

Obama Dreams of Brazil: A Mulatto in the Land of Racial Democracy

DREAMS FROM MY FATHER REVISITED: FROM U.S. BLACK TO BRAZILIAN MULATTO

In early April 2008, seven months prior to the U.S. presidential election, Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father* was released in Brazil. Acquired by Editora Gente, a publisher specializing in self-help books, the autobiography quickly captured the attention of Brazilian readers. Immediately after its release, *A origem de meus sonhos* made the best-seller list (remaining there for one week) and went through six editions. According to Carolina Rocha, senior editor at Editora Gente, the publisher decided to acquire the second edition of *Dreams from My Father* because Obama was one of the most important global figures at the time, and the book fit the publisher's catalogue, which included autobiographies of world leaders (personal interview). Moreover, the idea of the self-made mulatto who reached unattainable goals fit well with the Brazilian publisher's editorial formula. Editora Gente's web page delineates four main trends: happiness, success, wealth, and future ("Linhas editoriais"). Obama certainly represents the epitome of all of those: the working-class biracial individual who surpassed racial prejudice and economic constraints to become the leader of the world's most powerful nation, pointing to a brilliant future for race relations everywhere.

Reviews by writers in the Brazilian press and independent bloggers unanimously praised the autobiography. These reviews highlighted the reasons the autobiography was so successful in the Brazilian literary

market: the combination of universal themes (the search for identity, overcoming obstacles, and individual triumph) with national aspirations (the “cosmopolitan mulatto”).¹ Some emphasized Obama’s quest for personal identity, others that Obama was not a “typical” African-American. Amanda Cordeiro remarks: “Ele [Obama] conta sobre sua infância, *como ser ‘mulato’ num país onde só existem negros, brancos e latinos*. ... Todo negão com problemas de auto estima devia ler esse livro e ver como um negro pode *se impor e ter orgulho* de ser quem ele é *sem ficar bancando o coitadinho afrodescendente*. Black power total” [He tells about his childhood, *how to be ‘mulatto’ in a country where only blacks, whites, and Latinos exist*. ... All blacks with problems of self-esteem should read this book to see how a black person can *self-affirm and have pride without claiming to be a poor Afro-descendent*. Total black power] (emphasis mine). Cordeiro focuses on Obama’s “mulatto-ness,” placing him at a third, interstitial space between blacks and whites. The mulatto Obama does not succumb to the plight of young African-Americans—poor education, joblessness, and recurrent incarceration—and affirms his self, constructing a positive identity.² The successful mulatto prevails; black power is in the individual “hero” Obama, in a process that undermines the collective black community.

Paulo Fagundes Visentini also notes that “Obama *não é um afro-americano típico, carregado de ressentimentos sociais*. Ele trabalhou nos guetos, sentiu a discriminação pessoalmente, mas *tem um outro tipo de estrutura mental*. Numa América que passou do otimismo liberal do ‘Fim da História’ de Fukuyama ao ‘Choque de Civilizações’ de Huntington e à Guerra ao Terrorismo, Obama se revela um cosmopolita, de que tanto a América necessita hoje” [Obama *is not a typical Afro-American, filled with social resentments*. He worked in ghettos, felt the discrimination in person, but *has another type of mental structure*. In an America that passed from the liberal optimism of Fukuyama’s “End of History” to Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” and the War on Terrorism, Obama emerges as a cosmopolitan, which America so needs today] (emphasis mine). Despite being discriminated against, Obama surpasses obstacles to forge “another type of mental structure,” devoid of social resentment and defeatism. On the contrary, he constructs himself not as an African-American man, but as a cosmopolitan. Again, blackness gives place to a more universal—and appealing—conception: Obama is, at the same time, paradoxically one (unique) and all (familiar).

In his review, Maurício Santoro emphasizes Obama's search for identity, comparing it to the mythical Greek quests: "a história de um rapaz tentando descobrir quem é, e o que pode esperar da vida, a partir da busca por entender a trajetória extraordinária de seu pai, também chamado Barack Obama. A trama tem ressonância mítica: lembrei da Odisséia, de Têlemaco dizendo que gostaria de ter conhecido o pai, e partindo para encontrar Ulisses" [the story of a young man trying to discover who he is, and what he can expect of life, which has as the starting point the extraordinary trajectory of his father, also named Barack Obama. The plot has mythical resonance: it reminded me of Telemachus' Odyssey, (Telemachus) saying that he would like to have known his father, and going away to meet Ulysses]. "It is a spectacular book ... very rich in human observations of a variety of themes," Santoro concludes, noting that the autobiography reveals the personality of a man who might become the most powerful man in the world. Santoro does not focus on racial issues; on the contrary, he highlights the individual quest for identity (raising Obama to a heroic mythical status) and his "human observations" (equalizing the myth to that of a typical man). Hence, to Santoro, Obama is concomitantly ordinary and extraordinary, which helps to create an iconic figure that is widely accepted and greatly revered. Despite having high praise for the autobiography, Santoro is very critical of its Brazilian Portuguese version, especially the wrong translation of the title that "desvirtua o fio condutor da obra" [distorts the book's leitmotif].

