

MIXED-RACE INDIVIDUALS' IDENTITY DILEMMA IN DREAMS FROM MY FATHER: A STORY OF RACE AND INHERITANCE

Moïse KONATE

Ecole Normale Supérieure d'Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire

moisekonate@yahoo.fr

Résumé

La centralité de la question raciale dans Dreams from My Father : A Story of Race and Inheritance en fait une œuvre autobiographique unique, du fait de la nature même et de l'expérience particulière de son auteur, Barack Obama. Ce livre permet en effet une analyse factuelle de la construction identitaire d'une catégorie raciale souvent occultée lors de l'étude des interactions et tensions raciales entre blancs et noirs, à savoir les métis. Le présent article vient donc apporter sa contribution à la compréhension des luttes internes que vivent certains membres de cette catégorie raciale et qui les emmènent à refuser de s'identifier à la race noire comme normativement établi par la majorité blanche dans le contexte multiracial américain. Pour ce faire, l'argumentaire ici aura pour socle la Théorie Critique de la Race telle que conçue par les écrivains Alan Freeman, Richard Delgado, Derrick Bell et certains activistes dans les années 1970 pour son apport dans la compréhension des effets du racisme vécu par les minorités au quotidien. L'article démontrera que les métis Américains sont engagés dans une quête identitaire dont l'issue ne dépend pas seulement des convictions personnelles forgées au fil des années mais aussi et surtout de facteurs exogènes qui les obligent à se déterminer dans la société américaine multiraciale.

Mots-clés : Race, métis, dilemme, identité, Etats-Unis d'Amérique

Summary

The centrality of the question of race in Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance makes it a unique autobiographical work, due to the very nature and special experience of its author, Barack Obama. This book indeed allows a factual analysis of the identity construction of a racial category that is often overlooked when studies are carried out on racial interactions and tensions between Whites and Blacks, namely mixed-race individuals. This article therefore contributes to the understanding of the internal struggles experienced by certain members of this racial category and which lead them to refuse to identify with the black race as normatively established by the white majority in the American multiracial context. To do so, argumentation will be based on the Critical Race Theory as conceived by such writers as Alan Freeman, Richard Delgado, Derrick Bell and some activists in the 1970s for its contribution to the understanding of the effects of racism experienced by minorities in everyday life. The article will demonstrate that mix-raced Americans are engaged in a quest for identity; a quest whose outcome depends not only on personal convictions forged over the years but also and above all on exogenous factors that force them to determine themselves in the multiracial American society.

Keywords: Race, mixed-race, dilemma, identity, United States of America

Introduction

In 1952 came out Frantz Fanon's book *Black Skin, White Masks*, under its original title *Peau noire, masques blancs*. A psychological, political and social reflection on colonialism and its consequences, this essay exposes the dehumanizing rapport that white colonizers, and by extension the white community as a whole, had established with the Blacks on the basis of their supposed inferiority and incapacity to make decisions for their own social elevation. This essay also decries the fear, desperation, and complex of inferiority that have been instilled in the black man and woman and that have all participated in altering the vision they have of themselves. But the book does not stop at this simple analysis. It goes on to encourage Blacks to not integrate the stereotypes that the white population in general wants to pin on them but rather revolt in order to assert their humanity.

Obama's autobiographical book *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* resonates with Fanon's essay in its articulations around the issue of race. Their approach is indeed similar as it is based on their own experiences and reflections over the type of interaction that they believe should exist between people, regardless of their race. Like Franz Fanon, Barack Obama shares in his book his reflection over this sensitive topic in multiracial societies. As a mixed-race person, his experience however, goes beyond the realities that have pushed Fanon to write *Black Skin, White Masks*. It is indeed true that though mixed-race people –identified by Obama himself as brown on page 23 in contrast to his black father– are unavoidably designated as being black in predominantly white countries like France and the United States, to name only these two, they have a different racial experience than a person who is exclusively black or white. Their understanding and analysis of racially-connected events and discourses can thus be markedly different from the two other races listed above. This is particularly pertinent when one's experience, like Barack Obama's, is the sum of everyday realities lived on such diverse continents as Africa, America, Europe and Asia.

