

## **The Content of Their Complexes: The Wounded Leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Barack Obama**

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In 1959, C. G. Jung noted, “A political, social, philosophical, and religious conflict of unprecedented proportions has split the consciousness of our age” (1959/1978, p. 107). During times like these, the tension of opposites seeks relief and reconciliation through “a uniting symbol” (p. 108). He continued,

Should something extraordinary or impressive then occur in the outside world, be it a human personality, a thing, or an idea, the unconscious content can project itself upon it, thereby investing the projection carrier with numinous and mythical powers. . . . The projection carrier has a highly suggestive effect and grows into a saviour myth whose basic features have been repeated countless times. (p. 108)

Though Jung saw flying saucers as the uniting symbol of the late 1950s, I believe that in the “United” States of America, it was Martin Luther King, Jr. who appeared as the major symbol of unity, carrying numinous powers and projections as he embodied the savior myth for the country. Fifty years later, we see Barack Obama carrying similar powers and calling to himself similar projections.

But King and Obama are very different men, despite the media’s tendency to conflate the two, especially around King’s birthday, and despite any claims that Obama’s presidency is proof that King’s dream has come true, that blacks are now judged by the content of their characters and not by the color of their skin. Rather than exploring similarities in the content of their characters, in this article I will explore the dissimilar content of their complexes. Here, I take my lead from Robert Romanyshyn in his book *The Wounded Researcher* (2007) where he wrote, “A complex is a kind of wounding, and for the wounded researcher it is both the obstacle and the pathway into the unfinished business in the soul of his or her work” (p. 97). I assert that this is true for wounded leaders as well, that their complexes are both an obstacle and a pathway into the unfinished business in the soul of their individual work, *which is enacted upon and reflected by the collective.*

Stated another way, I am proposing that in times when tension is extreme, the collective will nominate and elevate a leader who has the very complex the collective needs to work with and through: together, the individual leader and the collective constituency will struggle with that complex, projecting it back and forth upon each other with varying degrees of consciousness.

Before I begin using this theory as a lens to see through the leadership of King and Obama, I want to note three trepidations I have in doing so, followed by one caveat. To begin with, an article of this length is inadequate to explore thoroughly two men's wounds, their subsequent complexes, and the effects of those complexes. Though I am a friend of the depths, it is the surface we must skim here, not for lack of material but for the limitations of the medium of a journal article. For this reason, I will only be discussing one complex per man (albeit, the one I've come to believe is the central complex), though we know in studying Jung's complex theory (*CW* 8) that we are each the crowded seat where multiple complexes sit.

My second trepidation echoes a letter Jung once wrote on the problematic nature of understanding.

Understanding is a fearfully binding power. . . . at times a veritable murder of the soul as soon as it flattens out vitally important differences. The core of the individual is a mystery of life, which is snuffed out when it is "grasped." That is why symbols want to be mysterious. (1973, pp. 30-31)

Both King and Obama are extraordinary symbols, and aware of their symbolic nature. King spoke of being unprepared for "the symbolic role that history had thrust upon me" (1998, p. 136), and Obama is reported to have said, "I have become a symbol of the possibility of America returning to our best traditions" (Weisman, para. 3).

As long as I have been studying King and Obama, they remain essential mysteries to me, still as numinous in their symbolic statures today as they were the day I first encountered them. This article is not a forgone conclusion, then, a presentation by someone who has "grasped" an understanding of the men, but rather, it is an introduction by someone who is grappling with a reading of the men in light of Jungian complex theory. The content and spirit of this analysis are not meant to be reductive but suggestive. Rather than close down diagnosis and prognosis, I hope to open up dialogue on the potential ways the wounds of our leaders are projected onto the public and projected back to them by that same public. Thus this article is less about understanding these two men, and more about understanding a psychological dynamic through these two men.

My final trepidation is allayed by the acknowledgement that this article reveals as much about me as the men about whom I am writing. I am a wounded scholar,

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and as such, I project my wounds onto my work and find my complexes reflected in what I read and revealed in what I write. Perhaps I am best able to identify King's guilt complex because I suffer from one myself. Perhaps I am best able to identify Obama's identity complex because I suffer from one myself. A different scholar might research this same topic and identify different complexes in King and Obama because, as the title of this article suggests, it may be the content of our complexes that defines us as much as (if not more than) the content of our characters. Or stated another way, perhaps complex *is* character, in which case exploring the characters of King and Obama means that we must spend some time exploring the wounds that have shaped their complexes and that in turn shape their leadership and, for lack of a better word, our followership.

And here is where I must insert the caveat. Comparing the leadership of King and Obama is difficult because King's leadership is over, and Obama's has just begun. Hundreds of books have been written about King versus only a dozen or so on Obama. From the time of the Montgomery Bus Boycott to his death, King led for 14 years; from the time of his emergence on the national stage at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Obama has led for five years. More importantly, we have had 41 years since King's death to reflect upon his leadership and not a minute post-Obama to reflect upon his. Obama's leadership is still unfolding, making the completion of this article extremely difficult. It is September of 2009 as I finish my final polish, and every day this month something has happened that I want to incorporate herein; by the time it is published online, who knows what might have happened that will either lend support or undermine the argument I make within?

*Mea culpas* complete, let us turn to complex theory itself. Jung stated that complexes are caused by a "so-called trauma" or an emotional shock to the psyche (CW 8, para. 204). The use of the adjective "so-called" is critical here because what is traumatic to one person may not be traumatic to another. This may be especially true of children, who show remarkable differences in sensitivity from a very early age.