The Brazilian readership could certainly identify with aspects of Obama's biography, drawing parallels with the nation's supposedly inclusive racial system, which permits a more fluid conception of race identity. *Dreams from My Father* is constructed as a Bildungsroman, in which the homodiegetic narrator surpasses social, economic, and racial obstacles to be assimilated into society, consequently displaying the rhetoric of African-American integrationism (Turner Jr. 15) and focusing on progress toward social harmony (6). Indeed, as Bertram D. Ashe asserts, "Obama's quest for identity is less about being biracial and more about being bicultural," noting that a more "hybrid, fluid, and elastic sense of black identity" marks the autobiography (103). Ashe goes as far as affirming that decentering and destabilizing black identity are at the core of *Dreams'* authorial project (107). Ignacio López-Calvo also indicates that Obama "embraces more inclusive, open-ended, and across-racial line alternatives" (79), complicating the traditional black and white dualism in U.S. society (66). Although racial conflicts dominate the

narrative, causing the narrator's identity crisis, Obama seems to carve a path of racial redemption that allows him to surpass feelings of alienation and displacement in order to be incorporated into mainstream society. Therefore, instead of becoming "the mixed blood, the divided soul, the ghostly image of the tragic mulatto trapped between two worlds" (Obama, "Introduction" 16), as he describes in the introduction of the second edition of *Dreams from My Father*, he thus becomes the "cultural mulatto," who, educated by multiracial cultures, effortlessly navigates the white world (Ellis qtd. in Ashe 105).³

Elements such as a fluid racial identity and the self-assured "cultural mulatto" (which can be equated to the "cosmopolitan mulatto" of the reviews) appeal to Brazilian sensibilities. Since the nineteenth century, Brazilian social scientists have promoted the idea of interracial breeding as a solution to the surplus of blacks. Racial mixing provided Brazil with a more malleable and pluralistic scale of social classification and established the mulatto as the cornerstone of Brazilian national identity; nonetheless, it is also important to note that racial mixing promoted a whitening ideology: as Thomas Skidmore notes, the general idea that "whiter is better" is prevalent in Brazil (44). Yet what remains in the Brazilian collective unconscious is the positive stock value of *mestiçagem* [miscegenation], the conception that a fluid racial system allowed for the construction of a more inclusive society.

At the height of the discussion on the implementation of affirmative action policies in the first decade of the twentieth-first century, journalist Ali Kamel's controversial best-seller *Nós Não Somos Racistas* was released in 2006. In the book, the author—described as one who seeks to defend Brazil from undesirable racially imported ideas—lectures readers about the implementation of social policies targeting the black population: these alien concepts would transform Brazilian society into a biracial nation, where harmony among races would no longer exist. Embraced by some intellectuals and rejected by others, including leaders of the black movement, *Nós Não Somos Racistas* has remained at the heart of the heated racial debates in Brazil.⁴

In his article "Barack Obama," Kamel writes about the 2008 U.S. election a few days prior to the popular vote. The journalist celebrates Obama's candidacy and possible victory as proof that the world is becoming post-racial and forging a path beyond racial differences. He thus praises the *mestiçagem* as the nation's foundational myth and condemns the "racists" who want to transform Brazil into a biracial, racially divided

country. Kamel affirms that Obama goes beyond the dichotomy of black and white to embrace all people because, after all, “races do not exist” (“Barack Obama”). Anthropologist Yvone Maggie, a vehement opponent of racially based affirmative action policies, follows the same arguments as Kamel: right after Obama’s victory, Maggie laments that Brazil “is following a backwards path” by institutionalizing “race” in Brazil. To Maggie, the supporters of “identity politics” are prompting a racialization of public policies and national traditions (897) and creating “uma interpretação [do Brasil] diversa da nossa mistura e do nosso ideal” [an interpretation (of Brazil) that differs from our mixture and our ideals] (899). They are also currently forging the myth that racism has been active and widespread in the country. The anthropologist, therefore, quotes isolated cases of racism that captured society’s attention to affirm Brazil’s true vocation: being an “ethnic and social democracy” (899). Maggie opposes a bipolar racial system, observing that when the United States lived under Jim Crow laws and race hatred, Brazilians “estávamos irmanados contra o racismo” [were united against racism] (399). Nevertheless, with Barack Obama, the United States seems to have overcome its racial problems. Maggie salutes the president because he distanced himself from a racial discourse, choosing to represent a universal way of being American and representing all Americans (897); he thus “fala para as comunidades das nações e não para a comunidade [de negros]” [speaks to the communities of nations and not to the community (of blacks)] (902).