The present article intends to expose and analyze the experience of the mixed-race characters that *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* presents. It specifically seeks to show that race is, for the

mixed-race individuals depicted in the novel, an unsteady construct that evolves with time and context. To do so, instances representing the dilemma they find themselves in on account of their skin color will be extracted and examined. This study will also call on the Critical Race Theory to expose the conditions that have pushed the characters to build the racial identity they believe is theirs in the novel. It will be divided into three main parts. The first will present the importance of the issue of race in the United States. The second will be devoted to presenting and analyzing who the mixed-race characters in the novel say they are and the last will be an analysis of how the author himself sees his own identity and how he reflects on the ones of his characters.

1. American racism denounced

The question of identity that mixed-race people in the United States have lived with since the early days of slavery has one root: the racial stratification that has eventually begotten racism. That is why the title *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* speaks for itself. Indeed, it indicates that the author has willingly decided to expose his experience with this delicate issue of race that has been part of his life since his early childhood. But beyond this evident fact, this title speaks in multiple ways to the reader by indicating, implicitly, that race has always been central to the life of the writer and has, just with its evocation, mainly been a difficult matter in his journey. The articulation of the whole book over the centrality of race demands an analysis that exposes the consequences of racism on the different characters of the novel. Thus, argumentations will be sustained by the tenets of the Critical Race Theory, a subpart of African-American literary criticism that has emerged in the 1920s and was initiated by such movements as the Black Arts Movement and the Harlem Renaissance. Calling on such a literary theory is indeed unescapable because *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* is a book that resonates with the experience that black people live daily in the United States. It is an experience whose violence leaves no one unchanged, particularly the members of the black community who have undergone the torments of slavery not so long ago.

The wording of the title of Barack Obama's autobiography is also indicative of the will of its author to embrace the storyline that most of the spokespersons of the cause of the Blacks often use in their writings. A quick look to the titles of most autobiographies produced by white writers, in contrast, permits to see that they do not mention the hardship they have gone through, let alone discriminations that they might have faced because of the color of their skin. Mark Twain's memoirs are simply entitled *Autobiography of Mark Twain*. Benjamin Franklin wrote his and simply entitled it *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. Many more, such as the ones written by Agatha Christie or Andre Agassi, to name only these two, do not bear any mark that can connect them to any type of rejection based on race. In fact, these authors have not lived any traumatic experience on account of their race and have, as a consequence, not had any reason for mentioning it. Richard Wright and Maya Angelou have. And the intensity of their personal experience with racism has in a way compelled them to address this issue right from the start with the first lines they laid on their autobiographies. The first entitled his *Black Boy* while the second called hers *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. These two titles share some similarities with *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* in that they automatically translate a certain form of pain linked to the skin color of their writers.

Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance also tells us indirectly that its author's experience is but a portion of all the experiences that nonwhite people have been living in the United States. It is thus just one story among the many that can be told across the country. And though it does not clearly state the difficult problem that racism is for a part of the American population, namely African Americans and, by extension, the other minority groups in the country, it is an invitation to look at the racial problem and to address it. In this respect, and "given the ubiquity of the effects of racial politics in the United States, 'the writerly imagination of a black author is at some level,' as Toni Morrison contends, 'always conscious of representing one's own race (*Playing*, xii; original emphasis). This condition marks the text, even in those instances in which the text is not otherwise racially designated" (Tate, 1998: 10). Here, the reader is told right from the start that he or she is going to embark on the racial journey that has

been the author's and his different characters, even though the title does not specifically indicate that the story will revolve specifically around that of the disastrous effects of racism and all forms of racial discrimination on Blacks.

