**'We Are the Ones We've Been Waiting For': Community Development, Collective Identity and Agency in the Age of Obama**

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**Introduction**
It is tempting perhaps to look back with twenty-twenty vision to see how clear the path was for Barack Obama to secure his historic victory in the 2008 US Presidential election. As a Washington outsider, a bi-racial African-American man and as a centre-left politician operating during a neoconservative and neoliberal historical moment, the former Illinois senator's Presidential campaign did at first appear to be based more on hope than grounded in reality. However, Obama's campaign managed to tap into a changing political mood in the United States. With an unpopular war in Iraq, an even more unpopular Bush Presidency, the world financial crisis and with the persistence of unresolved domestic problems related to healthcare and education, the Obama campaign seemed to emerge at just the right moment in time to capture and distil a transformation in the American zeitgeist. However, what remains unclear is how the Obama campaign was able to reflect and respond to this changing political sentiment among the American public.

Using a post-structuralist discourse analysis methodology, I will analyse the key ideas, language and social practices of Obama's 2008 Presidential campaign in order to understand how the discourse of the campaign constructs collective identity and agency among the public. Whilst it is indeed the case that the campaign was responding to a change in the popular political mood and public policy priorities, I shall argue that the discourse of the campaign constructs specific identities of both Obama and the public which (re)produce a collective mood for change. By constructing the public (rather than the campaign) as active agents for change, the Obama campaign helped to fuel the desire and social practices for change in the political establishment. Understanding how the campaign constructs the identities of Obama and the voting public is crucial for community development in the US and the UK. Despite its rhetoric, community development often constructs highly problematic identities in which the public are constituted as a passive object rather than an active agent for change. Learning lessons about how the Obama campaign constructs collective identity may help community development transform these problematic discursive practices in relation to local people. In this paper I will begin by briefly discussing my post-structuralist discourse analysis methodology. I will then move on to discuss three key concepts of the campaign's discourse and analyse the links to identity construction and agency. I will conclude by arguing for a new approach to the discourse and social practices of community development in the US and the UK.

**Post-structuralist Approaches to Discourse Analysis**
Discourse analysis (DA) is the study of language-in-use; it is the examination of the process by which humans create meaning (Wetherell et al 2001; Taylor et al 2001). In the context of DA, 'human meaning-making' takes the form of communication either through text or talk. DA, however, is a contested methodology because it is an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the sociology of communication, the representation of individual and group identity and the organisation of social relationships (Van Dijk 1993, Schegloff 1997; Billig 1999; Wetherell 2001; Taylor et al 2001). Depending on how the concept of 'discourse' is defined within DA, this particular methodological

framework can range from being an examination of a decontextualised slice of text from a conversation to a genealogical history of a given field of knowledge. Post-structuralist discourse analysis (PDA) is a form of interpretative DA. For PDA, 'discourse' is defined very broadly. Discourse is reality—nothing exists outside our socially constructed systems of meaning. That is not to assert that material objects do not exist, but to argue that the meaning of objects shift depending on a subject's location in a specific social and historical context. Thus the goal of a PDA methodology is to examine how discourse is structured and (re)produced through text and talk and to understand the implications of these structures for the identities of subjects (Hansen 2006).

PDA research methods are about understanding the formation and structure of discourse in relation to specific historical developments and examining the interplay between discursive formations and the constitution of identities. For the purposes of my research, I have adopted Hansen's (2006) approach to PDA methodology. Hansen argues that PDA is the process of understanding how identities are constructed and reproduced through the systematic selection and rigorous analysis of texts. Understanding identity construction is a three-pronged process of analysing discourse, dominant and oppositional practices within and between discourses and the construction of the Self and the Other across time, in space and in relation to the ethical responsibility within particular discourses.

