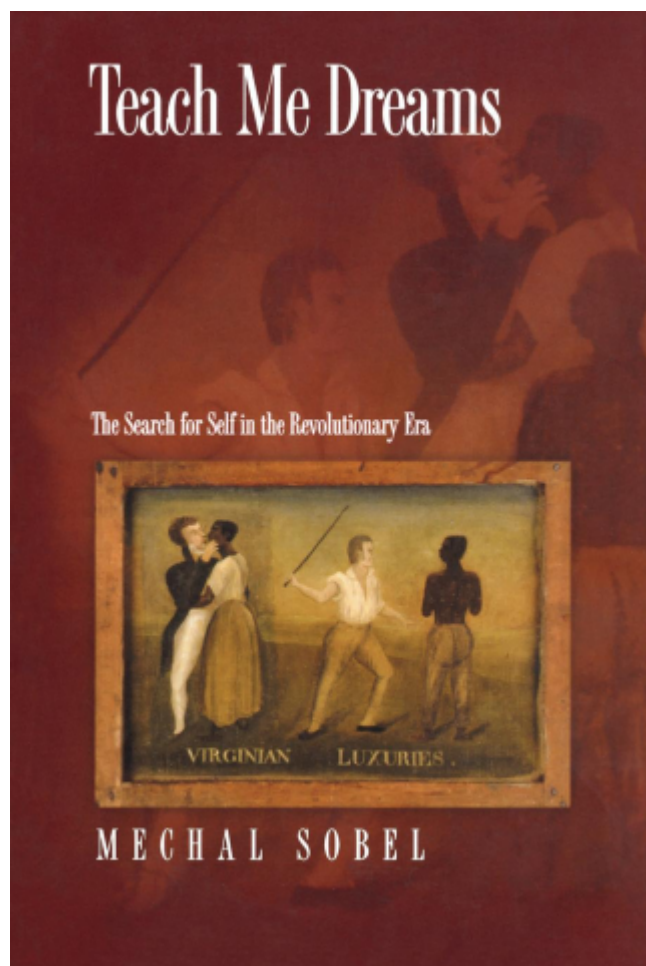


Searching for Self



During the opening years of the American Revolution, a young white Methodist convert from Maryland underwent an amazing transformation of self. Freeborn Garrettson experienced a “series of disturbing dreams and visions” that launched a process of radical self-transformation. Preaching to an African American audience, “he heard the voice of God telling him, ‘You must let the oppressed go free.’” He immediately freed his own slaves. At risk of his own safety, he opposed the War of Independence, feeling that he “should not ‘have any hand in shedding human blood.’” He was even guided by his dreams “to renege on a marriage proposal . . . so that he would be free to devote his life to preaching the word” (79-80). Garrettson “emerged from this time of inner turmoil and outer conflict with slave owners, Revolutionary mobs, and the temptation of a sexual and family life as a recognized leader in the new Methodist Church” dedicating “all his time and all of his self to oppressed people, black and white” (80). He had responded to God’s command “by freeing both his own slaves *and himself.*”

Garrettson’s remarkable experiences are but one of the many stories of self-fashioning that *Teach Me Dreams* explores. This important work looks at the changing relations between self and society in Anglo-America during the

"Greater Revolutionary era" of 1740 to 1840. As in her other works, Sobel remains concerned with the interconnections between white and black—the hatred and affection, envy and appropriation that permeated relations between Euro-Americans and African Americans. *Teach Me Dreams* is based upon some two hundred life narratives written by Americans from all walks of life. Landon Carter, Elizabeth Ashbridge, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass find their place in these pages alongside William Grimes, Solomon Mack, Maria Stewart, and K. White.