When studying the childhoods of King and Obama, I followed Jung's dictum that "image is psyche," and looked for an image in their autobiographies that they offer as a moment of psychic wounding or a "so-called trauma." For King, it is present in the very first paragraph of his autobiography. He described his birth in 1929 when the country was on the verge of the Great Depression, and though he did not remember much about the beginning, he wrote, "I do recall, when I was about five years of age, how I questioned my parents about the numerous people standing in breadlines" (1998, pp. 1-2). He ended that first paragraph by reflecting,

“I can see the effects of this early childhood experience on my anti-capitalistic feelings” (p. 2).<sup>1</sup>

For another child, seeing the breadlines might not have been traumatic, but King was by all accounts a very sensitive child (“Man of the Year,” 1964). He was also a relatively sheltered one. He was raised in an “average income” community in Atlanta and never experienced lack personally or in his community (King, 1998). From that place of relative privilege, the sensitive little King developed a guilt complex during the Great Depression that he could never shake, stemming from a deep-seated belief that all God’s children should be treated equally, that it was an unjust world if divided into “haves” and “have nots.” Thus guilt, inequality, and injustice were tied together for him in an inescapable psychic knot, one he carried his entire life.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, his wife Coretta Scott King noted, “My husband was what psychologists might call a guilt-ridden man” (1969, p. 158). She wrote,

His conscience was a formidable thing that kept him on the path he thought was right. If he ever did something a little wrong, or committed a selfish act, his conscience fairly devoured him. He felt that having been born into what was a middle-class African-American family was a privilege he had not earned, just as he felt the many honors heaped on him in the later years were not his alone. (p. 59)

King’s good friend and advisor Stanley Levison agreed: “Martin could be described as an intensely guilt-ridden man” (quoted in Garrow, 1986, p. 588).

That King would struggle with a sense of guilt is not terribly surprising, given the centrality of the concepts of sin, evil, and guilt to his Christian faith. In fact, we might imagine that guilt was seared into his soul through his ancestral lineage. In his autobiography, he wrote, “My father is a preacher, my grandfather was a preacher, my great-grandfather was a preacher, my only brother is a preacher, my daddy’s brother is a preacher. . . . Of course I was religious. . . . I didn’t have much choice” (1998, p. 1). Though King questioned elements of Christian dogma, he did not question the basic tenet of the “universality of sin” (1957/2007, p. 117), and he constantly spoke of the battle between good and evil raging in all souls. Guilt, he believed, was an appropriate response to “this agonizing gulf between the *ought* and the *is*” (1963, p. 40).

A sermon he preached at 25 is illustrative of his philosophy about guilt, and interesting as well for its reference to Jung.<sup>3</sup> King opened with the story of the adulteress who was being stoned by scribes and Pharisees until Jesus stopped them and suggested that the person among them without sin should cast the first stone. When all her accusers scattered, Jesus asked her, “Hath no man condemned

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thee?” She replied no, and he said, ““Neither do I condemn thee, go, and sin no more”” (quoted in King, 1954/2007, p. 199).

King gave two explanations in this sermon for Jesus’ actions. First, the scribes and Pharisees committed a bigger sin—King called it “the gravest sin”—which is “the sin of feeling that one has risen above the capacity for sin” (1954/2007, p. 200). King believed that to remember one’s own guilt was to have the capacity for empathy with another, and while the sin should be condemned, the sinner should not.

The second explanation King gave for Jesus’ lack of condemnation of the adulteress is “because she had already condemned herself. The object of condemnation is to produce a sense of guilt, then of penitence, and thus to inaugurate a new beginning” (1954/2007, p. 200). He continued, “The woman had a burning and terrible sense of guilt. Further condemnation would have been unnecessary and cruel” (p. 200). Here is where he quoted Jung, from *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (1955):

Condemnation does not liberate, it oppresses. I am the oppressor of the person I condemn, not his friend and fellow sufferer. . . . Modern man has heard enough about guilt and sin. He is sorely beset by his own bad conscience and wants rather to learn how he is to reconcile himself with his own nature, how he is to love the enemy in his own heart and call the wolf his brother. (quoted on p. 201)

Despite his agreement with Jung’s words here, King does appear to have been oppressed by his own sense of guilt, wracked with a sense of self-condemnation enough beyond the ordinary that we could call it a complex. Two examples from his youth clarify the strength of his guilt complex. Though it is not a well-known part of his autobiography now, it was widely known during King’s lifetime that he twice tried to commit suicide before the age of 13. *TIME* magazine reported the story in its January 3, 1964 edition, which declared King its “Man of the Year.” It described him as having developed in his earliest years “a raw-nerved sensitivity that bordered on self-destruction” (p. 3, para. 2).

The story recounted how King and his younger brother A.D. were sliding down the banister in their two-story home when A.D. accidentally knocked his maternal grandmother unconscious. His grandmother lived in the home with the family, and Martin was extremely close to her. Thinking that their mischief had killed her, King felt so guilty that he ran up the stairs and threw himself out the window, landing unhurt.

His second suicide attempt came when he heard about his grandmother’s death from a heart attack. Though it was a Sunday, King was supposed to be home doing

his homework, but instead he sneaked away to attend a parade without his parents' permission. King biographer Marshall Frady wrote that King "instantly supposed that this little delinquency accounted for his grandmother's death by heart attack that afternoon, and he flung himself with sobbing abandon out of the second-floor window of the house" (2005, para. 6). Frady described King as having "an inordinate compulsion to take on himself great cargoes of guilt" (para. 6).

Let us return for a moment to the major argument of this article: namely, that wounded leaders project their complexes onto their followers (or its teleological corollary, that a wounded collective seeks out a leader who embodies the complex that it is most ready to work through). This sympathetic complex may provide a pathway into the unfinished work in the soul of *both* the leader and his or her followers. The complex not only acts on the leader but is enacted within the collective. So let us turn to look at how King worked with and through this guilt complex in his leadership with the soul of America.

King knew that white America felt a kind of collective guilt for what it had done to its black citizens, a guilt felt especially by Southern whites. He analyzed the South as

haunted by a deep sense of guilt for what it has done to the Negro—guilt for patronizing him, degrading him, brutalizing him, depersonalizing him, thingifying him: guilt for lying to itself. This is the source of the schizophrenia that the South will suffer until it goes through its crisis of conscience. (1965/1986c, p. 358)

During the Civil Rights Movement, King provoked that crisis by using nonviolent marches and protests by innocent blacks to call forth violent responses by guilty whites in order to rile the conscience and raise the consciousness of the entire country.

