


“I Was Born . . .” (No You Were Not!): Birtherism and Political Challenges to Personal Self-Authorizations

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Abstract

While literary critics applaud Barack Obama’s memoir *Dreams from My Father* for its polyvocal self-authorizations, the book’s broader cultural context shows how politics and public performances constrain possibilities for multicultural identities. The fluid personal identity authorized by the book faces political pressures that require public reaffirmation of dominant narratives of both Whiteness and monocultural American supremacy. I trace specific counterattacks on Obama’s identity during the 2008 U.S. presidential election cycle, including “controversies” around his birth narratives. I evoke my own narratives as a Brown-and-bearded American immigrant to complicate my audiencing of Obama’s performative responses to “Birtherism” even after he was elected president. I focus especially on his interaction with Donald Trump prior to the raid that killed Osama bin Laden in May 2011. In such moments, I argue that Obama navigates away from self-authorizing his multicultural American identities and toward authorizing American power in ways that reinscribe a monocultural nationalism.

Keywords

multicultural identity, autobiography, birtherism, performative cultural politics, race, Whiteness, racism, American exceptionalism

Introduction

First published in 1995, Barack Obama’s memoir *Dreams from My Father* provides a case study of the personal quite literally becoming political in ways that extend literary texts into a broader cultural terrain. Treating the book as merely an artifact for literary analysis might lead scholars to celebrate the author’s artful approach to self-authorizing a plurally voiced and multiply-faced personal identity. However, the cultural and political contexts beyond the text limit the possibilities of such fluid and multicultural self-authorizations. For example, the book shows how far American society might be said to have “progressed” from the pre-Civil War age of the “slave narratives,” which were written by freed slaves but had to be authenticated and prefaced by White authorities before they were accepted as valid accounts of lived experience. While memoirs like Obama’s no longer require such an overt racial authentication, events subsequent to the book’s publication show how Obama’s multiculturalism confronts political forces that constantly require public reaffirmation of dominant narratives of Whiteness and American supremacy. One such force produced and sustained an alleged “controversy” about Obama’s birth certificate

even after he was elected president. These challenges generate tense everyday encounters for both Obama’s and others’ multicultural narratives, including my own itineraries as a Brown-and-bearded American immigrant in a post-9/11 world.

Understanding such tensions (and their implications for multicultural identities in the global struggle against “American” monocultural domination) requires extending the project of literary texts like Obama’s memoir into the political terrain of public cultural performances and representations, where multiply mediated texts contribute toward both hegemonic and counterhegemonic possibilities. Dwight Conquergood’s (1998) call for a performative cultural politics provides an urgency for such a move “beyond the text” and into the kinetic realm of performance-based epistemologies because “a textual paradigm privileges distance, detachment, and disclosure as ways of

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knowing [whereas] a performance paradigm insists upon immediacy, involvement, and intimacy as modes of understanding" (p. 26). This does not mean abandoning "text" entirely but rather to resist the "weight and prestige given texts in the academy—both text as a metaphor for conceptualizing social reality, and actual texts (books, monographs, articles, essays, archives) as representations of knowledge" (p. 33). Performance provides "a complement, supplement, alternative, and critique of inscribed texts" (p. 33) precisely because performance-based approaches to understanding lived experience draw from "a heterogeneous ensemble of ideas and methods on the move" (p. 34). Indeed, to understand how the personal self-authorizations of Obama's memoir collide with political hegemonies of Whiteness and American supremacy requires me to make sense of the *immediate, involved, and intimate* places where my own self-authorized performances as a Brown-and-bearded American immigrant wrangle as a matter of personal survival with the "social and cultural conditions under which I live and labor" (Alexander, 2005, p. 433). And to do so I must engage a variety of interpretive and performative methods—in kinetic ways that Conquergood might call an ensemble on the move—to link a wide range of texts (audio, video, song, imagery) not as disparate literary artifacts but as articulated cultural performances that move and shape people into action in the world.

Therefore, in this text I entwine the act of reading the printed version of Obama's memoir with the act of listening to his voice narrating the audiobook version of the text. I evoke the framework of music as a metaphor for epistemology to complicate the issue of personal identity as a polyvocal construct of multiple voices/faces. I then immerse the sound and song of Obama's memoir into the broader political and cultural context of struggles between hegemonic and counterhegemonic projects. I draw on Stuart Hall's theories of articulation and Hall's extension of Gramsci's notion of hegemony to situate texts as cultural performances shaping the ideological terrain of popular common sense. I link texts such as newspaper articles, blog posts, speeches, photographs, roasts, interviews, and internal campaign memos to understand how the rhetorical counterstrategies of "Birtherism" challenge Obama's multiculturalism. Within a multitextual and multiperformative struggle between conflicting articulations of "American" identities, I focus on two specific performances of self-authorization and power: one during the 2011 White House Correspondents' Dinner where Obama counters the bombastic claims of Donald Trump, and one during the military raid that killed Osama bin Laden. These events show tensions where Obama shifts from self-authorizing his plural identities and toward authorizing global American power in ways that reinscribe a monocultural American supremacy.

Embodying Audacious Hopes: Self-Authorizing Multiple Voices/Faces

Questions of performance and representation motivate Obama's self-authorizing efforts at formulating his plural identity in his memoir. Early in *Dreams from My Father*, a teenaged Barack converses with his friend Ray on whether their performances of masculinity are constrained or required by White stereotypes of Black expression, especially when performing what Obama (2004) terms the "pose" of "the bad-assed nigger":

Maybe we could afford to give the bad-assed nigger pose a rest. Save it for when we really need it.

And Ray would shake his head. A pose, huh? Speak for your own self.

And I would know that Ray had flashed his trump card, one that, to his credit, he rarely played. I was different, after all, potentially suspect; I had no idea who my own self was. Unwilling to risk exposure, I would quickly retreat to safer ground. (p. 82)

The "suspect" nature of Obama's identity here is the gap he inhabits between the "White" world of his mother and her parents versus the "Black" world of not just his father but the "American" contours of "Black" experience for his friends in high school. As a teenager, Obama (2004) learns an insight into the trap of performing race on a cultural terrain shaped by the "White man's rules":

[. . .] I had begun to see a new map of the world, one that was frightening in its simplicity, suffocating in its implications. We were always playing on the white man's court, Ray had told me, by the white man's rules. [. . .] In fact, you couldn't even 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, until being black meant only the knowledge of your own powerlessness, of your own defeat. And the final irony: Should you refuse this defeat and lash out at your captors, they would have a name for that, too, a name that could cage you just as good. Paranoid. Militant. Violent. Nigger. (p. 85)

This realization shapes how Obama navigates the ramifications of White-dominated power structures over not just Black but many other(ed) minority representations.

