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For ALFRED HORNUNG

on his seventieth birthday

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A Kaleidoscope of Color or the Agony of Race?

Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*

Mita Banerjee

Barack Obama's autobiography *Dreams from My Father* reveals, like few other texts, a deep, nuanced and profound awareness of the multiplicity of differences and the interrelatedness of various differences and their context-specificity. What emerges in *Dreams from My Father* is an encyclopedia of difference, a kaleidoscope of differences, none of which can be subsumed by another. In this paper, I would like to read Barack Obama's autobiography *Dreams from My Father* as what I would call a kaleidoscope of difference. Like the colors in a kaleidoscope, each of these differences – race, class, religion, gender, degrees of enfranchisement – blends into another; with each twist in the kaleidoscope, each difference finds itself in the vicinity of another, to which it may previously have seemed unrelated.

The aim of this paper is to argue that it was owing to this kaleidoscopic vision that Obama succeeded in becoming the first black president of the United States, and that his presidency, tragically, turned out to prove United States society's reluctance to view difference as kaleidoscopic. The tragedy of Obama's presidency, especially in his second term in office, was the reluctance of United States social reality to conform to the vision of the kaleidoscope; it was a calamity, tout court, which revolved around the *untranslatability* of difference. In this failure, then, each difference claimed to be absolute, and claimed to be completely independent of, or even superior to, other differences. What had previously seemed or promised to be a kaleidoscope reverted to the stark differences of black and white.

My argument in this paper is structured as follows. First, I suggest that Obama's autobiography *Dreams from My Father* can be read as a kaleidoscopic or encyclopedic vision of the relativity and relationality of difference. Second, I suggest that this vision leads to an 'agony of race' since social reality is pervaded by the antagonism between racial groups, dismissing relationality. Third, I argue that Obama's vision is born out of a shift from an autobiographer's perception to that of a biographer: As a historian of the lives of others, he explores difference through the eyes of others, and is hence forced or enabled to see each person's difference as related to the difference of others. Difference hence becomes not an absolute, but a relative concept. This, of course, may be a contradiction in terms since difference always has to be assessed in relation to another concept; yet, what this means in the context of United States racial history, I would argue, is that each community may tend to elevate its difference over the difference of another community, thus fueling an antagonism of race.

"Amazing Grace" and the "Space Outside the Sentence"

When I started writing this paper in October 2016, little did I know that many of its passages would seem obsolete a mere month later. With Donald Trump as a president

elect, Obama's kaleidoscopic vision seems more utopian than ever, but it may also be more important than ever before. At the turn of a new year, 2017, Obama's kaleidoscopic vision has been termed, by the followers of what has been termed a 'whitelash' phenomenon, as what is now said to be the "farce" of political correctness. One of the aspects which this paper sets out to explore against the background of Obama's last days in office and the impending specter of Trump's ascendance to United States presidency, then, are two scenarios with which to convey United States race relations; two scenarios which are mutually exclusive: the color kaleidoscope of a black man whose "color", race, and ethnicity could not ultimately be contained, or the black-and-white vision of a country, half of whose population claims to have been "left behind" by a color kaleidoscope it was at a loss to comprehend (WILSON 2016).

It is in this setting that I would like to return to Obama's eulogy to Reverend Clementa Pinckney. It was in this context, the context of a country reverting to the stark contrasts of black and white, in which Obama was called upon by the African American community to show his colors following the death of Reverend Pinckney, who on 17 June 2015 was shot by a young white man whose aim was nothing short of inciting a race war. As an article in the New York Times states, "Mr. Obama joined with others paying tribute in stressing that the twenty-one-year old white man charged in the killings had failed to achieve his stated goal of inciting racial conflagration" (SACK/HARRIS 2015).

In the eyes of many who watched and witnessed Obama's eulogy to Reverend Pinckney, this was a historical moment. Some argued for Obama to take a stand *not* as a multi-ethnic, mixed-race president who could be claimed by any community of color, from black to Asian, but as a black man in a country whose race difference could not be contained in the prefabricated categories of United States race relations:

In one of his presidency's most impassioned reflections on race, President Obama eulogized the Rev. Clementa C. Pinckney on Friday by calling on the nation to emulate the grace that he displayed in his work and that the people of South Carolina demonstrated after the massacre of nine worshipers at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Before nearly 6,000 mourners and a worldwide television audience, Mr. Obama, who met Mr. Pinckney during his first presidential campaign, placed the shootings in the context of America's long history of violence against African-Americans. (SACK/HARRIS 2015)

It is no coincidence, then, that this was indeed "one of [the] most impassioned reflections on race" (SACK/HARRIS 2015) in Obama's presidency. It was in this context, also, that Obama referred to the nation's impassioned debate over the role of the Confederate flag not only in national self-representation, but also in its collective identity. It is with reference to the Confederate flag that, in light of the presidential election that was to be held in 2016, Obama's words seem dismally prophetic. As he put it in his eulogy,

"[r]emoving the flag from this state's Capitol would not be an act of political correctness", Mr. Obama said. "It would not be an insult to the valor of Confederate soldiers. It would simply be an acknowledgment that the cause for which they fought – the cause of slavery – was wrong. The imposition of Jim Crow after the Civil War, the resistance to civil rights for all people, was wrong." (SACK/HARRIS 2015)

