

# IN SEARCH OF DESIRED SELVES: CONSTRUCTIONS OF SELF-IDENTITIES IN BARACK OBAMA'S *DREAMS FROM MY FATHER* AND NELSON MANDELA'S *LONG WALK TO FREEDOM*

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## ABSTRACT

In this article I use Barack Obama's *Dreams from my father: a story of race and inheritance* (hereafter to be referred to as *Dreams from my father*) and Nelson Mandela's *Long walk to freedom* to demonstrate Hall's (1996, 4) view that identities are about '... using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being,' meaning to say that they are not a fixed essence, but a process, always being constructed and deconstructed in response to the cultural and historical circumstances in which the subject finds himself. This theory rejects the claim that a life narrative is an uncontaminated story of one's personal history and life. I argue that Obama's and Mandela's identities take shape in response to the challenges of the duo's respective cultures and societies. Both men deploy narrative towards political ends: Obama uses it to resolve questions of his origins as well as to launch his political career while Mandela uses it mainly to justify and uphold already existing but seemingly contradictory public images of himself as a militant revolutionary and peacemaker.

## INTRODUCTION

When Hall (1996, 4) talks of identities as being about '... using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being,' he is rejecting

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the myths that identities are naturally constituted units and that they are situated in a specific location or past where they can easily be traced and discovered. The clause, 'using the resources of history, language and culture' has three major implications for identities. The first of these is the suggestion that they are constructed by the subject, as opposed to the idea that subjects are constructed by their identities. Secondly, the reference to history and culture recognises that identities do not sprout in a vacuum; rather, they emerge within specific historical and cultural contexts to which they then respond and adjust. The third implication is the idea that identities take shape within ever-changing discursive formations. The clause, 'in the process of becoming rather than being' points to a deferral of closure; an assertion that identities are in a constant state of flux and that they are under constant construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. As such, they do not precede the story of the subject 'since we are who we say we are' (Porter 2011, 121). Narrative thus constitutes part of the self. However, while Hall's definition of identities is valid as far as it goes, it does not go far enough; it appears to place little emphasis on the agency of self in the construction of identity. This cannot go unchallenged, for, as Porter (*ibid*) states:

[w]hile we are products of determinative forces - economic, cultural and political – that might appear to condition not only our lives, but our sense of self, we are nevertheless not without free agency to perform acts of self-fashioning.

Giddens (1991) corroborates this view by noting that identities in the modern era are increasingly becoming a personal project. I will therefore argue that while both Mandela and Obama are shaped by their respective sociocultural contexts, they nonetheless actively participate in determining who they come to be recognised as.

Javangwe (2011) has advanced the argument that individual life narratives can actually be useful resources in understanding not just individual self-identities, but also the history of the subject's nation. This is because 'the individual [subject] defines itself in relation to its other selves, others around it, the national image and historical processes' (Javangwe 2011, 18). What this means then is that although the desire in writing a life narrative may be to represent a stable, knowable self, autobiography is never simply about that. It aspires to produce a 'single, unified and fixed' self out of fragments or a multiplicity of potential selves which are 'not necessarily consistent with each other' (Burr 1995, 20).

While Obama and Mandela apprehend and interpret social reality differently, their narratives spring from similar positions of the subaltern or racialised Other whose history and culture has been distorted by those who perceive the world in binary terms as being constituted of two halves, the one white, the other black. The two life narratives thus share a common aim of correcting the distorted images of their respective subjects' cultures. Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* documents the history, culture and traditions of the Thembu Royal House, of the Xhosa tribe, and of the experiences of apartheid South Africa among other incidents. Obama, meanwhile,

describes his narrative as ‘a story of race and inheritance’ while expressing optimism that the narrative will play a part in addressing the fissures of race that characterise the American society. Hence, over and above being accounts of the personal lives of Mandela and Obama, both narratives can be read as sociocultural artefacts of their subjects’ respective communities.