Sobel draws upon several schools of psychoanalytic thought, including both object relations and self psychology theory, to explain the shift in self that she identifies with this pivotal period. From the permeable, communal "we-self" of the early modern era, Americans moved to a more "interior," individuated sense of self. The autobiographies reflect this change, in which lives formerly narrated as "a random string of events" were now infused with "a dramatic pattern" (1-2, 18). Individuals internalized an "enemy" or "alien other" as an important part of this process of individuation. Disavowed attributes of the self might be split off and located in the other (defined respectively as black or white, female or male). Such projections might then be reincorporated or introjected into the self in a more acceptable form. Dreams offered an important venue in which individuals could experience these disavowed parts. Both the extraordinary attention to dreaming in Revolutionary America and the interest in autobiographical reflection would prove to be important arenas (Foucauldian "technologies of the self") in which individuals might engage with their "alien others" in a transforming way (11-15). "Both Africans and Europeans began developing in opposition to each other—those whom they would 'not be'—however, this process actually made them dependent on their oppositional others" (4). Sobel explores this process of othering, both *consciously* and (most originally) *unconsciously* through a series of four chapters, each of which focuses on a different side of the two key dyadic relations she identifies: white/black, male/female. She ends her book with a lengthy coda in which she explores changes in the life cycle, new attitudes towards death, the development of gendered spheres for the nineteenth-century middle and upper classes, and, most important, an increasing rejection of dream experience. By the mid-nineteenth century, as Abraham Lincoln noted, dreams, dream interpretation, and the search for self in dreams were regarded as "very foolish," and had all been relegated to the province of "old women" or youngsters "in love" (240-41).

Sobel's book is notable in turning our attention back to a topic too long thought off limits to historians: the psychological origins of race and racism. She connects this hot-button issue to the formation of the modern, individuated self that would become the hallmark of modern capitalism, also a notable development of the early nineteenth century. As she nears the end of her story, she cautions, "by relating to their dreams . . . a wide spectrum of the population had become reconnected with disassociated parts of their selves. As dreams were increasingly ignored, these aspects became more alien and more dangerous, and selves began to develop in more polarized and menacing

directions." In a perceptive twist, she notes that this rejection of "'the world of dreams' . . . ostensibly because of the growth of rationality," unleashed a sadly modern racist and sexist "irrational hatred of the other" (241).

Readers either unfamiliar with or skeptical of psychoanalytic interpretations may find Sobel's work to be somewhat tough going. She makes few concessions to the lay reader, dropping analytic concepts ("projection," "introjection," "extractive introjection," "repression," "unconscious guilt") into her narrative with the sparest explanations of the analytic thought that informs each one. She scants other, more familiar modes of inquiry in favor of her psychological model. I longed for a fuller exploration of the autobiographical genre and its literary precedents, as well as for explanation of the commercial demand for and reader reception of the published life narratives. Such an exploration would have helped build a better historical context in which to allow the reader to credit or discount these highly refined sources. Indeed, both the structure of the narratives and the dreams retold therein were products of extensive secondary revision (another basic psychoanalytic concept) through which the true intentions of the dreamer's or narrator's unconscious were disguised and distorted.

Psychoanalytically inclined readers may have different reactions to Sobel's analysis. While her readings of dreams are often fruitful, why did she shy away from reading the complete narratives psychoanalytically? To do so would require massive in-depth research into the narrators' lives, although it might have been better to trade breadth for depth in order to uncover the multi-determined nature of character formation known to clinicians. Puzzling too is her privileging of race and gender over the other dyad that permeates analytic literature: that of nurturer and infant. One could, and should, argue that relations between black and white, male and female are often intertwined with this defining self-other relationship in the infant's experience. Yet Sobel privileges the relationship between black and white, declaring it "the defining self-other relationship for most of the narrators in this study and [one which] has remained central in American culture since that time" (6). Analysts and historians alike would doubtless agree that such an exclusive focus overlooks much critically important historical, regional, temporal, domestic, and cultural complexity in the American experience.

Still, despite its flaws, this is a brave and welcome addition to the literatures of both early American history and American cultural studies. Sobel has worked hard to teach us these dreams. She uses them as new and deeper sources of historical evidence, uncovering their pivotal role for Americans (especially evangelical Americans like Freeborn Garrettson) in the wake of the Revolution. Such texts served as sources of reassurance, edification, and inspiration for individual narrators and for their countless readers, and, in Sobel's hands, they bring a fresh message to modern readers as well.

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