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Dreams From My Father *A Story of Race and Inheritance*

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The title of this first book by Barack Obama is perfectly descriptive. The book is about race, and it is about inheritance. As for structure and use of language, the book is skillfully written, and Mr. Obama's storytelling skills are impressive. The narrative runs along in a well-oiled rhythm that keeps the reader engaged. But the prism through which Mr. Obama views racial issues is noticeably distorted in numerous places in his book.

On the very first page, for example, there appears a verse from the Old Testament of the Bible:

"For we are strangers before them, and sojourners, as were all our fathers." – I Chronicles 29:15

Upon reading it, I noticed the verse is inaccurately quoted – whether intentionally, or out of ignorance, I can't say.

In Scripture, the verse reads, *"we are strangers before Thee..."* It does not read before *them*, as we see printed on the first page of Obama's book. I would guess that many readers will conclude that the idea Obama is conveying through the [mis]use of the verse is that members on minority races have been "strangers" and "sojourners" in this nation – in other words, never *fully* American.

Those who are familiar with the verse will understand that the Biblical context is the consecration of the plans and the great stores of treasure – both from royal treasury and from the gifts of King David's subjects = for the building of the ancient temple of Solomon. King David acknowledges the gifts and the spirit of joy in which they were given. Then, in order to put the grandeur of the moment in its proper context, King David prays, *"Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is thine; thine is the Kingdom, O Lord, and thou are exalted as head above all...For all things come from thee, and of thy own have we given thee. For we are strangers before Thee, and sojourners, as all our fathers were..."*

Without question, this first book by Barack Obama is as absorbing as any fiction this writer has read in some time. It is revealing, as well; at times I wondered if Obama would unveil as much about himself if he were to write the book today. One has only to open the book and read the verse from *Chronicles* that appears on the very first page to sense that Obama is a man still in conflict with the history of blacks in America. Throughout the book, I had the uneasy sense that Barack Obama may be one of many in America today who will not allow the past to be buried in order to move into the future.

Most of this book deals with Obama's protracted personal struggle over his mixed race. His mother, a white girl originally from Kansas, met Obama's father, a Kenyan (also named Barack Obama), while the two were students at the University of Hawaii. They married and little Barack was born to them early in their marriage. But Barack's father left him and his mother behind to continue his studies at Harvard when the boy was only two years old. The marriage ended, and Barack's mother later married an Indonesian man – a Muslim. Barack and his mother moved to Indonesia; but after a few years, Barack's mother concluded that her son's opportunities would be greater in the United States. She sent him to Hawaii, where he lived with his grandparents (later, with his mother) during the elementary school years and during the years he attended the elite Punahou prep school in Hawaii. After graduating from Columbia University in 1983, Obama worked at a corporate job for a brief period, then as a community organizer with low-income residents on Chicago's South Side. He obtained his law degree from Harvard in 1991.

Toward the end of the book, Obama writes of his travel to Africa as an adult. There, for the first time, he meets with the extensive African family he has never known; and through them, he comes to know the father (now dead) that he had largely idealized and constructed in his own mind as a bridge to his own identity. His only personal contact with his father had been a one-month period when his father came to visit Barack and his mother in Hawaii when Barack was ten years old. Obama also learned a good deal about his Muslim grandfather, Onyango, a near-legendary man with a proud, austere, and independent nature, husband of four women and father of many offspring.

Obama's embrace of his Kenyan heritage after the long period of alienation from his black roots is understandable – but it seemed problematic to me, in light of the fact that Obama now seeks to lead the most powerful nation on earth – and whose loyalties seem not to reside in the “traditions passed from generation to generation” in these United States, but rather, with the traditions that forged his African lineage.

The personal conflict over his racially mixed heritage is expressed in subtle (and at times, not-so-subtle) ways throughout the narrative. Where one would expect to find expressions of affection for his white family, there is a curious detachment – a seeming reluctance to lay claim to that side of his family. This is especially noticeable, given that it was such a small and close family unit that committed to caring for and raising the child when his father left him behind. One senses that Obama was never comfortable with the fact that it was his mother's side – his white family – who raised him, loved him, and launched him into the wider world with high expectations and heartfelt dreams for his success.

Only a few brief and impersonal acknowledgments of sacrifices made on his behalf (especially by his grandmother) show up in the narrative of Obama's life.