Pace Trump, then, political correctness emerges here not as a form of discourse terrorism but as an acknowledgment of the violence which can be done by both symbols and speech acts. In her study *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler writes, “When we claim to have been injured by language, what kind of claim do we make? We ascribe an agency to language, a power to injure, and position ourselves as the objects of its injurious trajectory. We claim that language acts, and acts against us [...]” (BUTLER 1997: 1)

At Reverend Pinckney’s funeral, then, it seemed that a suspension of identity politics, the refusal to claim allegiance to one particular ethnic community in the United States, no longer seemed possible. And yet, I would argue here that Obama was able to take a stand as an African American president and as a president who was wary of subscribing to the idea that any identity, racial or otherwise, could ever be fixed. It was in this context where the suspension of the closure of identity politics no longer seemed possible, I would argue, that Obama pledged allegiance in the open-ended manner so significant for his politics both real and literary: At Reverend Pinckney’s funeral, Obama burst into song, singing “Amazing Grace” in front of an audience he had taken by complete surprise. Obama’s grief over both the Reverend’s murder and the racial hatred and bigotry which it symbolized, I argue, could no longer be put into words, but could only be expressed through music or what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha has called “the space outside the sentence” (BHABHA 1994: 257). It was a grief which not only encompassed the mourning for the senseless death of Reverend Pinckney, but also for Obama’s own faith in a nation which had disproved his belief that it could be multiethnic and multi-differential. As a newspaper report puts it,

[g]egen Ende seiner Rede stimmt Barack Obama „Amazing Grace“ an, das Volkslied über die „erstaunliche Gnade“ Gottes in schweren Zeiten, das schon den Sklaven in den USA Kraft und Hoffnung gab. Erst zögerlich, dann begleitet von Tausenden Stimmen in der Halle in Charleston singt der erste schwarze US-Präsident die Zeilen, die übersetzt so lauten: „Ich war einst verloren, aber nun bin ich gefunden, war blind, aber nun sehe ich.“ Es ist gut eine Woche nach dem Massaker an neun Afroamerikanern in einer Kirche der Höhepunkt seiner Traueransprache, die mehr wie eine Predigt wirkt. Wie ein Pastor, der sein Land wachrütteln will, zählt er die Lehren der grausamen Bluttat auf, die nun gezogen werden müssen. (SCHMITT-TEGGE/MIERKE 2015)

In his speech, Obama falters on the verge of breaking into song, as if undecided with himself about how to express his grief: His grief over a nation which failed to live up to his hope that the violence which has often been contained in United States race relations could be contained. Surrounded by Methodist clergy at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, Obama at first only references the song:

Obama: Amazing Grace! [pauses] Amazing Grace! [hesitates] [starts singing]
Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound... [the clergymen and -women
surrounding him raise their heads in surprise, then, smile, rising to their
feet].

In the paragraphs that follow, I would like to read the vision of the color kaleidoscope, which at the present moment seems more utopian than ever, not only back into the politics of Barack Obama the President, but also of Barack Obama the author and autobiographer. The open-endedness of Obama’s singing “Amazing Grace”, a spiritual born of African

Americans' fight against slavery and the racial violence which it signified, also marks Obama's autobiography, *Dreams from My Father*, published in 1995, fourteen years before he would be elected president of the United States, the first black president in the history of the nation. The kaleidoscopic vision of race, I will argue in the following passages, can be read on both a national and a transnational level. According to Alfred Hornung,

Barack Obama's biography encapsulates the principal features of a Transnational American Studies approach. His biracial descent from a white American mother from Kansas and an African father from Kenya, his formative years in the multiethnic environment of the state of Hawai'i, the school experience in the Muslim Indonesian capital of Djakarta, the education in Los Angeles and at Columbia University in New York, and the conscious decision to undertake social work for the African American community in South Side Chicago before entering Harvard Law School represent an academic background and an intercultural network which have prepared him for an unusual political career. (HORNUNG 2016: ix–x)

At the present historical moment, this transnational vision seems more important than ever because it is proof that identity politics can coexist with the awareness that any closure ascribed to social identities can only be imaginary and strategic; and that political correctness, at its best, is a movement which explains to majority communities the violence done to minorities by words and symbols which reference material histories of both violence and oppression. It is hence no wonder that Obama should implicitly have addressed the opponents of political correctness at Reverend Pinckney's funeral: By eliciting empathy for the man killed by racist violence and for the family he left behind, Obama drove home the message that the Confederate flag, to the victims of the white supremacist logic that the flag symbolized, was much more than a flag.

Obama's vision of race is as prophetic as it is necessary, then, in the idea that he refuses to see any difference as absolute. Rather, each difference is both context-specific and related to other differences. Even as identity politics may be necessary in calling attention to histories of subjugation and oppression, then, this is an identity politics which refuses to capitalize the initial letter of its first word. Obama's is an "identity" politics which refuses to capitalize, both literally and figuratively, the position that it revolves around. As Obama puts it in his foreword to the 2004 edition of *Dreams from My Father*, recalling his initial incentive to write an autobiography,

I [...] went to work with the belief that the story of my family, and my efforts to understand that story, might speak in some way to the fissures of race that have characterized the American experience, as well as the fluid state of identity – the leaps through time, the collision of cultures – that mark our modern life. (OBAMA [1995] 2007, vii)