This voyage starts with an admission of failure hidden behind the optimistic tone of the author when he declares that he believes his story “might speak in some ways to the fissures of race” (Obama, 2004: vii) that have for too long kept the different races of the country separated. Through the use of this turn of speech that appears to be a call on the white majority to understand the harm and pain that nonwhite populations –and Blacks in particular– have endured for centuries, the author is thus showing a form of skepticism in the possibility for racism to end. This sentence also comes as an established fact that confirms, right from the start, that racism is the number one problem that stains the image of the United State of America and that can ultimately lead to its demise. And even though the tone used here is very diplomatic as it does not denounce in a direct way the violence of this system that has and still is breaking the lives of so many Blacks in the United States, it does not blur Obama's underlying intention to draw the attention of the reader onto such a serious subject. This is by the way an issue that the Critical Race Theory is concerned with as this literary criticism tool “examines the ways in which details of our everyday lives are related to race, though we may not realize it, and studies the complex beliefs that underlie what seems to be our simple, commonplace assumptions about race in order to show us where and how racism still thrives in its ‘undercover’ existence” (Tyson, 2006: 368-369).

This “undercover existence” of racism is evoked on page 27 of *Dreams from my Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* with the realization by the author, and at an early age, of how dominant the issue of race was. When he marks his surprise by saying that “I was too young to know that I need a race,” he introduces the reader to this burning topic in a metaphorical way. Indeed, presented as a commodity that one can purchase at a mall or a grocery store, the objectification of race is a metaphor that unveils the vacuity of the importance accorded to the skin color in a country where so many races are somehow forced to interact with one another. Needing a color at a moment in a person's life indicates that the person subjected to such a choice has now left the

period of innocence to enter another one where conscious choice have to be made. This period that does not depend on the age of the individual but rather on circumstances is therefore not predictable or foreseeable, as the author seemed to have been caught off guard when he lived this life-changing experience. Nevertheless, it seems to be an imposed constant for the members of minority groups in an overwhelmingly white United States of America. It is a fact and a fate that the members of these groups cannot escape. This rupture is often lived when the person faces racism for the first time or is given an account on the type of relationship that exists between the different races of the American racial landscape. This is what is exemplified by James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time* when he confirms this already established fact and fate by telling his namesake that “you were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason” (1993: 7).

Blacks are not treated any better today since these lines were written by James Baldwin. Years and decades have passed but they have not brought any equality between races in the country. Even the innumerable fights and demonstrations that have taken place in the streets, schools, and different courts of the country have not totally erased the hatred that many Whites have for their black fellow citizens. Even the fact of “winning in white areas as well as black, in the suburbs as well as Chicago” (Obama, 2004: viii) that filled the author of hope for a better future in race relations in the country did not convince him that racism would now be a thing of the past. Actually, a series of events pushed him to ask this question that most Africans who are about to go to this country or who, like myself a few years ago when I went for my graduate studies, ask themselves: “Has racism disappeared” (Obama, 2004: 21)? To this question, the author responds with tact, even though his answers make no room for any doubt about the reality of this phenomenon. He asks himself for example “how could America send men into space and still keep its black citizens in bondage” (Obama, 2004: 22)? He then presents at length on page 182 the recrimination of a black man towards the oppression they live as a community in the hands of the Whites. To cap it all, he presents the despair of black children who are denied a decent living on page 177

and admits the despicable attitude of some Whites towards Blacks on page 302 where he mentions “white people’s scorn.”