As a teenaged Obama begins seeking ways that his identity might extend beyond the available binary choices for race, an older college-aged Obama resolves that his "identity might begin with the fact of [his] race, but it didn't, couldn't, end there" (2004, p. 111). While his initial instinct

was to consider the “White” and “Black” worlds as places he could “slip back and forth between [. . .] with a bit of translation on [his] part,” (p. 82) Obama comes to recognize that something remains unresolvable in the distance between the two worlds, something involving “a trick there somewhere, although what the trick was, who was doing the tricking, and who was being tricked, eluded [his] conscious grasp” (p. 82). Subsequently, Obama intertwines his own wrestling with voice(s) within the tensions of singer Billie Holiday’s voice: “Billie knew the same trick; it was in that torn-up, trembling voice of hers” (p. 93). Holiday’s voice provides the backdrop for Obama’s tensive encounters in between multiple fragmented identities, leading to a sense of hope for creating a new voice: “Beneath the layers of hurt, beneath the ragged laughter, I heard a willingness to endure. Endure—and make music that wasn’t there before” (p. 112). This sense of making “music that wasn’t there” becomes a metaphor for Obama’s crafting a multi-voiced persona similar to jazz improvisation, building upon existing patterns of voice and representation not in an ad hoc fashion but through careful study and immersed experience of those parts of life that “Europe does not, or cannot, see: in the very same way that the European musical scale cannot transcribe—cannot write down, does not understand—the notes, or the price, of this music” (Baldwin, 2010, p. 120).

Obama’s crafting of a polyvocal persona is a stark counterpoint to the situation of the slave narratives where, as Robert Stepto (1985) describes, the former slave’s “voice is striking [not only] because of what it relates, but even more so because the slave’s acquisition of that voice is quite possibly his only permanent achievement once he escapes and casts himself upon a new larger landscape” (p. 225). Instead of seeking stability, Obama’s memoir directly explores the ambiguity and impermanence of his own voice. While Obama’s narrative shares with the slave narratives the quality of being “full of other voices which are frequently just as responsible for articulating a narrative’s tale and strategy” (p. 225), Obama’s text does not require these other voices to be validated by “appended documents written by slaveholders and abolitionists alike” (p. 225). Obama’s (2004) text also does not begin with the kind of existential claim (“I was born . . .”) with which former slaves were required to begin their memoirs in order to prove the facts of their existence, but rather his first words are: “I originally intended a very different book” (p. xiii). With such a start, Obama’s text shifts to the privilege assumed by powerful White men such as Benjamin Franklin, whose existential facts were safely beyond question and who could thus begin their memoirs with an ethos-oriented explanation of why they have chosen to write (Olney, 1985, p. 155).

Writing/speaking in 2009, shortly after Obama’s inauguration as president, Zadie Smith emphasizes not just reading Obama’s text but listening to his polyvocal performances to

get a sense for the crafting involved in his “lifelong vocal flexibility” (Smith, 2009). She highlights a passage where a teenaged Obama is talking with his friend Ray. In the audiobook edition¹ of the text narrated by Obama, this segment features Obama switching from his “standard” speaking voice to a crafted vernacular voice for Ray’s parts of the dialogue, for example when Ray says:

I go ask Pamela out. She tells me she ain’t going to the dance. I say cool. Get to the dance, guess who’s standing there, got her arms around Rick Cook. “*Hi, Ray,*” she says, like she don’t know what’s going down. (Obama, 2004, p. 73)

In the audio for the above, Obama’s voice shifts twice: first into a different register for Ray’s speaking mannerisms which are in an African American vernacular, and then shifts again for the “*Hi, Ray*” part where the voice of Ray mimics, sarcastically, an imagined voice of a teenaged White woman. Such carefully crafted shifts between voices occur throughout Obama’s audiobook narration. As Zadie Smith (2009) observes, “This new president doesn’t just speak *for* his people. He can *speak* them. It is a disorienting talent in a president; we’re so unused to it.”

Smith (2009) connects this vocal ability at representing difference to the visual potential of multiple faces in shaping new options for political and cultural plurality:

When your personal multiplicity is printed on your face [. . .] in your hair and in the neither this nor that beige of your skin [. . .] you have no choice but to cross borders and speak in tongues. [. . .] It’s my audacious hope that a man born and raised between opposing dogmas, between cultures, between voices, could not help but be aware of the extreme contingency of culture. [. . .] We’ll see if Obama’s lifelong vocal flexibility will enable him to say proudly with one voice “I love my country” while saying with another voice “It is a country, like other countries.”

Blogger Andrew Sullivan expresses a similar potentiality in December 2007, writing in *The Atlantic* magazine that Obama provides a new “face” for American global power:

What does he offer? First and foremost: his face. Think of it as the most effective potential re-branding of the United States since Reagan. [. . .] The next president has to create a sophisticated and supple blend of soft and hard power to isolate the enemy, to fight where necessary, but also to create an ideological template that works to the West’s advantage over the long haul. [. . .] Consider this hypothetical. It’s November 2008. A young Pakistani Muslim is watching television and sees that this man—Barack Hussein Obama—is the new face of America. In one simple image, America’s soft power has been ratcheted up not a notch, but a logarithm. A brown-skinned man whose father was an African, who grew up in Indonesia and Hawaii, who attended a majority-Muslim school as a boy, is now the alleged enemy. If you wanted the crudest

but most effective weapon against the demonization of America that fuels Islamist ideology, Obama's face gets close. It proves them wrong about what America is in ways no words can.

While Zadie Smith, writing postelection, sees an audacious hope that Obama's polyvocality would encourage new articulations of "American" identities, Andrew Sullivan, writing preelection, sees an audacious "rebranding" of Obama's face for American global domination. Both options are challenged by the culturally contingent terrain of politics.