Rigorous text selection and analysis is the linchpin for effective discourse analysis. For the purposes of my research, I have defined 'texts' as the speeches Obama gave over the course of his presidential campaign. I analysed these texts by operationalising Hansen's three-pronged framework: I identified a basic discourse in the texts, I analysed antagonisms and contradictions within the discourse and I examined how the Self and the Other are constructed. It is important to emphasise that my analysis of texts was iterative: I was 'looking for patterns in the data but not entirely sure what these [patterns would] look like or what their significance [would] be' (Taylor 2001, p.38). I read and re-read texts looking for patterns in language and identities in order to interpret meaning in the discourse of the Obama campaign.

With my methodology and method explained, I will turn to my analysis of the discourse of the Obama campaign.

**The 'Hope Discourse': Constructing Collective Identity and Agency**
The 'Hope discourse' is constituted by the texts, language and social practices of the Obama campaign. I have chosen to label the discursive practices of the campaign the 'Hope discourse' because I think this effectively captures the nature of collective identity and agency among the public the campaign was seeking to construct:

> We all made this journey for a reason [to attend the launch of Obama's presidential campaign]. It's humbling but in my heart I know that you didn't come here just for me, you came here because you believe in what this country can be…In the face of a politics that's shut you out,

that's told you settle, that divided us for too long, you believe we can be one people reaching for what's possible, building that more perfect union (Obama 10 February 2007, p.1).

It is important to note at this stage how the idea of 'hope' is used as a mobilisation device for the construction of collective identity and agency. As I shall argue later in this paper, 'hope' is not a signifier ascribed to Obama as the presidential candidate but is instead constructed as a crucial characteristic that the public requires in order to take action to affect change in the American political system. Thus hope is the source for the public's agency and efficacy.

The Hope discourse is structured by three key concepts: the existence of a shared purpose/common dreams among the public, the necessity of active and reciprocal citizenship and the requirement for a majoritarian and intersectional form of progressive politics. I shall discuss these three concepts in turn. Firstly, the discourse's foundational concept is the insistence on the existence of a shared purpose and common dreams among all Americans. The discourse uses the American Dream—the belief in equality of opportunity for the pursuit of happiness—as a way of constructing a sense of unity among the public. For example Obama states:

> I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together—unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place but we all want to move in the same direction—towards a better future for our children and grandchildren (Obama 18 March 2008, p.2).

By operationalising the collective myth and the collective history that the American Dream signifies, the Hope discourse seeks to unite the public around an uncontroversial and patriotic collective subject position. Importantly, Obama also seeks to position himself within this patriotic collective subject position of the American Dream:

> I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me and that in no other country on earth, is my story even possible (Obama 24 July 2004, p.1).

It seems that Obama constructs himself as the personification of the American Dream. By mapping the story of his father—Kenyan student—and his mother—an ordinary woman from Kansas—onto the myth of the American Dream, Obama is seeking to make himself less 'exotic' by showing the ordinariness of his bi-racial identity and unusual upbringing whilst at the same time demonstrating how his journey to the White House was made possible by the unique American project of the American Dream.

By seeking to mobilise the American Dream as a unifying device for the public, the Hope discourse seeks to contextualise the public's common

dreams in the space of a new kind of social relations. In order to achieve collective and individual self-interest that the American Dream makes possible, the Hope discourse constructs a new, active, engaged and social citizenship for the public:

> That's why this campaign can't only be about me. It must be about us—it must be about what we can do together. This campaign must be the occasion, the vehicle, of your hopes, and your dreams…This campaign has to be about reclaiming the meaning of citizenship, restoring our sense of common purpose and realising that few obstacles can withstand the power of millions of voices calling for change (Obama 10 February 2007, p.3).

In order to realise a shared vision, the Hope discourse seeks to place a new moral obligation onto American citizenship. The public must 'stand in relations of equality to each other' (Anderson 1999, p.3). That in order to ensure one's own self-interest one needs to support other people's equality of opportunity. Thus American citizenship is not solely about the individual pursuit of happiness but about building a sense of agency, efficacy and solidarity among and between citizens in order to achieve the individual and common dream of equality of opportunity.