The blueprint was simple. King (1965/1986a) stated:

Long years of experience indicate to us that Negroes can achieve their goal when four things occur:

1. Nonviolent demonstrators go into the streets to exercise their constitutional rights.
2. Racists resist by unleashing violence against them.
3. Americans of conscience in the name of decency demand federal intervention and legislation.
4. The administration, under mass pressure, initiates measures of immediate intervention and remedial legislation. (p. 127)

A simple psychological formula undergirded these four steps: black nonviolence plus white violence multiplies white guilt and shame.<sup>4</sup> He knew that this would lead to the need for whites to balance the equation by adding redemptive

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acts of justice, effectively assuaging their guilt and restoring them to innocence again.

King needed to get white America to see its own evil or, in Jungian terms, to confront its own shadow. For example, two aspects of the shadow that whites had projected onto blacks were barbarianism and physical depravity. But after Birmingham and Selma, when police officers—the symbols of justice—initiated attacks on innocent protestors, beating, shoving, whipping, gassing, kicking, fire-hosing, and clubbing the men, women, and children protesting against injustice, how could white Americans help but withdraw the projections and see that barbarianism and physical depravity lay within them as well? As King simply stated, “If he has any conscience, he is ashamed” (1965/1986c, p. 348). In fact, King said of the whole movement, “More white people learned more about the shame of America, and finally faced some aspects of it, during the years of nonviolent protest than during the century before” (1967/1986b, p. 304).

In large part, this was due to one technological advance that distinguished the 20<sup>th</sup> century from the 19<sup>th</sup>—television. “Psychology is concerned with the act of seeing,” Jung once wrote (1983, pp. 262-263). He thought that “only the tiniest fraction of the population learns anything from reflection; everything else consists in the suggestive power of ocular evidence” (1959/1978, p. 39).

Without something remaining in front of our vision, we conveniently sink into the sea of forgetfulness, and that state of chronic woolly-mindedness returns which we describe as “normality.” In shocking contrast to this is the fact that nothing has finally disappeared and nothing has been made good. The evil, the guilt, the profound unease of conscience, the dark foreboding, are there before our eyes, if only we would see. (1983, p. 395)

Television and newsprint created millions of witnesses, national and international, who would see the evils of American racism: King believed that witnessing its own violence established a sense of guilt and shame in white Americans, even in those who would never commit an act of violence themselves. He knew what Jung knew: the powerful contagion of vicarious guilt. As Jung explained,

The psychological use of the word “guilt” should not be confused with guilt in the legal or moral sense. Psychologically, it connotes the irrational presence of a subjective feeling (or conviction) of guilt, or an objective imputation of, or imputed share in, guilt. (1945/1989, p. 51)

Jung called this guilt “psychological collective guilt” and noted that “it hits everybody, just and unjust alike, everybody who was anywhere near the place

where the terrible thing happened” (1945/1989, p. 53). Jung does note that this sort of collective guilt is unfair, though it still exists.

It may be objected that the whole concept of psychological collective guilt is a prejudice and a sweepingly unfair condemnation. Of course it is, but that is precisely what constitutes the irrational nature of collective guilt: it cares nothing for the just and the unjust, it is the dark cloud that rises up from the scene of an unexpiated crime. It is a psychic phenomenon, and it is therefore no condemnation of the German people to say that they are collectively guilty, but it is simply a statement of fact. (pp. 53-54)

If one substitutes the white population in America for the German population in his quotation, the same thing can be said of the collective guilt that swept through white America during the Civil Rights Movement.

Feeling one’s guilt is not a bad thing, Jung argued.

When we are conscious of our guilt we are in a more favourable position—we can at least hope to change and improve ourselves. As we know, anything that remains in the unconscious is incorrigible; psychological corrections can be made only in consciousness. Consciousness of guilt can therefore act as a powerful moral stimulus. (1983, pp. 72-73)

This recalls King’s statement in his sermon on the stoning of the adulteress: Jesus did not condemn her because she was already conscious of her guilt and thus capable of redemption.

Redemption played a key role in King’s working with his own guilt complex as well as the guilt he provoked in the country. He believed that redemption could be achieved in two ways: by accepting God’s endless forgiveness through the concept of grace and by striving to sin no longer by committing oneself to good acts. King used both pathways to redemption in his work with white America. The first step: “White America must assume guilt” (1967, p. 80). Once she did, black America would counter with forgiveness but only if white America committed to improving its actions. For every battle King fought, he went in with a concrete “to-do” list. The more guilt white America felt, the stronger the redemptive actions it would take to expiate that guilt. For example, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 followed after the violence in Birmingham, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 followed after the violence in Selma.

Historian August Meier noted of King in 1965, “He unerringly knows how to exploit to maximum effectiveness their growing feeling of guilt” (2007, p. 21). In this he is not unusual: Meier cited Black Muslims like Malcolm X and militants like James Baldwin who also heaped guilt upon whites, but King took it further. “With intuitive, but extraordinary skill, he not only castigates whites for their sins



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but, in contrast to angry young writers like Baldwin, he explicitly states his belief in their salvation” (p. 21).

It would be a mutual salvation, King believed. “The Negro needs the white man to free him from his fears. The white man needs the Negro to free him from his guilt” (1967/1986b, p. 309). But who would free Martin Luther King, Jr. from his own guilt? Certainly not the country he led. In a game of mutual projections, just as King served a ball of guilt toward the country, the country hit it back, projecting guilt back onto him. King was brought up in court on numerous false legal charges, including tax evasion; he spent time in jail; he was hounded by the FBI who looked for transgressions to discredit or blackmail him (see Garrow, 1981, 1986). The news media’s coverage of King’s trials and tribulations is well-documented in *Symbols, the News Magazines, and Martin Luther King* (Lentz, 1990).

Especially notable about the guilt projected onto King was its bipolar character, the “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” type. He was guilty of breaking laws for which he went to jail, and he was guilty of cowardice for the times he avoided going to jail or allowed himself to be bailed out. He felt guilty for his silence on the Vietnam War, but when he began to speak against it, some in the movement found him guilty of taking necessary attention away from racial issues. He was guilty of being an Uncle Tom, and he was guilty of being too militant. He was held guilty for all the white violence that happened in his wake and on his watch, and he was held guilty when occasionally some blacks would act violently during a nonviolent protest. In the early days of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, when King was only 27 years old, he stated, “I began to feel a personal sense of guilt for everything that was happening” (quoted in Garrow, 1986, p. 87); that personal sense of guilt would continue to the very week of his death, 11 years later, when he was wracked with guilt over black violence at a protest in Memphis (Garrow, 1986). David Garrow’s book *Bearing the Cross* (1986) chronicles in heart-breaking detail the depression, despondency, and despair that King felt throughout his life as he carried the burden of this overdeveloped sense of responsibility; it appears that his guilt complex was the terrible cross King had to bear, adding a layer of poignancy to the words carved upon his tomb: “Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, I’m free at last.”

