BARACK OBAMA’S COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AS NEW BLACK POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how discourse about Barack Obama’s community organizing background underscores his new Black politics. Whereas new Black politics is associated with a minimization of race, centrist and neoliberal policies, and an unwillingness to “speak truth to power,” Obama has been characterized as “different” due to his community organizing experience. As I show, Obama’s community organizing background is invoked by him and others in ways that amplify an opposition to Black racial solidarity associated with the tradition of old Black politics. The first section examines how Obama’s community organizing is depicted as a quest for racial acceptance from old guard Black activists but translates into a story of his political maturation. The second section considers how Obama’s relationship with his (now) former pastor Reverend Jeremiah Wright is symbolized as a struggle between old and new Black politics and thus serves as a commentary on the presumed ineffectiveness of racial solidarity for addressing the plight of working-class Blacks.

Keywords: Barack Obama; new Black politics; community organizing; racial solidarity; Black power
Despite being described as a “new Black politician,” characterized as minimizing race, espousing centrist and neoliberal policies, and an unwillingness to speak “truth to power” (Ford, 2009; James, 2010; Marable, 2008, 2009), Barack Obama is considered by some as a “different” from other new black politicians because of his community organizing background (Marable, 2008). This article departs from this consideration. As I show, references to Obama’s community organizing, in discourse by and about him, underscores his new Black politics, particularly in regards to a rejection of race as a basis of group solidarity and political mobilization for African Americans. Obama’s story of community organizing is also depicted as a journey of political maturation and developing moral authority on racial and economic matters in contrast to the purported ineffectiveness, parochialism, corruption, nationalism, and radicalism pejoratively associated with old guard Black politics. To this end I first detail how Obama’s community organizing is represented as a quest for racial acceptance and eventual negotiation with old guard Black politics. I then examine how Obama’s relationship with his (now) former pastor Reverend Jeremiah Wright symbolizes a struggle between old and new Black politics so as to comment on the purported ineffectiveness of racial solidarity for addressing the plight of working-class Blacks whom Obama organizes.

THE NEW BLACK POLITICS

The election of “hundreds of race-neutral, pragmatic black officials” in the post-Civil Rights era (Marable, 2009, p. 5) has led scholars to distinguish between the “old” and “new” Black politics (Ford, 2009; James, 2010; Marable, 2008, 2009; Walters, 2007). Compared to their civil rights and Black power predecessors, new Black politicians are characterized by Manning Marable (2008) as “post-racial black politicians,” who “espouse a politics that minimises matters of race. They do not like to talk about race and subsume it under the rubric of poverty and class. So they are generally left of centre, or liberal, on social and economic policy.” A related difference, as explained by Ronald Walters (2007), is that the old Black politicians “had been familiar to Blacks before these elections, serving them in various ways as heads of highly visible organizations in the field of civil rights. But by arising from within the Black community, they also arose at the periphery of the American electorate, a fact that defined the nature of the campaigning and the style, agenda, and audience addressed” (pp. 15–16). Specifically, those with roots in the Black political community tended to promote a “policy
focus that was a vehicle for the assertion of Black interests” (Walters, 2007, p. 16). Conversely “Obama’s policy aims, although liberal to progressive, are more universalistic and lack concentrated attention to the Third World or issues that are associated strongly with underrepresented American groups” (Walters, 2007, p. 16).

Of course, as Richard Thompson Ford (2009) notes, “Obama was not alone in his new, less confrontational style of politics. He was part of a cohort of new Black politicians who have won office not by appealing to narrow racial solidarities but instead by drawing broad support from voters of all races, and in some unlikely locations” (p. 39). In his provocatively titled article “Barack is the new Black” (2009), Ford explores the different style of politics as a source of generational conflict between the old guard and the new guard of Black leadership. As he suggests, the conflict may emerge from both substantive policy differences as emphasized by Walters as well as the old guard’s jealousy and resentment toward the younger generation’s relatively rapid ascendancy to political office. Taking as a point of departure Jesse Jackson Sr.’s infamous overheard sound bite about wanting to castrate Obama, Ford (2009) questions, “What was it about Obama’s speech that pushed Jackson’s buttons? Why did Jackson think that Obama was ‘talking down’ to his audience?” (p. 38). According to Ford, “It wasn’t the substance of Obama’s comments, which echoed themes that Obama and Jackson himself had sounded many times in the past” (p. 38). Rather, “Jackson’s bitter aside reflected a much deeper and more long-standing animosity” because Obama “had consciously and conspicuously avoided the style – and much of the substance – of the Black politicians of Jackson’s generation” (p. 38). Unlike Jackson, who is described by Ford as “a brash, belligerent, speak-truth-to-power race man in the Black Power tradition,” Obama “wasn’t angry or belligerent – he was poised, confident, and unflappable” (p. 38).

Ford continues:

The older generation of Black activists – and this included many who had in fact held public office – tried to pressure other people to take action on their behalf. They lectured White liberals and railed against conservatives. The basic model was oppositional and the tools used – mau-mauing, dramatic confrontation, public embarrassment, the guilt trip – were the tools of the weak. By contrast Obama didn’t raise the roof about social injustice, hoping that those in control would take some notice – he had every expectation that he would be in control. Obama and the Black politicians of his new generation didn’t speak truth to power—they were power. And they used the language and tools of the powerful: moderation and compromise, backed up by the proverbial big stick. (p. 38; emphasis in original)
Joy James (2010) concurs with Ford that new Black politicians, or as she calls them, “the new Black candidate,” are less likely to speak “truth to power” than their predecessors. However, unlike Ford, James does not conclude that the new Black candidate represents power. Nor does James emphasize the purported jealousy of the old guard towards the new, intimated by Ford and some new Black politicians – as well as relatively younger African American professionals who identify with them – as one of the major sources of conflict between the two generations (Bai, 2008). Rather James considers the new Black candidate’s status in a multiracial democracy in which “Blackness remains fixed as negation (of civil society, of prosperity, of law and order, and of patriotism),” and thus, “is to be avoided or disciplined, or in the case of the candidate’s persona, transcended” (p. 27). In other words, she considers the disciplinary function of the new Black candidate:

A product of ivy-league universities, no matter how humble his origins, the new black candidate reflects new social stratifications in which class privilege and racial etiquette, in the form of an uncompromised civility towards the mainstream, trump demands for “speaking truth to power”. Now, both black conservatives and pragmatic black liberals shoulder the burden of chastising those without institutional power: progressive radicals, the alienated, ‘too-black’ ideologues or culturalists demanding anti-racist accountability from the mainstream majority and its chosen political class. (p. 27)

Although acknowledging many of the aforementioned tendencies of the younger generation of Black elected officials, Marable (2008) nevertheless considers Obama “different” from other new Black politicians due to his community organizing background and familiarity with leftist politics:

What makes Obama different is that he has also been a community organizer. He has read left literature, including my works, and he understands what socialism is. A lot of the people working with him are, indeed, socialists with backgrounds in the Communist Party or as independent Marxists. There are a lot of people like that in Chicago who have worked with him for years. But to differentiate, this new generation of elected black officials are unlike the older group who emerged in the 1970s and 1980s whose constituencies were entirely black.

Although Marable (2008) cautions, “Obama is not a Marxist or a socialist – he is a progressive liberal with a kind of centre-left strategy,” he still sees Obama’s progressive potential but argues it is imperative that those “on the left ... press him to carry out his own agenda.” Or, as he puts it, someone needs to be “A Philip Randolph, the Black socialist leader,” to Obama’s FDR.

In the following two sections I explore how Obama’s community organizing figures in discourse by and about him. I show how Obama’s community organizing background is invoked in ways that underscore his
new Black politics and his opposition to Black racial solidarity in the tradition of his Black political predecessors. The first section examines how Obama’s community organizing is depicted as a quest for racial acceptance from the old guard but translates into a story of his political maturation. The second section explores how Obama’s relationship with his (now) former pastor Reverend Jeremiah Wright is symbolized as a struggle between old and new Black politics that serves as a commentary on the presumed ineffectiveness of racial solidarity for addressing the plight of working-class Blacks on whose behalf Obama organizes.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AS POLITICAL MATURATION

In his 1995 (2004) memoir, *Dreams from my father: A story of race and inheritance*, Obama describes his intention to pursue community organizing after graduating from Columbia University. The seventh chapter of the book begins, “In 1983, I decided to become a community organizer” (p. 133). At the time, Obama “didn’t know anyone making a living that way” and was unable to explain to his college peers “what it was that a community organizer did” (p. 133):

I couldn’t answer them directly. Instead, I’d pronounce on the need for change. Change in the White House, where Reagan and his minions were carrying on their dirty deeds. Change in the Congress, compliant and corrupt. Change in the mood of the country, manic and self-absorbed. Change won’t come from the top, I would say. Change will come from a mobilized grass roots.

That’s what I’ll do, I’ll organize Black folks. At the grass roots. For change. (p. 133)

According to Obama, he was partially inspired to take a more humble path than that generally associated with Ivy League graduates by “a series of images, romantic images, of a past I had never known” (p. 134). These images were “of the civil rights movement” (p. 134). Obama analogizes his quest to become a community organizer with his search for a place in the lineage of Black politics among those he would later call the “Moses generation,” or African Americans with political histories rooted in the Civil Rights Movement (Sweet, 2007):

Such images became a form of prayer for me, bolstering my spirits, channeling my emotions in a way that words never could. They told me … that I wasn’t alone in my particular struggles, and that communities had never been a given in this country, at least not for blacks. Communities had to be created, fought for, tended like gardens.
They expanded or contracted with the dreams of men – and in the civil rights movement those dreams had been large. In the sit-ins, the marches, the jailhouse songs, I saw the African-American community becoming more than just the place where you’d been born or the house where you’d been raised. *Through organizing, through shared sacrifice, membership had been earned.* And because membership was earned – because this community I imagined was still in the making, built on the promise that the larger American community, black, white, and brown, could somehow redefine itself – I believed that it might, over time, admit the uniqueness of my own life.

That was my idea of organizing. It was a promise of redemption. (pp. 134–135; emphasis added)

In his article “The Joshua generation: Race and the campaign of Barack Obama” (2008), David Remnick, borrowing from Obama’s self-identification as part of the generation of African Americans tasked with completing the unfinished journey of “the Moses generation” (Sweet, 2007), remarks: “Sometimes, as one reads ‘Dreams from My Father,’ it’s hard to know where the real angst ends and the self-dramatizing of the backward glance begins, but there is little doubt that Obama was at sea, particularly where race was concerned” (p. 2). Following this line of thought, Remnick quotes David Levering Lewis:

> The historian David Levering Lewis, who has written biographies of King and Du Bois, told me that after reading Obama’s books he had the sense of a young man almost alone in the world, trying to find a place. ‘The orphanage of his life compels him to scope out possibilities and escape hatches,’ he said … Lewis told me that he read the memoir as if Obama were a densely layered character in a coming-of-age novel. ‘To say he is constructing himself sounds pejorative, but he is open to the world in a way that most Americans have not had the opportunity to be,’ Lewis said. ‘That is something that outsiders have to do.’ (p. 2)

This narrative about Obama’s community organizing treats his commitment to service as an exploration into the meaning and basis of Black identity in a post-Civil Rights era. Levering Lewis, in his comments to Remnick about Obama’s memoir, concludes, “But, as he evolves, the African-American pathway is the pathway to service, to success, and to a more complete self-definition” (quoted in Remnick, 2008, p. 2). Or, as Remnick (2008) sums up: “He sought admission somehow into that distant world of seriousness and commitment – a connection to ‘the Moses generation.’ He craved authentic experience, a sense of service and belonging, and a racial identity” (p. 2).

