

UCLA

UCLA Previously Published Works

Title

The Other Father in Barack Obama's Dreams from My Father

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7472g4w9>

Authors

Cheung, K-K

Smith, RK

Publication Date

2023-12-11

Peer reviewed

CRITICAL
APPROACHES
TO
LITERATURE
Multicultural

Editor

Robert C. Evans

Auburn University at Montgomery

SALEM PRESS

A Division of EBSCO Information Services, Inc.
Ipswich, Massachusetts

GREY HOUSE PUBLISHING

2017

Contents

Dedication

vii

About This Volume, Robert C. Evans

ix

On Multicultural Criticism: Multicultural Approaches
to Wilfred Owen's "Disabled", Robert C. Evans

xvii

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner. For information, contact Grey House Publishing/Salem Press, 4919 Route 22, PO Box 56, Amenia, NY 12501.

∞ The paper used in these volumes conforms to the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, Z39.48-1992 (R2009).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
(Prepared by The Donohue Group, Inc.)

Names: Evans, Robert C., 1955- editor.

Title: Critical approaches to literature. Multicultural / editor, Robert C. Evans, Auburn University at Montgomery.

Description: [First edition]. | Ipswich, Massachusetts : Salem Press, a division of EBSCO Information Services, Inc. ; Amenia, NY : Grey House Publishing, [2017] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: ISBN 978-1-68217-575-0 (hardcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Multiculturalism in literature. | Literature--History and criticism--Social aspects.

Classification: LCC PN56.M8 C75 2017 | DDC 809.93352--dc23

Critical Contexts

Sounding the Alarm: Calls for Drinking in Moderation in
Early Modern English Pamphlets, Pulpits,
and Plays, Jonathan D. Wright

3

Introduction to Multicultural Criticism: An Overview
Melissa D. Carden

21

Multicultural and Other Approaches to a "New" Story by
Zora Neale Hurston, Christina M. Garner

35

"In a Far Country": Jack London and Multiculturalism
Kelley Jeans

48

Critical Readings

Trance, Trauma, PNES, and Epileptic Seizures in
Shakespeare's *Othello*, Robert C. Evans

63

Multicultural and Other Approaches to a "New" Story
by Sui Sin Far, Robert C. Evans

78

Minglings: Form, Style, and Theme in Zora Neale

Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Nicolas Tredell

92

From *This I Believe* to "The Marching Hordes": The Edges
of Multiculturalism in the Juvenile Novels of Robert A.
Heinlein, Rafeeq O. McGiveron

107

The Other Half of the Story: Valuing the Vision of
Black Atlantic Women, Shirley Toland-Dix

121

Asian-American Whodunit: Politics of Negative

Representation in *Chan Is Missing* (1982), Swan Kim

139

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

At the Threshold of Revelation: Intersectional Difference and Queer Utopia in <i>Angels in America</i> , Sarah Crockett	153
Social Constructions of Otherness in the United States: Four Latin American Examples, Susan Kenney	169
How to Teach a True Spokane Story: Learning Sherman Alexie's <i>Lone Ranger and Tonto Fisfight in Heaven</i> through Tim O'Brien's <i>The Things They Carried</i> , Michael Kaufmann	186
The Other Father in Barack Obama's <i>Dreams from My Father</i> , Robert Kyriakos Smith and King-Kok Cheung	203
Deconstructing the Urban Circuit: Gospel Musicals, Langston Hughes's Legacy, and Tyler Perry's Contemporary Influence, Phyllisa Deroze	217
The Jewish Dimension in Contemporary Latino Literature Bridget Kevane	235
Reading Terror, Reading Ourselves: Conflict and Uncertainty in Mohsin Hamid's <i>The Reluctant Fundamentalist</i> , Maryse Jayasuriya	249
Resources	
Multicultural Pluralism: A Variety of Possible Multicultural Approaches to Literature, Robert C. Evans	265
Chronology	273
Additional Works	279
Bibliography	283
About the Editor	287
Contributors	289
Glossary	293
Index	297

The Other Father in Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*

Robert Kyriakos Smith and King-Kok Cheung

Much has been written about the father mentioned in the title of Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father* (1995), the Kenyan namesake who sired and soon abandoned the forty-fourth president of the United States. Also well noted is Stanley Ann Dunham, Obama's white American mother who has her own biography, entitled *A Singular Woman* (2011). The collated material concerning this fleeting family of three lends itself to a simple math: Black father + White mother = Barack Obama; or, Africa + America = Barack Obama. But into these equations the present essay will introduce third terms: "Asian stepfather" and "Indonesia." For if Barack Obama's biography is to be in any way summed up, we must take into account both Lolo Soetoro (Obama's Indonesian stepfather) and the nation of Lolo's birth, a country where Obama spent a significant portion of his youth. Commentators' neglect of Lolo, especially, is a missed literary-critical opportunity we take advantage of in the following essay.