Now let us turn to Obama, a man who is leading in a totally different era, one in which he admitted in his words that “white guilt has largely exhausted itself in America” (2006, p. 247).<sup>5</sup> While Obama admitted that equality and justice have not been 100% achieved, he acknowledged that there has been “a profound shift in race relations in my lifetime” (2006, p. 233). His presidential election is proof of that shift for much of the country; as author Shelby Steele noted, “Obama’s post-racial

idealism told whites the one thing they most wanted to hear: America had essentially contained the evil of racism to the point at which it was no longer a serious barrier to black advancement” (2008, para. 7). In doing so, Obama spoke to “the longing on the part of whites to escape the stigma of racism” (para. 5). If one substitutes “guilt” in that last quotation for “stigma,” we can see how Obama’s election could offer white America “evidence, certification and recognition” that it is no longer guilty of racism, at least not egregiously so (para. 8).

To what degree white America is still guilty of racism in reality is of course hotly debated, and I will not add any heat in this article. What interests me more is the perception that somehow Obama’s election signifies what in the cultural conversation has been called a “postracial” or “transracial” era. Never during King’s era were people debating whether a postracial or transracial America had come to pass. No, we live in a different time than King, and Obama was born into and leads a different nation; this different time and different nation call for a struggle with a different complex because America simply does not have the same industrial-sized hook for a guilt complex as it once did.

Nor does Obama have the same hook for a guilt complex as King had. His book *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) suggests that this is due in part to having been raised outside the Christian faith, with its stern emphasis on concepts like sin, evil, the fallen nature of humanity, and their attendant affects, guilt and shame. “I was not raised in a religious household,” he stated matter-of-factly (p. 202). Even though his maternal grandfather was raised by Baptists and his grandmother by Methodists, he noted that “religious faith never really took root in their hearts” (pp. 202-203). His mother not only was unrooted in religion but also harbored ill feelings for Christians due to bad experiences with them in her youth: “for my mother, organized religion too often dressed up closed-mindedness in the garb of piety, cruelty and oppression in the cloak of righteousness” (p. 203). However, “in her mind, a working knowledge of the world’s great religions was a necessary part of any well-rounded education,” and she had the Bible, the Koran, and the Bhagavad-Gita on bookshelves next to books on Greek, Norse, and African mythology (p. 203).

Obama’s mother would later become an anthropologist, and it was through this eye that she taught her son to view religion as just one “expression of human culture” (2006, p. 204). Though he received an ecumenical education in world religions, he noted that religion itself “required no sustained commitment on my part—no introspective exertion or self-flagellation” (p. 204); religion was never associated with guilt or shame, with condemnation or salvation. Neither was it the site or source of his moral education. “Without the help of religious texts or outside authorities,” Obama learned his values from his mother: “honesty, empathy, discipline, delayed gratification, and hard work. She raged at poverty and injustice,

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and scorned those who were indifferent to both,” and “most of all, she possessed an abiding sense of wonder, a reverence for life and its precious, transitory nature that could properly be described as devotional” (p. 205). Obama called his mother “the most spiritually awakened person that I’ve ever known” (p. 205).

Obama did find his way to the church as a young adult, joining what he termed “a historically black church” in Chicago “as a choice and not an epiphany” (2006, p. 208). He turned to this church ultimately for two reasons. First, he saw it as “a vessel for [his] beliefs” (p. 206), especially with its emphasis on the social gospel, which encompassed many of the values his mother had instilled in him. Second, he joined the church for its communal aspects, calling it “a community or shared tradition in which to bring my most deeply held beliefs” (p. 206). Though he was a community organizer at this time, he felt apart from the African-American community by virtue of having no church to call home. Without such a home, he felt “free in the way that my mother was free, but also alone in the same ways she was ultimately alone” (p. 206).

Despite being “born again” in the church through the ritual of baptism, Obama was still able to hold onto his religious skepticism and his desire to be “of this world” rather than focused on the otherworldly afterlife, which he questioned anyway (2006, p. 226). The historically black church had to maintain its faith in the midst of struggle; he interpreted this to mean “that faith doesn’t mean that you don’t have doubts, or that you relinquish your hold on this world” (p. 207). If he was a sinner, he didn’t feel judged for it because “in the black community, the lines between sinner and saved were more fluid; the sins of those who came to church were not so different from the sins of those who didn’t” (p. 207). He felt accepted in the church and therefore could accept the church, believing that “religious commitment did not require me to suspend critical thinking, disengage from the battle for economic and social justice, or otherwise retreat from the world that I knew and loved” (p. 208).

Novelist Walter Mosley recently asserted that for Westerners, “guilt is the mainstay of who we are and how we are organized, and is, seemingly, our undeniable destiny, along with Death and Taxes” (2009, p. 28). Guilt is not Obama’s mainstay: after scouring his writings, I would say it does not even merit a listing in the index of his collected works thus far.<sup>6</sup> Borrowing from Mosley’s language, if Obama has a mainstay that organizes his life and makes up his undeniable destiny, it is the father wound. He titled his 1995 memoir (revised in 2004) *Dreams From My Father*, a “meditation on the absent parent” (p. xii), a thirty years’ “record of a personal, interior journey—a boy’s search for a father” (p. xvi). After reading it, one wonders why his editors did not insist that it be titled *Wounds From My Father* to render more accurately the contents.

It is a telling difference that while both King and Obama were named after their fathers, only King kept the “Jr.” in his name, while Obama dropped his. As recalled in *Dreams From My Father* (2004), Barack Hussein Obama, Sr. was an African from Kenya who was attending school at the University of Hawaii when he met Stanley Anne Dunham, better known as Sally, in a Russian language class. Sally was living in Hawaii with her parents, mid-Westerners who came to Hawaii to start a business. Obama, Sr. and Sally married and had Obama, Jr., but the marriage only lasted for two years before they divorced, with his father leaving to study at Harvard, then returning to live in Kenya. Obama saw his father only once after that, for a brief month when he was 10 years old; his father died in a car accident when Obama was 21 years old.

