Probably the most important aspect of Barack Obama's autobiography is his refusal to settle for simple narratives about racial identity. From the very beginning of the text, he declares his intention not to write another version of the tragic mulatto, the assimilated American, the angry black man, or even the class-based story of his rise from humble origins (xv; xii; 122; 82; 85; 99). Shaping his life from these narratives, however, constitutes the genius of his approach. At different points in the book, he makes sure that readers mark his race credentials: that he was identified as a black boy on the playground and had been called a coon, and that his father's intellectual friend bitterly told him not to sell out his race in college (61; 80; 97). He laughs at schoolmates who hide from their origins and only want to hang out with white people (99). At other points in the narrative, however, he also makes obvious attempts to identify with common experiences other Americans might share—his descriptions of his mother's corn belt origins in Wichita, his family's moves, his education at swanky schools, and even his illicit drug use (13-24; 58-64; 93). The goal of these accounts, I believe, is his attempt to forge a genuinely new discourse about identity in the United States, one that avoids a facile melting-pot ethos on one hand, and a self-righteous race politics at the other. In essence, Obama is using his own life to illustrate that many Americans have emerged from clashing origins that do not fully explain or do justice to who they are. Unlike the narrator of Invisible Man, however, Obama's concern that no one can really "see" him—a species of hipster pessimism—takes a
positive tone, a worldly cool. His gamble is that readers will put down his autobiography and think, "hmm, his awkward origins are a lot like mine."1

Obama’s unorthodox manipulation of our stories about race is best illustrated by his handling of one of the central tropes of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century black literary tradition—the process of coming-to-voice. Although Frederick Douglass did not invent the orator’s bildungsroman (its antecedents go far back into Euro-American history), the fusion of his life with the emergence of his eloquence set a significant precedent in black literature, shaping the aspirations of black political life in the U.S., the drama of the protagonists’ lives in black-authored fiction (such as Janie in Their Eyes Were Watching God, or the narrator of Invisible Man), as well as the relation of black writers to their audiences. Obama’s acknowledgment of this tradition is evident in chapter five of his autobiography, which describes the day he spoke at a student rally on university divestment from South Africa, but his version explicitly confesses to the insincerity of that moment. With this admission, Obama has it both ways by giving an inverted version of a familiar drama. As he undermines the story of his triumphant birth as an orator, his surprising candor makes it even more appealing than the typical emergence story would have been.

1The ideas presented in this essay were developed during a graduate course in “Rhetoric and Aesthetics” at St. John’s University in Queens, NY in the fall of 2009. I am grateful to all the students in that class for their energetic contributions. I would like to especially thank Nadina Persaud (who wrote a seminar paper that developed the idea of “multiracial” thought in Obama), Erin Ponton Fiero (who wrote on Critical Race Theory and Obama’s term at Harvard Law Review), and Heather Pope (who wrote on the spectacle of Obama’s tears). These scholars later collaborated on a conference panel at St. John’s that has influenced my thinking. I also need to thank Paul Devlin, a former St. John’s student and doctoral candidate at SUNY Stonybrook, for ongoing conversations with me about black literature, and especially his views on the work of Albert Murray and Ralph Ellison.

Ironically, Obama recuperates his prestige for eloquence with readers by sharing with them a vulnerability. This paradoxical method is a literary technique that appears throughout his writing and speeches. It allows Obama to engage with the narratives of his intellectual predecessors (of a variety of backgrounds), and to revise those traditions on the level of form and style.

Focusing on Obama’s understated way of promoting his eloquence, this paper puts Obama in dialogue with several of his literary antecedents who were also attuned to the importance of performance in American life. As Ralph Ellison makes clear in the invisible man’s recruitment for communist propaganda, or in Bliss’s successive careers in religion, film, and politics, the business of public speaking about race in America is not just the disclosure of truth—it is also about showmanship. Paradoxically, Obama’s deft exposure of the postures, tricks, and fabrications of politics is what makes his rhetorical ethos so powerful. By bringing his readers backstage, he creates another more intimate theater of persuasion.