The fact that the title of Obama's memoir explicitly references only one father may be seen to compound the oversight, especially since "my father" is a position that the absentee Barack Sr., for the most part, vacates. However, "my father" is also fundamentally a function that several people in Barack Jr.'s life perform. Therefore, in a sense, the Father of Obama's title is always already multiple, pointing simultaneously to a biological father and to his surrogates. This penchant for semantic doubling, of signaling two (or more) meanings with one expression, in discursive repetitions of what a biracial son of three cultures already embodies, we contend, structures much of Obama's memoir. Put another way, in writing an autobiography under the putative rubric of his African father, Obama develops a rhetorical approach that conjoins effectively, if ironically, his multiracial and multicultural legacies.

Living in Indonesia

To make our case, we begin by sharing a taxi with a nine-year-old Obama and his mother en route to the American embassy in Djakarta in 1970:

The road to the embassy was choked with traffic: cars, motorcycles, tricycle rickshaws, buses and jitneys filled to twice their capacity, a procession of wheels and limbs all fighting for space in the midafternoon heat. We nudged forward a few feet, stopped, found an opening, stopped again. Our taxi driver shooed away a group of boys who were hawking gum and loose cigarettes, then barely avoided a motor scooter carrying an entire family on its back—father, mother, son, and daughter all leaning as one into a turn, their mouths wrapped with handkerchiefs to blunt the exhaust, a family of bandits. (Obama 28)

Why does this anecdote open Obama's second chapter? Why does Obama take this besieged route to begin the narration of his childhood years in Indonesia? In other words, where does this road promise to lead? The US Embassy is one answer, though our arrival to a site representing American interests seems literally and metaphorically unlikely, when in describing the encumbered road Obama "traffics" in cultural imperialist tropes that threaten to "choke" his undiplomatic prose. The portrait is unflattering in some respects. The passage suggests that Djakarta is a place where progress is frequently checked. There, brown boys' entrepreneurship is a nuisance; and, beyond the fact that their precarious position on the back of a motor scooter makes them susceptible to exhaust and to the narrator's convicting gaze, an Indonesian family is but another obstacle to be "avoided."

And yet, within just a few pages, the narrative bridges the distance between the inside and the outside of the taxi, as the parochial, if not ugly, American adolescent who looks askance at the "Third World Other" matures into the retrospective adult narrator remembering his own unconventional kin and the street kid he himself once was. To date-stamp this scene, Obama writes that he was "a nine-year-old boy" who "had lived in Indonesia for over three years" with his mother and stepfather, Stanley Ann and

Lolo Soetoro (Obama 29, 30). In 1970, not long after what "reports said . . . had been a bloodless coup" in which the military strongman Suharto replaced Indonesia's president Sukarno, followed by "one of the more brutal and swift campaigns of suppression in modern times," Stanley Ann's and Lolo's daughter, Maya, was born (41, 44). Therefore, within the first few years after the transition of power from Sukarno to Suharto, when Barack Obama was nine his blended family represented another "father, mother, son, and daughter all leaning as one into a turn" under perilous conditions. And of those gum and cigarette boys that the taxi driver repels, one boy might, at some other time, have been Obama himself. For, as he recalls, the "children of farmers, servants, and low-level bureaucrats had become my best friends, and together we ran the streets morning and night, hustling odd jobs" (36). Either the taxi window out of which Obama looks is a glass that reflects himself darkly; or, as the scene also hints, rather than being self-reflexive Obama is self-projecting, finding his doppelgängers in Indonesia where, like a certain Conradian narrator, he makes "secret sharers" of figures he encounters in Southeast Asia.¹

To explain Obama's double vision, our argument turns to Edward W. Said who, about quite another context, writes: "Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is contrapuntal." Said adds, "There is a unique pleasure in this sort of apprehension, especially if the exile is conscious of other contrapuntal juxtapositions that diminish orthodox judgment and elevate appreciative sympathy" (186). Here Said's reflections on exile are not unique to his subject, and therefore our appeal to him is not to make the young Obama an exile. That would be an arrogation. Instead we note only that as an expatriate he shares with Said's exile a "plurality of vision" that aptly characterizes the narration of Obama's multicultural childhood, especially his time in Indonesia. Extending Said's musical metaphor, it is as if, beginning with the memoir's title, Obama's dream of his biological father thrums only a ground bass,

above which treble notes—namely Obama's mother, stepfather, and Indonesia—sound.