Related, Obama’s pursuit of community organizing is depicted as a desire to be recognized and accepted by those intimated as “authentically Black” due to their participation in the Civil Rights Movement. Service to community is thus depicted as Obama’s rite of passage into Blackness. Yet his baptism into the Black political community is stymied by the unresponsiveness of the old
guard. Consider for instance, how Obama describes in Dreams from my father (2004) his efforts to connect with “progressive” Civil Rights organizations while finishing up at Columbia University: “And so, in the months leading up to graduation, I wrote to every Civil Rights organization I could think of, to any Black elected official in the country with a progressive agenda, to neighborhood councils and tenant rights groups” (2004, p. 135). Obama reportedly never received a response from the organizations to which he wrote. This lack of response from civil rights organizations is also emphasized in David Moberg’s article in The Nation (2007a) titled “Obama’s community roots.”

In 1985, freshly graduated from Columbia University and working for a New York business consultant, Barack Obama decided to become a community organizer. Though he liked the idea, he didn’t understand what the job involved, and his inquiries turned up few opportunities. Then he got a call from Jerry Kellman, an organizer working on Chicago’s far South Side for a community group based in the churches of the region, an expanse of white, black and Latino blue-collar neighborhoods that were reeling from the steel-mill closings. Kellman was looking for an organizer for the new Developing Communities Project (DCP), which would focus on black city neighborhoods. (emphasis added)

As Kellman would later tell Byron York of The National Review (2008), “Barack had been very inspired by the civil-rights movement … I felt that he wanted to work in the civil-rights movement, but he was ten years too late, and this was the closest he could find to it at the time” (p. 1). Kellman, a white organizer working for a group that had been established by several Chicago Catholic churches, specifically sought an African American to organize area neighborhoods that were almost 100 percent Black. After receiving an application from Obama in response to an ad he had placed in trade publications, Kellman first thought Obama may be Japanese due to his last name and being from Hawaii. York (2008) reports, “It was only when Kellman talked to Obama on the phone, and Obama ‘expressed interest in something African-American culturally,’ that a relieved Kellman offered Obama the job” (p. 1). Thus, it was Kellman, a white man, who gives Obama a chance to professionally commit to organizing the Black working-class.

Before heading to Chicago to work for Kellman, Obama, “decided to find more conventional work for a year” to both pay off student loans and save for the future (p. 135). The future for which he saved would eventually involve becoming a community organizer: “I would need the money later, I told myself. Organizers didn’t make any money; their poverty was proof of their integrity” (p. 135). “More conventional work” was employment at what Obama describes as “a consulting house to multinational corporations” in New York (p. 135). While employed at the consulting house, a young Obama
is still committed to community organizing and thus considers himself akin to “a spy behind enemy lines” (p. 135). At the multinational corporation he encounters working-class African Americans who work in less glamorous positions at the firm. These African Americans will figure in his narrative as providing a counter to the old guard Black politics in which young Obama is purportedly eager to participate; as working-class Blacks they discourage Obama from pursuing community organizing. The Black administrative assistants who treated Obama “like a son” and with whom he shares over lunch his “wonderful organizing plans,” smile but nevertheless look “secretly disappointed” at the Columbia graduate’s career goals. However, it is “Ike,” “the gruff Black security guard in the lobby,” who is “willing to come right out and tell me I’d be making a mistake” (p. 135). Ike asks Obama why he would go into community organizing when he has other options:

> Forget about this organizing business and do something that’s gonna make you some money. Not greedy, you understand. But enough. I’m telling you this ‘cause I can see potential in you … got a nephew about your age making some real money there. That’s what we need, see. Not more folks running around here, all rhymes and jive. You can’t help folks that ain’t gonna make it nohow, and they won’t appreciate you trying. Folks that wanna make it, they gonna find a way to do it on they own. (p. 136)

Although he does not “pay Ike much attention at the time,” because he “sounded too much like my grandparents,” Obama nevertheless writes about “the idea of becoming an organizer slipping away from me” (p. 136). After being promoted to a “financial writer” Obama wavers between imagining himself as a “a captain of industry, barking out orders, closing the deal” and “who it was that I had told myself I wanted to be and felt pangs of guilt for my lack of resolve” (p. 136). Eventually, Obama resigned from his corporate position and “began looking in earnest for an organizing job” (p. 138). His earnest pursuit eventually landed him an interview with “a prominent civil rights organization in the city” (p. 138), in which the director emphasized the “changing nature” of civil rights, one that departed from the redemptive nature that Obama dreamt about (p. 135):

> “I like it,” the director said after looking over my resume. “Particularly the corporate experience. That’s the real business of a civil rights organization these days. Protest and pickets won’t cut it anymore. To get the job done, we’ve got to forge links between business, government, and the inner city.” He clasped his broad hands together, then showed me a glossy annual report opened to a page that listed the organization’s board of directors. There was one black minister and ten white corporate executives. “You see?” the director said. “Public-private partnerships. The key to the future. And that’s where young people like yourself come in. Educated. Self-assured. Comfortable in boardrooms.” (p. 139)
Obama was offered the job “on the spot” but “declined his generous offer, deciding I needed a job closer to the streets” (p. 139). He goes to work as a full-time organizer at City College in Harlem for the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG). Obama describes his time at NYPIRG in Dreams from my father accordingly: “I spent three months working for a Ralph Nader offshoot up in Harlem, trying to convince the minority students at City College about the importance of recycling” (p. 139).