In fact, the book tells us that racism is so widespread and so active that it has, in a way, transformed the members of the minorities, with a much more disastrous impact on African Americans. After having undergone decades of mistreatments of all sorts, Blacks have indeed developed in response a wide array of mental disorders that are affecting their lives. Some have for example lost confidence in themselves to the point that they always feel that they need the approval of the white for any action they undertake. This case is exemplified on page 197 by the words of Rafiq when he admitted that “I’d soaked up all the poison the white man feeds us. See, the folks you’re working with got the same problem, even though they don’t realize it yet. They spend half they live worrying about what white folks think. Start blaming themselves for the shit they see every day, thinking they can’t do no better till the white man decides they all right.” This attitude is corroborated by science. In his article entitled *Critical race theory speaks to the sociology of mental health problems produced by racial stratification* Tony Brown has indeed evidenced that “the seeking of white approval and assimilation to white norms and behaviors (deracination) is a feature distinguishing anti-self-issues as a mental health problem. Because being white is consistently constructed as better than being black, anti-self-issues likely occur as blacks attempt to manage and maintain positive feelings about their racial identity” (2003: 296). But these deviances, as depicted in vivid words by Barack Obama, are not the result of sporadic events. They are planned and executed by the white majority as black children are forced to learn about the very culture that rejects them. One of his characters even said out loud what many think to themselves, that is, that schools are all about “social control for blacks” (Obama, 2004: 258). What is sure is that “racial stratification produces mental health problems to the extent it generates stressful circumstances and cognitive states conducive to emotional distress” (Brown, 2003: 295). This could explain for example why Blacks sometimes seem to be ridiculing themselves in attitudes that push whites to mock them and continue to tag them as “a bunch of niggers,” as *Dream from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* reveals on page 246.

Is all the misconduct noticed in the black population connected to the effects of racism? Certainly not! It would be too reductive to draw such a conclusion and condone many of the wrongdoings perpetrated by the members of this community. But when they have been discriminated to the point that they have built certainties that “the airforce would never let a black man fly a plane” (Obama, 2004: 254) and that “life will never be easy in the US for blacks” (Obama, 2004: 284), it is hard to know the part of their personality that is directly affected by the dehumanizing racial experiences they have lived and the one that pertains to their own responsibility. It is also true that many observers could attribute this fatalism that seems to be endemic in the black community to their lack of courage, as some of their members succeed in making it all the way to the top of the social ladder like Barack Obama did when he was elected Senator. But even after having achieved this remarkable feat and testified that “within the black community, there was a sense of pride regarding my accomplishment,” he immediately indicated that this was “a pride mingled with frustration” (Obama, 2004: viii-xi). The reason was “that fifty years after Brown v. Board of Education and forty years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, we should still be celebrating the possibility [...] that I might be the sole African American –and only the third since Reconstruction– to serve in the Senate” (Obama, 2004: xi). These words expressed in the preface of his book evidence the fact that many dreams have been shattered because of the lack of equal opportunities for all. Thus, the frustration lived in the African American community is understandable and the Whites should, as a consequence, stop asking themselves “why black people were so angry all the time” (Obama, 2004: 211).

2. Am I who I say I am or who they say I am?

It is important to note however that beyond the apparent anger or lack of motivation and even fatalism that is observed in some members of the black community in the United States of America the self-hate that many have developed as a result of the endemic racism in the country is the most destructive side-effect of this discriminatory system. The reason is that it touches the very core of these individuals, that is, their

identity. As a result, some have literally decided to put on white masks, as Frantz Fanon's essay demonstrates. This assertion simply means that though they are genetically, anthropologically and sociologically associated with the blacks, as their melanin can testify, they reject all social codes that relate them to this specific race. Such a rejection has been evidenced by research that has come to the conclusion that these "blacks feel estranged from their racial selves and seek to escape from their blackness and, by corollary, any connection to other blacks" (Brown, 2003: 296). Consequently, "a black person suffering from [these] anti-self-issues might: (1) wish that he or she was white, (2) hate being black, (3) lighten her or his skin, (4) try to act white to feel better about himself or herself, or (5) pray that she or he could be reborn white" (Brown, 2003: 296-297).