## ON THE ROAD TO THE WHITE HOUSE: OBAMA’S MULTIPLE SELVES IN *DREAMS FROM MY FATHER*

*Dreams from my father* is a life narrative that explores its subject’s search for his origins. It chronicles Obama’s life from the time of his birth in Hawaii to his enrolment at Harvard Law School; traces his life from Hawaii to Jakarta and back to Hawaii and then on to New York, and Chicago and then delves into his epic trip to Kenya. Obama’s life was thus a peripatetic one, an existence that symbolises the instability of his identity. It is typical of the life of the American Negro in that it is characterised by what W.E.B Du Bois (1996) describes as ‘twoness’ or ‘double consciousness.’ The absence of his father and his identity as a mulatto are the two major impediments in Obama’s quest for a stable identity. He has thus deployed narrative to resolve this identity conundrum and fashion a public-political image for himself. In this way, he has confirmed Smith’s and Watson’s (2001) observation that identities do not exist outside narration. In other words, identities in the late modern era are not discovered; they are constructed as their subjects respond to the vagaries that characterise their lives.

Obama’s search for spiritual anchorage begins with his tracing of his paternal ancestry. The irony of this project, though, is that it will succeed in producing not a single, stable identity, but multiple, even conflicting selves. Each huddle he encounters in this endeavour demands that he crafts a new identity. Yet the reader gets the feeling that Obama suffers no illusions regarding the instability of his identity, for he declares: ‘My identity might begin with the fact of my race, but it didn’t, couldn’t end there’ (111). Implicit in Obama’s statement is the realisation of his agency when it comes to self-identification. As a marginalised black American, he is speaking from the position of the marginalised Other who has historically existed as defined by the dominant white race. By declaring that his identity does not end with the fact of his race, Obama is not simply trying to satisfy what he describes as ‘America’s hunger for any optimistic sign from the racial front [...] that, after all, some progress has been made’ (ii); rather, he is imagining his potential future at the heart of American politics, a future he can claim through occupying a liberal speaking position. His strategy is to project himself, not as another angry Bigger Thomas or Malcolm X, nor another Booker T. Washington forever eager to ingratiate himself with whites, but as someone who can transcend the parochialism of race politics and offer an all-inclusive national vision. Even as he bids to appeal to white Americans,

Obama avoids the temptation to denigrate or ditch his black heritage. His identity, paradoxically, gains more intelligibility and a firmer anchor through a closer and more pronounced connection with his shadowy black father. By embracing his father for all his blackness, he is asserting his 'Negritude.' Unlike Ellison's ex-coloured man who elects to efface his black identity, Obama actually claims it despite being of mixed blood, because as someone who harbours political ambitions, he has to be ever careful to avoid being mistaken for 'a sellout' (18) by black people. He becomes simultaneously a subaltern speaking in protest to those who refuse to recognise his nativity, and a black man desperate to retain his position among his people. He is, in his own way, espousing Bhabha's concept of hybridity. America must accept the fact of his (Obama's) race, his 'in-betweenness' (DuBois 1996). He describes himself as 'a black man with a funny name' (i) and as "a skinny kid [...] who believes that America has a place for him too" (Democratic Convention speech 2004). To appeal to both white and black Americans, Obama strategically invokes a unifying figure in American history, Abraham Lincoln, who has come to symbolise the humane side of White America thanks to his brave decision to emancipate slaves.

While Obama is, without doubt, his own man, ever so active in carving his own identity, he does so in the context of external forces. Mead (1934, 173) has observed that 'the origins and foundation of the self, like those of thinking, are social,' and Hall (1996, 4) rightly notes that 'identities are produced within specific historical and situational sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies.' In the preface to *Dreams from my father*, Obama expresses hope that his story 'might speak to the fissures of race that have characterised the American experience, as well as the fluid state of identity – the leap through time, the collision of cultures – that mark our modern life' (i) He makes a point of explaining that he began writing against the backdrop of significant historical events such as the collapse of the Berlin wall and the release of Nelson Mandela from prison. By linking his personal story to major events that have shaped the world, Obama is scaffolding his image and projecting himself as someone who is destined to influence events on the world stage. Obama's strategy here affirms Hall's (1996) view that the socio-political and economic context within which the subject finds himself has a bearing on how the subject locates or identifies himself. Thus, a subject can choose to identify with the status quo or adopt a combative stance against it. Either way, the subject is reacting to existing realities, which means, in Obama's case, that it is impossible to conceive of his identity as being self-constitutive or separate from the existing realities.