The "Extreme Contingency of Culture": Political Counterprojects Against Obama's Personal Self-Authorizations

Even as *Dreams from My Father* crafts a fluid and multicultural sense of personal identity within relations of difference, the contexts beyond the book are shaped by oppositional projects that vigorously reify monocultural knowledges of identity. While Obama's memoir makes an important contribution to artistic and literary projects that seek a more inclusive space for difference in society, Stuart Hall (1996b) reminds cultural scholars that such projects ought not to neglect the "popular" in reshaping everyday cultural terrain, especially the challenges posed by movements against change/difference:

[. . .] if the global postmodern represents an ambiguous opening to difference and to the margins and makes a certain kind of decentering of the western narrative a likely possibility, it is matched, from the very heartland of cultural politics, by the backlash: the aggressive resistance to difference; the attempt to restore the canon of western civilization; the assault, direct and indirect, on multiculturalism; the return to grand narratives of history, language and literature (the three great supporting pillars of national identity and national culture); the defence of ethnic absolutism, of a cultural racism [. . .] (p. 468)

In terms of Zadie Smith's recognition of the "extreme contingency of culture," Stuart Hall's theories of articulation and hegemony provide a contextual framework for understanding how Obama's self-authorizing efforts are challenged by projects that uphold dominant ideologies.

Hall's concept of hegemony extends Antonio Gramsci's formulation of the term to a system of articulated social forces that gather partial but popular consent from a broad coalition of diverse interests to maintain an always-dynamic always-shifting balance of power relations. Hegemony is never complete but always contested and contingent, requiring the ceaseless expenditure of power and energy to keep itself articulated into a coherent unity across multiple contradictory differences (see Hall, 1996a). For Hall, cultural

hegemony is "never about pure victory or pure domination [. . .] it is always about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it" (Hall, 1996b, p. 468). This view accounts for much of the contingency implied by Zadie Smith's reading of Obama's polyvocality as providing a new cultural narrative for "American" identities: one that can express patriotism simultaneously with a multinational worldview through a new unity of differences. This view also allows us to interpret Obama's self-authorizing personal multiplicity as not opposed in a binary manner against a political monoculturalism, but rather to see the two as part of different hegemonic projects—where neither side will ever obliterate the other but rather must both engage the popular consent of a broad coalition of very diverse positions.

Both Zadie Smith and Andrew Sullivan point to the intricate connections between the self-authorized personal multiplicity in Obama's narratives—both in his literary memoir and in his public speeches—and the politically contested terrain of popular culture, especially a terrain shaped continually, vigorously, and unabashedly by hegemonic narratives of Whiteness and American supremacy. As Zadie Smith (2009) acknowledges, "No one can hope to be president of these United States without professing a committed and straightforward belief in two things: the existence of God and the principle of American exceptionalism." Similarly, Andrew Sullivan (2007) notes (quite presciently) how Obama himself advocates an expression of American identity through global power: "He is not opposed to the use of unilateral force, either—as demonstrated by his willingness to target al-Qaeda in Pakistan over the objections of the Pakistani government." That is, on the culturally shaped terrain of the political sphere, Obama's options for authorizing a polyvocal and multicultural personal self are challenged by active projects that consistently authorize a narrower monocultural expression of nationalism.

To contextualize the events surrounding the various editions of *Dreams from My Father*, the memoir's trajectory starts with Random House Publishing offering a book contract in 1991 to a 29-year-old Barack Obama when he was elected the first African American president of *Harvard Law Review*. The first print edition of the memoir was published in 1995, when Obama had graduated from Harvard Law School and was working as a lecturer in constitutional law at the University of Chicago Law School. By 2004, when the second edition was published, Obama's political contexts had changed considerably: he had become a state senator in Illinois, representing the south side of Chicago, and he was running for a U.S. Senate seat. In 2004 the Democratic nominee to challenge incumbent George W. Bush for the presidency was Massachusetts senator John F. Kerry, who tapped Obama to deliver the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Boston that July. Obama's speech catapulted him into the national

limelight through an electrifying combination of oratory and imagery, entwining his own personal narrative with a broader American political identity that resonated with a wide range of citizens. In November 2004 Obama won the U.S. Senate seat in Illinois even as Kerry lost the presidential election to Bush. Obama was only the third African American in history to be elected to the U.S. Senate, and nationwide demand was already increasing for his narrative—by this time Obama was writing his second book *The Audacity of Hope*. Random House Publishing contracted with Obama to reissue a special second edition of *Dreams from My Father*, with a new foreword by Obama as well as an excerpt from *Audacity of Hope* in the back. In 2005, Random House released an abridged audiobook edition narrated by Obama. At the end of the audiobook the publishers provide the complete audio of Obama's 17-minute keynote address at the 2004 DNC. Both print and audio editions became bestsellers—the audiobook won Obama the 2005 Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word Album². In both the 2004 DNC speech and in Obama's narration of the 2005 audiobook edition of *Dreams*, we can trace moments where Obama begins navigating a balance between self-authorizing his polyvocal personal multiplicity and authorizing a narrower public/political identity.

Obama's 2004 DNC speech features several moments where his plural identities weave a more unified American narrative. His introductory remarks³ provide some examples:

Tonight is a particular honor for me because, let's face it, my presence on this stage is pretty unlikely. My father was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya. He grew up herding goats, went to school in a tin-roofed shed. His father, my grandfather, was a cook, a domestic servant to the British. But my grandfather had larger dreams for his son. Through hard work and perseverance, my father got a scholarship to study in a magical place—America—that shone as a beacon of freedom and opportunity to so many who had come before. [Applause] While studying here, my father met my mother. She was born in a town on the other side of the world, in Kansas. [Applause from Kansan contingent] Her father worked on oil rigs and farms through most of the Depression. The day after Pearl Harbor my grandfather signed up for duty. Joined Patton's Army. Marched across Europe. Back home my grandmother raised a baby and went to work on a bomber assembly line. After the war they studied on the GI Bill, bought a house through FHA, and later moved west, all the way to Hawaii, in search of opportunity. And they too had big dreams for their daughter. A common dream born of two continents. My parents shared not only an improbable love. They shared an abiding faith in the possibilities of this nation. They would give me an African name, Barack, or Blessed, believing that in a tolerant America, your name is no barrier to success. [Applause] They imagined me going to the best schools in the land, even though they weren't rich, because in a generous America you don't have to be rich to achieve your

potential. [Applause] They're both passed away now. And yet I know that on this night they look down on me with great pride. They stand here—and I stand here today, grateful for the diversity of my heritage, aware that my parents' dreams live on in my two precious daughters. I stand here knowing that my story is part of a larger American story, that I owe a debt to all those who came before me, and that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible. [Applause, scattered chants of "USA, USA"] (Obama, 2005. Audio transcribed by me with my annotations added in italics.)