A Love that Can’t Be True

Chapter five of Dreams from My Father is an explicit meditation on the search for an authentic identity. It begins with the aftermath of a party at which Obama and his friend Regina have had a fight about the speech Obama gave at a political rally held earlier in the day. As Billie Holiday plays—a Sinatra requiem for being a fool for “a love that can’t be true”—Obama has a drink at three in the morning and ruminates on the past and his attempt as a freshman at Occidental College to appear as a solid Brother. The chapter moves in and out of Obama’s early morning consciousness, cutting from the party leftovers in the apartment to his years smoking pot as a high school senior, to his first years in
college, and to what the day's speech meant to him. Obama's reverie introduces readers to his politically-oriented comrades, and rehearses his first conversation with Regina, whom he discovers came to the black cause from growing up in poverty on the South Side of Chicago. Obama underscores for us that he joined the divestment movement to clearly establish himself as an activist, and that Regina inspired him to make use of his voice on behalf of the People.

Obama and his friend design the rally with the intention of creating political theater, but the performance takes on more meaning than Obama anticipated. Obama had planned to make a few remarks and then be dragged off by white students dressed in paramilitary uniform. As he reports the event unfolding, Obama confesses that a transformation occurred in him---in the middle of the act, he suddenly felt that his words might matter. He takes us to the moment at the beginning of his speech where he declares, "There's a struggle going on." He repeats the phrase several times, getting more confident with his incantation. And then he gives readers a sample of what he may have said that day, a heroic apostrophe on the importance of choosing sides for social justice in South Africa:

It's happening an ocean away. But it's a struggle that touches each and every one of us. Whether we know it or not. Whether we want it or not. A struggle that demands that we choose sides. Not between black and white. Not between rich and poor. No---it's a harder choice than that. It's a choice between dignity and servitude. Between fairness and injustice. Between commitment and indifference. A choice between right and wrong. . .

(Dreams 106)

Obama confides that he began to heat up during the short speech. He had the impression that he had made a strong connection with his audience, who had momentarily stopped playing frisbee long enough to pay attention to what he had to say. But then the students yank him off stage and Obama protests in the narrative that despite the show, "I really wanted to stay up there, to hear my voice bouncing off the crowd and returning back to me in applause. I had so much to say." Later that day, however, he grows disappointed in the event, concluding that the whole protest was a "farce" that would do little to influence the board of trustees from investing in apartheid (107).

The snippet of the speech that Obama provides in Dreams is illustrative of the oppositions that this anecdote both summons and undermines. Obama is ostensibly speaking about social injustice, and he wants that topic to be as clear as black and white, though not understood as a struggle between black and white. He characterizes his act on stage as expression of the simplicity of that vision. The Moment means that he has identified with his activist friends in college and he is genuinely doing his part to carry forward their politics and commitment. In a melodramatic sense, Obama is providing readers with the moment where his virtue is disclosed and recognized by the masses. Like the courtroom speech or confrontational crowd scene at the end of a Hollywood melodrama, the protagonist emerges vindicated and eloquent, and the audience vicariously shares in the beatific transformation on stage. A lesser writer than Obama might have let the story stand at that, but he ingeniously complicates the tableau by bringing us back to the cold reality of the staged performance and his subsequent disenchantment with it. After it is done, he concludes that the rally failed to change anyone's mind in America or Soweto. At the party thrown at Obama's apartment later that night,
Regina congratulates him on his speech but he rejects her praise. He tells her that it was the last time he will do anymore speechmaking, and that he thought that the performance was meaningless. He tells her that the primary reason he did it was vanity: "I like the applause. It gives me a nice, cheap thrill. That's all." (108).

So at the same time that the divestment speech advertises Obama’s inauguration into black activism, it clearly retreats from it too. Again, the content of the speech excerpt is important. Obama declares that he is not speaking about a race issue, even though the speech is obviously about race. The speech declares that there is a clear and unmistakable difference between two things, between right and wrong, between substance and illusion, and yet the speech itself is not that simple---it is a cardboard Punch-and-Judy show to catch the attention of the audience. It marks the birth of Obama’s character but it also underscores the falsehood of that illustration, too.

Obama’s open display of these tensions is where the literary innovation and power of the narrative reside, and where his stronger ethos reveals itself. He does not try to take full credit for a genuine political awakening; rather, his disclosure of his posturing as he attempts to be genuine is where his appeal is strongest for jaded audiences. For those who have become accustomed to the spectacles of political television and the hollow righteousness of public figures, Obama’s honesty is an extraordinarily surprising and likeable demonstration of what is going on behind the show.