Some of Obama’s contemporaries from New York recall his work differently. In a 2007 article titled “Obama’s account of New York years often differs from what others say,” New York Times writer Janny Scott reports that “his years in New York City … in the early 1980s surfaces only fleetingly in his memoir. In the book, he casts himself as a solitary wanderer in the metropolis, the outsider searching for a way” (p. 1). Obama’s representation of his duties at NYPIRG “surprised some former colleagues. They said that more ‘bread-and-butter issues’ like mass transit, higher education, tuition and financial aid were more likely the emphasis at City College” (Scott, 2007, p. 2). And as Scott (2007) relays, Eileen Hershenov, who “oversaw Mr. Obama’s work for NYPIRG,” remembers the recent college graduate being adept at organizing: “You needed somebody – and here was where Barack was a star – who could make the case to students across the political spectrum” (p. 2). Related, Obama’s description of his time working at “a consulting house to multinational corporations” (135) is also recalled by others differently: “Far from a bastion of corporate conformity, they said, it was informal and staffed by young people making modest wages. Employees called it ‘high school with ashtrays’” (Scott, 2007, p. 1). Dan Armstrong, who was a colleague of Obama at Business International Corporation in New York in 1984 offered an opinion on why Obama’s account of his New York years differs from some of his colleagues: “All of Barack’s embellishment serves a larger narrative purpose: to retell the story of the Christ’s temptation. The young, idealistic, would-be community organizer gets a nice suit, joins a consulting house, starts hanging out with investment bankers, and barely escapes moving into the big mansion with the white folks” (quoted in Scott, 2007, p. 1).

Such recollections from Obama’s colleagues, while perhaps inaccurate, nevertheless suggest a larger purpose to Obama’s telling, albeit how limited in its detail, of his New York years. Obama of course is not alone in crafting a narrative of himself as a candidate and politician – indeed, his future vice president Joe Biden was caught during his 1987 presidential campaign plagiarizing quotes – and storyline – from British Labor party leader Neil Kinnock (Shafer, 2008). Nevertheless, I want to consider how
Obama’s depiction of his community organizing experience serves to signal him as a new Black politician. Although a story in which a person opts for the moral road less traveled by dedicating one’s life to political office is not specific to African American candidates, the casting of Obama’s foray into community organizing can also be interpreted as a commentary on Black politics in which a young Obama is initially eager to participate but as Kellman put it, was “‘ten years too late’” (quoted in York, 2008, p. 1). By downplaying his community organizing work in New York and over-emphasizing his anxiety working for corporate America (as well as declining the offer from the prominent New York civil rights organization that, similar to Obama today, privileges private-public partnerships) (Gates, 2009), Obama depicts himself specifically as a Black man on a quest to seek, as he puts it, redemption vis-à-vis acceptance and inspiration from the Moses generation. Depicting himself as a Black man interested in serving the Black community, Obama also tells a story of the failures and corruption of post-Black civil rights politics.

Whereas New York serves as the site of Obama’s foray into community organizing and his initial reception, or lack thereof, from civil rights organizations, Chicago is the site of Obama’s political maturation, a process that involves a growing skepticism toward the Moses generation. In different accounts, Obama’s time in Chicago’s South Side, itself a trope for both poor and working-class Black Chicago and Black politics, is invoked to pose Obama as a pragmatic Black candidate in relation to the specter of the old guard. It is in Chicago that Obama encounters another “Ike,” the Black security guard in New York who told him to forgo community organizing and make money. The “Ike” of Chicago is an unnamed public school administrative aide that Obama references in a 1988 essay featured in Illinois Issues (2008a) titled “Why organize? Problems and promise in the inner city.” Obama begins his statement on organizing with:

> Over the past five years, I’ve often had a difficult time explaining my profession to folks. Typical is a remark a public school administrative aide made to me one bleak January morning, while I waited to deliver some flyers to a group of confused and angry parents who had discovered the presence of asbestos in their school.
> “Listen, Obama,” she began. “You’re a bright young man, Obama. You went to college, didn’t you?”
> I nodded.
> “I just cannot understand why a bright young man like you would go to college, get that degree and become a community organizer.”
> “Why’s that?”
> “Cause the pay is low, the hours is long, and don’t nobody appreciate you.” She shook her head in puzzlement as she wandered back to attend to her duties.
Similar to Ike of *Dreams from my father*, the aide encourages Obama to pursue a different path than community organizing. And related to Ike’s statement, “You can’t help folks that ain’t gonna make it nohow, and they won’t appreciate you trying” (Obama, 2004, p. 136), the aide suggests that it is a futile effort because “don’t nobody appreciate you” (Obama, 2008a). Both Ike and the aide’s comments serve to make Obama’s time as a community organizer an act of moral sacrifice that they encourage of him to be temporary. As Obama writes in “Why organize?” (2008a): “I’ve thought back on that conversation more than once during the time I’ve organized with the Developing Communities Project, based in Chicago’s far south side. Unfortunately, the answers that come to mind haven’t been as simple as her question. Probably the shortest one is this: It needs to be done, and not enough folks are doing it.” Ike and the aide, then, become signifiers of an alternative Black politic that eschews long-term community organizing (and by extension, constant confrontation against structural inequality) – because of its presumed futility in resolving the plight of the Black masses in which they are a part. Through the stories involving Ike and the aide – particularly the words of the former, old guard Black politics is also depicted as excessive, incompetent, and corrupt whereas a path dedicated to making money – albeit “not greedy” (p. 136) – is proposed as a more appropriate remedy for resolving the ills of the Black community. As members of the proletariat (a security guard and public school administrative aide) as opposed to the Black political “class,” Ike and the aide thus serve to authorize an alternative “authentic” Black politics that Obama can pursue. This alternative Black politics is one committed to the working-class and racial uplift through social mobility but that somehow elides the implied corruption and greed of the prominent civil rights organization in New York City at which Obama interviewed and eventually rejected in order to be “closer to the streets” (p. 139). Keep in mind Ike’s comment, “Forget about this organizing business and do something that that’s gonna make you some money. Not greedy, you understand. But enough … That’s what we need, see” (p. 136; emphasis added). Whereas Obama claims to once believe that poverty was “proof” of “integrity” (2004, p. 135), Ike and the aide absolve him of his planned long-term sacrifice.