This passage is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, because, in assuming the autobiographical mode, Obama inserts himself into an autobiographical tradition which harks back to the work of Benjamin Franklin. In the sense of Franklin's autobiography, the author's life is said to be characteristic of and potentially a model for, the life of the nation (MADSEN 1998). Secondly and even more importantly for my purposes here, Obama positions himself, in this passage, less as a black man than as a man whose identity – both racial and otherwise – can only be seen as "fluid". The nation's multi-ethnic character,

by the same token, is implied in this passage to be curiously ungraspable; it is a chimera of identity, the illusion of identity perhaps, which nonetheless has material repercussions on the politics of the nation itself. It is this fluidity which, I have argued above, also marked Obama's song – and the stance of bursting into song – at Reverend Pinckney's funeral. In writing his own life, then, Obama at once sets out to write the life of the nation; yet, he does so less by positioning himself as a role model (in the tradition of Benjamin Franklin), but as someone who sets out to comprehend the race dynamics of the nation by using himself as a 'guinea-pig'. Indeed, Obama's presidential campaign would center on the self-irony of a man describing himself in terms of racial 'mongrelization'. As Alan Fram has noted, Obama's reference to himself as a "mutt" marked not only his investigation of his own racial heritage, but in the curious "off-handedness" of Obama's tone also signaled his insistence that "race" was an issue which had to be addressed, rather than hushed up. As Fram notes,

[i]t popped out casually, a throwaway line as he talked to reporters about finding the right puppy for his young daughters.

But with just three offhanded words in his first news conference as president-elect, Barack Obama reminded everyone how thoroughly different his administration – and inevitably, this country – will be.

"Mutts like me".

By now, almost everyone knows that Obama's mother was white and father was black, putting him on track to become the nation's first African-American president. But there was something startling, and telling, about hearing his self-description – particularly in how offhandedly he used it.

The message seemed clear – here is a president who will be quite at ease discussing race, a complex issue as unresolved as it is uncomfortable for many to talk about openly. And at a time when whites in the country are not many years from becoming the minority.

(FRAM 2008)

Moreover, Barack Obama's kaleidoscopic vision of the interrelatedness of differences not only pertains to an astute perception of the differences within US-American society, but is a transnational vision as well. It is for this reason, then, that I will propose in this paper that, as an encyclopedia of difference, *Dreams from My Father* lends itself to being read through a variety of different methodologies. It can be read through the lens of ethnic studies and whiteness studies, African American studies, class studies, transnational studies of race and transnational whiteness studies (MORETON-ROBINSON/CASEY/NICOLL 2008), transnational religious studies, diaspora studies, and studies of social justice. As this article progresses, I will rehearse some of these readings, but at the same time, I will point to what may in fact be some of the shortcomings of such a rehearsal. For there may be a danger for each of these fields to remain insular, to 'feel' unrelated to other fields. How is our understanding of whiteness studies different, in other words, when we read it not as simply responding to but as being in dialogue with ethnic studies? How, as Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz have asked in studies such as *White Trash*, is our understanding of whiteness also inflected by the meaning of class? They write:

In a country steeped in the myth of classlessness, in a culture where we are often at a loss to explain or understand poverty, the white trash stereotype serves as a useful way of

blaming the poor for being poor. The term white trash helps solidify for the middle and upper classes a sense of cultural and intellectual superiority. (WRAY/NEWITZ 1997: 1)

What is so striking about Barack Obama's autobiography *Dreams from My Father*, then, is that it can be said to trigger academic readings of itself in the terms of the fields and methodologies outlined above; yet, it simultaneously points to the *interrelatedness* of these fields. The point made time and again in Barack Obama's autobiography *Dreams from My Father*, is not so much that each difference jostles for space with another, but that each difference may be uncannily close to another. Obama's open-ended notion of difference, or his notion of difference as open-ended, thus constantly translates one difference into another, seeing the interrelatedness, for instance, of both race and class in a transnational dimension. He writes:

I know, I have seen, the desperation and disorder of the powerless: how it twists the lives of children on the streets of Jakarta or Nairobi in much the same way as it does the lives of children on Chicago's South Side, how narrow the path is for them between humiliation and untrammelled fury, how easily they slip into violence and despair. (OBAMA [1995] 2007: x–xi)

Dreams from My Father may hence constitute a utopia, a vision of each difference that defies closure by pointing to its intersection with others. My point here is that the differences detailed, in an encyclopedic manner, in *Dreams from My Father*, may center on Obama's own position or rather location as a *Grenzgänger* between differences, a shape-shifter who, by his own accord, has never felt completely at home in any community. There is hence, as a complement to what I have termed a kaleidoscopic vision of difference, something which I would call the agony of race: the tendency of 'race' in United States discourse and the history of race relations, to be exclusive, to defy or exclude ambiguity. It is this unbelonging of race which informs, as a form of agonistic labor, Obama's investigation of race in *Dreams from My Father*. This investigation, in turn, is also a self-inspection and a painful, because open-ended, self-introspection. The pain at the heart of Barack Obama's autobiography, I would argue, is precisely the dilemma, as I have tried to suggest above with regard to the expectations brought by many to Obama's eulogy for Reverend Pinckney, of constantly having to show one's colors. These 'colors', what is more, are said to defy the blurring of contours, of shades; they have to be clear-cut, even binary, in a way that Obama (the author) is at a loss to understand. In a sense, then, in his original foreword to *Dreams from My Father*, written in 2004, Obama anticipates the gaze of an African American community wanting him to take a stand at the Charleston Emanuel AME Church: the stand that indeed, 'black lives matter' and that he himself is black. This stance, the expectation that Obama show his colors in an unambiguous kind of way, is captured in his foreword by a curious expression: the notion of being taken "at face value". What Obama's autobiography drives home through the narrator's painful self-searching, then, is that no identity can ever be taken at face value: For any identity to be interpretable "at face value" would be to assume its open-endedness, the state in which it blurs into others and is contiguous to other identities and differences. There is in this passage what I would term an agony of race: the ability to comprehend or impose closure on a concept which can neither be comprehended nor contained, because it is, of course, a fiction, a social construct. Racial identity, as Matthew