Rather than avoiding the stale motifs of bildung (ie: personal education and development) Obama actually uses these tropes in startlingly new ways. For example, when he writes about his love for basketball in an earlier chapter, he describes it as both a sacred experience and a stereotype. The technique initially seems rather schematic and overly intellectual. But Obama develops the anecdote carefully. He first admits to an insider’s delight in the sense of community generated by the energy of the sport. He liked something nobody talked about: a way of being together when the game was tight and the sweat broke and the best players stopped worrying about their points and the worst players got swept up in the moment and the score only mattered because that’s how you sustained the trance. In the middle of which you might make a move or a pass that surprised even you, so that even the guy guarding you had to smile, as if to say “Damn . . .” (79)

Obama shares with us a rarified and personal appreciation for basketball acknowledged by even his opponents in the heat of the game. He lets this sublime moment sink in and then he completely upends it by interrupting the narrative with a simulation of his wife Michelle’s unimpressed reaction to his story, as if she were judging Barack’s literary performance by reading over his shoulder with us: “My wife will roll her eyes about now. She grew up with a basketball star for a brother, and when she wants to wind either of us up, she will insist that she’d rather see her son play the cello. She’s right, of course; I was living out a caricature of swaggering American manhood” (79). Like the turn of his divestment speech, Obama frames his story in two antagonistic ways. The first is his sincere expression of his love and respect for the game---in this case, that psychological insight into the unspoken pleasures of basketball, earned by hard experience. The second, however, pokes fun at the sincere expression, deftly recontextualizing it from the point of view of its spectacle, but without fully withdrawing his original claim to sincerity. His autobiography succeeds because the narrative continues to out-do itself, developing more like a
contrapuntal fugue than a tangle of contradictions. As Billie Holiday wistfully croons at the beginning of the fifth chapter, Obama is describing loves that “can't be true,” but which nonetheless are.

Signifyin’ Hamlet

The performative paradoxes of Obama’s divestment speech harken back to an earlier moment in African-American literary history: Frederick Douglass’s heroic apostrophe to the ships in his 1845 *Narrative*. There are several related ways to think about Obama’s narrative in this historical context. First, Obama’s autobiography is signaling the expressive tradition codified by Douglass. Obama both writes within Douglass’s legacy and diverges from it, as I have been arguing here. On another level, however, Obama’s innovation allows us to glimpse aspects of Douglass’s work that previously remained latent. As T.S. Eliot hypothesized in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” the new work of art obliges the ideal order created by the “monuments of the past” to shift over slightly to accommodate the newcomer (38). This theory has a mystical quality to it—does Homer’s *Odyssey* really change because of a later epic poem written in the 1980s, like Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*?—but perhaps Eliot simply means that the new work of art provides new modes of access to earlier works, allowing for new interpretations that simply had not been previously available. In this sense, Obama is not only writing within the established framework of earlier writers, he’s nudging back at that tradition, exerting a kind of gravitational power backwards through time on his literary antecedents (both black and white).

For example, Douglass’s famous speech to the ships has been recognized from its initial publication as a triumphant moment in American literature, but it has rarely been thought of as a self-conscious *performance* of identity. In his preface to the first edition of Douglass’s *Narrative*, William Lloyd Garrison, (who was then Douglass’s employer), directs readers’ attention to the text’s many eloquent passages, but he selects the Chesapeake speech as the single most “thrilling” one and asks, “Who can read that passage, and be insensible to its pathos and sublimity? Compressed into it is a whole Alexandrine library of thought, feeling, and sentiment” (7). Coupled with Douglass’s celebration of literacy as the single most important aid to his freedom, the speech functions as a *mis-en-abyme* of the autobiography and Douglass’s career more generally—an illustration of the power of the speaking voice to enact social justice. After confessing that the slavebreaker Covey had indeed crushed his spirit to live, Douglass describes a moment on Sunday afternoons when he had the liberty to see the white-sailed ships on the Chesapeake bay. Addressing the ships as if they were his free readers, Douglass writes that he would then pour forth his “soul’s complaint” in a speech contrasting their freedom and his enslavement:

> You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom’s swift-winged angels, that fly round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free! O, that I were on one of your gallant decks, and under your protecting wing! Alas! betwixt me and you, the turbid waters roll. Go on, go on. O that I could also go! Could I but swim! If I could fly! O, why was I born a man, of whom to make a brute! The glad ship is gone; she hides in

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*This section of my essay draws on a larger work in progress on Douglass’s connection to nineteenth-century performance culture.*
Over the course of giving this speech, Douglass discovers his conviction to escape slavery—the speech actually results in a mental emancipation that will lead to his physical freedom. The patent melodrama of the scene has annoyed some critics of slave literature (see Robert Stepto’s complaint about antislavery’s “florid soliloquies,” for example), but for readers like Garrison the passage powerfully illustrates the marriage of Douglass’s literary skill with his politics, and underscores the efficacy of the righteously spoken word to lead to human agency and emancipation. Obama signals this tradition in his divestment performance where he too comes to discover his future course in life through speech.