> It's that fundamental belief—I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper—That makes this country work. It's what allows us to pursue our individual dreams, yet still come together as a single American family…Out of many, one (Obama 24 July 2004, p.3).

It seems that the discourse is constructing this new form of citizenship as necessitating a different kind of social and political power based not on a zero-sum gain but on deliberation, compromise and the recognition of difference:

> Democrats, Independents and Republications who are tired of the division and distraction that has clouded Washington, who know that we can disagree without being disagreeable…who challenge ourselves to reach for something better, [know] there is no problem we cannot solve, there is no destiny that we cannot fulfil…The reason our campaign has always been different…is because it's not just about what I will do as president. It is also about what you, the people who love this country, the citizens of the United States of America, can do to change it (Obama 8 January 2008, p.3).

Again, we can see how constructing a collective identity is central to the Hope discourse. The driver for this collective identity is the shared value of the American Dream and the way of achieving this common dream is building a new type of citizenship and politics that is rooted in the collective and reciprocal obligations of social citizenship.

The Hope discourse's notion of social citizenship is dependent on a particular practice of politics. The discourse constructs as a necessity, a form of political

strategy and goal, rooted in an Alinskyist tradition of American community organising: majoritarian and intersectional politics. The discourse constructs itself as majoritarian because the campaign's social practices are focused on building a broad-based constituency which is multi-racial and multi-class and issues are defined in such a way as to have broad-based appeal among the public. For example:

> There's something happening when people vote not just for the party they belong to but the hopes that they hold in common. And whether we are rich or poor, black or white, Latino or Asian…we are ready to take this country in a fundamentally new direction. You can be the new majority who can lead this nation out of a long political darkness…We can do this with our new majority (Obama 8 January 2008, p.2).

Interesting, this language interpells the discourse and social practices of the type of community organising work in which Obama was involved in the 1980s in Chicago's Southside. For comparison purposes, here is a quotation from a leading proponent of majoritarian community organising in the 1980s:

> ACORN [Association of Community Organisations for Reform Now] has a line: rather than organising around racism, we involved our members in campaigns that affect all low and moderate income people, building solidarity…Our people have common problems and they try to help one another, not kick them in butt because they're black or Catholic or something (Delgado 1986, p.193).

There is a tension in the discourse as it attempts to construct itself as a space for intersectional politics. On the one hand, the discourse seeks to unite citizens by interpelling the collective myth of the American Dream. Thus on one level the discourse is seeking to construct a kind of politics that resists particularity because a focus on minority self-interest may undermine collective solidarity.  For instance:

> We're…up against forces that…feed the habits that prevent us from being who we want to be as a nation…A politics that tells us that we have think, act and even vote within the confines of the categories that supposedly define us. The assumption that young people are apathetic…The assumption that the wealthy care nothing for the poor and that the poor don't vote. The assumption that African-Americans can't support the white candidate; whites can't support the African-American candidate; blacks and Latinos can't come together (Obama 26 January 2008, p.2).

However, on the other hand, the discourse is attempting to create space for the recognition of difference in identity and history in terms of recognising specific struggles based on race, class and gender. Importantly, the Hope discourse does not construct these struggles as 'identity politics' but instead defines them as fundamentally American problems that must be recognised and solved in the space of reciprocal social citizenship and majoritarian politics:

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> For we have a choice in this country. We can accept a politics that breeds division, and conflict and cynicism…or at this moment…we can come together and say 'Not this time'. This time we want to talk about the crumbling schools that are stealing the future of black children and white children and Asian children and Hispanic children and Native American children…This time we want to talk about how the lines in the Emergency Room are filled with whites and blacks and Hispanics who do not have health care…This time we want to talk about the fact that the real problem is not that someone who doesn't look like you might take your job; it's that the corporation you work for will ship it overseas for nothing more than a profit (Obama 18 March 2008, p.10).