Frye Jacobson has written, is made, not given: “Caucasians are made [...] not born” (JACOBSON 1999: 4). Obama’s agony of race, I would suggest, is hence born both of his knowledge of the chimerical nature of race and the awareness that he lives in a nation which insists on taking race “at face value”. Obama writes,

[those caught up in the binary logic of race] know too much, we have all seen too much, to take my parents’ brief union – a black man and a white woman, an African and an American – at face value. As a result, some people have a hard time taking me at face value. When people who don’t know me well, black or white, discover my background (and it is usually a discovery, for I ceased to advertise my mother’s race at the age of twelve or thirteen, when I began to suspect that by doing so I was ingratiating myself to whites), I see the split-second adjustments they have to make, the searching of my eyes for some telltale sign. They no longer know who I am. Privately, they guess at my troubled heart, I suppose – the mixed blood, the divided soul, the ghostly image of the tragic mulatto trapped between two worlds. And if I were to explain that no, the tragedy is not mine, or at least not mine alone, it is yours, sons and daughters of Plymouth Rock and Ellis Island, it is yours, children of Africa, it is the tragedy of both my wife’s six-year-old cousin and his white first grade classmates, so that you need not guess at what troubles me, it’s on the nightly news for all to see, and that if we could acknowledge at least that much then the tragic cycle begins to break down ... well, I suspect that I sound incurably naive [...] (OBAMA [1995] 2007: xv)

This passage can be said to encapsulate, in a nutshell, what I would call the racial politics of Barack Obama’s vision. It is a vision, I would argue, that is not so much post-racial as it is differently racialized; that it addresses the material consequences of race without, however, forgetting that race is a construct. This passage encapsulates, moreover, not only Obama’s redefinition and suspension of race in its traditional usage but also another facet of what I have called the agony of race. Obama drives home in this passage the idea that the agony of race must not only concern those who inhabit non-white histories and subjectivities, but that the agony of race concerns the nation as a whole. What is especially remarkable in this passage is that in Obama’s vision of the multifaceted notion of race as it marks the history and the present of the nation, not only do black and white histories coexist in what should be their common concern with the fact that the material reality of racism continues to persist, but that whiteness itself is seen as multifaceted: In Obama’s vision, Plymouth Rock whiteness and Ellis Island whiteness coexist. Not only is whiteness hence as much of a construct as blackness is, but the history of whiteness, as Jacobson has noted, is itself one not only of cultural, but also of racial complexity. The groups, Jacobson writes, who we “see” as white today used to be non-white, a perspective which drives home the arbitrariness of racial definition. Whiteness itself is hence fractured into Plymouth Rock and Ellis Island whiteness; whiteness, too, comes in shades. I would like to argue, then, that this passage exemplifies that Obama’s *Dreams from my Father* can be read not only through different methodologies, but that it invites these methodologies. This passage, in drawing attention to the difference between Plymouth Rock and Ellis Island, also draws attention to the history of whiteness as it has been investigated by whiteness studies. Neither whiteness nor blackness, then, are monolithic; they are equally constructed and hark back, to an equal extent, to a multifaceted history of amalgamating heterogeneous elements into a seemingly coherent and monolithic whole.

Obama is African American, then, because his father was Kenyan; his Africanness, he is well aware, differs from his wife's immersion into Chicago's African American community. Not incidentally, it was argued by many during Obama's initial presidential campaign, that his wife Michelle was in fact "blacker" than he was. What this above-quoted passage demonstrates, then, is the extent to which Obama the narrator is aware of the fact that both black and white communities insist on rendering race relations monochrome, and of rendering monochrome the shades within each of these colors. Even as he describes the black-and-white scenario in which he, as a mixed-race man, has been trapped, then, his vision insists on eclipsing both these colors into an infinity of shades of both whiteness and blackness. There is, strikingly enough, a kaleidoscope within whiteness and blackness themselves. It is this vision of the multifold shades of whiteness and blackness that will open up as his autobiography unfolds towards a map of an infinity of colors, where black, white, and Native American communities, among many others, are investigated not in their difference/s, but in their similarities.