Also, Hall (ibid) notes that identities shape up within specific power modalities, which characterises them more as markers of difference and exclusion than as symbols of a natural, constituted unit – or identities in the traditional sense of the word – a blanket sameness, seamless and free of differentiation. That is why Derrida (1981 cited in Mhiti 2013) stresses that identities are relational. It is through, and not

outside, difference that they are constructed. The Other is a necessity for the Self to define itself. So, in a sense, the Other is constitutive of the Same. The implication of this argument to Obama is that his identity is inextricably linked with those who surround him, who themselves are shaped by the politics of their times. It is not accidental then that *Dreams from my father* begins with the subject questing to trace his ancestry. The genealogical history that the narrative delves into is deployed to establish and to reinforce the uniqueness of the circumstances surrounding Obama's birth; and that in itself is a quest for identity. Yet this is not to suggest that Obama is merely seeking to be accommodated. On the contrary, Obama belongs to late modernity and, while he traces his roots, he is fully aware that ultimately he will have to carve his own identity. He is his own man, though he cannot be completely independent of external forces. His identity formation trajectory does not cut through a void or uncharted territory. So the self is always conceived in relation to the bigger unit. It (the self) is moulded as much by its own agency as by those around it. While he is in Jakarta, Obama's mother tries to intervene in her son's identity development. Keen to ensure that her son does not lose his American identity, she warns: 'If you want to grow into a human being you are going to need some values' (p49). As Obama himself observes, these remarks are born out of [his mother's] awareness of the 'ignorance and arrogance that often characterise Americans abroad' (p47). Obama's comments here cast him as someone who retains his critical capacity even as he is subject to influence from those he interacts with.

Obama further states that in her dogged effort to mould her son, his mother 'had only one ally,' (p50) and that was the remote authority of his father. According to her, it was not a question of choice, but only natural that her son would take after his father. It was 'in the genes' (p50). However, typical of what Giddens (1991) specifies as the late modern era subject, Obama realises that his self-identity is his personal project and so, not even by his mother will he be impeded from defining himself at the self-reflexive level. In fact, Obama confesses to being deeply suspicious generally of the stories he was told and the opinions he was given by those around him. At one point he remarks that his mother's 'account of the world and [his] father's place in it was somehow incomplete' (p52). This suspicion alienates him even from those close to him. He says: 'I was trying to raise myself as a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance, no one around me knew what that meant' (p76). While in Chicago, where he was involved in organising black people, he rejected suggestions that he join the church in order to acquire more pulling power. His rejection of that suggestion is quite consistent with his natural inclination to define himself and not just be defined. To him, a religious identity adopted for expediency's sake smacks of hypocrisy. This buttresses the idea that, while external factors are pivotal in identity formation, the individual almost invariably retains the capacity to remain his own man.