In this segment we hear and see Obama embodying a plurality of voices into "a larger American story," one that extols the virtues of "a tolerant America" and "a generous America" as not just "a magical place" but one that is both supreme and exceptional in that "no other country on Earth" would make Obama's story possible. Obama also begins a centering narrative with this framework: his father leaves Kenya to come to "a magical place" to study, and in reality his father comes to Hawaii but in the speech Obama replaces the island imagery evoked by the word "Hawaii" and instead pauses deeply to intone: "America." Thus, immediately afterward, when Obama says that "While studying here, my father met my mother," the word "here" centers "America" as the location where a "common dream" would be "born of two continents"—not Hawaii, distanced from the mainland but in actuality the location where Obama's parents met and married. The only time Obama mentions Hawaii is in connection with his White grandparents, who move "west, all the way to Hawaii, in search of opportunity." Such a displacement achieves two framing gestures: (a) his White grandparents, assured of an impeccable association with the geographical center of mainland America, can safely pursue a "Westward" ambition without losing their American affiliation—indeed, their "search of opportunity" evokes and reifies prior narratives of American expansionism and Manifest Destiny; and (b) his Black African father, with a suspect "foreign student" itinerary, is quietly enfolded into an assumed mainstream location "here" within mainland America.

Similarly, by the time Obama narrates his audiobook in mid-2004 through to early 2005, he is not only a rising political star but he is also authoring his second book in which he will lay out his larger visions for a broader national agenda. Thus, the position that Obama occupies as he narrates *Dreams*, in 2004 to 2005, is a very different embodied and political situation than where and who he was when he wrote the printed text for *Dreams* over a decade previously. By 2004 to 2005, Obama's public and political voice is already acquiring both a national reputation and an intensely commodified demand. Thus, his narrated voice for the audiobook carries with it not just representational tensions but a host of expectations—some of them cultural and political and some of them starkly financial. In other words, what might have been mostly literary or academic or artistic

questions/explorations of identity when he wrote the original text in 1991 to 1995, even set against the backdrop of the boiling “culture wars” of the 1990s, have become inextricably political and cultural concerns in 2004 to 2005, when he narrates the text using primarily his range of voice(s) to “cast himself upon a new larger landscape” (Stepito, 1985, p. 225).

As Obama in 2004-2005 handles the representational requirements of narrating his multivoiced text from 1995, the audiobook shows patterns of distancing certain modes of expression away from Obama’s distinct “voice” onto other bodies, other times, and other spaces. For example, to return to the segment where a teenaged Obama is conversing with his high school friend Ray, Obama’s vocal range finds a broader set of expressions in Ray’s speech than in Obama’s own contributions. Thus, when Obama’s voice mimics or mocks the White young woman, it is understood to be Ray who does the intended mocking, not Obama himself—and the distancing thereof allows the moment of Obama’s double-shifted voice to become interpreted as humor, as something Zadie Smith (2009) will characterize as “seemingly plucked from a comic novel,” rather than a potentially problematic association of anti-White sarcasm with Obama. More charged moments later in the book are abridged out of the audiobook and not voiced by Obama—such as an incident when Obama describes how he wanted to punch a young White man who had just told Obama that “I can see how it must be tough for you and Ray sometimes, at school parties . . . being the only black guys and all” (Obama, 2004, p. 84). Similarly, most of the chapter where Obama significantly intertwines his reflections on voice and (tricked) identity with Billie Holiday’s musicality are left unvoiced—perhaps because much of that chapter also deals candidly (and in politically problematic ways) with Obama’s use of drugs and alcohol during his youth⁴.

Similarly, another example involves a pivotal scene where Obama visits Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago to hear a sermon by Reverend Jeremiah Wright—the sermon title is “The Audacity of Hope” and it has a deep impact on Obama’s spiritual and personal growth. Thus, in the audiobook Obama narrates the moment with a somber gravitas. However, while the printed edition includes many textual moves hinting at Obama’s own vocal multiplicity in singing and call-response, in the audio version Obama’s voice shifts carefully such that those vernacular expressions are bracketed onto other characters. For example, consider this sequence where Rev. Wright’s sermon is interspersed with responsive utterances from the audience:

“Isn’t that . . . the world that each of us stands on?”

“Yessuh!”

“Like Hannah, we have known bitter times! Daily, we face rejection and despair!”

“Say it!” (Obama, 2004, p. 293)

This sequence is rendered by Obama in the audio version⁵ as an oral performance of voice acting. For the sermon, Obama’s voice transforms into a fair facsimile of Rev. Wright’s own mannerisms and familiar to those who have heard Rev. Wright preach, as I have on other audio recordings. Meanwhile, for the “Yessuh!” and “Say it!” sections, Obama’s voice shifts into a different register—the “Yessuh” becomes more of a slurred drawl, while “Say it!” becomes a third voice that adds a quick and shortened “now” at the end, as “Say it, na—” before quickly morphing back into Rev. Wright’s “voice.” Right after that segment, there is a transformational moment where Rev. Wright sings a few verses:

Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus.

Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus.

Thank you, Je-sus.

Thank you, Lo-ord.

You brought me fro-om

A mighty long way, mighty long way. (Obama, 2004, p. 295)

For this section, Obama too breaks into song on the audio—the only moment in the audiobook when Obama’s voice literally transcends the spoken and moves into the musical. Even in doing so, Obama brackets and distances such expressions away from his own body: it is clear throughout that the singing voice here is meant to be heard as Rev. Wright singing, not Obama, and while the call-response utterances are voiced by Obama, the bracketing of voice indicates that those utterances are displaced onto the bodies of other Black congregants.

