



**Downing, Antonio Michael. (2021). Saga Boy: My Life of Blackness and Becoming.
New York: Viking Press.**

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Antonio Michael Downing's book, "Saga Boy: My Life of Blackness and Becoming", is a memoir of a black Trinidadian's experience immigrating to Canada and his self-discovery towards his black identity and self. Downing's story is about overcoming abandonment and trauma while navigating Canada to discover himself and his identity. A significant element of Downing's becoming was family ties, particularly his bond with his Grandmother and parents. Music was fundamental to Downing's development during his harrowing trials and tribulations. Downing continually sought a feeling of belonging, which aided in developing his quest for identity. Downing was also a victim of generational trauma in the form of Saga Boy, in which he attempted to escape his legacy. For Downing to finally find his identity, he must accept himself and overcome his adversities.

Relationships with family members are essential to Downing's journey in Canada and discovery of himself. Although he did not realize it initially, his Grandmother influenced and shaped his life through "her resilience, her songs, her wisdom, and her unquenchable spirit," which Downing held on to throughout his life (p. 257). When his Grandmother passed away, his entire world altered in terms of geography and familial connections. Despite the problematic treks of his

life, Downing constantly found his way back to his Grandmother's words and lessons to get him out of the darkness. Miss Excellly had taught him two things that would help him survive: how to read and how to sing (p. 151). Although these two gifts were significant, the greatest gift she gave him was unconditional love, which became scarce once she passed away.

Downing's relationship with his parents contributed significantly to his becoming and adjusting to a new life. In Trinidad, Downing fantasized about his absent father and learned about him through stories in his village. However, when his father took him in, he only cared for the government checks he received for caring for him and the narcotics he could buy with them (p. 144). On the other hand, his mother only treated him like her son when it suited and benefited her. His parents were a significant contributor to his becoming because he decided to forgive them despite his resentment towards them for never being the parents he needed. He forgave them because they also had been abandoned by their parents and were simply the product of their parents.

Music is another aspect that has shaped Downing's becoming and adjustment to Canadian life. Downing learned his love for music from his Grandmother, Miss Excellly, who would teach him religious hymns. Music was the one thing that provided him peace throughout his neglectful experience living with his father since it allowed him to escape to a different world. When Downing performed as Mic Dainjah on stage, he experienced catharsis while performing and "vanished into a place with no father, no mother, no corporate bosses" (p. 228). Through performance, he was able to forget himself and his perpetual worries. This shaped Downing's becoming through the fantasy he cultivated that helped him cope with his distressing realities.

Downing used music not only as an escape from life but also as a method of connecting with his Grandmother, father, and brothers. During Downing's period in Trinidad, he connected with his Grandmother through hymns and stories. This connection allowed Downing to go "into her sacred place and bathed [him] in her profound peacefulness" (p. 27). Downing also bonded with his brothers through music, which they would listen to together and "sing along as if [their] lives depended on it" (p. 183). Not only did music bond Downing with his brothers, but it also connected him and his brothers to their absent father. Through music, their father "was what connected [them], what made [them] one, and this was the closest thing [they] had to being with him" (p. 184). These connections through music helped develop Downing's identity through the complexity in which music brought him solace.

A sense of belonging and identity is a significant aspect of Downing's journey in adapting to Canada and discovering himself. During Downing's childhood, he "always knew where he belonged" amongst his peers and family (p. 114). In Trinidad, Downing earned praise for being academically intelligent compared to his peers. Everything changed once he immigrated to Canada and became the only black child amongst his peers. Not only did Downing become a minority, but he also went from being a "smart kid" to becoming the "class dunce" (p. 117). These changes are integral to Downing's sense of belonging and identity because everything he remembered as a child changed once he entered a new continent, leaving him feeling like an outcast.

Downing's sense of belonging and identity also aligns with his passion for performing and taking on different roles. From a young age, Downing enjoyed imitating people and continued doing this in various forms during adulthood. He enjoyed this because he "could be anything [he]

wanted to” to his heart’s desire without fearing judgment (p. 66). This hobby developed into a passion for performance, and he believed that through performing on stage, he “would be special” and loved by all (p. 137). Downing explains not feeling “black enough for the whites” and not “black enough for the blacks” in terms of his passion that does not fit into the stereotype of black people (p. 156). Downing describes his need to belong as being “hungry to prove that [he] belonged” and “hungry to feel like [he] fit in” (p. 179). Downing’s weak sense of belonging derives from his lack of familial support and adjusting to a new world where he does not fit into a particular group.

Generational trauma is an additional element that affects Downing’s growth and becoming towards his black identity. Downing’s inheritance of his generation’s trauma relates to the term *Saga Boy*. Like his father and his grandfather, they had gained a reputation for being “resilient, spiritually devout, and a little mentally unstable” (p. 43). Downing and his brothers would bond over their father’s taste in music and life, inevitably leading them to become like him (p. 260). The reason for this generational trauma emerged from generations of “absent fathers” and “children scattered” that led to them becoming like their own fathers (p. 291).

When Downing was young, he had painted a different image of his father and aspired to become like him. Once Downing saw his father’s true colours, he swore to himself that he would “never end up like him” and become “something else” instead (p. 193). Downing’s inheritance for violence from his father was evident when Downing punched his girlfriend, the same way his father’s violence originated from “a vengeful thing that lived inside him” (p. 147). However, Downing escaped from his inheritance and took a different path from his father when he reflected

upon himself and realized he could be better. Downing did not want his Grandmother's strength in raising him to be in vain by becoming a "jailbird" like his father (p.251).

Self-acceptance is the most necessary step towards Downing's becoming while navigating life in Canada. Downing would give himself different names corresponding to his environment and point in life. He went by Tony in Trinidad, Michael while working corporate, Mic Dainjah when touring England, and John Orpheus in his boldest form(p. 2). The purpose of creating all these personas was to escape his reality and insecurities by pretending to be someone else. Downing relates these different identities and personas to "wanting to be anyone but [himself]" (p. 264). However, after his revelation of needing to become himself without a persona, he could accept himself for who he was (p. 321).

Although self-acceptance is the most important step towards Downing's becoming, it was hindered by his trauma. Downing's trauma comes from being sexually abused by his neighbour's son and brother. Although Downing tried to forget this, his trauma did not disappear by ignoring it; instead, it grew larger on his avoidance (p. 299). Downing used personas to hide from himself and forget his trauma, but it was music and writing that saved him (p. 297). Downing was able to overcome this trauma by letting go of himself and his shame; only then did he feel less lonely (p. 298). Being John was Downing's way of forgetting his trauma; however, after getting rid of John, he was liberated from the burdens of his past (p. 321).

Downing's book was well-written and had no limitations or identifiable problems. Downing's descriptions of different landscapes and settings were so vivid that I could visualize these settings as the book progressed. Downing's writing was also emotionally evoking due to the

rawness of emotions during stirring events. Some fields that may find this book helpful are sociology and psychology, which specialize in family and childhood. I found “Saga Boy: My Life of Blackness and Becoming” heart-wrenching, engaging, descriptive, and ultimately captivating. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in an emotional journey and the hardships of being a black immigrant.