Douglass’s speech has several curious elements to it, however, one of which is Douglass’s unorthodox means of achieving the effects of sincerity. Few modern literary readers or nineteenth-century audiences would fail to hear imitation in this speech. Douglass’s Shakespearian soliloquy echoes of Hamlet, (specifically Coleridge’s interpretation of Hamlet,) whose slow decision to act framed reception of the play from the first half of the nineteenth century onwards. As Lawrence Levine argues in Highbrow Lowbrow, Shakespeare functioned as the sign of art for both elite audiences as well as lower and middle-class ones (see esp. 50-64). Although elite audiences might prefer to see longer versions of Shakespeare’s plays, popular ones would be pleased to see highly compressed or fragmentary versions, cut down to the

Over the dim distance. I am left in the hottest hell of unending slavery. O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave? I will run away. I will not stand it. Get caught, or get clear, I’ll try it. I had as well die with ague as the fever. I have only one life to lose. I had as well be killed running as die standing. (46)

A second reason to see this speech as a kind of self-conscious performance of authenticity, rather than a passionate eruption of his inmost self is that Douglass probably never gave such a speech on the Chesapeake. Like Douglass’s account of the abandonment of his grandmother after the sale of his master’s property, but which Douglas later admitted in his Life and Times that he had fabricated entirely (448-9), or his claim that his father was white, similarly retracted by 1881 (15), Douglass used these false claims and postures to shape an identity of righteousness for his audiences. Yet it is testament to Douglass’s literary power that no audiences of Douglass’s age, nor---to my knowledge---has any modern day scholar ever complained that the artful Chesapeake speech does not belong in his story, a genre typically anchored to the objective authentication of its contents. Rightly appreciated for his gripping account of slavery, Douglass’s use of highly theatricalized representation puts him in uneasy company with the traditions of imposture and confidence which emerged during the nineteenth century. But by reading Douglass’s through Obama, petty indictments of Douglass’s moral lapse lose significance in view of his greater artistic achievement: the creation of (false) spectacles that are nonetheless true.
Ellison’s Audacity

In addition to Frederick Douglass, a literary parent who also looms significantly over Obama’s autobiography is Ralph Ellison, whose *Invisible Man* is a sustained criticism of the broken promises of charismatic oratory in black politics. As James Kloppenberg notes, Obama’s *Dreams* initially seems to be an explicit rejection of that novel’s nihilistic aspects (251), and Obama himself declares that he does not share Ellison’s or Richard Wright’s racial anguish, doubt, and self-contempt (86). But in the same way that Obama recuperates an oratorical tradition through critique, Obama’s apparent rejection of *Invisible Man* actually underscores his fundamental agreement with Ellison about the complex role of public self-fashioning in modern society. If Obama’s autobiography is an implicit revision of *Invisible Man*, an attempt to make the complex dynamics of identity visible and to recover politics as a meaningful area of progressive thought, it is fortuitous that Ellison’s posthumous novel, *Juneteenth*, also attempts to rehabilitate the “frauds” of politics, film, and religion that constitute American life.

The first third of *Dreams* traces the growth of Obama’s critical consciousness about race in ways that initially seem to corroborate the insights of *Invisible Man*. As a college sophomore, Obama not only reflects on his outward experiences of racism, he begins to wonder about its mental toll. He writes that racism has so shaped black consciousness in the U.S. that “you couldn’t be sure that everything you had assumed to be an expression of your black, unfettered self—the humor, the song, the behind-the-back pass—had been freely chosen by you. At best, these things were a refuge; at worst, a trap. Following this maddening logic, the only thing you could choose as your own was withdrawal into a smaller and smaller coil of rage” (85). Obviously, Obama’s text does not conclude with this anger, but he dwells on this experience to show that he has a keen sense of the inner demons that torment the invisible man.