As I have already indicated, Obama's identity is substantially informed by his absent, almost mysterious father. Indeed, it is not accidental that his narrative is titled 'Dreams from my father.' He says of this life narrative, that it is a 'personal interior journey – a boy's search for his father, and through that search, a workable meaning for his life as a black American' (xvi). He confesses that he had no idea who his own self was. Thus, the search for his father is directly linked with the search for his own identity. He attempts to piece together stories he gathers from different people in order to create a fuller picture of his father. The stories that Obama is told of his father portray a strong, confident, articulate personality that, by and large, remains mysterious and elusive. It is after this image that Obama wants to fashion his identity. He '...realised that even in his absence, his strong image had given [him] a bulwark to grow up, an image to live up to or to disappoint' (p129). Yet it is an image that he can imaginatively expand. His father becomes more than just a parent as he describes him as 'the black man, son of Africa' (p 129) into whom he had packed all the attributes he had sought in himself, 'the attributes of Martin and Malcolm, Du Bois and Mandela' (p 129). Obama's pack of desired attributes is instructive. The historical figures that he has invoked are symbols of the struggle for black freedom and human dignity. By identifying himself with such figures, Obama is projecting himself as a champion of the same cause, and this decision neatly fits into the script that Obama is drafting, a narrative whose telos is political leadership. It is not extraneous then to argue that Obama is already building his political profile, and he pursues this project through a strategy of association. We need constantly to remind ourselves that autobiography is a retrospective rendition of a life lived; as such, it is prone to be deployed for purposes of projecting certain identity indices of the subject narrator. Thus, it can scarcely be wild to imagine and posit that the narrating 'I' is inscribing lofty political sentiments in the historical 'I' for purposes of scaffolding the image of the self. That is the whole purpose of narrative, which Onega and Landa (1996) define as a semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal or causal way. In fact, Obama himself draws attention to the contestable facticity of autobiography by acknowledging its fictive element when he states that '...I had spent much of my life trying to rewrite these stories, plugging up holes in the narrative, accommodating unwelcome details, projecting individual choices' (pxv-xvi).

While Obama registers his interest in the peculiarities and particularities of his lived life, he, like anyone else, 'can't remain indifferent to the [way] in which [that life is] inscribed by the larger contexts in which [it is] lived [...for] we are never free from the pressures of global history' (Vambe and Chennells 2009, 2). Hunt's (2010) sentiments corroborate this view: the vicissitudes of upbringing, including the pressure of powerful narrative and discourse in societies and cultures in which human beings are embedded, are critical to the formulation of who individuals are as well as to the provision of coherence. Obama's narrative is crafted within the cultural

matrix of black subjugation and white supremacy which relegates his race to the periphery. He (Obama) intones:

they no longer know who I am...they guess at my troubled identity, I suppose the mixed blood, the divided soul, the ghostly image of the tragic mulatto trapped between two worlds (pxv).

Being highlighted here is the idea that those of mixed heritage such as Obama are born into a society in which they are already defined, and the pre-existing, normative definition of his race awakens, in Obama, acute resentment and a defiant desire to slough off this identity. Thus, looked at through the lens of postcolonial theory, this narrative is a write-back; it has the express intention of demythologising the myth of the black man as the lesser, inferior Other. It is strategic that Obama sets off by embedding himself within the black fold. In doing so, however, he remains open-minded as he looks to transcend the parochialism offered by such an identity. So, while he accepts his African heritage, he will not be chained by customs and practices that he claims have outlived their usefulness: 'Boys don't want to follow their father's tired footsteps' (79). Moreover, he is 'answerable to the steady gaze of [his] conscience' (p134). But he is careful to avoid being seen as reading from the repertoire of racist America when he speaks critically of some African customs. To evade that slur, his comments must be endorsed and legitimised by Africans themselves. Thus, Sayid, an African, is made to opine:

...a man does service for his people by doing what is right for himself...not by doing what others think he should do... (p154).

Such a balancing act is necessary for a man who wants his life narrative to help him reclaim both sides of his heritage.

Some racism-riddled events in Obama's life prompt him to become more proactive in the fashioning of his identity. At Panahou Academy, Obama is laughed at due to the colour of his skin. As he grows up, he observes that his grandmother has a pathological fear of black people. Thus, for the first time he realizes that is 'utterly alone' (p91). His reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* intensifies his race consciousness, prompting him to seek answers via books by fellow black Americans such as Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, W.E.B. Du Bois and Malcolm X. What Obama calls a search for answers is, in fact, a search for a stable identity. Ironically, this search leaves him with more questions and mysteries, notwithstanding his claim to achieving completeness. He realises that the world he is living in is a 'white man's world' (p85). This awakening to racial animosity motivates him to negotiate his place in America and beyond. His strategy is to be openly critical of the status quo and to reject the inferiority tag on his black identity. In this way, he avoids the Booker T. Washington inferiority syndrome and confirms Giddens' (1991) assertion that, in the late modern epoch, identities are not discovered but constructed. The narrative

gets patently political as the narrating subject goes into overdrive in sprucing up the image of the self as community organiser and distinguished leader. It is at this point that we get a fuller comprehension of Obama's consistent positive portrayal of his father. Being intimated in this portrayal is the idea that his father's positive qualities have passed on to him.