The discourse defines the specific claim-making of particular identity groups within a broader collective claim-making about the failure of the American Dream to deliver for the majority of people—regardless of identity. Thus in order to struggle for particular self-interests, the public must construct these interests within a broader narrative of reciprocity, the recognition of Others and a common dream of equality of opportunity for all.

Because the Hope discourse seeks to unify the public by mobilising the American Dream, by reframing the nature and purpose of citizenship and by subsuming minority self-interests into a broader majoritarian politics, it constructs an interesting relational form of identity between the Self and the Other. The Self in this discourse is 'Obama the candidate'. Obama partially constructs himself, as I have previously argued, by mapping his personal history onto the myth of the American Dream. More importantly, however, is that Obama constructs himself as a facilitator for the public's hopes, dreams and aspirations. For instance, after his decisive victory in the South Carolina primary Obama (8 January 2008, p.2) states:

> We know that real leadership is about candour and judgement and the ability to rally Americans from all walks of life around a common purpose—a higher purpose.

Obama constructs himself as facilitator-leader, an identity that brings people together so they can recognise each others' differences in order to jointly pursue their common dreams. This pattern of constructing the Self as a facilitator-leader is also evident in Obama's (10 February 2007, p.4) launch of his campaign:

> By ourselves, this change will not happen. Divided we are bound to fail…That's why I'm in this race. Not just to hold an office but to gather with you to transform a nation…I want us to take up the unfinished business of perfecting our union and building a better America.

This emphasis on facilitation-as-leadership is important because I think the Self as constructed in the Hope discourse is always seeking to be invoked in the context of and in relation to a collective identity. The Self in the Hope discourse does not stand alone; Obama does not construct himself as a 'Great Man of History' but as a facilitator of a shared vision of America:

> My own American story…hasn't made me the most conventional candidate. But it is a story that has seared into my genetic make-up the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts—that out of many, we are truly one (Obama 18 March 2008, p.2).

This construction of the Self as a facilitator has important implications for the public Other. As I have already discussed, the Other in this discourse is constructed as a unified collective sharing common dreams for the future. More importantly, however, the discourse constructs the public as active agents for change. Indeed, it seems to me that the distinctive feature of the Hope discourse is the construction of collective agency among the public. For example:

> Change will not come if we wait for some other person or if we wait for some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change we seek…We are the hope of the future, the answer to the cynics who tell us our house must stand divided, that we cannot come together, that we cannot remake this world as it should be (Obama 6 February 2008, p.4).

An overlooked feature of the Hope discourse is its use of the concept of 'hope'. Commentators usually focus on the strategic ambiguity of the term so that people can map their own meanings onto the concept (for example see Bligh and Kohles 2009). However, I think this misses a crucial point; 'hope' is constructed as a code word for collective agency and efficacy in the discourse. Hope is the catalyst for the practice of social and political change linked to the new form of social citizenship and majoritarian and intersectional politics I discussed above. In the discourse, hope serves as a motivating precondition for transformative action:

> Hope is not blind optimism…It's not ignoring the enormity of the tasks ahead or the roadblocks that stand in our path. It's not sitting on the sidelines and shirking from a fight. Hope is that thing inside us that insists, despite all of the evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us if we have the courage to reach for it, and work for it and to fight for it (Obama 3 January 2008, p.3).

The implications for these types of identity constructions are clear. The Self in the Hope discourse is not the only identity invested with agency; this subject position is always consciously invoked in relation to and in solidarity with the public Other. The role of the Self is constructed as a facilitator of the unity of the Other. The Other is also invested with agency; it is not a passive object to be acted upon by the Self. The Other is constructed as a collective subject position with shared dreams which are a motivator for effective collective action to change the current political landscape. Understanding these identity constructions in the Hope discourse is crucial to contemporary community development theory and practice. In this final section, I shall discuss what community development discourses in the US and the UK can learn from the Hope discourse of the Obama campaign.