Related, by telling the stories of Ike and the aide, Obama is able to suggest that he must reject the trappings of the old guard, described by Ike as hustlers or “folks running around here, all rhymes and jive” (Obama, 2004, p. 136) to truly serve the Black working-class and poor. Pursuing a path that emphasizes making money but divorced from the old guard civil rights organizations is somehow redeemed of the immorality and corruption
associated with the “hustle” and profanity of Black politics. In other words, Obama depicts himself as a different version of an authentic Black politics that is presumably more in tune with the needs of the Black proletariat than the old guard, who is characterized as being exploitative of the Black working-class whom Obama organizes.

Additionally, Obama’s community organizing background is referenced so as to translate his quest for political office into an act of service that can simultaneously alleviate the plight of the Black masses but pose no threat to the racial order. Whereas the old guard’s quest for political office has been considered a call for Black power by both Blacks and non-Blacks, the racial anxiety of the latter has interpreted such a goal as one of corruption and reverse racism. Obama instead translates his professional goals of community organizing into a commitment to service through elected office and in turn, reassures the public that he is not pursuing Black power. In a revised version of his narrative about his path to community organizing involving Ike and the aide, Obama on the presidential campaign trail told an audience in Iowa: “People would ask me, ‘You seem like a nice guy, you have a fancy law degree, you make a lot of money, you’ve got a beautiful, churchgoing family, why would you want to go into something dirty and nasty like politics?’” (Macfarquhar, 2007, p. 9). This representation, of Obama seeking political office as a moral imperative – as opposed to selfish reasons, such as greed or corruption, associated with old guard Black politics – is also found in a 2007 story in The U.S. News & World Report:

As a community organizer in the Altgeld Gardens public housing project in the mid-1980s, Obama, then 23, quickly emerged as a tireless and pragmatic advocate for the community – traits that characterize the kind of president he says he wants to be. “His work as a community organizer was really a defining moment in his life, not just his career,” his wife, Michelle, told U.S. News. It helped him decide “how he would impact the world” – assisting people in defining their mutual interests and working together to improve their lives. (p. 1)

What some might see as a goal motivated by the same thirst for power associated with old Black guard elected officials is thus translated into a moral gesture on behalf of Obama. References to Obama’s community organizing background help him avoid appearing as a corrupt Black politician or as someone interested in consolidating power along racial lines. Consider, for instance, Moberg’s (2007a) depiction of Obama the community organizer in The Nation: “Often by confronting officials with insistent citizens – rather than exploiting personal connections, as traditional black Democrats proposed – Obama and DCP protected community interests” (emphasis added). Rather than being depicted as simply a Black
organizer of Black communities – which could easily be read as an association with old guard Black politics, Obama’s community organizing in Chicago’s South Side promotes an image of him as a populist – a term rarely associated with the democratic tendencies of Black politicians. Thus, Obama’s community organizing can simultaneously demonstrate a commitment to both the Black working-class and multiracial populism; as he claimed in a 2008 election campaign speech: “I can bring this country together … I have a track record, starting from the days I moved to Chicago as a community organizer” (quoted in York, 2008, p. 1).

Unlike Marable’s (2008) consideration of Obama as a different new Black politician because of his community organizing roots, it appears that references to Obama’s community activism serve to represent Obama as simultaneously supportive of the Black working-class and different from the old Black guard. It is here that we can consider the disciplinary function of new Black candidates (James, 2010) and specifically, of the invoking of Obama’s community organizing background. Obama’s story of political maturation involves distinguishing himself from the implied corruption, or the “rhymes and jive” of the old Black politics (Obama, 2004, p. 136), purportedly on behalf of the Black masses. Unlike new Black politicians who often minimize race (Marable, 2008), Obama actually amplifies his Blackness as well as the status of the Black working-class, symbolized by Ike and the public school administrative aide, so as to draw attention to his new Black political orientation. Whereas Obama would, in his 2008 speech, “A more perfect union” (2008b), suggest that it is others who are fixated on his Black authenticity, his story of community organizing is also one in which he openly engages questions of Blackness so as to differentiate his political approach and commitments. As the next section shows, Obama’s community organizing narrative is also one that promotes a consideration of class diversity among African Americans so as to ultimately dismiss Blackness, or race, as a source of political identity and collective action. I discuss how Obama’s relationship with his (now) former pastor Reverend Jeremiah Wright is symbolized as a struggle between old and new Black politics so as to serve as a commentary on the ineffectiveness of racial solidarity to address the plight of Blacks Obama encounters as a community organizer. Also considered is how Obama signals a commitment to the Black proletariat that simultaneously incorporates the Black working-class into an enlightened multiracial citizenry in which African Americans’ class status can be linked to that of non-Blacks, a gesture that ultimately displaces Blackness as a source of political organizing and treats such a dismissal as a moral imperative.
REVEREND JEREMIAH WRIGHT AND BLACK SOLIDARITY

In the aforementioned 1988 essay “Why organize?” Barack Obama remarks on the import of Black churches in Chicago Black politics:

Nowhere is the promise of organizing more apparent than in the traditional black churches. Possessing tremendous financial resources, membership and – most importantly – values and biblical traditions that call for empowerment and liberation, the black church is clearly a slumbering giant in the political and economic landscape of cities like Chicago. A fierce independence among black pastors and a preference for more traditional approaches to social involvement (supporting candidates for office, providing shelters for the homeless) have prevented the black church from bringing its full weight to bear on the political, social and economic arenas of the city.