The above-cited ride through Djakarta is as allegorical as the narrative of Obama's first encounter with the city three years earlier. After traveling from Hawaii to Indonesia with his mother, the six-year-old Obama that Lolo picks up from the airport is, for his age, typically inquisitive:

The streets became more congested . . . then the buildings grew taller, like buildings in Hawaii . . . When we passed a row of big houses with high hedges and sentry posts, my mother said something I couldn't entirely make out, something about the government and a man named Sukarno.

"Who's Sukarno?" I shouted from the backseat, but Lolo appeared not to hear me. Instead, he touched my arm and motioned ahead of us. "Look," he said, pointing upward. There, standing astride the road, was a towering giant at least ten stories tall, with the body of a man and the face of an ape.

"That's Hanuman," Lolo said as we circled the statue, "the monkey god." I turned around in my seat, mesmerized by the solitary figure . . . "He's a great warrior," Lolo said firmly. "Strong as a hundred men. When he fights the demons, he's never defeated." (Obama 32-33)

The question "Who's Sukarno?" is followed by one of Obama's first lessons in Indonesia: Not every question asked is answered. For Lolo, in another "bloodless," because rhetorical, "coup" replaces Sukarno—if only as a topic of conversation—with a mythical figure as "towering" as the formidable historical Suharto. At this point in Indonesia's history, to ask, as Obama does, about Sukarno is to look backwards, a perspective that Lolo appears not to want Obama to take; instead Lolo touches his stepson's arm and redirects him forward and upward. But Obama won't be blinkered, and his turning around in his seat to see Hanuman from more than one angle is indicative of Obama's narrative approach to his Indonesian experience. Taken together, the two anecdotes of Obama's car trips through Djakarta chart an interesting course wherein what

drives the plot is a series of what Said might call "contrapuntal juxtapositions": Obama emigrates from Hawaii to Indonesia and compares two archipelagos and two worlds ("First" and "Third"); two warriors, one mythical, one historical, compete (for attention) in the family car; and, as we have seen, the image of a "father, mother, son, and daughter all leaning as one into a turn" mirrors uncannily the Soetoro family's insecure trajectory. Allegorically, the oriental culture that Indonesia introduces into *Dreams from My Father* makes Indonesia function as a place that, for Obama, "gives rise to an awareness that is contrapuntal."

That Indonesia in Obama's memoir should function as a place where Obama's vision is pluralized is doubly fitting when we remember that here is where Lolo, Stanley Ann's second husband, becomes Obama's second father. Of importance to our argument is the fact that, in this proliferation of husbands and fathers, Lolo is counterpointed to Barack Sr. and to Stanley Ann, though on occasion the effect of this juxtaposition means that only one parent at a time can be foregrounded. For example: Obama's mother met her second husband where she had found her first, in Hawaii. It is there that Lolo, as Obama frames it, courts not Stanley Ann but his future father-in-law and stepson, who explains: "For two years, from the time I was four until I was six, [Lolo] endured endless hours of chess with Gramps [Obama's maternal grandfather] and long wrestling sessions with me" (Obama 31). The suggestion, of course, is that Stanley Ann's hand in marriage is what Lolo wins after several contests with her father and her son. Nevertheless, in what we must assume to be part of Lolo's strategic, if indirect, wooing of Stanley Ann, Lolo's most "endur[ing]" and physically intimate relations are between him, Obama, and Gramps. In another sense, for one chapter at least, Lolo also competes with Barack Sr. to be the titular father of Obama's memoir. But this is yet another competition between men for which Stanley Ann's sex appears to disqualify her as a contestant—though it can and should be argued that, because for much of her son's childhood she was a single parent, Stanley Ann often acted as both mother and father to Obama. But instead of competing with Barack Sr. (and Lolo) to be