It took nearly 460 pages in *Dreams From My Father* (2004) to explore the father wound, and one senses after reading it and some of his subsequent speeches that he is still working through it, though it has been 46 years since his father left him. Through the energy of his wound, Obama is dedicated to showing us what it is like to be a good father, schooling the country in fatherhood, modeling for us that even though a man is busy with important work, he can still take the time to help his children get ready for their first day in a new school and to attend a parent-teacher conference or an occasional soccer game. The Commander-In-Chief is also the Father-In-Chief, a father who is modeling for us a deep respect for partnership with a woman who is clearly his lover as well as his wife and the mother of his beloved little women. The iconic images of him with his wife and his daughters are more imprinted in my psyche so far than any images of him with cabinet members or commanders of state, and this searing of images of a new kind of fatherhood may be one of his biggest legacies, all stemming from the vow that he made on behalf of his wounded child to be a good father.

He spoke of that vow in his second book, *The Audacity of Hope*: “I determined that my father’s irresponsibility toward his children, my stepfather’s remoteness, and my grandfather’s failures would all become object lessons for me, and that my own children would have a father they could count on” (2006, p. 346). And not just his own children, but the nation’s children: just today as I write this, Obama addressed America’s school children (2009a), sounding very much like a responsible, caring father as he urged them to stay in school and become their best selves for themselves and the country (and to wash their hands often and turn off the television and video games!). He has also taken to the pulpit to educate the nation’s fathers about the importance of their role in their children’s lives: his “Father’s Day 2008” speech is anthologized as one of his seven key speeches in the book *Change We Can Believe In: Barack Obama’s Plan To Renew America’s Promise* (2008c). Though that speech was given before a black church, he speaks to all American fathers when he stated that there are “certain lessons we must strive

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to live and learn as fathers—whether we are black or white; rich or poor; from the South Side or the wealthiest suburb” (p. 237). Because of his imperfect father, part of the wounded leadership of Barack Obama seems to be revaluing the soul of fatherhood.

In his Father’s Day speech, Obama referred to himself too as “an imperfect father” (2008c, p. 237), echoing a note that he hit earlier in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006). Despite how we might see him as a father, Obama admitted that though he has succeeded “in the most basic sense . . . of all the areas of my life, it is my capacities as a husband and father that I entertain the most doubt” (p. 346). Here is where he feels the gap that King often spoke of, the gap between the *ought* and the *is*, the “gap between the idea of parenthood in my head and the compromised reality that I live” (p. 347). If Obama suffers from any degree of guilt, it appears to be with his imperfect fatherhood, as he shared: “So I do my best to answer the accusation that floats around in my mind—that I am selfish, that I do what I do to feed my own ego or fill a void in my heart” (p. 348). In fact, his essay in *Parade* magazine (2009b) titled “What I Want For You—And Every Child in America”—an open letter to his daughters upon the eve of his inauguration—can be read through the lens of a guilt-ridden father trying to justify his absence to his children, though inarguably for the most noble of reasons (there is no mention of feeding his ego in that letter).

Despite the fact that Obama’s father wound has clearly defined his life and become, in Mosley’s term, his “undeniable destiny,” I believe that it is only half of a more defining wound, the whole of which may more clearly define his wounded leadership. It is not the absent father who wounded him most deeply: it was the absent *black* father, the absent *African* father, a father who was foreign in his presence, not just in his absence. When Obama referred to his memoir as “a record of a personal, interior journey—a boy’s search for his father,” he completed his sentence by connecting this search to “a workable meaning for his life as a black American” (2004, p. xvi). This sentence in its entirety points to what I believe is Obama’s ultimate complex: an identity complex.

Let us follow the same path into Obama’s psyche as we followed into King’s: by looking at an early memorable image that he identifies as traumatic. In *Dreams From My Father* (2004), Obama recalled when he was nine and flipping through magazines at his mother’s workplace. He came across an image of a man whose lips, nose, face, and hands all had, as he described it, “an uneven, ghostly hue” (p. 30). When Obama read the text, he discovered that this was a black man who had undergone voluntary chemical treatments to lighten his skin color. The article talked about thousands of people like him who had undergone the same painful treatments, all in the attempt to denounce their blackness. Obama reacted bodily,

his face and neck flushing, his stomach knotting, his eyes blurring, and he felt “ a desperate urge to jump out of my seat, to show them [his mother and her boss] what I had learned, to demand some explanation or assurance” (p. 30). Unlike King who asked openly about the meaning of the breadlines, Obama kept his questions and his fears inside, seemingly because they were so inchoate.

As Obama described his childhood up to that point, race was not an issue. “That my father looked nothing like the people around me—that he was black as pitch, my mother white as milk—barely registered in my mind” (2004, p. 10). When his father left him, he was raised by his white mother and grandparents and rather thoroughly integrated into the melting pot that was Hawaii. At the age of six he moved to Indonesia with his mother and his step-father; there was born a sister who was half-white and half-Indonesian, and there too he experienced relative racial acceptance. Several times in the memoir he used the word “innocent” to describe his childhood, especially with regard to race.

However, that innocence shattered when he saw the image in the magazine. He described it as “violent for me, an ambush attack” (2004, p. 51). When he went home that night, he stood in front of the mirror and stared at his black skin, knowing that he looked as he had always looked but wondering for the first time if something was terribly wrong with him. He wrote, “The alternative seemed no less frightening—that the adults around me lived in the midst of madness” (p. 52). Where he had not noticed race before as a problematic issue, he reported that his “vision had been permanently altered,” and he began to notice race everywhere, from the lack of black models in the Sears catalogue to the fact that Santa Claus was a white man (p. 52).