Kamel and Maggie conveniently “misread” Obama—an operation that the Brazilian media frequently perform—to ratify their own idealized construction of race relations in Brazil (a notion that continues to sustain racism as an exception, and not as structurally embedded in society). Although Obama constructs himself as a multicultural and multiracial candidate, he does not reject race, as the reflections in *Dreams from My Father* and his speeches demonstrate. Furthermore, by reading Obama’s candidacy as a sign of a post-racial—more “civilized”—world, they blatantly disregard the rising racism during the U.S. presidential campaign, which triggered personal attacks against Obama (e.g. criticism of his friendship with Reverend Wright and the allegations of the Birther movement).

Muniz Sodré, sociologist and activist of the black movement, also deconstructs Kamel’s and Maggie’s idyllic readings of Obama’s accomplishments and beliefs. In “Um particular sobre Obama,” he notes that the president’s personal history—his biracial origin and multiethnic

upbringing—did not blind him to racist violence; on the contrary, to Obama the word “mestizo” did not evoke a “candura conciliatória” [untainted conciliation], but described a repressive and violent world. Muniz also reminds readers that without a history of black struggles and further achievements, Obama would not have been possible: “Obama ... é o resultado de uma luta civil empreendida pela comunidade negra norte-americana, na qual o estabelecimento de quota foi uma importante conquista política” [Obama is the result of a civil struggle promoted by the North American black community, of which the establishment of racial quotas was an important political achievement]. Obama is certainly well aware of the abovementioned issues.

Still, the idea that Brazil has constructed a society devoid of racism has proved to have tremendous endurance: the myth of racial democracy is so strongly rooted in the nation’s collective unconscious that many Brazilians continue to believe in the affable idea of racial equality. Thus, it is not surprising that the Brazilian Portuguese translation of *Dreams from My Father* helped to highlight what readers might have perceived as positive elements in the narrative on the one hand, while deemphasizing the effects of Obama’s critical racial assessments on the other. In fact, one finds minor but significant differences between the U.S. and Brazilian editions. Broadway Books’ cover (Fig. 2.1) features three pictures, presenting a triad that encapsulates the idea of African Diaspora: on the left side, Habiba Akumu Hussein, Obama’s maternal grandmother, holds the young Barack Obama Sr.; on the right side, Stanley Dunham, Obama’s maternal grandfather, smiles next to the young Ann Dunham; and in the middle, Obama displays a serious and reflexive expression, looking pensively to a distant point ahead, as if he was searching for something impenetrable, longing for the past, or yearning for the future.

The pictorial representation evokes an interesting dialectic: two different worlds that unite and produce a third, novel component, Obama, originally informed by two cultures, and yet himself a significantly new and altered element. As the biography illustrates, Obama (the synthesis) would not erase the thesis (West) and antithesis (East), but would transform them by his personal multicultural experiences and quest for social and political knowledge. In this sense, Obama’s search for an identity is a dynamic process, in which historical roots are as important as the collection of experiences he acquires throughout his youth and adulthood.