Obama is well aware, then, that his refusal to take 'race' or identity at face value will strike many as incurably naïve. It is this naïveté, however, which he is quick to translate into another, and arguably, a quintessentially 'American' quality: his innocence. It is this innocence which, at the outset of his autobiography *Dreams from My Father*, may be his greatest weapon; it is an innocence, and an optimism born of innocence, which may constitute an alternative, even antidote to, what I have termed the 'agony of race'. As Obama goes on to note, "[a]nd yet what strikes me most when I think about the story of my family is a running strain of innocence, an innocence that seems unimaginable even by the measures of childhood" (OBAMA [1995] 2007: xiv). This is an innocence, Obama is quick to admit, which may itself constitute a luxury; it is an innocence which permits Obama the narrator to transcend or at least to dissociate himself from the antagonism of United States race relations. Yet, in a stance so characteristic of his politics, Obama does not elevate his own multiethnic and multiracial vision of what the country could be over others whose perception of color contrasts is much starker than his own. He does not, in other words, judge, let alone look down on those who insist that color differences, *in their material effects*, are much more clear-cut than Obama's deliberately blurry vision would allow. Obama includes in his autobiography, then, not only the history of his own family but that of his wife's family as well:

My wife's cousin, only six years old, has already lost such innocence: A few weeks ago, he reported to his parents that some of his first grade classmates had refused to play with him because of his dark, unblemished skin. Obviously his parents, born and raised in Chicago and Gary, lost their own innocence long ago, and although they aren't bitter [...], one hears the pain in their voices as they begin to have second thoughts about having moved out of the city into a mostly white suburb, a move they made to protect their son from the possibility of being caught in a gang shooting and the certainty of attending an underfunded school. (OBAMA [1995] 2007: xiv–xv)

Obama's agony of race is defined, then, by his awareness of the discrepancy between his own insight that race is both a fiction and a chimera and his knowledge of the fact that the effects of this chimera are nonetheless both material and 'real'. Obama's agony, and the tragedy not only of his life but also of his politics, is thus the entrapment of having to follow and act upon a concept which one knows is chimerical. In Obama's vision, then,

the individual is both caught up in the claustrophobic logic of United States race relations and has the power to transcend this logic. As Michel Foucault has written of the nature of freedom, “[r]ather than speaking of an essential freedom, it would be better to speak of an ‘agonism’ – of a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation which paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation” (qtd. in MCGOWAN 1991: 141).

It is this same agony of race which, as a young man trying to find his way in a country obsessed with race, racial demarcation, and racial difference, Obama finds in a genealogy of African American men of letters:

Over the next few months, I looked to corroborate this nightmare vision. I gathered up books from the library – Baldwin, Ellison, Hughes, Wright, DuBois. At night I would close the door to my room, telling my grandparents I had homework to do, and there I would sit and wrestle with words, locked in suddenly desperate argument, trying to reconcile the world as I’d found it with the terms of *my* [emphasis added] birth. But there was no escape to be had. In every page in every book, in *Bigger* Thomas and *invisible men*, I kept finding the same anguish, the same doubt: a self-contempt that neither irony nor intellect seemed able to deflect. Even DuBois’s learning and Baldwin’s love and Langston’s humor eventually succumbed to its corrosive force, each man finally forced to doubt art’s redemptive power, each man finally forced to withdraw, one to Africa, one to Europe, one deeper into the bowels of Harlem, but all of them in the same weary flight, all of them exhausted, bitter men, the devil at their heels. (OBAMA[1995] 2007: 85–86)

In its agony of race, an “anguish” born of the awareness that ‘race’ is both chimerical and nevertheless real in its material effects, Obama’s *Dreams of My Father* anticipates the arguments of Critical Race Theory. As Kimberlé Crenshaw et al. write in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*,

[i]t was obvious to many of us that although race was, to use the term, socially constructed (the idea of biological race is “false”), race was nonetheless “real” in the sense that there is a material dimension and weight to the experience of being “raced” in American society [...]. Thus, we understood our project as an effort to construct a race-conscious and at the same time anti-essentialist account of the processes by which law participates in “race-ing” American society. (CRENSHAW et al.: xxvi)

Even as Obama’s autobiography refuses ‘color-blindness’ in favor of color-consciousness, it nonetheless highlights what color consciousness, in order to be itself, must obscure, or dismiss: the complexity of race that, in order to be color-conscious, one must deliberately remain unconscious of.

The Life Writing of Race

What is so striking, then, is that this agony of race, for Obama’s public perception, has been not a curse but a blessing. If for himself his own journey to self-awareness, which he recalls in painstaking detail in *Dreams from My Father*, is constantly deferred by his awareness of his own racial ambiguity, this very ambiguity may politically have made for his charisma: Because, in a public perception which is so steeped in an unambiguity of

racial definition, Obama seems a shape-shifter; forever ambiguous, he can be claimed by many communities at once. It is in this vein that, in a volume edited by Alfred Hornung, he has been claimed not only as the first African American president in the history of the United States, but also as the first Asian American president of the country. Drawing on Toni Morrison's description of Bill Clinton as a "black" president, Greg Robinson makes a similar point about Obama's proximity to metaphors of Asianness. According to Robinson,

in terms of the kind of cultural signifiers that Toni Morrison identified with respect to Clinton, Barack Obama should more properly be considered our first Asian American president. If you take into account his public persona and life history – and most importantly the transnational nature of his identity – his portrait resonates in fundamental ways with the list of archetypes (or stereotypes) that we might call "tropes of asianness". (ROBINSON 2016: 83)

For those of us trained in 'difference studies' – and inspired by Alfred Hornung's own kaleidoscopic vision, which, not incidentally, led to the founding of the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies at the University of Mainz in 2017 – *Dreams from My Father* may hence function as an encyclopedia for studying difference in all its multiplicity, but also for reminding us of the interrelatedness of all these different fields. Following the work of Alfred Hornung – a work which was honored with the lifetime achievement award of the American Studies Association in 2013 – the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies has a number of main emphases, among them life writing, transnational ethnic studies, and the intersection between life writing and life sciences. All of these emphases, arguably, are present in Obama's autobiography *Dreams from My Father*.