Over the past few years, however, more and more young and forward-thinking pastors have begun to look at community organizations such as the Developing Communities Project in the far south side and GREAT in the Grand Boulevard area as a powerful tool for living the social gospel, one which can educate and empower entire congregations and not just serve as a platform for a few prophetic leaders. Should a mere 50 prominent black churches, out of the thousands that exist in cities like Chicago, decide to collaborate with a trained organizing staff, enormous positive changes could be wrought in the education, housing, employment and spirit of inner-city black communities, changes that would send powerful ripples throughout the city.

Eventually, Obama would become affiliated with one such Black church in Chicago, Trinity United Church of Christ, which was under the leadership of Reverend Jeremiah Wright. Questions of Obama’s religious faith would take on greater significance in his presidential campaign due to both anti-Muslim bigotry and anxieties that Obama agreed with the content of Wright’s incendiary speeches that were continuously fed to the public (Miller, 2008, p. 1). Obama would “counter” the Wright controversy with his 2008 address “A more perfect union,” popularly referred to as his “race speech.” His remarks depict his relationship with the Black church, and Trinity United Church specifically, as part of Obama’s journey towards affirming his place in the Black community. Like the Black civil rights organizations he was eager to work for as a community organizer, the Black church is treated, in Obama’s (2008b) account, as a source of an authentic Black politics and community in which he yearned to participate:

People began to shout, to rise from their seats and clap and cry out, a forceful wind carrying the reverend’s voice up into the rafters… 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. Our
trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal, black and more than black; in chronicling our journey, the stories and songs gave us a means to reclaim memories that we didn’t need to feel shame about ... memories that all people might study and cherish—and with which we could start to rebuild. (p. 3)

Several months after delivering “A more perfect union,” Obama, while on the campaign trail, discussed the trajectory of his religious beliefs with *Newsweek*. Recalling his New York years, he commented, “I did a lot of spiritual exploration” (Miller, 2008, p. 1). Obama’s spiritual search would sometimes lead him to the famous Black church in Harlem, Abyssinian Baptist: “‘I’d just sit in the back and I’d listen to the choir and I’d listen to the sermon,’ he says, smiling a little as he remembers those early days in the wilderness. ‘There were times that I would just start tearing up listening to the choir and share that sense of release’” (Miller, 2008, p. 1). As *Newsweek* reported:

Obama says his spiritual quest was driven by two main impulses. He was looking for a community that he could call home – a sense of rootedness and belonging he missed from his biracial, peripatetic childhood. The visits to the black churches uptown helped fulfill that desire. “There’s a side very particular to the African-American church tradition that was powerful to me,” he says. The exuberant worship, the family atmosphere and the prophetic preaching at a church such as Abyssinian would have appealed to a young man who lived so in his head. And he became obsessed with the civil-rights movement. He’d become convinced, through his reading, of the transforming power of social activism, especially when paired with religion. (Miller, 2008, p. 3)

According to *Newsweek*, “Obama’s organizing days helped clarify his sense of faith and social action as intertwined”:

“It’s hard for me to imagine being true to my faith – and not thinking beyond myself, and not thinking about what’s good for other people, and not acting in a moral and ethical way,” he says. When these ideas merged with his more emotional search for belonging, he was able to arrive at the foot of the cross. (Miller, 2008, p. 4)

“And how much of the decision was pragmatic, motivated by Obama’s desire, as he says in ‘Dreams,’ to get closer to the people he was trying to help? ‘I thought being part of a community and affirming my faith in a public fashion was important,’ Obama says” (Miller, 2008, p. 4). While the *Newsweek* reporter, Lisa Miller, asked Obama about whether his decision to explore his faith was pragmatic, her question asked whether it was deliberate in the service of connecting with those on behalf of whom Obama organized in Chicago. Put simply, Obama is still depicted as exploring his faith as well as determining which church he would become affiliated with out of altruistic reasons – to connect with poor and working class Blacks. Such representation is also found in *Dreams from my father*. In it Obama
describes meeting with Wright to encourage the pastor to support the work of his organization. He also recounts an exchange that ensues about class differences in the Black community. Obama (1995 [2004]) recalls, ‘‘I’ll try to help you if I can,’’ he said. ‘‘But you should know that having us involved in your efforts isn’t necessarily a feather in your cap’’ (p. 283). When Obama asks why, Wright tells him, ‘‘Some of my fellow clergy don’t appreciate what we’re about. They feel like we’re too radical. Others, we ain’t radical enough’’ (p. 283). The then community organizer interjects: ‘‘Some people say,’’ I interrupted, ‘‘that the church is too upwardly mobile’’ (p. 283). In response,

The reverend’s smile faded. ‘‘That’s a lot of bull,’’ he said sharply. ‘‘People who talk that mess reflect their own confusion. They’ve bought into the whole business of class that keeps us from working together … We don’t buy into these false divisions here. It’s not about income, Barack. Cops don’t check my bank account when they pull me over and make me spread-eagle against the car.’’ (p. 283)