the titular father of Obama's memoir, Stanley Ann's idealization of her son's absent father inadvertently diminishes Lolo's significant parental presence. It is only because Stanley Ann is so consistently his champion that Barack Sr. remains a competitor for his son's affection. Obama writes of his mother that "[i]ncreasingly, she would remind me of his [Barack Sr.'s] story, how he had grown up poor, in a poor country, in a poor continent; how his life had been hard, as hard as anything Lolo might have known. . . . He had led his life according to . . . principles that promised a higher form of power. It would follow his example, my mother decided. I had no choice. It was in the genes" (50). Here we find another oneiric interpreter in *Dreams from My Father* as Stanley Ann has a vision of the father that she then translates for the son. For Stanley Ann, speaking within the comparatively poor country of 1970s Indonesia, poverty is a great leveler; and, evidently sharing her son's preoccupation with juxtapositions, Lolo's and Barack Sr.'s separate histories of poverty allow Stanley Ann to assimilate to each other the "hard lives" of two husbands, two countries, two continents, and the international poor. What else is impoverished is her own contribution to her son. "You have me to thank for your eyebrows," she tells Obama. "But your brains, your character, you got from him [Barack Sr.]" (50). But with contrapuntal self-awareness Obama sees a side of himself that his mother refuses to acknowledge, and he attempts to recoup what Stanley Ann modestly disowns—the gifts she bequeaths to her son—when he suggests that in addition to his father's genes he inherits his mother's "decision." What Obama has to thank Lolo for is something Stanley Ann does not here recognize, as her simile replaces the Indonesian stepfather with the African father that the Indonesian stepfather replaced. Where Stanley Ann's literal genealogy would substitute one father figure for another, Obama prefers to multiply that figure as his literary autobiography (and, as we have argued, his title) accommodates, virtually simultaneously, several fathers: Barack Sr., Gramps, Lolo, even Stanley Ann.

"[D]espite his androcentric title," argues Tavia Nyong'o, "the parent that Obama consistently seeks to understand in *Dreams from My Father* is his mother, since it is *her* dreams that have

made him as much as any others" (n. pag., emphasis Nyong'o's). Yes, Obama does seek to understand his mother even though he makes "Father" the eponym. But rather than center consistently on any one parent, and given the biological father's absence and the stepfather's reticence, Obama's memoir, we argue, regularly makes Stanley Ann the necessary counter to which the two fathers must be poised. Because Barack Sr. is largely absent, the father's voice that may have said "I grew up poor, in a poor country, in a poor continent. My life has been hard, as hard as anything Lolo might have known" is, in the autobiography, often ventriloquized through another, here specifically the mother. But Barack Obama Sr. is not the only father for whom the narrative depends on Stanley Ann to mediate his, and his country's, history. Lolo Soetoro, as noted earlier, does not talk Indonesian politics. Consequently, Stanley Ann's introduction to Indonesian political theater must occur via:

Innuendo, half whispered asides; that's how she found out that we had arrived in Jakarta less than a year after one of the more brutal and swift campaigns of suppression in modern times. The idea frightened her, the notion that history could be swallowed up so completely, the same way the rich and loamy earth could soak up the rivers of blood that had coursed through the streets; the way people could continue about their business beneath giant posters of the new president as if nothing had happened. . . . As her circle of Indonesian friends widened, a few of them would be willing to tell her other stories—about the corruption that pervaded government agencies, the shakedowns by police and the military, entire industries carved out for the president's family and entourage. And with each new story, she would go to Lolo in private and ask him: "Is it true?"

He would never say. The more she asked, the more steadfast he became in his good-natured silence. "Why are you worrying about such talk?" he would ask her. "Why don't you buy a new dress for the party?" She had finally complained to one of Lolo's cousins, a pediatrician who had helped look after Lolo during the war. (Obama 44)

If for letting us in on state secrets we acknowledge only his mother's "widen[ing]" "circle of Indonesian friends," we neglect the