Such bracketing gestures raise the stakes for challenges around the notion of “authentic” expressions of cultural identity, but only for ethnically “marked” bodies while a normative “standard” voice goes un(re)marked. Obama’s own voice strives to maintain its own distinct cadence, to maintain a hard-fought sense of identity drawn through a lifetime of “enduring—to make music that wasn’t there before” (Obama, 2004, p. 112). Meanwhile, Obama’s voice also navigates a careful path between those “other” voices which he flexibly demonstrates his capability to reproduce and yet does not adopt as his own. By 2004 to 2005 there is already a growing narrative around Obama as being a new kind of Black politician who does not fit the available modes/trajectories for Black political leaders—such as Rev. Jesse Jackson or Rev. Al Sharpton. Indeed, in early 2007 another Democratic contender for the presidential nomination, Senator Joe Biden, triggered a controversy (one of several Bidenisms) when he remarked to a reporter from *The*

New York Observer about Obama: “I mean, you got the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean⁶ and a nice-looking guy” (Horowitz, 2007). Meanwhile, several Black leaders at the time also criticized Obama for not being “authentic” enough as an “African American” in his spoken expressions of identity.

Thus, while Obama is able to deploy a wide range of personal voices in his literary memoir, on the political terrain of popular culture he faces the very real insight he first grappled with as a young teenager—the trap of performing representations of identity on a cultural terrain already shaped by the “White man’s rules” such that there would be a caging “name” readily attributed to him should he choose any of the “expected” modes of expression, names such as: “Paranoid. Militant. Violent. Nigger” (Obama, 2004, p. 85). (These names are unvoiced in the audio edition.) And indeed, during the Spring and Summer of 2008, Obama faced a heavily manufactured “controversy” around selected media clips of Rev. Wright’s sermons that portrayed the reverend as a radical militant Black preacher. Obama then had to carefully distance himself from Rev. Wright by delivering, with his own distinct voice, a much acclaimed “Philadelphia speech” on race relations titled “A More Perfect Union.”

Whiteness and the Audacious Existential Challenge of Birtherism

One of the more striking examples of an articulated project that explicitly set out to destabilize Obama’s self-authorized personal identity arose from the campaign of Hillary Clinton, his rival for the Democratic nomination during the 2008 election season. In March 2007, senior Clinton campaign strategist Mark Penn wrote an infamous memo⁷ in which he outlined the blueprint for a narrative framework that would directly challenge Obama’s identity. In the memo, Penn lists four factors that are positives for Obama: “Authenticity,” “Left/Right appeal,” “Black”(!), “New and fresh.” He then lists four factors that he frames as negatives for Obama: “Lack of Experience,” “Lack of American roots,” “Removed from working man/woman,” “Phony/Just another politician” (Penn, 2007, p. 2). He goes on to detail his strategies for attacking Obama on each of his negatives. His strategy for “Lack of American roots” is worth quoting in full to show the outlines of a strategy later deployed by right-wing activists:

All of these articles about his boyhood in Indonesia and his life in Hawaii are geared towards showing his background is diverse, multicultural and putting that in a new light.

Save it for 2050.

It also exposes a very strong weakness for him—his roots to basic American values and culture are at best limited. I cannot

imagine America electing a president during a time of war who is not at his center fundamentally American in his thinking and in his values. He told the people of NH yesterday he has a Kansas accent because his mother was from there. His mother lived in many states as far as we can tell—but this is an example of the nonsense he uses to cover this up.

How could we give some life to this contrast without turning negative:

Every speech should contain the line you were born in the middle of America to the middle class in the middle of the last century. And talk about the basic bargain as about the deeply American values you grew up with, learned as a child and that drive you today. Values of fairness, compassion, responsibility, giving back.

Let’s explicitly own “American” in our programs, the speeches and the values. He doesn’t. Make this a new American Century, the American Strategic Energy fund. Let’s use our logo to make some flags we can give out. Let’s add flag symbols to the backgrounds.

We are never going to say anything about his background—we have to show the value of ours when it comes to making decisions, understanding the needs of most Americans—the invisible Americans. (Penn, 2007, p. 3)

From the start of this excerpt, Mark Penn systematically displaces Obama’s identity away from an “American” center to a “foreign” margin. He juxtaposes Obama’s “boyhood in Indonesia and his life in Hawaii” with Hillary Clinton being “born in the middle of America to the middle class,” thereby shifting Obama’s origins away from “America” to “Indonesia” and “Hawaii” (also a double-displacement since it casts “Hawaii” as being somehow far from “fundamentally American”). He also states laconically “Save it for 2050”—a reference to the year when population trends project that White people in the United States would become a minority.

Mark Penn’s strategy relies on White anxieties over losing majority status as a key leverage point for framing Obama’s multiculturalism as a threat to White American identity—a threat that Penn suggests is best countered by Hillary Clinton’s “American” centeredness. Indeed, if Obama displays a centripetal impulse in swirling his own identities toward his (White) mother’s roots in the geographic center of the United States (by stating that he “has a Kansas accent because his mother was from [Kansas]”), Penn counters such an impulse with a centrifugal push that continually disperses Obama’s narratives outward and paints those outward moves as vaguely unknowable and possibly suspect in their nomadism: Obama’s mother “lived in many states as far as we can tell” (Penn, 2007, p. 3). In contrast, Penn sets up Clinton as someone who has always had stable roots in “the middle of America to the middle

class in the middle of the last century” (Penn, 2007, p. 3). That is, in Penn’s strategy Clinton reifies White middle class mid-Western values as the ultimate and unquestionable center for an American national identity, a center that Obama can at best hope to approach only tangentially even when Obama associates his accent with White middle-America geographically. Finally, Penn uses the American flag, among other symbols of patriotism, to paint Obama as un-American by inference alone.

Much of this strategy went into place over the following year, but its influences resonated beyond the Clinton campaign. For example, by the middle of 2007 the Clinton campaign was habitually festooned with American flags and in October 2007 an ABC News reporter noticed that Obama did not wear a flag pin on his lapel and questioned him about it (Wright, 2007). Obama provided a lengthy and nuanced reply about how he was averse to flag pins as de facto proofs of patriotism—a reply that immediately triggered a heavily manufactured weeks-long media controversy around Obama’s alleged “disrespect” for the flag, while other candidates continued only sporadically wearing flag pins. Obama has rarely been seen without a flag pin since then, foreshadowing Zadie Smith’s comment in 2009 that candidates for the U.S. presidency must profess “a committed and straightforward belief in two things: the existence of God and the principle of American exceptionalism” (Smith, 2009).

