "could possibly comprehend the essence of being Black in America." For Flanagan, therefore, the issue of Obama's "Blackness" might well have profound implications regarding his ontological and epistemological investment in the experience of the black masses in this country. Grounded in the extended moment of her immigrant/Caribbean experience in America, Flanagan's discussion not only cuts to the quick of her own fears with regard to Obama's presidency but also specifies how these fears may be allayed.

And she is not alone in her spirit-centered musings. In fact, Daniel Black not only raises similar questions but considers that Obama's failure to address concerns like Flanagan's might well be the price that he had to pay, firstly, to be elected and, secondly, to be perceived as an "American" president. At its core, Black's essay combines with Flanagan's to excavate some decidedly psycho-spiritual issues: Was Obama acceptable to the white masses because he "might not be a carrier of African American rage … that "socio-psychological rumbling in the souls of black folks [which] frightens whites more than Hannibal Lector?" Was Obama's denunciation of Jeremiah Wright, one of his cultural and spiritual elders, symptomatic

of his own psycho-spiritual deracination? Was his refusal to "*talk* black" part of a larger cultural concession he had to make in order to gain the presidency? Did Obama, in the final analysis, have to sell a part of his soul? Even if the answers to these questions are affirmative—and we infer from the essay that they may well be—Black is certain, however, that Obama "will need"—and black folks will supply—all the cultural relics and rituals necessary "to restore his soul."

Complementing each other in sociologically and psychologically enlightening ways, the last two studies in this section—conducted by Imani Scott and Cindy Lutenbacher, respectively—attest to the range and complexity of African American male identity at a specific moment in history. With regard to Scott's study, this complexity is demonstrated through (and by) the voices of males as they expound on their individual perceptions of Obama and his presidency. Scott limits her quantitative, phenomenological study to the responses of five black men (of varying ages and educational backgrounds) to a series of strategically posed and carefully crafted questions. Their answers to these questions illumine "middle-aged African American male perceptions of President Barack Obama, the degree to which [these men] see or do not see reflections of themselves in [him], and the degree to which they believe projections of President Obama's identity will impact self-perceptions." The fact that each of Scott's questions grows out of, and is prefaced by, specific quotations from *Dreams of my Father* speaks not only to the authenticity of her study but also to its in-built mechanisms of control. Taking another more open-ended approach, Lutenbacher records the responses of sixty-four of her present and former Morehouse College students to a single question: "What does Barack Obama mean?" In framing the context of her study, Lutenbacher notes (1) that her study makes no claim of embracing a strictly scientific method, (2) that her students, reflecting the rich diversity of Morehouse College, come from "all levels of socio-economic classes" and from "all over the nation and the world," and (3) that they represent an array of political perspectives. Her holistic reading of the students' declarations is intended not to support any particular positions with regard to Obama but, rather, to allow any possible common themes (among the students' responses) to emerge. If we contemplate the combined results of Scott's and Lutenbacher's projects, we are afforded a profound glimpse into the complex heart of Black male subjectivity, a prerequisite for any attempt to probe the collective consciousness of African American men for indications of Obama's effect on their psychospiritual infrastructure.

IV. Bridging Interstitial Spaces between Race, Class, Law, and Commerce

The writers in this final section, collectively considered, venture through and beyond the racial terrain to bridge spaces between structures that undergird the national consciousness. They seem to imply that the construction of such a bridge is vital to the process of re-engineering American space in the Age of Obama and beyond. A trenchant interrogation of the state of the nation with regard to race, suggests Frederick Gooding, should constitute a good beginning point and should not only yield a better understanding of the lay of the land but also assist the integrity of the psychical infrastructure. To promote such interrogation, Gooding isolates and closely scrutinizes five well-known incidents that intensified race-centered discourse in the months following Obama's inauguration, two of them being the arrest of Professor Henry Louis Gates and the alleged hurling of "insensitive epithets such as 'ni**er' and 'fa**ot'" at two prominent House representatives. That Gooding conducts these "mini-case studies" with a keen eye for irony and with a penchant for near-Juvenalian satire imbues his discussion with an unflappable verve and complicates in decidedly ambiguous ways the notion of a post-racial society.

However, Tara Miller's attempted expose of the post-election state of racial affairs allows no such ambiguity. Her investigation of the same subject as Gooding's coalesces into a hard-edged indictment against American upholders of white privilege, who, Miller insists, currently seem unable to dissociate the Black man in the White House from their seemingly ubiquitous and "primordial" fear of "otherness." Miller regards this fear as a crucial element of the American "asili," that part of the American system of values that "gives context and meaning to all other aspects of the culture's behavior." Put another way, this pervasive fear of otherness functions as the fulcrum of American society. Miller further contends that this fear congeals into a conviction, religious in its fervor and theological in its implications, that Black people are innately inferior. Thus the chief trumpeters of this gospel of otherness—she singles out Rush Limbaugh, Joe Wilson, Glen Beck, and Sarah Palin—reify white suspicion that Obama, as the symbolic embodiment of Blackness, is spiritually unfit for the White House. Particularly in their attempt to associate Obama with a grossly distorted version of Liberation Theology, they also promote an image of Obama as someone who "assumes the specter of the Anti-Christ" and who, consequently, should be cast "into the nether regions of Other."

Especially because it follows closely on the heels of the discussion regarding the attempt to advance the image of Obama as Other, Alison Ligon's "'Silent Signifyin': The Collision of Fashion and Politics on HBCU Campuses in the Wake of the 2008 Presidential Election" is bound to widen the range of our perceptions of Obama's impact. While the responses of the Republican "fringe" to Obama's career was receiving the national spotlight, the fashion movement on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, less strident and less febrile but equally as passionate and profound, evinced the hallmarks of a quiet revolution: a dynamic evocation and expansion of "touchstone" moments in American and world history when iconographic leaders like Ernesto "Che" Guevera, Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela, Fidel Castro, and Martin Luther King inspired students to use fashion as a "firm declaratory statement of their growing political awareness, engagement, and enthusiasm." Ligon not only uncovers these moments but also mediates their coherence, in a manner that simultaneously telescopes Obama's multi-layered impact on the spirit of contemporary youth, validates their participation in an international, cross-cultural and sociopolitical tradition, and asserts the economic repercussions of their' "powerful poetry of self-adornment."

Economics is the sole focus of Nicholas Weekes and Alvin Thomas as they explore the potential impact of Obama's presidency on global trade, with specific reference to the Caribbean. In their brief but penetrating glance at American and Caribbean trade policies, historical and current, Obama's presidency, situated within the global economic downturn, emerges as a pivotal moment for a demonstration of interdependence and mutual gain. On the one hand, US policy prescriptions such as the Recovery Act (enacted by the Obama administration) may curtail the nation's job loss and inspire the creation of new jobs. On the other hand, the Caribbean Aid Program's targeting of specific investments in Caribbean economies can help to bridge some of the economic divides and render the region's economy more diverse and less volatile. In any case, this essay represents yet another dimension to our extrapolation of Obama's significance, deepens and widens the nature of our thematic concerns.

Further widening the gyre of our discussion, we finally consider specific legal ramifications of the Obama presidency, ramifications that may well bridge the interstices between race, class, economics, law, and commerce. Toward this end, Joseph Whitfield probes Obama's legal initiatives with regard to the Guantánamo Bay controversy, the re-vamping of the nation's system of health-care, and the signing of the Lilly Ledbetter Act in order to accomplish two objectives: to highlight "some of the ways