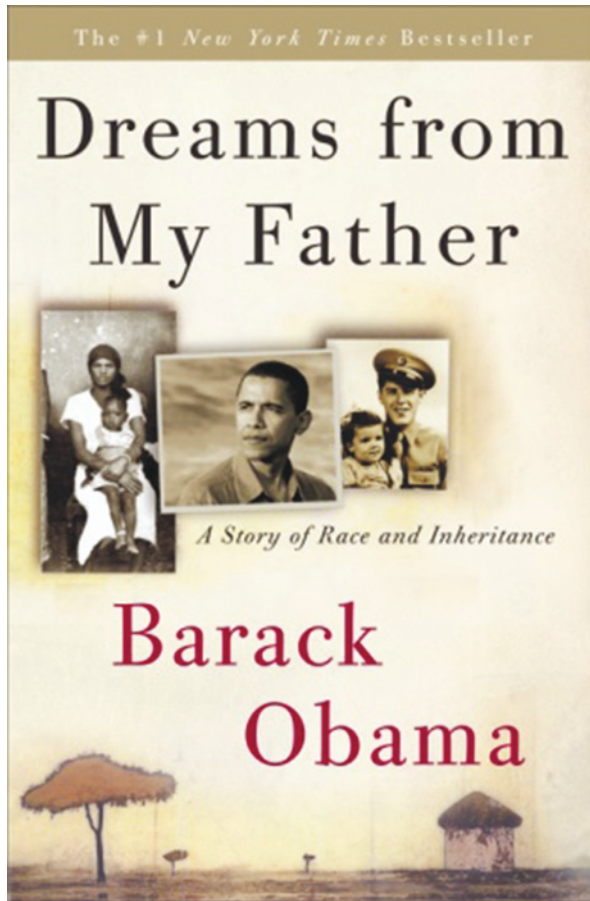


Fig. 2.1 Cover of *Dreams from My Father*. Source Broadway Books, a division of Random House

The title, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, centers on the paternal figure, mostly absent and yet all encompassing, throughout Obama's story. Claire Joly indicates that the "dream" was not used as "a pleasant fantasy (as opposed to a nightmare), but more in the sense of what which is imagined (the father) because it has no tangible reality" (77). Obama, therefore, constructs his father using fragments

of family stories, a few pictures, and personal speculation.⁵ Moreover, the “inheritance” reinstalls the paternal presence into the identitary subject construction,⁶ unwillingly or not, and the category “race” gains new life and importance in the light of the protagonist’s upbringing in a racially divided country (even though the book depicts Hawaii as a site of relative racial and ethnic diversity and tolerance). Analyzing the autobiography’s epigraph, Joly notes that the “we” of the quote represents all humanity, but the words “strangers” and “sojourners” highlight “the physical and emotional displacement of the African diaspora” (76).⁷

The Brazilian translation of Obama’s autobiography, however, downplays the construction of the imagined father and mythical Africa. The title *Dreams from My Father* becomes “The origin of my dreams” [*A origem dos meus sonhos*] in Portuguese, and the subtitle “A Story of Race and Inheritance” is completely erased. This section of this chapter underlines, therefore, that the title’s translation fabricates the annihilation of the father figure related to Africa in order to focus on the personal achievements of the individual mulatto. In this sense, the use of “my dreams” conveys an idea more attuned to the celebrated Brazilian notion of *mestiçagem*; “the origin of my dreams” connects to the materialization of “my dreams,” although it is not clear by the title’s translation how “my dreams” originated or what they truly are. The “inheritance” (Africa) and “race” (blackness) are conveniently deleted, giving place to the mestizo subject, one who is an opportune product of a whitening process. In this sense, the Obama of the Brazilian publisher stands alone and victorious on the cover; his face and trademark smile take center stage, evoking more the optimism of an existing presence than the struggles of a historical past (Fig. 2.2).

Although Obama’s personal story highlights crucial issues of race and class in the United States, in the comparison of the English original and the Brazilian Portuguese translation, this study concentrates on a short passage in the book: the episode in which Stanley Ann Dunham, Obama’s mother, watches Marcel Camus’ film *Black Orpheus* (1959). The movie was based on the Brazilian poet and composer Vinícius de Moraes’ play *Orfeu da Conceição*. Moraes transposes the Greek myth to a *favela* [slum] in Rio de Janeiro, where Orpheus is a poor Afro-Brazilian *samba* composer, who hopes to achieve fame and fortune with his music, and attracts Eurydice, a naïve and pretty black woman from the countryside, who recently migrated to the city. Their romance develops against the background of Brazilian *carnaval* and, despite the joyous