Similarly, two years after Obama was elected president, columnist and former Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan (2010) published an article titled “We Just Don’t Understand” in the *Wall Street Journal* where she frames Obama as unknowable and un-American:

When the American people have looked at the presidents of the past few decades they could always sort of say, “I know that guy.” Bill Clinton: Southern governor. Good ol’ boy, drawlin’, flirtin’, got himself a Rhodes Scholarship. “I know that guy.” George W. Bush: Texan, little rough around the edges, good family, youthful high jinks, stopped drinking, got serious. “I know that guy.” Ronald Reagan was harder to peg, but you still knew him: small-town Midwesterner, moved on and up, serious about politics, humorous, patriotic. “I know that guy.” Barack Obama? Sleek, cerebral, detached, an academic from Chicago by way of Hawaii and Indonesia. “You know what? I don’t know that guy!” (p. A13)

In distinguishing personas that are inherently “knowable” by “the American people” versus those that are “unknowable,” Noonan invokes the privilege and invisible norms of Whiteness to dislocate Obama’s American identity as foreign: “by way of Hawaii and Indonesia.” To demarcate the line of difference between Obama and other presidents, Noonan conveniently ignores the obvious common threads of race and gender among the three presidents she lists and indeed any three previous U.S. presidents she could have

chosen (all White and male). Instead she carefully chooses which geographical markers to associate with these specific three persons. Clinton becomes a “Southern governor” who somehow “got himself” a Rhodes Scholarship—never mind the elite and international nature of the Rhodes program in Oxford, United Kingdom. So too does her former boss Ronald Reagan suddenly become a “small-town Midwesterner” instead of the more cosmopolitan Los Angeles-based actor he was better known as before he became Governor of California—itsself a state decidedly not in the “center” of American cultural and political geography. And Bush’s authenticity as a Texan goes unchallenged by Noonan even with his history as a New England Yankee transplant.

Noonan deftly unravels Andrew Sullivan’s 2007 proposition that Obama’s face would be a rebranding of American identity; by dismissing Obama’s persona as being fundamentally unknowable by Americans, Noonan reifies an older, “traditionally knowable” face of American power: White, male, conservative, privileged. Further, Noonan sets up an epistemological line for American identity that grounds itself so deeply in Eurocentric White privilege that multicultural representations like Obama’s become, in Noonan’s world of Whiteness, simply unknowable; she “does not, or cannot, see: in the very same way that the European musical scale cannot transcribe—cannot write down, does not understand—the notes, or the price, of this music” (Baldwin, 2010, p. 120). And because Noonan reifies a White privilege so dominantly articulated in contemporary American politics, she can ascribe her lack of understanding not as a willful choice to be ignorant (a choice to *not* understand despite Obama having written two award-winning personal memoirs), but she can frame her ignorance as a statement of epistemological “fact” shared by what she sees as the totalizing view of all Americans. She can thus safely speak for the “We” in her article’s title (“We Just Don’t Understand”), and a mainline publication like the *Wall Street Journal* can print her views backed by the clout of its own conservative editorial board, without either event attracting much attention in the mainstream popular press.

Perhaps the most damaging influence of Mark Penn’s strategy was its contribution toward the burgeoning “Birther” movement. Starting in late 2007, the “Birther” movement represented an initially small group of fringe right-wing conspiracy theorists who claimed that Barack Obama’s government-issued birth certificate from the Hawaii State Department did not legitimately prove the fact of his American birth. Shortly after Obama’s inauguration in 2009, the “Birther” movement gained repeated airtime on mainstream right-wing propaganda outlets such as Fox News and Rush Limbaugh, gathering “supporters” (including several Fox News anchors) who demanded that Obama release a more elaborate version of his birth

certificate called the “long form” certificate. However, most states (including Hawaii) have laws prohibiting the release of such a “long form” certificate since the official state-issued standard birth certificate satisfies the strictest of legal standards for proof of birth. Nobody, including Obama as president, has the authority to request their “long form” certificate be released from state records. Despite this common legal fact, the summers of 2009 and 2010 saw the articulation of a broad array of diverse ideological forces that claimed, variously, that Obama was a Socialist and Communist, that he was an atheist, that he was a Nazi, that he was a Muslim, and other repeated attacks on Obama’s ‘American’ identity.⁸ But none of these attacks was as pointed and as persistent as the “Birther” movement in challenging Obama’s identity on a fundamentally absurd existential level. For example, on the occasions of Obama’s birthdays in August 2009 and 2010, right-wing radio hosts across the country, led by Rush Limbaugh, regularly featured jokes along the lines of “do we even know if he was born on this planet?” And such jokes have made their way into subtly coded laugh lines repeated by right-wing politicians at events even up to this day.

Thus, while Obama’s self-authorizing narrative in *Dreams from My Father* shows a significant literary departure from the pre-Civil War era “slave narratives” in not needing an existential claim such as “I was born . . .,” the “Birther” movement illustrates how such a narrative faces the hateful existential counterclaim “No you were not!” from a rabidly conservative White popular culture mobilized and articulated by a concerted hegemonic project. The “Birther” movement provides a haunting echo of James Olney’s observation about the situation that a prototypical former slave faced when writing his narrative in the 1850s: “it was his existence and his identity, not his reasons for writing, that were called into question” (Olney, 1985, p. 155). More than 150 years later, precisely such a question challenged an African American writer in 2009, even as he became the first African American President of the United States of America. While Obama steadfastly refused to humor the demands of the “Birthers” (and indeed, legally he could not force the state of Hawaii into releasing his “long form” certificate), things changed quite drastically when billionaire Donald Trump began adding his bombastic voice to the “Birther” claims in early 2011. This new challenge prompted a markedly different performance of self-authorization from Obama.

Self-Authorizing the Audacity of Trumping Trump

On Wednesday, April 27, 2011, the State Department of Hawaii officially released President Barack Obama’s “long form” birth certificate. Obama then released the birth

certificate at a White House press conference that day, prompting widespread media analyses that Trump had effectively forced the president’s hand. It was a moment of despair for me, personally, as an immigrant who was in the final stages of becoming an American citizen—if even the president of this country was not immune to such racist pressure to prove his birth by showing his papers on demand to White authorities, what hope did I have to live “free” without feeling like I needed to have my “papers” on me at all times? And what hope for other immigrants who were not citizens? Perhaps, I thought, Reverend Wright was right, after all, when he advised Barack Obama decades ago that: “Life’s not safe for a black man in this country, Barack. Never has been. Probably never will be” (Obama, 2004, p. 284). This was a sentiment echoed on many immigrant blogs I was reading at the time—a sense of betrayal, a sense of hopelessness, a sense of futility at the sustained power of moneyed White conservative interests in our everyday lives.