Similarly, Obama’s skeptical thoughts about political oratory also echo Ellison’s characterization of the inability of representational systems to do justice to race. *Invisible Man* casts oratory as one of the central discursive perpetrators of falsehood, a tool of oppression in the hands of both black and white leaders. Recruited by the communist Brotherhood as a public speaker to energize the black masses, the invisible man discovers that his sincere oratory becomes just another fraud to con the public. By the end of the text, he is confused with a chameleon-like trickster, Rinehart, a Harlem operator with a thousand faces. And as the narrator ends his speaking career, he is eclipsed by another orator, Ras the Exhorter, who transforms into Ras the Destroyer (i.e. oratory used as a wrecking ball). As the novel comes to a close, it appears that the traditional venues of public expression failed to convey what the narrator has to say; rather, he communicates his code through in the “lower frequencies” of broken faith and renegade whispers. In Ellison’s letters to Albert Murray in the 1950s, written during the final editing and publication of *Invisible Man*, Ellison continued to express his concern with hustlers and con artists like Rinehart and Ras—“swindlers” and “fourflushers”—who lead people to believe in something based on an illusion (*Trading Twelves* 42, 47). In the first half of *Dreams*, Obama shows his wry awareness that even virtue is susceptible to such blindesses: as Obama chuckles with his friend over the fight that he has with Regina, he dismisses her idealism as an illusionary belief in “things that aren’t really there” (110).

When Obama discovers personal faith after hearing Rev. Jeremiah Wright toward the end of his discussion of his years as a
Chicago community organizer, he knows that he is deliberately moving against the cynicism expressed in his own text as well as that of a secular black intellectual tradition before him. As a character in his own story, he is about to go to Harvard Law School and leave a city whose charismatic black mayor has recently died and left the black community rudderless. Obama’s aspirations as an organizer have not paid off as he had hoped---albeit with some small victories---but the young man is leaving anyway for his own career, much as his own father had left, also bound for Harvard and for greater personal opportunity. As Obama concludes the Chicago portion of his autobiography, he ends the section with his first attendance at Wright’s church, where Wright gives the sermon entitled, “The Audacity of Hope.” Obama presents a compressed version of the entire sermon, moving between published excerpts of Wright’s actual words, reconstructions of the congregation’s response, and his own feelings during the performance. It is a multi-leveled account of the central image’s power---a bruised and battered woman on the top of a mountain playing a broken harp with only one string---because Obama is re-transmitting it third hand via Wright, who in turn borrowed it from a sermon of Rev. Frederick Sampson. The sermon develops the idea that true hope is represented by the woman, fully aware of the desperation of her circumstance and daring to make music anyway. Summarized this way, the image is pretty corny, rife with popular sentimentality and cheap theatrics, but Wright’s oratorical presentation of the image somehow strikes Obama to the core of his being. Obama records the effect of the sermon on him as a revelation:

And in that single note---hope!---I heard something else; at the foot of that cross, inside the thousands of churches across the city, 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. Those stories---of survival, and freedom, and hope---became our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears our tears; until this black church, on this bright day, seemed once more a vessel carrying the story of a people into future generations and into a larger world ... (294)

After declaring how the sermon itself redeemed the apparent futility of his organizing hopes, Obama concludes the chapter with the climactic call-and-reponse performance of Wright---his words blending with the validation of the audience. As Obama’s account trails off into applause and song, a young boy who had been previously fussing beside Obama hands him a handkerchief to wipe the tears off his face, and on his other side, he hears another woman thanking Jesus “for carrying us this far” (295). The show certainly worked for Obama.

Obama’s unlikely epiphany builds on a long Christian tradition that goes back to St. Paul, but he personalizes it by continuing to be able to stand outside the experience at the same time. Always the intellectual, he admits that such spiritual awakenings may sometimes be an oversimplification, or a salve, or impediment to action, but he nonetheless comes to appreciate the gut-felt experience of idealism, the audacity of hope, when things seem bleakest (294). It’s a profound feeling for Obama precisely because of his intellectual habits, and it is one that he hopes will resonate with even his most jaded readers.