All these self-hate characteristics are described in some of the characters of *Dream from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. In the second paragraph of page 30, a man who had tried to change his complexion "to pass himself off as a white" is presented. And though he showed regret for his act, what he did is not an isolated fact. Actually, the book indicates that lightening their complexion has become a normality for many as "there were thousands of people like him, black men and women [...] back in America who'd undergone the same treatment in response to advertisements that promised happiness as a white person" (Obama, 2004: 30). This is even more visible in the entertainment world where scores of celebrities are making use of very sophisticated treatments for achieving spectacular skin lightening effects. The case of the late Michael Jackson in the recent past is a vivid testimony of this trend that is only the continuation of practices that date back since slavery. Beyond the material fact of whitening their skin, these Blacks have psychologically integrated the beauty canons of the white world around them and do not want to associate with African Americans whose color is seen as the color of the "losers" (Obama, 2004: 100). Is the rejection of the black identity a response to these very Blacks who often say that the mixed-race are not black enough? Obama's novel does not give a clear response to this question. But it is known that the members of this interracial group sometimes face the harshest criticisms and discrimination in the midst of the race the Whites identify them with, that is, the Blacks. In *Crossing Black: Mixed-*

Race Identity in Modern American Fiction and Culture, Sika Dagbovie-Mullins gives a testimony that sheds light on this rejection. She writes that “I faced a conundrum that many mixed people face: the black community of those heady times [the late 1970s] told me that I’d better identify as black, but that I would never be black enough” (2013: 6). With this type of rejection, the mixed-race people find it hard to identify themselves with the African American community.

And yet, circumstances do not offer them much choices with the preeminence of the issue of race in public discourse. Sooner or later, each mixed-race individual will have to make his or her own introspection and take a position that might end up being different from his or her preconceived self-constructed race. Obama himself did not escape this unavoidable moment that forces mixed-race people to say who they think they are. When he indicates, like stated a few lines above, that he did not know he had to choose a race, he acknowledges and demonstrates that race is a constructed notion that each individual, and specifically mixed-race people, will consistently grapple with. The surprise Obama expressed when he faced this racial identification issue for the first time also shows that he did not make any difference between the races of his parents and the one that he believed he had prior to that critical moment. Consequently, he never saw any reason to question his. Of course, not all the mixed-race Americans live colorblind until they face such a traumatic experience. But what is certain is that they will all face, at certain moments of their life, situations that will at best make them consider this question or, in the most difficult cases, choose the race they think they belong to. Naomi Zack, in the preface and acknowledgments part of her book *Race and Mixed Race*, shared her own experience that exemplifies that race is not a stable construct for some members of this biracial group. First she starts by saying that “my father’s father had been born a slave in Virginia [...]. My father’s mother was from the Oklahoma-area Sioux. When I was sixteen, I thought of my father as a Negro. During most of my adult life I thought of him as black. Now I think of him as mixed race” (1993: xii). She then confesses that “I have always lived in racial ambiguity. I have resisted identification as black, Jewish (if Jews are a race), or white. My preference has been for people to accept me “as I am” (1993: xii). These words also resonate with the testimony of the

professional golf player Tiger Woods who refused to be associated with the African-American community and coined the word “Cablinasian” to define himself. Indeed, “In 1996, Oprah Winfrey, on her U.S. television show, asked Tiger Woods how he racially identified. He famously responded by saying he made up his own word, ‘Cablinasian,’ combining the words Caucasian, Black, Indian, and Asian” (LeiLani Nishime, 2012: 92). This, as events later showed, led to a violent reaction of the African-American community who felt betrayed by this sport icon they believed to be a positive representative of their race. The white community was also amused by his created identity.

As a matter of fact, accepting mixed-race people for what they are, that is, a third race could have ended their internal identity quest, and for some, their unending suffering. This is what Naomie Zack has evidenced when she says:

Since mixed race does not exist in a biracial system, individuals who are of mixed

race, or who would be if black and white racial categories had rational foundations,

have an interesting identity problem: Either they can create identities of mixed race for

themselves, in opposition to the biracial system, or they can eschew all racial

identities. This is an ambivalent position, in theory. In fact, Americans of mixed race

who acknowledge at least one black forebear are rarely permitted to identify?

themselves in any way except as black (1993: 6)

Thus, until laws are finally passed to include “a classification of ‘multiracial’ [to be] added to the United States census” (Spencer, 1997: xi) so as to firmly establish the presence of a third race, many mixed-race people will rebel against their categorization as Black and will try to assume the identity they believe suits them best. It is true that just passing laws to state their uniqueness in the racial landscape of the country will certainly not put an end to the rejection they sometimes live in the hands of the members of both the black and white communities but it will at least alleviate the identity struggle that they also live from within.