However, the following Saturday night (April 30, 2011), a markedly different performance of self-authorization occurred at the annual White House Correspondents’ Dinner—a traditional black-tie event hosted by the White House to appreciate the White House Press Corps. Usually an event marked by humor and roasts by the president (and roasts of the president by the keynote speaker), this was also a celebrity gathering of noted personalities in the media industry. The dinner event of 2011, though, had a significant difference: Donald Trump, the major instigator of “Birther” rhetoric in the days preceding the very recent birth certificate release, would be attending as an invitee of the *Washington Post*.

During the dinner, as President Obama got up to make his remarks, the lights dimmed and the song “I am a real American” by Rick Derringer blasted through the speakers. While the song played, a montage of American iconography flashed across the video screens: a giant American flag waving in the breeze, an eagle swooping out of the sky, a scene from the movie *Rocky*, the Chicago White Sox winning the pennant, and then suddenly a flashing image of the president’s “long form” birth certificate. As the audience applauded, the cameras zoomed in on Donald Trump, seated at a table in the center of the room. When the applause subsided, Obama began speaking by drawing out the words “My fellow Americans,” emphasizing the word “fellow.” As the room roared into applause again, Obama cheerily exclaimed: “Mahalo!”⁹

This introductory sequence marked the beginning of an extraordinary performance by Barack Obama: over the next several minutes he roasted Donald Trump with pointed jabs about the contrived nature of the birth certificate issue—and he also did not spare Fox News as well as other potential Republican contenders for the 2012 election. The cameras repeatedly zoomed in on Trump, as well as the Fox

News table, showing a group of impassive men and women maintaining stony expressions. At one point, as Obama riffed about how Trump could now go on to investigate other serious controversies such as “Did we fake the moon landing? What really happened at Roswell? And where are Biggie and Tupac?!” the room erupted into laughter and the cameras stayed on Donald Trump, whose expression went from stony to awkward to uncomfortable as he attempted a sardonic wave at the president. Even after Obama was done, the humiliation of Trump continued as the guest speaker, Seth Meyers from *Saturday Night Live*, proceeded to unload several jokes regarding Trump’s obsession with birth certificates.

Watching the online video of the speech, I could not help but feel a different kind of audacious hope: that in 2011 an African American man could stand at the most powerful position in the room and then publicly humiliate one of the richest White men in the country, while making that man squirm under public scrutiny in front of a televised audience. This was a different mode of self-authorized personal voice—a jazz motif that broke beyond Baldwin’s understanding that “you begin to sing and dance; for those responsible for your captivity require of you a song” (Baldwin, 2010, p. 124). In Obama’s use of sarcasm and irony, I saw a reversal of Baldwin’s comment about how hard it is to “despise so many of the people who think of themselves as White, before whose blindness you present the obligatory historical grin” (p. 124). The obligatory grin was on Trump’s discomfited face—while my face, watching, had a gleeful grin. “Okay, Brother Barack,” I think to myself now, even as I watch the moment again on video and grin, yet again, “you may have had to provide your authenticating document first, before you could do this, but you’re not just handing that paper over—way to rub his face in it!”

And yet, there are moments of slippage in this self-authorization: moments when the framework of middle class ironic humor can barely veil the fury and indignation of having one’s personal identity get questioned yet again by those who are empowered by hegemonic structures of Whiteness and American supremacy. For example, there is a moment when Obama turns to Congresswoman Michele Bachmann and suggests to the audience that she was actually born in Canada. The laughter is tentative, especially when Obama quite seriously says “Yes, Michele, this is how it starts. Thought you should know.” In another moment Obama shows what he claims is his original birth video—which turns out to instead be a clip from the movie *Lion King*—and then turns quite seriously to the Fox News table and explains to them, painstakingly, that the video clip was a joke. These moments highlight for me a turning of the gaze toward making “Western epistemologies themselves the object of inquiry” (Denzin, 2005, p. 936), when the rightful focus ought to be those structures that make White identity a category that:



Figure 1. Official white house situation room photograph taken during Bin Laden raid on May 1, 2011.

[. . .] is not subject to the constant process of challenge and change that have characterized the history of other “racial” names. This process enables white people to occupy a privileged location [. . .] of knowing that “their” “racial” identity might be reviled and lambasted but never actually made slippery, torn open, or, indeed, abolished. (Bonnert, 1999, p. 204)

Nevertheless, the slippage in this scene is incomplete—Obama’s release of his birth certificate might have preauthenticated his audacious trumping of Trump at the dinner, but to validate his political identity he would need to perform a postauthentication by authorizing a dominant American triumphalism that will necessarily trump his personal multiplicity. To move past the existential challenge of Birtherism, Obama would need not an existential claim (“I really was born!”) but rather an ontological claim (“I really am an American!”) authenticated by a hegemonic authoring of American power.

Self-Authorizing (an American) Identity / Authorizing (Absolutely American) Power

The very next day after the 2011 White House Correspondents’ Dinner, late on Sunday night, May 1, 2011, celebratory crowds across the nation watched as President Obama made a dramatic televised announcement that the United States had just successfully completed a military operation that located and killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan. Later in the week, the White House released several pictures from the White House Situation Room showing the president and his advisers during the operation, monitoring the progress of the mission via satellite feeds on their laptops and projected onto a large display screen along one wall. One particular photo became quickly iconic both in mainstream print media as well as in circulation and reproduction across the Internet (see Figure 1).



Figure 2. Image meme circulated widely on the Internet shortly after May 1, 2011. The official White House situation room photo has been digitally modified to show a video game controller in Obama's hands.

This photo shows Obama near one end of a conference table packed with several others, and almost everyone has their gaze riveted on the projected display which is off camera to the left. The one person who is not looking off camera is directly at the center of the scene, both geometrically in the photograph and spatially in the context of the room: a uniformed White male with a massive display of medals on his chest, typing intently on his keyboard. Notable persons in the room include Joe Biden, once the man who praised Obama for being “articulate and clean” but now vice president, and Hillary Clinton, once Obama’s fiercest campaign rival but now secretary of state. In the plethora of White male figures in the photograph, the three visible markers of difference are Obama (in the corner), Clinton (central foreground), and a woman¹⁰ peeking around the shoulder of another White male at the door of the room.