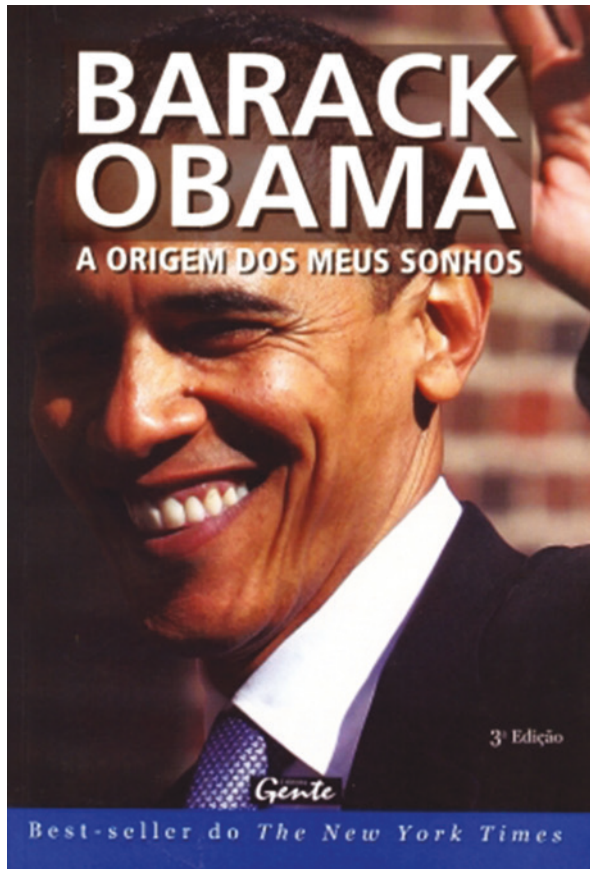


Fig. 2.2 Cover of *A origem dos meus sonhos*. Source Editora Gente

celebration, Moraes retains the myth's tragic ending: in trying to escape an inexorable fate, the two lovers meet Death (a character in the play) and perish.

Brazilians were very critical of Camus' film. Film critics were reluctant to embrace a movie by a French director with a French production, in which one of the protagonists, Eurydice, was the American-born French actress Marpessa Dawn. Moreover, they also lashed out at the movie's romanticized version of poverty, the sensualization of black people, and

the overexposure of celebratory images, where *carnaval* festivities permeated the society's entire structure (M. Santos, "The Brazilian Remake of the Orpheus Legend" 50).

Nevertheless, *Black Orpheus* received many international accolades: in 1959, it won the Oscar for Best Foreign Film; received the *Palme d'Or* at the Cannes Film Festival; was considered the Best Foreign Film and the Best Film by the New York Film Critics' Circle and the British Academy respectively; and was awarded the Golden Globe Award in 1960 (M. Santos, "*Black Orpheus* and the Merging of Two Brazilian Nations" 108). Foreign audiences were clearly fascinated by the idyllic version of poverty in the Brazilian *favelas*, the dazzling images of *carnaval*, and the exoticized Afro-Brazilian subjects. This strange yet exuberant and colorful universe captured the imagination of Obama's mother, as described in *Dreams from My Father*.

Ann Dunham watched the movie when she was young, and she loved *Black Orpheus* so much she insisted her son see the movie with her when Obama was attending Columbia University in New York. Below I transpose this passage from the original book, followed by the Portuguese translation:

One evening, while thumbing through *The Village Voice*, my mother's eyes lit on an advertisement for a movie, *Black Orpheus*, that was showing downtown. My mother insisted that we go see it that night; she said it was the first foreign film she had ever seen.

"I was only sixteen then," she told us as we entered the elevator. "I'd just been accepted to the University of Chicago—Gramps hadn't told me yet that he wouldn't let me go—and I was there for the summer, working as an au pair. It was the first time that I'd ever been really on my own. Gosh, I felt like such an adult. And when I saw this film, I thought it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen."

We took a cab to the revival theater where the movie was playing. The film, a groundbreaker of sorts due to its mostly black, Brazilian cast, had been made in the fifties. The story line was simple: the myth of the ill-fated lovers Orpheus and Eurydice set in the favelas of Rio during Carnival. In Technicolor splendor, set against scenic hills, the black and brown Brazilians sang and danced and strung guitars like carefree birds in colorful plumage. About halfway through the movie, I decided that I'd seen enough, and turned to my mother to see if she might be ready to go. But her face, lit by the blue glow of the screen, was set in a *wistful gaze*. At that

moment, I felt as if I were being given a window into her heart, the unreflective heart of her youth. I suddenly realized that the depiction of *child-like blacks* I was now seeing on the screen, the reverse image of Conrad's dark savages, was what my mother had carried with her to Hawaii all those years before, a reflection of the simple fantasies that had been forbidden to a white, middle-class girl from Kansas, the promise of another life, warm, sensual, exotic, different.

I turned away, embarrassed for her, irritated with the people around me. ... I left the movie theater with my mother and sister. The emotions between the races could never be pure; even love was tarnished by the desire to find in *the other some element that was missing in ourselves*. Whether *we sought out our demons or salvation, the other race would always remain just that: menacing, alien, and apart*. (127–128, emphasis mine)

[Uma noite enquanto folheava o jornal *The Village Voice*, os olhos de minha mãe se iluminaram com o anúncio de um filme, *Orfeu Negro*, que estava em cartaz no centro da cidade. Minha mãe insistiu para que fôssemos vê-lo naquela noite: ela disse que esse foi o primeiro filme estrangeiro que ela já tinha visto na vida.