He recounted stories of racial confusion, times he would negate his blackness, then times he would negate his whiteness— his memoir is full of such painful pendulum swings. To mention a few: in elementary school in Hawaii, he was questioned about his name by his teacher, asked if he preferred Barry, the Americanized nickname, or Barack, the African name (2004, p. 59). He chose Barry. In that same elementary school, he rejected the only other black student in his grade, a girl whom some were calling his girlfriend. Though the incident constitutes seemingly minor elementary-school boy/girl dynamics, he called it “an act of betrayal” with major repercussions: “from that day forward, a part of me felt trampled on, crushed” (p. 62). Swinging the other way on the pendulum, during his college years at Columbia when he was no longer Barry but Barack, he broke up with a white girlfriend after visiting her family because he knew that if he continued to date her, he would align with that family and live a white lifestyle (pp. 210-212).

His struggles in high school were particularly intense. There were not many black people on the island of Hawaii and only four in his high school. When his

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black friends played the race card every time they were slighted by whites, he would defend whites by saying that all conflicts were not necessarily about race. His high school classmate Ray's response was typical of others: "Man, I don't know why you making excuses for those folk," he would say (2004, p. 74). In Obama's confusion, he became sullen and withdrawn from his white mother and grandparents: "I was engaged in a fitful interior struggle. I was trying to raise myself to be a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance, no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant" (p. 76). Unable to turn to his black father for answers, he took clues from television, movies, and the radio, where "pop culture was color-coded, after all, an arcade of images from which you could cop a walk, a talk, a step, a style" (p. 78). About the young black men he knew at the time, he wrote, "Each of us chose a costume, armor against uncertainty" (pp. 79-80). But the armor was unsuccessful, as Obama admitted: "I had no idea who my own self was" (p. 82). When he was with his black friends, they would often talk about "white folks," as in "white folks this" and "white folks that," and then he would remember his mother and grandparents, and he wrote, "I would suddenly grow quiet, as if I had secrets to keep" (pp. 80-81).

Of those formative years, he acknowledged the swinging pendulum of identity, writing,

I learned to slip back and forth between my black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and structures of meaning, convinced that with a bit of translation on my part, the two worlds would eventually cohere. (2004, p. 82)

In the black world, he discovered the literature of famous writers like W. E. B. Dubois, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin. He would close the door to his bedroom, and "there I would sit and wrestle with words, locked in suddenly desperate argument, trying to reconcile the world as I'd found it with the terms of my birth. But there was no escape to be had" (2004, p. 85). In their books he found "the same anguish," "the same doubt," and the same "self-contempt" that he was experiencing (p. 86). Despite the company of black writers, he began for the first time to feel "utterly alone" (p. 91). To numb his confusion and alienation, he drank, smoked, and did drugs, getting high, he wrote, to "push questions of who I was out of my mind" (p. 93).

He spent his first year in college like that, finding his racial identity constantly challenged by blacks, by whites, and by multiracial friends and acquaintances. It was a black woman, Reggie, who asked if she could call him Barack—this time he said yes—and she told him all about growing up in Chicago on the South Side. He wrote, "Her voice evoked a vision of black life in all its possibility, a vision that

filled me with longing—a longing for place, and a fixed and definite history” (2004, p. 104). When he told her that he envied her life, she laughed and told him that she envied his growing up in Hawaii. She challenged him for wallowing in his self-centered identity crisis until he realized how much fear he had been living in: “the constant, crippling fear that I didn’t belong somehow, that unless I dodged and hid and pretended to be something I wasn’t I would remain forever an outsider” (p. 111).

At that point he chose to believe that “my identity might begin with the fact of my race, but it didn’t, couldn’t, end there” (2004, p. 111). However, there is a sense in reading the rest of the memoir that this stance is mere intellectualism, a defense mechanism called upon to deal with his profound identity complex. Two years after graduating from college, his defense wore off. “I was like a drunk coming out of a long, painful binge, and I had soon felt my newfound resolve slipping away, without object or direction” (p. 115). He compounded the question “Who am I?” with “Where did I belong?” (p. 115). Desperate for a community to belong to, he turned to Chicago and became a community organizer, a career that held the “promise of redemption” for his lost soul (p. 135).

In Chicago, he broke out of “the larger isolation” he carried with him by beginning to share some of the stories from his past with the people he worked with, breaking through his fear that they would find those stories too foreign (2004, p. 190). He noticed a reciprocal phenomenon would take place.

Then they’d offer a story to match or confound mine, a knot to bind our experiences together—a lost father, an adolescent brush with crime, a wandering heart, a moment of simple grace. As time passed, I found that these stories, taken together, had helped me bind my world together, that they gave me the sense of place and purpose I’d been looking for. (2004, p. 190)

Joining the historically black church was another way of binding his world together and dealing with “the old fears of not belonging” (p. 253). During the first sermon he heard there, preached by the man who would become his very controversial pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Obama “imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging” with the stories of the Bible, and “those stories—of survival, and freedom, and hope—became our story, my story” (p. 294). That he feels bound to the black community emerges from the repetition of the word “our” throughout that paragraph: “our story,” “our blood,” “our tears,” “our trials and triumphs,” “our journey,” “our condition,” and “the possibility of moving beyond our narrow dreams” (p. 294).

It is immediately after relating this experience in the church that Obama described his first trip to Africa, where he hoped to come to terms with the African part of his African-American identity, to “somehow force my many worlds into a



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single, harmonious whole” (2004, p. 347). He wrote of meeting a woman at the airport who recognized his last name, and “For the first time in my life, I felt the comfort, the firmness of identity that a name might provide” (p. 305). Simply stated, “My name belonged and so I belonged” (p. 305).

The confusion over who he was, the fear of not belonging, the doubt and despair and constant questioning, the pendulum swings between black and white that mark the first 30 years of his life as told in his memoir connote a profound identity complex. Given the argument in this article, then, it is no surprise that Obama’s leadership has been marked by questions and confusion about his identity, while his complex is projected back upon him by a country divided and confused about its own identity.

Before we examine that projection, let us briefly establish the country’s own identity complex. Perhaps it is most clearly illustrated in the name of the country itself. The proper geographical name of the continent is North America, but the country nicknamed itself “The United States of America,” which is both misnomer and myth: misnomer, because it suggests the Americas (North, Central, and South) are united, which they are not; and myth, because North America itself is anything but united. As Juliet asked, “What’s in a name?” Apparently the answer for Obama (Barry or Barack? Obama or Obama Jr.?) and the citizenry of North America is identity. The myth of the United States of America, betrayed in the metaphor of the great melting pot, echoes Obama’s desire, noted above, to “somehow force my many worlds into a single, harmonious whole” (2004, p. 347).