Interestingly, some mixed-race individuals succeed in passing as Whites because of the whiteness of their skin that makes it hard for them to be identified as having any black forebear. Obama's characters, such as Joyce on page 99 who refused to identify with the losers, are among these mixed-race Americans who are accepted among the Whites as long as they have not disclosed their kinship. Minelle Mahtani confirms this assertion in her article *Mixed Metaphors: Positioning 'Mixed Race' Identity* published in the collective book entitled *Situating: Critical Essays for Activists and Scholars* edited by Jo-Anne Lee and John Sulton Lutz. Indeed, she highlights the fact that "there are times when some [of the] participants [to her study on mixed race people] actively or passively veil or conceal their ethnicity for safety's sake, where covertness is enacted primarily as a survival strategy" (2005: 85). These "participants also explained that they employed particular furtive and covert strategies in order to move through spaces which might not be accessible to them if they proclaimed their ethnic allegiances aloud" (2005: 86). Obama, in *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, does not adopt such an attitude. He takes a stance for his black heritage, even though construction of his own identity has not been linear from the first pages of his book to its end.

3. Taking a stance for his race: Obama's racial identity

Analyzing Obama's vision of his own identity is a trip of its own. It is a sinuous path that goes from the shock he received when forced to choose a race on page 27 to his full statement of his blackness when in Kenya on page 311. It is also the affirmation of his mixed heritage at multiple occasions like what is evidenced by his own words on page 430 and then his realization that he is a black man, after all, at the end of his book. It is a voyage that ultimately leaves the reader doubtful about who the writer says he is, even though there seems to be a tendency on his part to assert his belonging to the black race. Prior to having to choose a race as a child on page 27, indeed, Obama gives the racial description of his family that shows he had not fully identified himself as Black, even though he did not state he was White. On page 23, he says: "With his black son-in-law and his brown grandson, Gramps had entered the space age." This statement, and particularly its

independent clause, is indicative of the presence of three distinct skin complexions and therefore three races in the same family: black, brown and white. And beyond the fact that none of these races seems to take precedence over the two others, the coexistence of all of them demonstrates that Obama is aware of the difference and uniqueness of each of them. It is this difference and the peculiarity that his family represented to most Americans that forced him to add that “gramps had entered the space age.”

Born to a white mother and surrounded and nurtured from childhood to adulthood by his white grandparents, Obama could have legitimately claimed the white race as his. But he never takes such a stance. Even at an early age, he knew he was different. He had full knowledge of the existence of his African father and could therefore not think of himself as being part of the white race. When he defines himself as a brown-skinned individual, he marks this difference that resonates also as a message to the American society that unavoidably linked any person born to at least one black parent to the black community instead of acknowledging the existence of this particular racial group and see it for what it is. The brown color that he said was his can therefore be interpreted as a rejection of the standards set by social norms that only divide the American people into two major races, that is, Blacks and Whites. In reality, Obama defines himself as a representative of that other race that has for so long been neglected by the authorities in charge of the American census over centuries; the race that many share because of the racial duality of their genitors.

All through the book, the writer asserts this mixed-race identity that appears to him as an asset that has the possibility to bring the two antagonistic races he is coming from together. He says: “As it was, I learned to slip back and forth between my black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language and culture and structures of meaning, convinced that with a bit of translation on my part the two worlds would eventually cohere” (Obama, 2004: 82).