**Community Development and the Problem of Collective Agency**

My standpoint in this paper is that of a critical friend to the theory and practice of community development. I define community development as a political and social process of collective education and action to achieve self-determination and social justice for marginalised groups. In my recent work on community development, my research findings demonstrate that community development is a highly problematic discourse and social practice because it (re)produces unequal and undemocratic identity constructions (for a detailed discussion of this see: Emejulu forthcoming 2009a and Emejulu forthcoming 2009b). Based on my analysis, it seems that community development is embedded with a number of a priori assumptions, conventions and myths that perhaps distract from a more considered discussion of identity and related social practices. In community development texts, it is taken for granted that community development is an emancipatory process in which the interests of local people are championed (Ledwith 2005; Checkoway 2009). It is assumed that community development professionals are always on the side of the 'marginalised' working against a disempowering institutional status quo (Shaw 2008).

However, my recent research findings have problematised these assumptions and that rather than community development being a transformative process of progressive social change, oftentimes it is a process of professionals subjecting local people to patronising and undemocratic ideas, language and practices. I think that many theorists and practitioners have been looking in the wrong direction when they critique a given community development praxis and propose a new approach (for example see: Henderson and Thomas 2000; Ledwith 2005; Dominelli 2006; Butcher et al 2007; Shaw 2008; Defilipis, Fisher and Shragge 2009). Through my analysis of texts, it seems that these theorists and practitioners have been over-concerned with the promotion of a right and proper definition of key concepts (such as 'community development', 'the community', 'power') but they have neglected the construction of identities and the related social practices which they perhaps unintentionally (re)produce.

As my recent research has shown, community development appears to be predicated on highly problematic identity constructions (Emejulu forthcoming 2009a). In a range canonical, classic and contemporary texts, the community development professional Self is constructed as an active agent whilst the local people Other is constructed as a passive and oftentimes incorrigible object to be acted upon by the professional Self. What this means is that local people are often misrecognised in key community development texts and I argue that this can lead to dubious social practices within a given community development process. Local people are often misrecognised in three different ways in community development texts dating from 1968 onwards. Firstly, local people's interests and identities are often homogenised whereby issues of gender/race/class/disability/sexuality are ignored or downplayed in texts. Returning to my example of majoritarian community organising discussed earlier in relation to Obama's experience in 1980s Chicago, this form of community development was a reaction against the left-wing radicalism of the 1960s. A key practice of this tradition of community development was to

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consciously avoid politically divisive issues related to identity and the recognition of difference:

> We don't cut issues racially where that isn't relevant. There's no point constructing rhetorical enemies who cannot be defeated. Short of race warfare, black people cannot triumph over whites; but whites and blacks can win against real estate agencies…Winning is what is important in organising, it's almost an obsession (Campbell and Friedman 1978 quoted in Delgado 1986, p.194).

It is only in the early to mid-1990s that community development in both the US and the UK began to consistently construct local people as diverse and heterogeneous:

> Instead of having a unitary view of the working class which is based on an outdated view of white, male, workers engaged in heavy, manual work, the emphasis needs to be on the way in which class position is mediated by geographical location, sexuality, age, race and gender (Meagher and Tett 1996, p.131)

Secondly, local people are often constructed as confused and bewildered by the process of rapid social, political and economic change. In the classic text which created the profession of community work in the UK, the Gulbenkian Foundation (1968, p.14) constructs local people in this way:

> The demand that those who use services should have a say in their operation is often nullified by growth in size and complexity which makes it less and less possible for the man in the street to exercise an informed judgement about such matters…To press people to assume responsibilities beyond their powers creates disillusionment; but it is essential that they should exercise these capacities up to the limit if local democracy is to have meaning.

Finally, local people are often constructed as incapable of deliberating and making complex political choices and decisions about their lives. Local people are thus described by Saul Alinksy (1971, p.18-9) in his canonical text as:

> Chained together by the common misery of poverty…ignorance, political impotence and despair…They are a mass of cold ashes of resignation and fatalism but inside there are glowing embers of hope which can be fanned by the building of means of obtaining power.