In fact, though we enforce a pledge of allegiance to the proposition that we are “one Nation, under God, indivisible,” we are clearly a divided nation. The divisions are of course racial: what King pointed out in the 1960s no doubt still rings true today, that the most segregated hour in America is 11:00 on a Sunday morning in the most segregated institution, the church (1956/1998, p. 31). But the divisions go much deeper than the color of our skin. Looking at Obama’s victory or any recent presidential election will illustrate this point: our group identity sways the way we cast our ballots. We vote differently if we are white or black, if we are Catholic or Jewish, if we are male or female, if we are gay or straight, if we are rich or poor, if we are young or old, if we live in a red state or a blue state. We are one nation under many Gods, divisible, a cacophony of identity groups rather than a harmony of citizens. If the country could speak, it might echo Obama’s statement: “I [have] no idea who my own self [is]” (2004, p. 82).

A country that does not know itself, constantly strained asunder the tension of opposites, is rife for a uniting symbol such as Jung called for above that will carry its projections (1959/1978, p. 107). In this case, a country struggling under the burden of the question “Who are we who elected this man?” turns that question

around and asks “Who is he whom we elected?” At one point on the campaign trail, his presidential rival John McCain started to repeat the question, “Who is Barack Obama?” and the country Obama won over still persists in repeating those questions. In fact, typing in the exact phrase “Who is Barack Obama” on a Google search as of this writing resulted in 1,650,000 pages offering their various opinions and answers.

One can hear the pendulum swinging inside Americans’ heads in the questions they ask. Is he a Muslim or a Christian? Is he a socialist, or a communist, or a fascist, or simply a pragmatist? Is he an American patriot, or a black nationalist, or is he a terrorist? Is he a populist, or an elitist? Why, if he is half-black and half-white, do we call him the first black president? Is he not the first biracial president? Comedian Wanda Sykes’s (2009) joke during an Obama roast at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner touches a nerve: he is the first black president, she claimed, unless he screws up. “Then it’s going to be, ‘What’s up with the half-white guy, huh? Who voted for the mulatto, what the hell?’” (para. 6).<sup>7</sup>

Other questions about his identity persist. Did he renounce his U.S. citizenship for Indonesian citizenship? Does he have dual citizenship? Is he even an American, as the group called the “Birthers” continues to ask, as they call for the public release of his birth certificate from Hawaii, which they claim does not exist. As comedian and critic Bill Maher (2009) wrote in an op-ed piece in the *Los Angeles Times*, “There’s nothing anyone can do to convince these folks. You could hand them, in person, the original birth certificate and have a video of Obama emerging from the womb with Don Ho singing in the background,” and they still wouldn’t believe it (para. 5). That same Bill Maher often refers to Obama as “the chocolate Jesus” on his HBO series, and indeed many do see him as a messiah or savior. On the other hand, in a recent poll of New Jersey residents, 8% thought that Obama is literally the anti-Christ, while 13% were simply unsure (Public Policy Polling, para. 2). Lest this number shock, the fact is that before the poll came out, there were 1,330,000 entries on Google for a search using “Obama” and “Antichrist” (since the poll, there are 10 times more). A similar search using “Obama” and “Savior” was winning with 1,690,000 entries: one of those sites contained another pendulum swing in its title: “Barack Obama: Savior or Freakin’ Moron?” (Eisenberg, 2009).<sup>8</sup>

As Obama has questioned and undoubtedly to some degree still questions his identity (if we accept Jung’s [CW 8] proposition that our complexes never vanish entirely), the country does the same. In fact, in the very memoir that explores his identity complex, Obama wrote in the introduction, “Some people have a hard time taking me at face value,” when they find out that he had a white mother (2004, p. xv). “I see the split-second adjustments they have to make, the searching of my eyes for some telltale sign. They no longer know who I am” (p. xv). In 2004, he wrote, “I don’t fault people their suspicions” (p. xv). In 2006, he wrote, “I am new

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enough on the national political scene that I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views” (p. 11). What would he write now? It seems improbable that Barack Obama could have imagined the extreme suspicions and projections—the Anti-Christ?—that he would be facing in 2009.

Todd Gitlan, a professor of communication and sociology, wrote, “Mythically . . . Obama is elusive, Protean, a shape-shifter who, when not beloved, arouses suspicion” (2008, para. 10). To this mythos Gitlan added “the quintessential outsider,” “part city-slicker, part man of the world,” and the Lone Ranger, though “closer in color to Tonto” (para. 9). Since I have been following him after he stepped upon the stage in his electrifying 2004 speech at the Democratic National Convention, I have heard him referred to as the Professor, the Geek, the Sex Symbol, the Rock Star, the Renegade, the Dreamer, and a host of other archetypal roles. Obama added one, calling himself “an outlier” (2006, p. 18). Gitlan wrote, “Personifying a welter of archetypes, he thrills some, confounds others and jams circuits. Some people ask, ‘Who is this guy?’” (para. 11).

Published before the election, Gitlan’s article concluded, “No wonder this race is thrilling and tense. America is struggling to fasten a name on its soul” (2008, para. 12). I would assert that Obama’s presidency is just as thrilling and tense because having him in the White House, a wounded leader with an identity complex, gives us the opportunity not just to project the question “Who is he?” but also to reflect upon the question “Who are we?” This is not Martin Luther King’s America anymore, but if it is Barack Obama’s America and we do not know who he is, then who are we? How will he lead us through our profound complex with our collective identity? As Gitlan noted,

Obama is the new kid on the block, the immigrant’s child, the recruit, fervent but still preternaturally calm, embodying some complicated future that we haven’t yet mapped, let alone experienced. He is impure—the walking, talking melting pot in person. In his person, the next America is still taking shape. (para. 11)

It is too early to know what effect his leadership will ultimately have, and the ways in which he will shape and smooth the rough, unfinished sides of America’s soul, but the chance for Obama and the country to work through a measure of its identity complex is certainly a psychological possibility. To return to Romanyhsyn, the complex wound is both “the obstacle and the pathway into the unfinished business in the soul. . . .” We have seen how Obama’s identity complex is an obstacle, but the question remains: how will it be a pathway—and to where? If his ascendancy to the presidency is not evidence of a postracial or transracial America,

a more united United States of America, will it lead us there or at least point the direction?