We also note Obama's effort to present himself as the answer to America's race problem. His involvement in the disinvestment company which deals with problems in apartheid South Africa assumes strategic significance. Evaluating the situation in South Africa, he remarks: 'It demands that we choose sides. Not between black and white...it's a choice between dignity and servitude, between fairness and justice' (108). Here, Obama's language becomes strongly rhetorical; it is scaffolding the subject as the rational, neutral messiah who can bridge the racial divide. His hybrid identity is being infused with new possibilities. Whereas it has been discursively represented as a disadvantage, a lack, or a condition deserving of pity, here it is portrayed as a plus, the long elusive panacea to the age-old fissures of race. His mixed race and peripatetic existence, once the ultimate symbols of identity crisis and anxiety, blossom into points of strength. The subject then poses like a colossus that bestrides the two worlds (black and white). This is what Obama means when he euphemistically declares: 'With a bit of translation on my part, the two worlds would eventually cohere' (p82).

A reading of *Dreams from my father* as a manifesto for political power explains why Obama flaunts his organisational prowess. It is in the communities that he begins to sow seeds of political visibility, and the narrative chronicles massive transformations of black neighbourhoods; there is reform in public schools and in healthcare thanks to his agency. The Altgeld asbestos issue proves to be a massive investment for the narrator's status. The narrative then makes intimations that the developed communities are, in fact, America in miniature. Says the narrator:

Communities had to be created, fought for, tended like gardens – because this community I imagined was still in the making, built on the promise that the larger American community, black, white, brown, could somehow redefine itself – I believed that it might, over time, admit the uniqueness of my own life (p135).

Obama's trip to Kenya marks a defining moment in his life. It gives him a sense of wholeness; it fulfils his quest for spiritual stability. He is thrilled when his name is recognised in Kenya and he states that, for the first time, he felt the comfort and the firmness of identity that a name might provide. Because his name belonged, he felt he belonged. Thus, through his Kenya visit, Obama affirms his African and black identity. Although his tone towards the end of the narrative is triumphal, signalling an arrival, or discovery, of who he is, early indications are that the process of constructing personal identity continues as he refuses to be totally subsumed. He declares that, even here in Africa, no one should tell him what his blood ties

demand. While he has embraced his African heritage, he is already rejecting some of Africa's customs such as polygamy and collective land ownership which he believes are outdated.

## INVENTING AND REINVENTING THE SELF IN MANDELA'S *LONG WALK TO FREEDOM*

Like the multiple selves of Obama that we find in *Dreams from my father*, Nelson Mandela's selves, as depicted in *Long walk to freedom*, bear testimony to Hall's (1992) observation that, in constructing identities, individuals draw from aspects of their world. Even the mannerisms or forms of behaviour that come to define individuals are greatly informed by the environment in which the individuals find themselves. By his own admission, Mandela was greatly influenced by those in whose company he grew up. Right from boyhood as a village boy, Mandela's views were influenced by his father and by the regent who took custody of him after his father's demise. We see Mandela characterising his father as possessing a 'proud sense of rebelliousness, a stubborn sense of fairness that I recognize in myself' (p4). In fact, he explicitly states: 'I defined myself through my father' (p26). Thus, both Mandela's and Obama's narratives foreground the father in the formation of the subject's identity.