Following is a collage of snapshots from one period in Barack's memory, projected onto the wide screen of his narrative like black and white images scanned from a family album belonging to someone else:

“Without a college education, she [grandmother] had started out as a secretary to help defray the costs of my unexpected birth. But she had a quick mind, and sound judgment, and the capacity for sustained work. Slowly she had risen, playing by the rules, until she reached the threshold where competence didn't suffice [for advancement]. There she would stay, for twenty years...”

“Toot didn't complain. Every morning, she woke up at five a.m. and changed from the frowzy muu-muus she wore around the apartment into a tailored suit and high-heeled pumps. Her face powdered, her hips girdled, her thinning hair bolstered, she would board the six-thirty bus to arrive at her downtown office before anyone else...she rarely mentioned hopes or regrets.... ‘As long as you kids do well, Bar,’ she would say more than once, ‘that's all that really matters.’”

The passages that reveal Obama's conflict over his mixed lineage also show a thinly veiled contempt for whites. At times, when he and his black “brothers” (as he describes them) were engaged in disparaging conversations about the way “white folks will do you,” the conflicted Obama would remember his mother's smile, and an uncomfortable guilt would arise in him.

So young Obama gathered up books from the library – Baldwin, Ellison, Hughes, Wright, DuBois. “In every page of every book...I kept finding the same anguish, the same doubt; a self-contempt that neither irony nor intellect seemed able to deflect...Only Malcolm X's autobiography seemed to offer something different...And yet, even as I imagined myself following Malcom's call, one line in the book stayed me. He spoke of a wish he'd once had, the wish that the white blood that ran through him, there by an act of violence, might somehow be expunged...I knew that traveling down the road to self-respect my own white blood would never recede into mere abstraction. I was left to wonder what else I would be severing *if* and *when* [emphasis added] I left my mother and my grandparents at some uncharted border.”

In one passage, Obama reveals a relational strategy that he devised as a young man – a strategy that he perhaps finds useful even today, as the schisms in his racial and political identities continue to surface:

“One day, she [mother] marched into my room, wanting to know the details of Pablo's arrest [Pablo was a friend of Barack]. I had given her a reassuring smile and patted her hand and told her not to worry, I wouldn't do anything stupid. It was usually an effective tactic, another one of those tricks I had learned: People were satisfied so long as you were courteous and smiled and made no sudden moves. They were more than satisfied; they were relieved – such a pleasant surprise to find a well-mannered young black man who didn't seem angry all the time.”

During his visit to Africa as a young man, Barack saw the tourists there (Germans, Japanese, British, Americans) as “an encroachment...I found their innocence vaguely insulting. It occurred to me that in their utter lack of self-consciousness, they were expressing a freedom that neither Auma [his sister] nor I could ever experience, a bedrock confidence in their own parochialism, a confidence reserved for those born into *imperial cultures*” (emphasis added).

But having finally connected with his African roots, Obama is still unsettled. He ruminates about the plight of a black waiter in an outdoor café at the New Stanley Hotel in Nairobi. The man waited attentively on an American family seated near Obama and his sister; but he seemed resentful when Obama and Auma began to register their impatience with the man's lack of enthusiasm in serving them. He writes,

“Maybe a part of him still clings to the stories of Mau-Mau, the same part of him that remembers the hush of a village night or the sound of his mother grinding corn under a stone pallet. Something in him still says that the white man's ways are not his ways, that the objects he may use every day are not of his making. He remembers a time, a way of imaging himself, that he leaves only at his peril...He can't escape the grip of his memories. And so he straddles two worlds, uncertain in each, always off balance, playing whichever game staves off the bottomless poverty, careful to let his anger vent itself only on those in the same condition. A voice says to him yes, changes have come, the old ways lie

broken, and you must find a way as fast as you can feed your belly and stop the white man from laughing at you. A voice says *no, you will sooner burn the earth to the ground.*”

Were it not for the fact that Obama seeks the Presidency of the United States, this pilgrimage to identify – through the years of his youth, adolescence, and his long-delayed connection with his African roots – would simply be an interesting and well-written narrative of one man’s journey. He comments that his wife, Michelle, worries that he is “something of a dreamer.” I would agree. No doubt, that trait adds significantly to both his ability as a writer, and his ability to compel the attention of his political audiences on the stump. But there is a vast and important difference, I believe, between a dreamer and a visionary.

In the final analysis, no-one – not even a great storyteller – can conceal for long who he really is. And one has to wonder how a man who claims to be a “uniter,” yet has given expression to such troubling conflicts over race, could ever aspire to lead a nation as racially divided as the United States is at this time.