contracting triangle that Obama draws between his retrospective narrator, international political intrigue, and the diegetic focalization through Stanley Ann's consciousness (not to mention her American liberal's conscience). This triangulation is the process by which the narrative attempts to locate Lolo in recent Indonesian history. Lolo's response is to treat Stanley Ann as he has her child. Just as he "motioned ahead" to a six-year-old Obama asking a question about Indonesia's past, Lolo attempts to reorient the twenty-something Stanley Ann away from what is behind to what is before them: "Why are you worrying about such talk?" "Why don't you buy a new dress for the party?" Demonstrating that her son is a product of his mother, Stanley Ann redoubles her efforts to pluralize her vision of Indonesia and of her husband. After Lolo's protective but also infantilizing gesture, Stanley Ann, appropriately enough, seeks another opinion from "one of Lolo's cousins, a pediatrician." With the cousin serving as her informant, she (and the reader) learns what happened to Lolo after a precipitate summons back to Indonesia curtailed his university studies in Hawaii: "[T]he army officials took him away and questioned him. They told him that he had just been conscripted and would be going to the jungles of New Guinea for a year" (45). The doctor cousin then recommends (for Lolo) clemency and (for Stanley Ann) amnesia: "You shouldn't be too hard on Lolo. . . . Such times are best forgotten" (45).

The pediatrician's prescription, to accommodate her husband and to forget, only reiterates Lolo's advice to his wife. But Stanley Ann's reaction to this prescription allows Obama to repeat one of his favorite plot devices and have the mother, like her son, roam the Djakarta streets until she comes face-to-face with her Indonesian double:

My mother had left the cousin's house in a daze. Outside, the sun was high, the air full of dust, but instead of taking a taxi home, she began to walk without direction. She found herself in a wealthy neighborhood where the diplomats and generals lived in sprawling houses with tall wrought-iron gates. She saw a woman in bare feet and a tattered shawl wandering through an open gate and up the driveway, where a group of men were washing a fleet of Mercedes-Benzes and Land Rovers. One of

the men shouted at the woman to leave, but the woman stood where she was, a bony arm stretched out before her, her face shrouded in shadow. Another man finally dug in his pocket and threw out a handful of coins. The woman ran after the coins with terrible speed, checking the road suspiciously as she gathered them into her bosom. (Obama 45)

Here Obama's mother, on the "walk without direction" in which "she found herself," meets another "wandering" woman who, also like Stanley Ann, asks something of men on whom she is dependent. As if taking a page from Lolo's playbook, the men's attempt to make the supplicant stop "worrying" them is to buy her off, but the similar treatments that Stanley Ann and her fellow obstinate vagabond receive do nothing to satisfy their respective "suspicions." There, the correspondence between the two women abruptly stops. It is to be remembered that the beggar is Stanley Ann's *Indonesian* double—the adjective is to remind us that Stanley Ann's status as white, middle class, and American cannot be occluded. Consequently, in referencing the woman's "bare feet and tattered shawl," Obama immediately and explicitly marks her otherness even as he establishes her resemblance to his mother, who easily can afford "a new dress." The woman's indigence repeats Stanley Ann's predicament but with a significant difference; and the contrapuntal juxtaposition, instead of merely symmetrically assimilating one woman to another, also reminds us of the great discrepancy between what each woman lacks and the very uneven means to which each has recourse. Nevertheless, the rhetorical effect, again returning to Said, attempts to "diminish orthodox judgment [of] and elevate appreciative sympathy" for both women.

Meeting Barack Obama Sr.

Obama's biological father, however, suffers at least once under his son's contrapuntal mindset, resulting ultimately in an initially inharmonious face-off when the two Baracks meet in Hawaii. When Stanley Ann places together her two husbands the two men come out even, though she does privilege Barack Sr.'s "principles." But when her son juxtaposes his two fathers, he privileges, at least

at first, *Lolo's* principles. *Dreams from My Father's* second chapter is a veritable testament to the gospel according to Lolo, which abounds in his aphorisms like the following: "The first thing to remember is how to protect yourself" (Obama 35); "Sometimes you can't worry about hurt. Sometimes you worry only about getting where you have to go" (40); and, as if in oblique answer to his wife's and stepson's questions about Sukarno and Suharto: "Better to be strong. . . If you can't be strong, be clever and make peace with someone who's strong. But always better to be strong yourself. Always" (41). Vulnerability, injury, and weakness are threats to self-preservation that Lolo teaches his stepson to shun. Therefore, after Obama writes that "it was to Lolo that I turned for guidance and instruction" (38), we can trace back to steppaternal influence the unsparring eye with which Obama receives his biological father upon their first and only reunion back in Hawaii at Christmas 1971, about which Obama remembers:

I watched him [Obama's biological father] carefully. . . . He was much thinner than I had expected, the bones of his knees cutting the legs of his trousers in sharp angles. . . . Beside him, a cane with a blunt ivory head leaned against the wall. . . . His horn-rimmed glasses reflected the light of the lamp so I couldn't see his eyes very well, but when he took the glasses off. . . I saw that they were slightly yellow, the eyes of someone who's had malaria more than once. There was a fragility about his frame, I thought, a caution when he lit a cigarette or reached for his beer. (65)

Obama describes his birth father's lap as positively inhospitable. The man is no Hanuman-like warrior, for his appearance and behavior make legible the several personal and professional setbacks (a car accident and political blacklisting) that have defeated him. And what with his dependence on prosthetics (the cane, the horn-rimmed glasses) and stimulants (the cigarette and beer) and his emaciated appearance overall, Barack Sr. presents the image of manhood that Lolo has taught Barack Jr. is unworthy of embrace. Thus it is no wonder that when his father "crouched down and put his arms around" him, Obama admits, "I let my arms hang at my sides" (65). The young Barack does not here warmly welcome his

father back to America; his attitude tellingly anticipates the time when Obama will find his idealized African father incompatible with what he will discover later about American "blackness." "[M]ost black folks," writes Obama of African Americans, "weren't like the father of my dreams, the man in my mother's stories, full of high-blown ideals. . . . They were more like my stepfather, Lolo, practical people who knew life was too hard to judge each other's choices, too messy to live according to abstract ideals" (278). In a memoir about a biracial but African American-identified man with an Indonesian childhood and a spectral African father, it is no accident that the Indonesian stepfather who raised Obama should exemplify the lived-experience of African Americans while Obama's largely absent African biological father belongs to the realm of the imagination, to "dreams" and "stories." Albert U. Turner Jr. is partially correct when he observes: "In absence and presence, Barack Hussein Obama, Sr. is also a prop in Obama's narrative" (20). Indeed, when it appears that Barack Sr. stepped out of a Chinua Achebe novel about an idealistic African for whom Things Fall Apart, and when Lolo's Indonesia continues to be a mysterious and secret-ridden island chain reminiscent of what Stanley Ann's father remembers "from reading Joseph Conrad as a boy" (Obama 31), what better way is there to set off Barack Obama Jr.'s only-in-America success story? But we need not scoff at the unusual calculus by which Obama constructs a black identity. For Obama, until he was ten years old, his other models of black masculinity could only be accessed via a contrapuntal rerouting through Indonesian friends' proximate brownness and a white woman's lessons in African American history—in Obama's words: "If I told [my mother] about the goose-stepping demonstrations my Indonesian Boy Scout troop performed in front of the president, she might mention a different kind of march, a march of children no older than me, a march for freedom" (50-1). Here goose-stepping and the march of civil rights are two rhythms Obama superimposes rhetorically into a syncopated drumbeat that supports his contrapuntal phrases.

After he turns ten years old, his mother sends Obama back to Hawaii to attend school at Punahou Academy, a site that, as

we shall see, enables more “contrapuntal juxtapositions that diminish orthodox judgment and elevate appreciative sympathy.” In December 1971 Barack Obama Sr. is [re]introduced not only to his son. He also has been invited to give a lecture at his son’s school, about which episode we give Junior’s account:

“We have a special treat for you today,” Miss Hefty began.

“Barry Obama’s father is here . . . all the way from Kenya, in Africa, to tell us about his country.”

The other kids looked at me as my father stood up, and I held my head stiffly, trying to focus on a vacant point on the blackboard behind him. He had been speaking for some time before I could finally bring myself back to the moment. He was leaning against Miss Hefty’s thick oak desk and describing the deep gash in the earth where mankind had first appeared. . . . And he told us of Kenya’s struggle to be free, how the British had wanted to stay and unjustly rule the people, just as they had in America; how many had been enslaved only because of the color of their skin, just as they had in America; but that Kenyans, like all of us in the room, longed to be free and develop themselves through hard work and sacrifice.

When he finished, Miss Hefty was absolutely beaming with pride. All my classmates applauded heartily, and a few struck up the courage to ask questions. . . . The bell rang for lunch, and Mr. Eldredge [Obama’s math teacher] came up to me.