Mandela sets out to project himself as a tough, questioning character that generally refuses to be cowed. His name 'Rolihlahla' (literally troublemaker), which was conferred on him even before he became conscious of the social injustice around him, is conveniently infused with significance right at the start of the narrative to establish the subject as a character that was destined for the struggle, almost as if the name anticipated the active role that he would play later on in the politics of his country. Even at this early stage, Mandela's narrative already vindicates Hall's (2000) view that identities are made viable by making them conform to or fit the larger system of which the subject is a part. An otherwise innocent name that probably had nothing to do with resistance of a political nature is given expedient meaning, and Mandela himself makes no secret of this; he remarks that years on, his friends would attribute 'the many storms I have weathered' (p14) to this name.

Events in the subject's life are interpreted retrospectively to suit the desired image of the self. Mandela mentions that the year of his birth 'marked the end of the great war' (p20). It is easy to appreciate the choice of this particular detail if we understand autobiography as a re-construction of the past. In this instance, Mandela identifies himself with two things, war and peace (end of the Great War). Identifying with war helps him build the macho image that is celebrated in African cosmology, which image he consolidates through his repeated reference to his boxing prowess, his assertiveness and his ability to tend sheep and calves at the very young age of five. By associating himself with peace, Mandela intends to appeal to the wider modern

world. Yet we are aware that the voice narrating this story is that of the Mandela who has already earned a reputation internationally as a peacemaker. Thus, carefully selected details from the narrator's history are deployed to uphold an already existing reputation or to justify a present perception of the self, an act that affirms the view that identity formation is never complete but ever an ongoing process.

Mandela makes a point of embedding himself in the African community. Because he wants to shape his identity around the struggle against imperialism and racial oppression, he finds it necessary to assert, not just his indigeneity, but the fact that royal blood runs in his veins. This he does to lend legitimacy to the struggle to which he devotes much of his life as well as to justify his current leadership role. So what is clear here is the idea that Mandela's identity is not shaping up of its own accord in some kind of void; rather, it is drawing substantial influence from the resources of history. If white occupation were to be eliminated from the equation, the imperative for the narrator to fix his origins in the locality would be equally erased.

By describing the Xhosa as a 'proud patrilineal people' (p2) with clear democratic governing structures, Mandela speaks with the 'authority of presence' (Chennells 2009) in a society whose commitment to these values has been disputed. The narrative at this stage can thus be read as refuting claims in colonial literature about Africans being a bunch of disorganised people to whom the European felt duty-bound to donate culture and democracy. According to the narrator, the Xhosa society had 'a balanced and harmonious social order in which every individual knew his or her place' (p 2). Also observable in this statement is a veiled attack on the settlers who disrupted this peaceful, organised society and imposed their own form of government.

There is a hint in Mandela's narrative to the effect that he has inherited some of his father's positive qualities. The narrative alludes to the fact that his father lost his chieftaincy as a consequence of defying the local magistrate. Summoned by the local magistrate to appear before the court, Mandela's father reportedly remarked, *Andizi ndisagula* (I am not coming. I'm still girding for battle) (p22). This incident is quite curiously related to Mandela's refusal at Fort Hare University to take up a leadership position that came out of an election that had been boycotted by the majority of the students. The choice of such details has the cumulative effect of projecting Mandela as a principled and selfless character ready to forfeit personal benefits for the common good. Incidentally, this quality is one of the most prized attributes in modern leadership; so Mandela is propping up his own image, touting himself as the man to lead the new nation.

Hall's socio-cultural definition of identities is in some way related to Karl Marx's observation that '[i]t is not the consciousness of men that determines their being... but their being that determines their social consciousness' (cited in Gillet 1994, 18 ). We may as well bend Marx's observation to our purpose and argue that the material status of human beings is crucial in determining how they seek to define themselves.

This approach enables us to understand Mandela's transformation from being a liberal who sought freedom through peaceful means to being a revolutionary who embraced any means necessary in the pursuit of the same objective. It is interesting to note that during his first days of active opposition to the establishment, Mandela harbours an antipathy for communism. It is only when he gains a broader view, when he begins to see the problem in South Africa through the dual prism of race and class, that he realises that peaceful means alone will not achieve the desired goal. The Marxist lens he adopts allows him to see that black people are also oppressed as a social class and that any form of action that does not threaten the upper class materially will only serve to strengthen the hegemony of the ruling class. Thus, he is spot on when Hall (1996) argues that the roots of narrative and social identity merge and are inalienably embedded and nurtured in the soil of human action.