And referencing the sociologist William Julius Wilson – whose research Obama mentions in his 1988 essay ‘‘Why organize?’’ (but who he would not meet until 1996) (Gates, 2009, p. 18; Obama, 2008a [1988]), Wright, according to Dreams from my father, also said to Obama, ‘‘These miseducated brothers, like that sociologist at the University of Chicago, talking about ‘the declining significance of race.’ Now, what country is he living in?’’ (p. 283). In response to Wright’s reaction, Obama wondered, ‘‘But wasn’t there a reality to the class divisions’’ (p. 283). Obama later states in his book, ‘‘Wright was at least partly justified in dismissing the church’s critics, for the bulk of its membership was solidly working class … Still, there was no denying that the church had a disproportionate number of black professionals in its ranks’’ (p. 285). Eventually, Obama comes to identify Trinity United Church as a site in which

the former gang-banger, the teenage mother, had their own forms of validation—claims of greater deprivation, and hence authenticity, their presence in the church providing the lawyer or doctor with an education from the streets. By widening its doors to allow all who would enter, a church like Trinity assured its members that their fates remained inseparably bound, that an intelligible ‘us’ still remained. (p. 286)

As he did on behalf of Ike and the public school administrative aide, Obama questions what relevance Black racial politics – in this sense expressed through Wright’s commitment to a cross-class Black solidarity and an “intelligible ‘us’” (p. 286) – had for the Black masses:

It was a powerful program, this cultural community, one more pliant than simple nationalism, more sustaining than my own brand of organizing. Still I couldn’t help wondering whether it would be enough to keep more people from leaving the city or
young men out of jail. Would the Christian fellowship between a black school administrator, say, and a black school parent change the way the schools were run? Would the interest in maintaining such unity allow Reverend Wright to take a forceful stand on the latest proposals to reform public housing? And if men like Reverend Wright failed to take a stand, if churches like Trinity refused to engage with real power and risk genuine conflict, then what chance would there be of holding the larger community intact? (p. 286)

Consistent with the class versus race debate, in which class diversity is raised so as to trump the existence of a coherent “Black community,” or Black ontology – and in turn an “authentic” Black politics (Gates, 2009), Obama the community organizer depicts himself as the class consciousness of Black nationalist institutions. Obama’s rhetoric is similar to African American scholars such as Wilson as well as Henry Louis Gates – both supporters of Obama – who are quick to emphasize class diversity and the status of the Black poor so as to promote neoliberalism (Gates, 2009). “Black leaders” who emphasize the shared racial experiences of African Americans – notably, in Wright’s account with the racial state (“Cops don’t check my bank account when they pull me over and make me spread-eagle against the car,” p. 283) – are depicted as bourgeois or politically out of touch for promoting an archaic notion of shared racial oppression despite the class diversity of the Black community or the “successes” of some Blacks in the post-Civil Rights era. Indeed, in Obama’s telling, those African Americans who may want to share fellowship with poor and working-class Blacks may be interpreted as frauds akin to white liberals with racial guilt because they derive validation from the “authenticity” of their poorer peers. Thus, Obama not only makes, perhaps inadvertently, a moral case for middle-class African Americans to socially distance themselves from poor and working-class Blacks so as to not to exploit them in a quest for “racial authenticity,” he also translates (some may say conceals) his opposition to racial solidarity into a concern about class differences and the plight of the people he organizes. Not depicted as the huckster brand of civil rights, Wright and Trinity United Church nevertheless become metaphors for an outdated mode of Black politics that Obama, the committed organizer, must also negotiate. By emphasizing racial solidarity in the post-Civil Rights era, Wright remains too preoccupied with a purportedly anachronistic sense of race in the face of class differences. Consistent with new Black politicians’ emphasis on class and poverty rather than race (Marable, 2008), Obama invokes his community organizing background to question the preoccupation with racial solidarity – as opposed to “class consciousness” – among the old guard, as represented by Reverend Wright’s diverse Black congregation.
Despite his initial reservations about Wright’s church, Obama officially joined Trinity United Church “several years later, when he returned to Chicago” after graduating from Harvard Law School (Miller, 2008, p. 5). Whereas he had expressed reservations about the class diversity of the church in *Dreams from my father*, it appears that the presence of upwardly mobile and well-connected African Americans was much more attractive to Obama than he intimates in his commentary on Wright’s over-emphasis on racial solidarity. Toni Preckwinkle, who had been the alderman on Chicago’s south side whom Obama approached in 1995 about running for state senate, says as much in a 2008 *New Yorker* article “Making it: How Chicago shaped Obama.” As writer Ryan Lizza puts it, “For anyone trying to understand Obama’s breathtakingly rapid political ascent, Preckwinkle is an indispensible witness – a close observer, friend, and confidante during a period of Obama’s life to which he rarely calls attention” (p. 1). Reported by Lizza (2008), Preckwinkle “suggested that Obama joined Jeremiah Wright’s Trinity United Church of Christ for political reasons. ‘It’s a church that would provide you with lots of social connections and prominent parishioners,’ she said. ‘It’s a good place for a politician to be a member’” (p. 1).

Noticeably, Obama’s account of his relationship with Trinity United Church and Wright is dramatically different in “A more perfect union” (2008b). Here he does not talk about confronting Wright for having class diversity or, as mentioned in *The New Yorker*, his interest in connecting with “prominent parishioners” (Lizza, 2008, p. 1). Instead, the speech championed the very class diversity of the church Obama had questioned Wright about:

> Like other predominantly black churches across the country, Trinity embodies the black community in its entirety – the doctor and the welfare mom, the model student and the former gang-banger. Like other black churches, Trinity’s services are full of raucous laughter and sometimes bawdy humor. They are full of dancing, clapping, screaming and shouting that may seem jarring to the untrained ear. The church contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and yes, the bitterness and bias that make up the black experience in America. (p. 3)

As in *Dreams from my father*, Obama’s race speech amplifies the class diversity of Trinity United Church so as to discipline Black solidarity. Obama is able to both apologize for Wright’s commentary and signal his role in diversifying the Black community by speaking to the dichotomies that the church represents, thus distancing the then presidential candidate from the nationalism and “radicalism” of the Black church and his pastor.
Such distancing, as James (2010) describes, attempts to redefine whiteness and rehabilitate Blackness to a non-Black public:

Through electoral politics, both the new black political class and the mainstream white voter can shed past racial stigma and elevate their social status as pragmatic politicians and citizens who have moved beyond old antagonisms. In fact, in their electoral opposition to “bad” whites – i.e. those, particularly the less well educated, who will not vote for black candidates – affluent whites redefine ‘racial purity’: the good white is colorblind. In repudiating as divisive blacks who challenge the skewing of material and moral wealth towards whites, black elites redefine racial authenticity: the good black expresses no racial solidarity. (p. 27)

Consistent with James’ (2010) account of the disciplinary functions of new Black politics, Obama emphasizes the diversity of the Black congregation of Trinity United Church not to promote the cross-class racial solidarity among Blacks as espoused by Wright but rather to identify his rejection of the pastor’s brand of Black politics and the old guard generation it represents.

**CONCLUSION**

Far from the centers of power and privilege that have spawned so many commanders in chief, it’s an unlikely place to incubate a future president. But the seemingly endless clumps of drab brick apartment buildings and patchy lawns on Chicago’s South Side are where Sen. Barack Obama learned some of his most enduring lessons about politics, leadership, and the paths to social change. (Walsh, 2007, p. 1)

These words, “Far from the centers of power and privilege …,” written by Kenneth T. Walsh for *U.S. News & World Report*, speak to the significance of Obama’s community organizing. Indeed, it appears that Obama’s community organizing has been one source of his popularity. For example, Jackie Kendall, executive director of Midwest Academy, an organization in Chicago, was quoted on the internet as saying, “He’s given community organizing a good name … My mother will know what I do now after all these years” (quoted in Moberg, 2007b). When the Republican candidate for vice-president, Sarah Palin, mocked Obama’s community organizing background at the Republican National Convention (RNC) – “I guess a small-town mayor is sort of like a community organizer, except that you have actual responsibilities” – she was met with applause by her audience (Lawrence, 2008). But the reaction from many, of all political stripes, suggested that Obama’s community organizing background is meaningful to many people. In a letter to the editor sent to the *Washington*
Post in response to the RNC, Tracy M. Soska, chair of the Community Organization and Social Administration Program at the University of Pittsburgh (2008), wrote:

Listening to Governor Sarah Palin and Mr. Rudy Guliani [sic] at the Republican Convention deride Barack Obama’s background as a “community organizer” as less than valued work, seemed both smug and ignorant of this important and skilled profession. They demean the thousands of brave and trusted community organizers who serve, often for very meager wages, to ensure that citizens at our grassroots have a voice and role in decisions and issues that affect their lives, their communities, and our country.

And as reported by The Chronicle of Higher Education (Mangan, 2009):

Discouraged by layoffs in the private sector and inspired by President Obama’s call to public service, students are flocking in record numbers to graduate programs in public affairs and public service, according to program directors who are reporting application increases as high as 52 percent for this fall.

Despite the inspiration that Obama’s community organizing background may engender, we should also consider how Obama’s community organizing experience – and its telling of it – make him popular in a post-Civil Rights era marked by anti-Black racial backlash and hostility toward old guard Black politics. Part of Obama’s popularity may stem from his community organizing background. But while his community organizing experience perhaps distinguishes him from other U.S. presidents, the casting of it by him and others does not distinguish him from new Black politicians. As shown in this article, discourse by and about Barack Obama’s community organizing background underscores his new Black politics. Whereas Obama has been considered a “different” new Black politician because of his community organizing (Marable, 2008), references to his community work serve to undermine beliefs in Black ontology and racial solidarity among African Americans, thus establishing Obama more firmly in the new Black political tradition. Stories about Obama’s community organizing are part of a larger narrative of him coming to terms with both his racial identity and the presumed politics of the Moses generation from whom he initially seeks acceptance. While there are plenty of issues with members and organizations of the old guard Black politics that African Americans have raised, the conclusion derived from Obama’s community organizing narrative is that race is an outdated source of political identity and collective action for African Americans in the post-Civil Rights era, a claim tantamount to suggesting racism is no longer a primary factor shaping life chances or
decisive in structuring social relations. Through stories that depict old guard Black politics as either racial hucksterism or sincere but out of touch with the diversification of the Black community, Obama and his supporters are making a case for the new Black politics, which emphasizes a non-confrontational class consciousness so as to disregard or minimize racial solidarity as the basis of political organization among African Americans (Ford, 2009; James, 2010; Marable, 2008, 2009; Walters, 2007). Related, Obama’s community organizing background is referenced by him and his supporters to simultaneously condemn old Black politics – and subsequently discipline those African Americans whose political identities are steeped in race consciousness. His activist background is also invoked to morally distinguish Obama from the presumed corruption and profanity of Black politics. In this vein, Obama’s quest for political power is represented as an extension of his community organizing and guided by an appreciation for both multiracial populism and the Black masses presumably underserved or exploited by the Moses generation.

Overall, one of the most troubling aspects of Obama’s narrative is that it involves a celebration of community organizing and the championing of ordinary people in the service of an anti-Black project. Such a gesture is particularly insidious because people dedicate their lives and put themselves at further risk of isolation, repression, defeat, and incarceration, to challenge political conditions. Many with “opportunities” make thoughtful career decisions to pursue a path of service and in turn resist the trappings of corporate America or the desire to be wealthy. And some, in the process, demand a recognition of the centrality of racism in shaping life chances – and are viciously punished for doing so from people of all political stripes. Unfortunately, rather than support the valor of such risk-takers, most notably Black people dedicated to Black liberation, the casting of Obama’s community organizing ultimately works against such efforts.

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