While numerous commentators have remarked on the historic nature of this photograph, especially the presence of both an African American president and two powerful women in a room where a significant national military operation is being overseen, the power and distance relations in the photograph evoke a series of troubling interpretations. The overwhelming power center of the room is military, male, and White—the surrounding tableau is likewise dominated by White men wearing business attire. Obama’s relationship to this power center is primarily one of displacement and relegation: he is literally and figuratively placed in the corner, in an area of shadow, away from the table, dressed

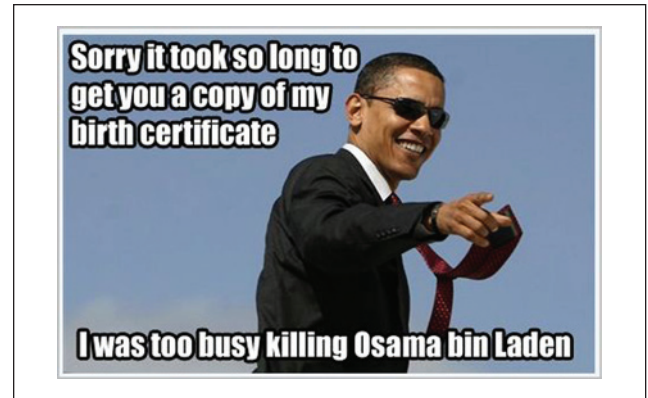


Figure 3. Image meme circulated widely on the Internet shortly after May 1, 2011. It is a stock photo of President Obama digitally modified afterward with added text.

the most informally and with no obvious sign of power or activity in front of him. In contrast, Hillary Clinton has a large number of documents and material on her part of the table, and Joe Biden as a laptop in front of him. Obama is also passive, like many others around the table—the action is happening off camera and seems to be beyond the control of anyone there except perhaps for the White man in the blue uniform. However, Obama’s intent expression belies his dependence on the exercise of (White male) American military power embodied in the room. Further, that power itself is being exercised at a distance yet removed—White male observers located in a conference room gazing intently at the Brown and bearded “other” targets of their military attention, located half a world away in a land close to where my own immigrant itineraries originated.

In the weeks following the bin Laden raid, several different response photographs circulated widely on the Internet—some were parodies of the situation room photograph but two particular responses were especially popular (see Figures 2 and 3). In many ways the original photograph and its various recirculations represent a metaphor for the power of Whiteness and American supremacy over the efforts of progressive rearticulations of “American” identities. Andrew Sullivan’s 2007 hypothetical image acquires an entirely different face through the original situation room picture—Obama is present here, yes, but all too obviously relegated to the margins by a White male military/business dominance. Obama authorizes a particularly imperialist narrative of White American power in this picture, even if his own personal self-authorizations project a more multi-cultural rebranding of American identity. In other words/images: “Sorry it took so long to get you a copy of my birth certificate, I was too busy killing Osama bin Laden” (Figure 3) even if by “remote control” as parodied by the digitally modified image in Figure 2 where Obama is caricatured as being intently focused on playing a videogame—but a game

with substantially higher stakes played out at the expense of “remote” and “othered” identities.

It is perhaps too cynical to suggest that the entire week’s events—from the release of the birth certificate on Wednesday, to the White House Correspondents’ Dinner on Saturday, to the killing of bin Laden on Sunday—were carefully coordinated to rearticulate Obama’s personal identity within an American triumphal narrative. However, these events do call for a different approach to experiencing the potentials and limitations of other-ed minority identities within the context of American cultural hegemonies. At a minimum, these events suggest that if you are a non-White “American” writer who seeks to become President of the United States of America, you are allowed to authorize and authenticate your personal identities only so long as those plural voices reaffirm the structures of Whiteness and American exceptionalism that sponsor your position of relative power in the world.

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Notes

1. I have provided audio clips from the audiobook online. For the particular section being described here, please visit <http://bit.ly/iwasborn-audio1>
2. The other nominees in 2005 were: *The Al Franken Show Party Album* and Bob Dylan’s memoir *Chronicles – Volume One* narrated by Sean Penn. Possibly more significant was Obama’s Grammy award in 2007 for *The Audacity of Hope*, which he also narrated. The other nominees in that category that year were none other than two former Presidents: Bill Clinton for his book *Giving*, and Jimmy Carter for *Sunday Mornings in Plains*.
3. For audio of the full speech, please visit <http://bit.ly/iwasborn-audio2>
4. Or perhaps simply due to practical considerations of time and flow. The audio version of *Dreams From My Father*, even abridged, clocks in at about 7 hr and 9 min long.

5. For an audio clip of this section, please visit <http://bit.ly/iwasborn-audio3>
6. In making this comment, Biden also coincidentally resonates with another observation that a teenaged Barack Obama realized in Hawaii about White people’s reactions to Black masculinity: “People were satisfied so long as you were courteous and smiled and made no sudden moves. They were more than satisfied; they were relieved—such a pleasant surprise to find a well-mannered young Black man who didn’t seem angry all the time” (Obama, 2004, p. 95). In the audio version of this section, Obama’s voice takes on a sarcastic tone as he utters the phrase “such a pleasant surprise”—perhaps one of the few places in the audiobook where Obama lets his own narrator’s voice take a jab at White prejudice. To hear the audio clip, please visit <http://bit.ly/iwasborn-audio4>
7. The full memo is available online at <http://bit.ly/iwasborn-memo>
8. Never mind that there are many White Americans who are also Socialists, atheists, Muslims, and even Nazis.
9. The full video is on C-SPAN’s streaming website (<http://www.cspanvideo.org/program/WhiteHouseCorrespo>). I have also provided video clips of relevant portions of the dinner online as follows:
<http://bit.ly/iwasborn-video1>: the intro sequence and the President’s opening remarks.
<http://bit.ly/iwasborn-video2>: where he targets other GOP candidates and Trump
10. The woman at the door is Audrey Tomason, the Director of Counterterrorism. For a detailed list of the persons in the photo, please visit: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/whitehouse/5680724572/>

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