Obama’s worldly path to his acceptance of the Word in both a political and spiritual sense puts him in surprising accord with Ellison’s final work, the book that was edited and published
by John Callahan in 1999 as Juneteenth. As a discourse about identity, the novel revolves around an orphaned character of unknown race, named Bliss, who rejects his upbringings by a black minister named Hickman. Having also impregnated and abandoned a brown-skinned woman while living in Oklahoma, Bliss, who renames himself Adam Sunraider, is eventually shot by his forgotten son while Bliss gives a speech on American identity in the Senate. The overall Faulknerian theme of the book is that the past is always alive in the present. As a novel about race, it suggests that the claims of black culture made upon Bliss will not be denied—America’s black past is not going to be repressed forever. As John Callahan notes, Ellison seemed to be engaged in a stylistic experiment: as he stages a rapprochement between black and white, Ellison also seems to be self-consciously creating hybrid idioms of discourse by juxtaposing different slangs and dialects (xxi). At its best, this interplay of discourses is nearly seamless.

One unexpected place for this fusion occurs at the beginning of the Callahan text—Adam Sunraider’s speech to the Senate on American identity. The speech touches on three principal venues of truth and deceit that Ellison saw shaping contemporary American life—the manipulation of illusion in religion, film, and politics. As a boy, Bliss is brought up in the black church where his mentor, A.Z. Hickman, is both a comman as well as a gifted preacher. Bliss later travels as a filmmaker, a trafficker in images, and the novel is punctuated throughout by explicit references to the camera-eye view of events and the shadings of light and dark that constitute identity; and the book’s third arena of analysis is Bliss’s political career. A conventional reading of Sunraider’s performance might conclude that the speech is simply a gaudy indictment of racist America, a rhetorical display of Sunraider’s moral offenses that cry out for his assassination.

But as Obama does with the oratorical moments of his text, Ellison uses Sunraider’s speech as the opportunity to stage a complicated dialogue about the creation of identity from deceit and illusion. As chapter two opens, Sunraider is distracted by the “cinematic” emblem of the rampant eagle facing him in the Senate chamber, and he proceeds to give a speech on the topic of e pluribus unum: one from many. During his hallucination, where he can’t decide whether the eagle is trying to attack him or not (actually, it’s his son who is going to do that), he launches in an impressively Emersonian analysis of the re-creation of American identity through the achievement, rejection, and transformation of the Revolutionary ideals of the past. Ironically announcing that America does not forget the past, Sunraider declares,

Where we have been is where we shall go. We move from the realm of dreams through the valley of the practical and back to the realm of rectified dreams. Yes, but how we arrive there is our decision, our challenge and our anguish. And in the going and in the arriving our task is to tirelessly transform the past and create and re-create our future […] Indeed, we shall reshape the universe—to the forms of our own inner vision. (Juneteenth 16-17).

Of course, Sunraider is the living manifestation of his own theme—a product of American self-creation, an “Adamic definer, namer and shaper” (23), who, as Emerson advocates at the end of Nature, has built his own world (55). At the same time however, that

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Although I will treat this book as Ellison’s, Luke Menand has made a compelling case, although perhaps an overstated one, that it is not Ellison’s novel—it is Callahan’s, a Frankenstein creation where the editing has deeply shaped its meaning.
transformation is a shabby illusion because he has foolishly tried to deny the most influential parts of his own past.

The most difficult moment of the speech is when Sunraider’s genteel philosophy erupts in a series of racist slurs about the significance of wild black men driving around America in Cadillacs. Sunraider is furious that poor blacks have co-opted the pride of the American auto industry as their own badge of success. Although his comments are outrageous—Ellison seems to have taken poetic delight in scripting the excess of Sunraider’s language—Sunraider does acknowledge that this symbolic theft of the good name of Cadillac is part of the American process of self-creation too: “we move toward the fulfillment of our nation’s demand for citizen-individualists possessing the courage to forge a multiplicity of creative selves and styles” (Juneteenth 23). So even though the Cadillac has been hijacked on behalf of black style, Sunraider finds that their action is nonetheless American and it gives him some cause to find “brightness in darkness and hope in despair” (23).

The combination of Sunraider’s racism with his forceful celebration of the ideals of American self-fashioning is an uncomfortable fit. On one level, in the same way that Bliss’s rise to power illustrates the repressed black contributions to American life, Ellison is also acknowledging the racism that accompanied that struggle. In a positive sense, the black church shaped Bliss’s upbringing and its contributions are part of him, no matter how he denies it. But in a negative sense, his racism is a historical part of the imperfect idealization of American identity, a legacy that is dangerous to forget. The speech illustrates both traditions at once. As Hickman and his parishioners listen to the speech, they note how his movements resemble Hickman’s and they recall Bliss’s days as a young preacher. Hickman also sees the debt and laments Bliss’s rejection of his roots: “they take what they need and then git. Then they start doing all right for themselves and pride tells them to deny that they ever knew us” (35). But Hickman too knows that he has bent the Word to suit his own purposes by forcing Bliss to rise from a coffin during the middle of his revivals, and that Bliss is simply using the rhetorical and performative tricks that Hickman taught him (41-46).