— Eu só tinha 16 anos na ocasião — ela nos contou ao entrarmos no elevador—Havia acabado de ser aceita para a Universidade de Chicago (vovô não tinha me falado ainda que não me deixaria ir) e estava lá durante o verão, trabalhando na casa de uma família. Foi a primeira vez que estive realmente sozinha, por minha conta. Nossa, eu me senti adulta. E quando assisti a esse filme, pensei que era a coisa mais bonita que eu já tinha visto.

Tomamos um táxi para o cinema. O filme, inovador com seu elenco principalmente de negros brasileiros, havia sido produzido na década de 1950. O enredo era simples: o mito grego dos amantes desventurados, Orfeu e Eurídice, ambientado nas favelas do Rio de Janeiro durante o Carnaval. Em technicolor esplendoroso, e tendo como fundo morros cênicos verdes, os brasileiros negros e mulatos cantavam, dançavam e tocavam violão, como pássaros despreocupados de plumagem colorida. No meio do filme, resolvi que já tinha visto o bastante e virei para a minha mãe para saber se ela gostaria de ir embora. Mas seu rosto, iluminado pelo brilho azul da tela, estava tomado por um *ar nostálgico*. Naquele momento, senti como se uma janela tivesse sido aberta para o meu coração, o coração irrefletido da sua juventude. Subitamente percebi que *a representação dos jovens negros*, que eu via agora na tela, a imagem inversa dos sombrios selvagens de Joseph Conrad, era o que minha mãe havia levado com ela para o Haváí muitos anos antes, uma reflexão das fantasias simples que haviam sido

proibidas a uma garota de classe média branca do Kansas, a promessa de uma outra vida: quente, sensual, exótica, diferente.

Eu me virei, envergonhado por ela, irritado com as pessoas ao meu redor. ... Ao deixar o cinema com a minha mãe e irmã (eu carregava um pensamento): as emoções entre as raças nunca poderiam ser puras; mesmo o amor era maculado pelo desejo de encontrar *no outro algum elemento que estava perdido em nós mesmos*. Não importa se *procuramos nossos demônios ou nossa salvação, a outra raça sempre será apenas isso: ameaçadora, estranha e distante*.] (141–142, emphasis mine)

Obama has an epiphany when observing his mother, who seemed to be hypnotized by the cheerful and colorful images: the heart of her youth, naïve and yet full of stereotypes, equates to the heart of darkness of Joseph Conrad's novel. The negative vision of the primitive and savage is replaced by a more affable, but still stereotyped, portrayal of blacks as infantile and untroubled. Conrad is mentioned three times in the autobiography. The first time is when Obama's grandfather says he has read the famous author, becoming fascinated by the descriptions of lands of great mystery and enchantment (curiously, emulating the same sentiment that Ann Dunham displays when watching the movie) (*Dreams from My Father* 45). The second mention is by Obama himself, when he tells a female colleague at Occidental College that *Heart of Darkness* is "a racist book," but he reads the novel because it is a course assignment and it teaches him "about white people" and "their demons" (109), which parallels the reflection on Camus's movie and his mother's reaction. The third time concludes Obama's thoughts, as the abovementioned passage demonstrates: "Whether we sought out *our demons or salvation, the other race would always remain just that: menacing, alien, and apart*" (128, emphasis mine).⁸ Therefore, a circularity underlines Obama's reflections on Joseph Conrad, his familial experiences, and white people's perceptions of the "other."

This episode, although brief, is also crucial to understanding that Obama's critical perspective of a vision that celebrates an exotic and tropical nation, where race relations are purportedly harmonized by Afro-Brazilian cultural expressions: his critical assessment sharply opposes the notion of racial democracy. Paradoxically, some Brazilian readers used the same passage as an example of Brazil's harmonious race relations.

Clearly, Obama was not impressed with *Black Orpheus*, and he even felt uncomfortable with the manner in which blacks were portrayed: he

thought the movie was boring and presented a series of racial stereotypes. Nonetheless, the Brazilian Portuguese translation seeks to minimize Obama's critical perception of the movie and, consequently, to preserve Brazil as a positive site of race relations. The focus here is mainly on the phrases "wistful gaze" and "depiction of childlike blacks," which were (mis)translated as "ar nostálgico" [nostalgic air] and "representação dos jovens negros" [representation of young blacks].