Let me return to Jung's quotation that opened this article: "A political, social, philosophical, and religious conflict of unprecedented proportions has split the consciousness of our age," he wrote (1959, p. 108). Jung asserted that during times of split consciousness, the tension of opposites would seek relief and reconciliation through "a uniting symbol" (p. 108). If Obama can literally hold the tension of opposites within him, he could become our nation's transcendent function, moving us closer to a transracial America and helping to heal our split consciousness. He could become the living embodiment of our yet unrealized motto, *e pluribus unum*, "out of the many, one." That he is uniquely qualified to do so is acknowledged by Obama himself, who wrote that his personal history "has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts—that out of many, we are truly one" (2008a, p. 217).

In fact, one of his most memorable lines was delivered at the 2004 Democratic National Convention: "There is not a Black America and White America and Latino America and Asian America—there's the United States of America" (2004, p. 451). Reflecting on how many people have referred to this line in subsequent years, he noted,

In a sense, I have no choice but to believe in this vision of America. As the child of a black man and a white woman, someone who was born in the racial melting pot of Hawaii, with a sister who's half Indonesian but who's usually mistaken for Mexican or Puerto Rican, and a brother-in-law and niece of Chinese descent, with some blood relatives who resemble Margaret Thatcher and others who could pass for Bernie Mac, so that family get-togethers over Christmas take on the appearance of a U.N. General Assembly meeting, I've never had the option of restricting my loyalties on the basis of race, or measuring my worth on the basis of tribe. (2006, p. 231)

That 2004 speech, with its vision of a truly united America, is generally credited with catapulting Obama straight into the next presidential election queue. He rode that theme all the way to victory. After he had won the New Hampshire primary, he gave a speech in which he said,

We will remember that there is something happening in America: that we are not as divided as our politics suggests; that we are one people; we are one nation; and together, we will begin the next great chapter in America's story with three words that will ring from coast to coast; from sea to shining sea. Yes. We. Can. (2008c, p. 213)

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The story is still unfolding; we are just a few pages into the next chapter, and it is unclear whether we can, whether we will, work through a significant portion of our collective identity complex as a nation under the leadership of this man who knows firsthand the wounds of a personal identity complex, in the same way that we worked through a significant portion of our collective guilt complex 50 years earlier under the leadership of a man who knew firsthand the wounds of a personal guilt complex. The psychological possibility exists for the United States of America to cultivate the content of her character through a more conscious relationship with the content of her complexes, and those she chooses to carry those complexes for her.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that King's autobiography was not written entirely by King. Eminent King scholar Clayborne Carson, the editor of the King Papers Project out of Stanford University, pieced together the autobiography from various texts written or spoken by King, and at times Carson connected those texts with material of his own. Therefore, King did not choose to open his autobiography with this incident, Carson did, though it is written by King and is still to my knowledge the earliest traumatic image King offers anywhere.

<sup>2</sup> One might assume that King's earliest traumas were with racism, given his subsequent leadership on the issue, but he was relatively sheltered from racism as well, growing up in a primarily African-American community. In the autobiography, he does recount some traumatic experiences with racism in his youth, but they came later than this experience with economic injustice. In this light, it is interesting to note that while King, of course, felt that racial inequality was unjust, by the end of his life he had come to believe that economic injustice was a worse injustice, as it was the architect of racial inequality. That he was assassinated while protesting economic injustice perpetrated on sanitation workers in Memphis brings home the point that wounding experiences of economic injustice framed his life. See Selig (2007) for further discussion.

<sup>3</sup> King had read Jung in college. In one essay King wrote, he stated that he had a "certain predilection" for Jung and Adler over Freud and Watson (1950/1992, p. 358). In particular, he referenced *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (Jung, 1955) several times in sermons and writings, both the passage mentioned above in addition to the well-known passage that problems of midlife are ultimately spiritual ones.

<sup>4</sup> King often conflates the terms “guilt” and “shame,” but there is a distinction. If we consider guilt and shame as feelings, the simplest distinction is that guilt is the feeling that one *has done* something wrong, while shame is the feeling that one *is* bad or wrong. Thus it is possible to feel guilty without feeling shame, if one does not identify with the act itself. King wrestled all his life with this distinction between *doing* and *being*, and though he paid frequent lip service to condemning the sin (which implies judging the action as wrong) but not condemning the sinner (which implies not judging the actor as inherently bad or wrong), we will see in the paragraphs below that he either uses the terms interchangeably or sees a causal relationship between them. That is, when we acknowledge our guilt, we feel shame, or when we feel shame, it can awaken us to our guilt. Thus shame is so entangled in his guilt complex (and arguably, by extension, in Christianity itself) that I will make no further attempt in this essay to disentangle them.

<sup>5</sup> See Shelby Steele’s 2007 book *White Guilt: How Blacks & Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era* for his astute analysis of how black innocence and white guilt have played themselves out in the last 50 years.

<sup>6</sup> The website [www.asksam.com](http://www.asksam.com) contains a searchable database of over 200 Obama speeches between 2002 and 2009. The word “guilt” does not appear in any speech.

<sup>7</sup> Obama refers to himself as African-American or black; in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) he describes himself as “a black man of mixed heritage” (p. 10). I wish I had time to explore his choice *not* to call himself biracial, and what implications this might have for his, and our, identity complex when it comes to race; I’ll simply raise the question here.

<sup>8</sup> King faced some similar questions about his identity during his lifetime, especially questions about whether he was a communist, a socialist, or a Marxist, whether he was an Uncle Tom or a black radical, and whether he was a black savior or a black devil. Perhaps all leaders in extremely divisive times face such questions from their divided constituency. Regardless, I would note that in my study of King, I don’t believe he was a man with an identity complex, even though there were questions about his identity; in similar fashion, I would assert that Obama does not have a guilt complex, even though he questions his own guilt as a sometimes-absent father. In neither man does the affective charge seem to rise high enough to cross into complex territory (Jung, 1969).