Obama's astute awareness of the relativity of difference, its relationality and its contiguity to other differences, is informed by a particular practice of life writing. Obama's book *Dreams from My Father*, then, is not only an autobiography but it is also a biography of the lives of others: of his mother, to whose romance of and fascination with blackness Obama owes his own existence; of his Indonesian stepfather, who was forced to return to Indonesia from the United States and who was left traumatized, hardened and embittered by the experience of torture and the effects of political corruption; of his grandparents, who saw their Hawai'ian dreams constantly deferred and who continued to be amazed by their multiracial grandson whose very presence in their family at times surprised them; and of many others whose lives had intersected with his own during his political campaigning in Chicago. Obama's book *Dreams from My Father* is so unique, then, because it refuses to be only an autobiography of its author, but points instead to the idea that each autobiography is also a biography of others. Mark Twain described this phenomenon in his autobiography, which, published a hundred years after his death in 2010, turned out to have anticipated the emergence of 'life writing' as a field; disappointed with the way in which his own autobiographical project was developing, Twain proceeded to abandon autobiography in favor of biography: As the editors of *Autobiography of Mark Twain* write, "Clemens seems to have become discouraged at least in part over his inability to be completely frank and self-revealing [...]. His solution was, at least temporarily, to recast the autobiography as a series of thumbnail biographies

of people he had met over the years” (CLEMENS 2010: 15–16). If in Twain’s case, the turning to the writing of biographies of others was born from his belief that no-one would ever be able to tell the unvarnished truth in an autobiography, Barack Obama’s autobiography nevertheless implies a similar proximity of the autobiographical to the biographical mode. Obama’s biographies of others, moreover, are much more than “thumbnail” biographies; they are fully-fledged life narratives contained in his own autobiography. These biographies, what is more, are at the same time agonistic inquiry into the nature of both ‘blackness’ and ‘whiteness’. What his biographies of both his mother and his grandparents reveal, then, is an inquiry into the nature of white privilege; but because this inquiry is contained in a biography written by a loving son and grandson, it is never tinged with bitterness. It is in this biography of whiteness, then, that Obama’s autobiography-cum-biography anticipates and recaptures the logic of whiteness studies. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson et al. have suggested in their introduction to *Transnational Whiteness Matters*,

[a] key thread that weaves through this book is how notions and claims of virtue operate discursively within transnational whiteness. Virtue, the claiming of a morally superior position that at the same time denies any moral authority to others, functions as a usable property or currency that is deployed to support, defend and perpetuate white dominance. (MORETON-ROBINSON et al. 2008: x)

If Obama’s inquiry into the nature of whiteness is also a biography of the lives of his mother and grandparents, then, it also functions as an investigation of the ways in which, *in spite of themselves*, individuals may be implicated in the logic of white privilege.

Thus, the point I would like to make here about *Dreams from My Father* is not only that it is a life writing text par excellence because it so astutely links the autobiography of its author to the biographies of others. Rather, it can be argued that Obama demonstrates his keen awareness of the relativity of difference precisely by engaging with the lives and biographies of others who are differently situated from himself. As an autobiographer turned biographer, Obama can engage with the difference of others and the relationality of their difference to his own because, as their *biographer*, he attempts to see this difference from their perspective. What may be crucial here is to compare the different modes of the autobiographer and the biographer: the biographer arguably is a historian of other people’s lives.

Moreover, it is because the differences of others and the difference inhabited by others never remain abstract but are investigated through their position in others’ lives that Obama’s narrative never passes judgment on the lives of others. It is as a biographer, as an historian of other lives, that he investigates differences other than his own. I believe that this fusion of the autobiographical with the biographical mode could not be more central to Obama’s politics: the refusal to privilege one difference over another and hence to engage in a hierarchy of differentiation. It is this refusal, tragically, which would later clash so jarringly with a reality in which the lines between differences would not be blurred, but redrawn, and in which the *antagonism* of racial groups, already present, under erasure (DERRIDA) in Obama’s agony of race, would resurge.

The agony of race in Obama’s writing is so painful precisely because he is so aware of the antagonism of race which informs the social reality surrounding him. His agony of

race, I would suggest, is so painful to witness by us as the readers of his autobiography because once the autobiographer has become another person's *biographer*, having seen the world from their perspective, he can no longer pass judgment, even, at its most extreme, on the racism of this other person. This is especially true of Obama's recollection of his grandmother's fear of an African American man on the bus. The shift from the autobiographical to the biographical mode, then, is at the core of Obama's vision of the relativity and relationality of difference; it is also at the heart of an agony of race born of the knowledge that the social reality around him knows only the antagonism of race. What makes the anguish conveyed by Obama's autobiography even more acute is the fact that the antagonism of race has his own family in its grips; his grandparents, Obama realizes as a youth, are by no means immune to this antagonism, despite their love for him. His grandmother's fear of black men at the bus stop feels to Obama like a form of betrayal:

[My grandfather] turned around and I saw now that he was shaking. "It is a big deal. It's a big deal to me. She's been bothered by men before. You know why she's so scared this time? I'll tell you why. Before you came in, she told me the fella was *black*." He whispered the word. "That's the real reason why she's bothered. And I just don't think that's right." The words were like a fist in my stomach [...] In my steadiest voice, I told him that such an attitude bothered me, too [...]. Gramps slumped into a chair in the living room and said he was sorry he had told me. Before my eyes, he grew small and old and very sad. I put my hand on his shoulder and told him that it was all right, I understood [...]. After they left, I sat on the edge of my bed and thought about my grandparents. They had sacrificed again and again for me. They had poured all their lingering hopes into my success. Never had they given me reason to doubt their love; I doubted if they ever would. And yet I knew that men who might easily have been my brothers could still inspire their rawest fears. (OBAMA [1995] 2007: 88–89)

It is by engaging, as a mixed-race autobiographer, with the biographies of others, that he refuses to privilege identity politics – moored in the lack of the open-endedness of identity as a concept – over the unpredictable turns a life can take. Life writing, in the sense of both autobiography and biography, thus in a way contradicts or at least complements identity politics in *Dreams from My Father*. As I have tried to outline above, Obama is aware that in order to fight racialist structures and structures of social inequality, identity politics may be necessary; but he nonetheless refuses to subscribe to the assertion that identity is not always already open-ended. It is this belief in the open-endedness of identity that may bestow on Obama, the chronicler of his family's life, the gift of being a biographer. For, arguably, a biographer must immerse himself in the lives of others, to be surprised at each turn of the meanders which the lives of these others may take. Nothing in his grandparents' lives, Obama notes, could have predicted the fact that they acquiesced to their daughter's marrying an African man:

Sure – but would you let your daughter marry one?
The fact that my grandparents had answered yes to this question, no matter how grudgingly, remains an enduring puzzle to me. There was nothing in their background to predict such a response, no New England transcendentalists or wild-eyed socialists in their family tree. True, Kansas had fought on the Union side of the Civil War; Gramps liked to remind me that various strands of the family contained ardent abolitionists. If asked, Toot would turn

her head in profile to show off her beaked nose, which, along with a pair of jet-black eyes, was offered as proof of Cherokee blood. (OBAMA [1995] 2007: 12)

Obama is quick to note the ambiguity of this form of ‘race treason’ in which his white grandmother claims indigenous ancestry; and he is well aware of the debatable romanticism inherent in a contemporary practice in which many white Americans claim to have ‘Native’ roots. Yet, what about his wonder at his grandparents’ acceptance of his mother’s marriage to his African father? As a biographer who has to suspend his own expectations of the lives of others, and who must be attuned to the complex and often contradictory turns which these lives may take, Obama has to immerse himself in the lives of his grandparents. As a biographer, he cannot impose his own interpretation and prefabricated categories of ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’ on these lives, but must instead be attuned to the unexpected turns which these lives may take. His grandparents’ life, Obama notes, cannot be contained by the identity categories that their race and ethnicity would jolt them into. Crucially, this is not color-blindness, since Obama’s narrative is keenly attuned to the material consequences which racism has on the lives of both black and white Americans; yet, it is the insistence that color-consciousness may come at a price: the price of having to play down or dismiss one’s own racial ambiguity in order to be taken, by others, ‘at face value’.

In a nation which insists on the antagonism of race rather than subjecting itself to the agony of having to make sense of racial ambiguity, Obama can only be taken at face value, he writes, by taking sides against “white folks”. And yet, it is here that the position of the autobiographer may clash with that of the biographer: As a biographer of his mother’s and his grandparents’ lives, Obama the narrator has realized that ‘whiteness’ as an identity category fails to capture the complexity and the ambiguity of these lives, the implicit heterogeneity within whiteness; and yet as a an autobiographer, he has to chronicle the ways in which he had to snap out of the biographical mode in order to be able to pronounce the phrase “white folks”. To the extent to which he would be able to pronounce this phrase without hesitation, he knows, he will gain acceptance by the African American community; yet, as a biographer, he is simultaneously aware of the ways in which his mother’s and grandparents’ lives could not be contained by ‘whiteness’ as both a term and a predication. In his autobiography, Obama recalls his high school years:

White folks. The term itself was uncomfortable in my mouth at first; I felt like a non-native speaker tripping over a difficult phrase. Sometimes I would find myself talking to [my friend] Ray about *white folks* this or *white folks* that, and I would suddenly remember my mother’s smile, and the words that I spoke would seem awkward and false. Or I would be helping Gramps dry the dishes after dinner and Toot would come in to say she was going to sleep, and those same words – *white folks* – would flash in my head like a bright neon sign, and I would suddenly grow quiet, as if I had secrets to keep. (OBAMA [1995] 2007: 80–81)

In *Dreams from My Father*, Obama confronts us not only with a kaleidoscope of difference, but also with the things we have invented in order to describe these differences. African American studies, whiteness studies, and Native American studies have emerged as fields which investigate the history and presence of a particular group or group identity.

Yet, the italics in the above-cited passage, the italics inherent in the phrase “white folks”, serve as scare quotes in Obama’s autobiography, a reminder that each of the names we use to describe a particular category necessarily falls short. These terms, Obama’s autobiography reminds us, can only be a form of “shorthand”. As he goes on to note, “[t]he term *white* was simply a shorthand for [Ray], I decided, a tag for what my mother would call a bigot” (OBAMA [1995] 2007: 81). Obama’s autobiography, by refusing to privilege the autobiographical over the biographical mode, can be read as the longhand version of identity; an account not so much of difference than of the process of differentiation which emphasizes that even though in the political arena we have to resort to identity politics, the clearly delineated boundaries that these categories are defined by are nonetheless both fictional and, ultimately, false.