The word "gaze" has strong social and political implications, as it suggests the unidirectional and "exoticized" manner in which the Western spectator looks at the cultural "others." In his classic article "The Other Question," Homi Bhabha examines the matrixes of colonial discourse and its ideological construction of "otherness." To Bhabha, understanding "the productivity of colonial power" is crucial to recognizing that "otherness" entails, at the same time, "an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity," because "the body is always simultaneously inscribed in both the economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination and power" (19).

Placing the stereotype at the core of colonial discourse construction, the philosopher sets out not to solely focus on ideological misrepresentations, but to emphasize the "stereotype as an ambivalent mode of knowledge and power," of which the convergence of discourse and politics sets "the meaning of oppression and discrimination" (18). To Bhabha, the stereotype is, at the same time, a fixity and repeatability, constructing a regimen of "truth" that naturalizes the subject "other." Repetition helps to affix the unfamiliar to normative categories, in a process that concomitantly provokes delight and fear. In this sense, the stereotype is also fetish and phobia; in other words, a desire for the original moment of "wholeness"/similarity—"All humans have the same skin/race/culture"—(fetish), and the horror caused by "the return of the oppressed," which contains "stereotypes of savagery, cannibalism, lust, and anarchy," (phobia) (25–27). In establishing a link between the stereotype and the fetish, Bhabha is drawing from Freud's theory of castration—fetish is the desire for the original moment prior to the penis loss, and phobia is the fear of castration: "For the scene of fetishism is also the scene of the reactivation and repetition of primal fantasy—the subject's desire for a pure origin that is always threatened by its division, for the subject must be gendered to be engendered, to be spoken" (Bhabha 27). The racial stereotype of colonial discourse longs for an original moment of wholeness

("All humans have the same skin/race/culture"), while, at the same time, reproducing lack and difference ("Some humans do not have the same skin/race/culture").

Bhabha also notes that the stereotype entails a fantasy; that is, a fantasy of the original wholesome moment that becomes threatened by difference. By disavowal and fixation, the colonial subject seeks to return "to the narcissism of the Imaginary and its identification of an ideal ego that is white and whole" (28). Here Bhabha is drawing from Lacan's "imaginary order"; that is, the mirror stage when the child has a coherent image of him/herself through a specular image in the mirror and recognizes the self as "I," but is still the same unity as the world and the mother. The child misrecognizes the image as a whole self, as the image does not correspond to the real child; it is thus a mere fantasy. As the child acquires language, he/she starts to develop the ego, dissociating from the mother and the world and losing the sense of unity, which causes lack and anxiety, a sense of a primary unity forever lost. Seeking to restore his/her totality, the individual searches for that fantasy of a complete image, which entails a narcissistic impulse.⁹

Furthermore, to Bhabha, when examining the processes of the production of colonial discourses and the ideological construction of otherness, it is of utmost importance to consider the act of seeing/being seen, as the colonial power's regime entails a scopic drive, the pleasure of seeing the object of desire (28), which in turn is also an object. In this sense, regimes of visibility and discursivity (visual and textual narratives)—which are fetishistic, scopic, imaginary—emerge as essential to the exercise of colonial power (and, consequently, the production of "otherness").

No other narrative economy, however, promotes more voyeurism and fetishism than classic cinema, as in the dark space of the theater the "act of seeing" cannot be answered with the "act of looking back." In her famous essay on cinema, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey observes that the act of seeing is also an act of subjugation, as cinema remains marked by visual pleasures and projections of one's repressed desires (59). The screen promotes an extreme scopophilia (pleasure in looking) that transforms people into objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze (60). Mulvey also emphasizes that cinema develops the scopophilia into a narcissistic impulse, as the spectator's fascination with image includes "a love affair between image and self-image" and "a recognition of his like" (61). This powerful gaze

has no possible answer, encapsulating the images/objects into the realm of the spectator's wishes and anxieties.

Taking into consideration Bhabha's and Mulvey's reflections, the episode of *Black Orpheus* as retold by Obama exposes an interesting dynamic: Obama "looks at" his mother, who in turn "looks at" the screen. His critical gaze exposes Ann Dunham's fascinated, exoticized, and unilateral gaze, a white, civilized woman's stare at the "infantile" and "primitive" (and yet "colorful" and "cheery") blacks. Obama is well aware of the power relations embedded in the reproduction of stereotypes and the act of looking, being also conscious that his mother's gaze reinforces dominant Western structures of seeing. Nevertheless, by translating "wistful gaze" as "nostalgic air," the Brazilian Portuguese translation of *Dreams from My Father* undermines the power relations embedded in colonial visual discourses. Furthermore, when Obama refers to "wistful" and finding "in the other some element that was missing in ourselves," one can recall a lost, imaginary past, a moment when the individual was immersed in totality and not divided by Western discursive dualities (e.g. black/white; civilized/barbarian; cultured/primitive), as Bhabha describes.