The community development professional, in contrast to these problematic constructions of local people, is constructed as capable, rational and (sometimes) visionary. For example in the American community economic development tradition, professionals are described as such:

> The work of development activists [is of] mastering skills in social administration—in budgeting, personnel management, negotiations…It

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is through skills in these technical matters that community-based development organisations are enabled to do the projects that renew hope and empower those within poor communities (Rubin 1997, p.86).

The work of professionals has also been described in an influential community development text like this: 'Community work…is engaged in liberating the minds and encouraging and supporting the actions of the disadvantaged' (Popple 1994, p.33-4).

This pattern of constructing local people as passive and the professionals as active repeats itself in key community development texts from 1968 onwards. As we can see in the above quotations, to sustain the construction of the professional Self as a subject with agency, this necessitates the construction of a passive subject position for local people. As a result, the Self creates a perpetual justification for the domination of the Other; the domination of the Self is inextricably linked with the undemocratic and disempowering construction of a hapless and passive Other. That this binary construction exists and persists in community development discourses from 1968 to at least 2000 in both the US and the UK and that this binary is evident in various antagonistic discourses that span left-wing and right-wing political thought is very troubling. The persistence of these binaries in community development problematises the main assumptions and founding myths on which community development is based. According to my analysis, community development does not seem to be able to support and facilitate the agency of local people; nor does it seem able to construct local people based on respect and equality in relation to the professional Self. Community development, in many ways, can be seen as a dubious social practice of imposing unequal and disrespectful identities and relationships on local people—in the name of the self-determination of these very people.

For community development to regain a sense of legitimacy it needs to engage seriously in the process of reconstructing the relational identities of the 'professional' and 'local people'. Learning the lessons from the Hope discourse of the Obama presidential campaign is an important first step. Part of this task is about reconceptualising the constitution of the Self and the Other. As my analysis and interpretation of the Hope discourse has shown, this discourse attempts to avoid clear distinctions between the identity of the Self and the Other; the Hope discourse deconstructs, displaces and decentres the dominant binary construction of Self/Other. In the place of the usual Self/Other (professional/local people or candidate/public), the Hope discourse constructs a new binary of us/them: those politicians, media opinion-shapers, institutional actors or local people who do not value a unified, active, reciprocal social citizenship and majoritarian/intersectional politics are constructed as the Other.

Displacing the Self/Other professional/local people binary is a significant challenge to community development for a number of reasons. Firstly, part of the identity of a 'professional' is to be an authority who has access to exclusive knowledge and belongs to a closed group that controls access to this knowledge. Thus to displace the binary requires a fundamental

redefinition of what it means to be a 'professional' in a community development field of practice. Secondly, further empirical and theoretical work needs to take place in order for community development to have the ability to recognise the Other and thus construct local people in equal, respectful and democratic ways. Indeed, as I discuss in my recent research, the fixation that community development has with constructing the Self to the detriment of the Other is surprising. Local people themselves need to be directly involved in this process of identity construction so that differences among local people can be recognised and so that the subject position of 'local people' can be one constituted by collective agency.

## Conclusions

Using a post-structuralist discourse analysis methodology, I have analysed the language and social practices of the Hope discourse which is constituted by texts and social practices of Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. I argued that the Hope discourse seeks to unify the public by mobilising the myth of the American Dream and then seeks to build solidarity among the public by subsuming the pursuit of individual self-interest into a wider politics of reciprocal collective social citizenship. Because the Hope discourse seeks to construct relational identities of the Self and the Other based on equality and collective agency, I argued that the discourses of community development in the US and the UK can learn important lessons from the Hope discourse. For community development to maintain its relevance and legitimacy, practitioners and theorists will need to treat seriously the challenge of identity construction and consider how community development can be transformed into a practice which is based on democracy, equality and respect. Meeting this challenge will require drawing on innovative discursive repertoires—as we have seen with the Hope discourse—in order to reconstruct the dominant modes of being within contemporary community development theory and practice.

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