It is in this sense, then, that Obama’s text not only oscillates between different identity categories – thus triggering in our reading the methodologies through which these differences may be and have been defined – but it zooms in not on the lines dividing these differences, but on the spaces which fuse them. What is especially remarkable in this context is that *Dreams from My Father* refuses to separate ethnic studies from indigenous studies. As Sneja Gunew has argued in a Canadian context, the focus on immigrant histories and the subsequent establishment of ethnic studies as an academic discipline may often have led to the marginalization of indigenous lives and histories; ethnic studies and indigenous studies have thus often been seen as being independent of or unrelated to one another. Arguably, this may be true for a United States context as well. *Dreams from My Father*, on the other hand, points precisely to this interrelatedness by stressing, time and again, issues of racial justice as they pertain to Native American communities in the United States:

Power. The word fixed in my mother’s mind like a curse. In America, it had generally remained hidden from view until you dug beneath the surface of things; until you visited an Indian reservation or spoke to a black person whose trust you had earned. But here [in Indonesia] power was undisguised, indiscriminate, naked, always fresh in the memory. Power had taken Lolo and yanked him back into line just when he thought he’d escaped, making him feel its weight, letting him know that his life wasn’t his own. (OBAMA [1995] 2007: 45)

This passage is remarkable since it encapsulates not only the narrative’s kaleidoscopic vision of difference, and of the ways in which different differences spill into one another, but also the sense that differences can be investigated through a transnational vision. Obama’s own vision of his life thus superimposes Indonesia and the United States; and once again, it engages in life writing by refusing to judge what might otherwise appear as his stepfather Lolo’s harshness towards ‘beggars’. Becoming a biographer of Lolo’s life, Obama the autobiographer notes that Lolo’s spirit was broken by the acts of cruelty and corruption he witnessed in his home country. Powerlessness, the narrative is quick to note, may crisscross and transcend the lines of race, of class, and of nation.

Translated into an academic context, then, what *Dreams from My Father* illustrates is interrelatedness of black and indigenous lives, both of which complicate a model assumed by ‘immigrant histories’: forced migration and colonization severely contradict the model of the United States solely as a ‘nation of immigrants’. It is here that we may return, then, not only to Obama’s distinction between Plymouth Rock and Ellis Island, but also to the

way in which, as many critics have argued, the emphasis on Ellis Island which turns the history of the nation into that of a ‘nation of immigrants’, may have marginalized indigenous communities, whose presence is erased anew by a focus on immigration. It must also be said here, however, that this is an instance where Obama the president failed to live up to the potential of Obama the writer and autobiographer. Although he had, in his autobiography, drawn attention to the plight of Native Americans and their continued marginalization by United States politics, he disappointed many when, during his time in office, he did not issue an official apology to Native Americans for an entire history of disenfranchisement. After the governments of both Australia and Canada had officially apologized to Aboriginal communities and First Nations in 2008, Obama’s presidency was associated by many with the hope that the United States would follow suit. Even though the Obama government did issue a resolution, then, both the scope and the way in which it was publicized was in no way comparable to the apologies in Australia and Canada. Yet, the resolution, issued in 2009 (a year after apologies had been made to indigenous communities in Australia and Canada) is nevertheless significant:

President Obama acknowledged the importance of the Apology to Native Peoples and his support for it. Reflecting on the difficult circumstances of Indian nations today, Obama said: “These cases serve as a reminder of the importance of not glossing over the past or ignoring the past, even as we work together to forge a brighter future. That’s why, last year, I signed a resolution, passed by both parties in Congress, finally recognizing the sad and painful chapters in our shared history – a history too often marred by broken promises and grave injustices against the First Americans. It’s a resolution I fully supported – recognizing that no statement can undo the damage that was done; what it can do is help reaffirm the principles that should guide our future. It’s only by heeding the lessons of our history that we can move forward.”¹

Yet, critics have noted that the apology made by Obama was “tucked away” in the Defense Appropriations Act of 2010, and that “President Obama never publicly acknowledged the ‘Apology to Native Peoples of the United States’”.² *Dreams from My Father*, then, remains a vision of the kaleidoscope of difference and of the ways in which different differences are contiguous to and blur into one another. In this as in many other instances, Obama’s vision – the vision of the autobiographer – was stopped short by a political reality reluctant to engage in visions.

As the violence against African Americans which seemed to erupt with increasing force under Obama’s presidency painfully illustrates, political reality refused to cash the check that a president armed with the innocent belief that the antagonism of race could finally be overcome had presented. As we move into a new presidential era, which has been termed ‘post-factual’ in its stubborn assurance that populist sentiments are more reliable than historical facts or a knowledge of cultural complexity, such a belief seems more urgent than ever.

¹ *First Peoples Worldwide*: President Obama acknowledges need for Native American Apology. <http://firstpeoples.org/wp/tag/the-apology-to-the-native-peoples-of-the-united-states/>. [17 January 2018]

² Robert Longley: Did You Know the US Apologized to Native Americans? 7 July 2016. <http://usgovinfo.about.com/b/2012/12/27/did-you-know-the-us-apologized-to-native-americans.htm>.

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