Hall (ibid) has observed that the logic of identity is interconnected with questions of authenticity or the search for a true self. Apartheid South Africa undermined the natives' sense of self and authenticity in many ways, and one such way was the practice of changing the names of both places and of the natives themselves. Mandela was given the name 'Nelson' by one of his teachers, Miss Mdingwane. As Mandela saw it, there was no such thing as African culture and it was considered uncivilised to have an African name. Perhaps with the intention of justifying his acceptance of the name, Mandela then conjectures that the name was given to him due to its connection with the great British sea captain. Here, the narrating 'I' is trying to speak for the historical or narrated 'I' and the reason is simple: a foreign name to an avowed cultural nationalist is a contradiction in terms. Mandela conveniently downplays the foreignness of the name and elects instead to emphasise the connotations of valour that the name carries. It is, however, worthy noting that as Mandela grows in terms of his political consciousness, he begins to detest and reject white paternalism. He refuses to be co-opted into the elite group that whites defined as 'civilized,' 'progressive' and 'cultured'. He rejected the meaning of 'good boy' as defined by the system. Clearly, Mandela was at this stage trying to be his own man. Yet, ironically, the more he tried to block outside influence on his identity, the more that identity got contaminated, because being a cultural nationalist presumes that one is fighting a certain culture that is inimical to one's own.

While in the Transkei, Mandela is shaped by the customs of the Xhosa and the values he extols are those of the Xhosa people. However, he casts himself as a man who could go beyond the parochialism of his society to define himself as he so pleased. 'I was quite prepared to rebel against the social system of my own people' (p33), he intones. He cites his rejection of the daughter of the local Thembu man as evidence of his capacity to become his own man. Yet he goes on to state that '[i]t was the education that [the regent] had afforded me that had caused me to reject such traditional customs' (p44). Here, again, the narrative affirms Hall's (1992) claim that identities draw from the resources of history and culture. Throughout the narrative,

Mandela tries to balance his desire to be his own man with his championing of African cultural nationalism. For someone who professes to champion African nationalism, Mandela's effort to achieve an independent self-identity sometimes seems like a contradiction because the African society is intrinsically communalistic. It subordinates individual to communal values, which means that the identity of the community comes before that of the individual.

The narrative exhibits Mandela's anxiety to live up to the image of him that is available in public discourse. He is widely regarded as a character that embodies a universal sense morality. Apart from his democratic credentials, he is depicted generally as a leader of immense magnanimity, one with the capacity to forgive the unforgivable. He says of himself, '[e]ven as a boy, I defeated my opponents without dishonoring them' (p23). Later on, he harps on the fact that he shook F. W. de Klerk's hand after defeating him in a debate, and when the two jointly won the Nobel Peace Prize, Mandela in his speech praised de Klerk for his vision. Evident here is a deliberate attempt to construct a consistent image of the self, and even more evident is how this effort is steeped in Mandela's socio-cultural context.

## CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to demonstrate the socio-cultural view that personal identity, which presumes a narrative, comes into shape as the Self shuttles between the present and the past, cultural and personal, private and public. In short, identities, it has been shown, do not sprout in a vacuum. Obama's life acquires meaning as part of the larger American story, just as Mandela's identity cannot be conceived of outside its socio-cultural context. It has further been demonstrated that narrative and identity are mutually constitutive. With his narrative, Obama has affirmed his black identity, announced his political aspirations and defined himself as a liberal ready to lead America. Mandela, on the other hand, has explained his origins, justified the various stances he took in response to the ever-changing circumstances of his life, and upheld his reputation. Language as discursive action has been shown to be pivotal in the construction of multiple unstable subjectivities. While Obama retains audacious hope, Mandela ends with 'conversations' with himself, metaphorically an admission that the dream for a stable identity remains deferred.

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