So as racist as Sunraider’s speech is, how wrongheaded that it is, it also takes part in a longer tradition of self-creation from borrowed and dubious materials that Obama explicitly narrates—and makes visible—in his own story. When discussing his intellectual and literary role models, he selects Malcolm X as his foremost influence, an admittedly difficult choice for him because of Malcolm’s distrust of whites during most of his life. Nonetheless, Obama confesses to being attracted to the man’s blunt poetry, force of will, and “repeated acts of self-creation” (86). Obama acknowledges the false posturing and yet finds something worth belief—the audacity of hope—because of Malcolm’s show, not just in spite of it.

Similarly, in his “More Perfect Union” speech, when Obama acknowledged the bigoted statements of his pastor, Jeremiah Wright, he gracefully shifted his defense of his pastor, the spectacle of his epiphany at Wright’s sermon in his autobiograh (which Obama quotes from at length in his speech), to an admission about the racial contradictions he also saw in his own grandmother:

I can no more disown him [Rev. Wright] than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother—a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman
who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe. These people are a part of me. And they are a part of America, this country that I love.

Obama ingeniously unites black and white human frailty in this paragraph, and integrates both on behalf of an America in-the-becoming. At the same time that he affirms his appreciation for Wright, Obama admits to reservations about some of Wright’s conduct by confiding with his audience a similar concern he has had about his own grandmother’s bigotry---an unexpected admission that makes this speech a masterpiece of surprise and persuasion. Explicitly refusing to perform what he calls the “politically safe thing,” and play the role of the earnest presidential candidate doing damage control, Obama nonchalantly gestures toward the performance, letting his audiences see what a typical politician might do, and then gives them something far more intimate and vulnerable.

As I’ve shown throughout this paper, Obama’s most appealing rhetoric is when he discloses such weaknesses at the same time that he acknowledges the requirements of spectacle. This technique both draws from the examples of his literary predecessors, such as Douglass and Ellison, at the same time that it extends and transforms their achievements. Obama makes Douglass’s techniques of self-promotion more visible; he recuperates the oratorical moments in Ellison’s text as potential sites of construction, rather than destruction. At the core of Obama’s technique is a dissatisfaction with monological narratives, whether they be familiar complaints about the welfare state or the grandeur of times gone by, and his literary gift has been
to simultaneously invoke familiar types and gracefully move beyond them in the next breath. His preference for the particular over the universal (as James Kloppenberg argues) or genuine dialect voice over the generic (as Zadie Smith notes) are part of that technique. But mostly, it is talent for describing types of experience that don’t fully manifest what he wants to say, and re-staging the imperfections of those dramas for his audiences to see.

New Languages and Old

At the time of this writing, two years into Obama’s presidency, the bloom has come off the Obama rose. The man who was once celebrated as the standard bearer of America’s new Camelot, a worthy successor to the mythos of John F. Kennedy, finds a Republican party united only in its ability to shout “no!” and a Democratic left frustrated that he has compromised so much: a technocrat, they say. Even mainstream liberal journalists tend to grimace about the slow improvement in the economy. At a conference panel on Obama at the Modern Language Association in 2009, the distinguished professor John Ernest discussed the importance of leaders finding a language or discourse equivalent to their times to bring about social change. A figure like Frederick Douglass, using a righteous and moral discourse to frame his critiques of slavery, seemed to succeed in the decades prior to the Civil War. Ernest noted that Obama’s language seemed to be stronger prior to his election----such as his “More Perfect Union” race speech of March 2008----but afterward, he felt a decline. Maybe, Ernest said, being president forecloses on some of the things one can say (“Changing”). It is true that Obama has not recently pushed his critics back with a strong literary defense—a speech on the economy to make the nation gasp. But Obama’s strongest hand has always been his backhanded eloquence, an honesty coming from an unexpected direction. In *Dreams from My
Father he showed that he is capable of making a grand statement and defining a moral vision at the same time that he admits to its contrivances. And in the future, perhaps our biggest surprise will be come from our assumption that the show is over.

**Works Cited**