Although Obama’s arguments as to the race he belongs to are well-articulated, his numerous moves back and forth between being brown and black, that is being part of both the white and black communities and finally asserting that he is fully black, confirm a tenet of the Critical Race Theory. This form of indecision puts to the fore its “social

construction' thesis [that] holds that race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient" (Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, 2011: 8). When in Kenya, Obama found these convenient circumstances that led him to affirm his blackness in an unequivocal way. "Here the world was black, and so you were just you, you could discover all those things that were unique to your life without living a lie or committing betrayal" (Obama, 2004: 311), he said. Had he ever betrayed this black race he is here heralding or even lied to himself about its true color? No part of his book permits to say it in a definite way. However, his incessant movements between these two racial groups could legitimately be ill interpreted by the members of both groups as a form of betrayal. Obama himself makes no mystery about his will to not be fully associated with a race, and therefore did not really follow his father's advice. The latter was indeed used to calling his son "Black man" (Obama, 2004: 222) and did not miss the opportunity to instruct him about who he really is when Obama finally decided to make the trip to Kenya, the country of origin of his father, as follows: "The important thing is that you know your people, and also that you know where you belong" (Obama, 2004: 114).

At times, the writer seems to fully abide by his father's words when he rejects for example on page 118 the name "Barry" that sounds like the Americanized form of his African-heritage name "Barack." Still, this injunction from his father did not appease the internal struggle that he is going through in a country where the issue of race is so central and where mixed-race individuals are forced into a racial group they do not necessarily identify with. "Where do I belong," is the existentialist question Obama asks himself after having pondered over the letter of his father asking him to know where he belongs. Starting from there, he makes it clear that this is no easy decision for him to make because of the very nature of the intricate racial situation circumstances have put him in. The monologue and reflection he have from page 114 to 115 on his identity are indicative of that torment he is living regarding where he truly belongs and who he really is. He says:

Know where you belong, he advised. He made it sound simple, like calling directory assistance.

“Information –what city, please?”

“Uh... I’m not sure. I was hoping you could tell me. The name’s Obama.

Where do I belong?”

[...] My conversation with Regina that night after the rally might have triggered a change in me, left me warm with good intentions. [...] Whatever my father might say, I knew it was too late to ever truly claim Africa as my home. And if I had come to understand myself as black American, and was understood as such, that understanding remained unanchored to place. What I needed was a community, I realized, a community that cut deeper than the common despair that black friends and I share when reading the latest crime statistics, or the high fives I might exchange on a basketball court. A place where I could put down stakes and test my commitments (Obama, 2004: 114-115).

The voyage to Kenya provided Obama with that community he had been longing for all through his identity quest. It came as a cathartic pilgrimage that finally convinced him, once back to the United States, of his blackness, even though he had not denied his white heritage. He finally understood that he is and will forever be a black man, just like the African Americans he calls his “brother” on page 438, that is to say, a few pages from the end of his book.

Conclusion

Dreams from my Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance provides an insight into the difficult question of race in the United States in our generation through the life experience of multiple characters of diverse races and particularly that of Barack Obama, its author. Not only does it shed light on the hardship that nonwhite populations in the country go through on a regular basis on account of their skin color but it also,

and in a remarkable way, presents the identity struggle that mixed-race Americans face in a racially-polarized America. Through the example of its author, indeed, the book shows how hard it is for mixed-race Americans to define themselves in a country that forces them to associate with the black community while their unique racial background appears to them as an opportunity to define themselves and determine who they think they are.

Obama's autobiographical work also brings more weight to the Critical Race Theory's major principles by showing that race, and therefore identity, is not a stable and definite concept but rather a notion that can evolve or be altered depending on the context each individual finds himself or herself in. In the specific case of Barack Obama, the different settings and family conditions he has experienced from his childhood and teenage years in both Hawaii and Indonesia to his first visit to Kenya where he bonded with his African roots and heritage have greatly shaped the identity, he affirms is now his towards the end of the novel, that is, his African American identity. His refusal to be seen as Black as he defined himself at many occasions as both Black and White, or simply as brown at the beginning of his book is therefore not to be seen as the denial of his black heritage as nowhere in the book has, he rejected his black African father. His multiple movements back and forth between him being both Black and White are just the evidence of the dilemma most mixed-race Americans find themselves in in an American society where the issue of race is and continue to be so central.

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