“You’ve got a pretty impressive father.” (Obama 69-70)

The symmetries above are exponential. Before paraphrasing his father’s speech, Obama reminds us that he is his father’s double, even if only nominally; for his father’s class lecture gives both Barack Obamas the opportunity to speak about men named Barack Obama. Indeed, Obama’s classmates refuse immediately to distinguish one Barack from the other, which explains why, as Obama relates it, after Barack Sr. is introduced, “The other kids looked at me as my father stood up.” Thereafter begins the rhetorical rehabilitation of Obama’s biological father that, if it doesn’t make him another Hanuman, does make him nonetheless “pretty impressive.” Instead

of an invalid’s cane, what now supports him is “Miss Hefty’s thick oak desk,” the locus of pedagogical authority. We discover that the junior Obama and his mother haven’t exhausted *Dreams from My Father’s* cultural comparisons when Barack Sr. makes “just as they had in America” the refrain in his hymn to Kenyan independence. Of course the tacit cultural comparison here is that between the Indonesian and the African father. But the latter is the victor in this contrapuntal rematch. Unlike Lolo, Barack Sr. is more than eager to rehearse his country’s history; where Lolo will look only forward, Barack Sr. is unafraid to return even to the very origin of the human species. When the father now before him is a fearsome man others must “str[rike] up the courage” to approach, Barack Jr. learns that strength and perseverance aren’t only Lolo’s virtues. In the aforementioned “Reflections on Exile,” Said urges: “Regard experiences as if they were about to disappear” (185). Something of this sentiment seems to suffuse Obama’s eulogy to his father’s classroom performance. “Two weeks later he was gone,” Obama records (Obama 70). He never saw his father again.

In telling the story of his father, Obama participates in a family tradition, one of multiple voices conjuring the departed Barack Sr. into being. Obama describes why and how his father was invoked: “He had left Hawaii back in 1963, when I was only two years old, so that as a child I knew him only through the stories that my mother and grandparents told” (Obama 5). Obama characterizes these stories as:

compact, apocryphal, told in rapid succession in the course of one evening, then packed away for months, sometimes years, in my family’s memory. Like the few photographs of my father that remained in the house, old black-and-white studio prints that I might run across while rummaging through the closets in search of Christmas ornaments or an old snorkle [sic] set. At the point where my own memories begin, my mother had already begun a courtship with the man who would become her second husband, and I sensed without explanation why the photographs had to be stored away. (8-9)

If his autobiography’s title suggests that he is caught up in the cult of his father’s reputedly magnetic personality, here Obama is an

acolyte who celebrates Barack Sr. only seasonally, that is, partially. For his son, Barack Sr. is a father whose history, metaphorically, can be retrieved at any time from the storehouse of (mostly someone else's) memory but whose image, however, literally is closeted—out of sight but, nonetheless, retained. However, as we have argued, Barack Sr. is not alone as Obama's father. The eponymous Father, perhaps even Obama's primal father, the father "at the point where [his] memories begin," is a pastiche, a medley composed of his African biological father, images of that father that Obama's white American mother and grandparents caption, and the Indonesian man who courts, and later marries, Stanley Ann.

Notes

1. In Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" (1910), the first-person narrator is an unnamed ship-captain in the Gulf of Siam (now the Gulf of Thailand) who secrets aboard ship a fugitive sailor who proves to be the captain's veritable double.
2. For a reading that links *Dreams from My Father* to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Chinua Achebe's writings, see Zeitler.

Works Cited

- Nyong'o, Tavia. "Barack Hussein Obama, or, The Name of the Father." *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 7.2 (Spring 2009): n. pag. Web. 8 Dec. 2015. http://sfolonline.barnard.edu/africana/nyongo_01.htm
- Obama, Barack. *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. 2nd ed. Three Rivers Press, 2004.
- Said, Edward W. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Harvard UP, 2000.
- Scott, Janny. *A Singular Woman: The Untold Story of Barack Obama's Mother*. Riverhead Books, 2011.
- Turner, Albert U., Jr. "In No Other Nation Is My Story Even Possible: Collective Narrative, Self-Narrative, and Prosthetic Memory in Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance." *Critical Essays on Barack Obama: Re-affirming the Hope, Re-vitalizing the Dream*. Eds. Melvin B. Rahming and Delores P. Aldridge. Cambridge Scholars, 2012, pp. 3-22. Proquest. Web. 8 Dec. 2015.
- Zeitler, Michael. "An Image of Africa: Race and Identity in Barack Obama's Rewriting of Conrad's Heart of Darkness." *Race and Identity in Barack Obama's Dreams from My Father: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Eds. Michael Zeitler and Charlene T. Evans. Edwin Mellen, 2012, pp. 115-32.