Obama also has a critical perception of *Black Orpheus's* stereotyped black characters, condemning the movie's "depiction of childlike blacks." Still, *A origem dos meus sonhos* underplays Obama's critique by translating the phrase as "representation of young blacks." In this sense, the Brazilian translation tones down Obama's assessment of Camus' celebratory and racially harmonic image of Brazil. By erasing the father figure related to Africa and seeking to preserve Brazil as a privileged site of race relations, the Brazilian edition of *Dreams from My Father* focuses on the personal achievements of the individual mulatto and keeps the notion of racial democracy unchallenged. Thus, it is not a mere coincidence that the autobiography's short passage on *Black Orpheus* captured the hearts and minds of Brazilians. In this sense, this episode was of utmost importance to creating an ideal Obama, an Obama who is more a "superlative" Brazilian than a "relative" American. The episode of Ann Dunham's fascination with *Black Orpheus* would be exhaustively retold by the Brazilian media. The next section, "Marcel Camus, the Creator of Barack Obama," explores how this idea would take shape in a peculiar book, Fernando Jorge's *Se não fosse o Brasil, jamais Barack Obama teria nascido* [If it were not for Brazil, Barack Obama would have never been born]. As the title indicates, Jorge intriguingly argues that Barack Obama

would not have existed if not for Brazil, a proposition that reveals more about how Brazilians think of themselves than about how Obama has constructed his biography.

MARCEL CAMUS, THE CREATOR OF BARACK OBAMA

In 2009, journalist Fernando Jorge's *Se não fosse o Brasil, jamais Barack Obama teria nascido* [If it were not for Brazil, Barack Obama would have never been born] was released in Brazil. The book's proposition, as the title indicates, is as original as it is bizarre: Brazil—and not the United States or Nigeria—was the real reason Obama ever existed. Jorge's starting point is the opposition between the pervasive and virulent American racism, which had created official segregation and the Ku Klux Klan, and the “Brazilian spirit,” the essence of a racially and socially inclusive nation forged by an African matrix. Fernando Jorge postulates that Ann Dunham had perfectly apprehended this Afro-Brazilian essence when she watched Marcel Camus' *Black Orpheus* and, consequently, felt “compelled” to reenact the film's multiracial perspective in her own life story. Divided into eight chapters, Jorge's book emphasizes two main arguments: Brazilian society as an all-embracing nation, and the United States—a racially and exclusionary country—as a nemesis of Brazil. In this sense, because of his unique multiracial origin and multicultural upbringing, Obama would be more attuned with Brazilian ideals. *Se não fosse o Brasil's* cover (Fig. 2.3) perfectly places the U.S. president in this picturesque universe: a smiling Obama appears driving a yellow Brasília, a popular Volkswagen car named after Brazil's capital, and happily waving to the (imagined) population. In the background, symbols of national identity emerge: the Sugarloaf; Christ the Redeemer; and the famous Copacabana promenade's pavement, designed by renowned architect Robert Burle Marx, encompass the lively landscape. The title appears in large white, bold letters, surrounded by the colors of the Brazilian flag: yellow, green, and blue.

Obama appears very comfortable and cheery surrounded by this Brazilian-themed scenario. In fact, Jorge's book reframes Obama's personal story according to an imaginary connection with Brazil and its culture. Five out of the eight chapters directly associate the president's birth with Brazil's history, art, music, and literature; (1) “*Orfeu negro, o filme que maravilhou a mãe de Obama e o fez nascer*” [*Black Orpheus, the movie that amazed Obama's mother and made him be born*]; (2)



Fig. 2.3 Cover of *Se não fosse o Brasil, jamais Barack Obama teria nascido*.
Source: *Novo Século*

“Barack Obama compreende porque sua mãe ficou deslumbrada com o filme *Orfeu negro*” [Barack Obama understands why his mother was dazzled by the movie *Black Orpheus*]; (3) “Vinicius de Moraes, o poeta brasileiro que também fez Obama nascer” [Vinicius de Moraes, the Brazilian poet who also made Obama be born]; (4) “A peça *Orfeu da Conceição*, outra causa do nascimento de Obama” [The play *Orfeu da Conceição*, another reason for Obama’s birth]; and (5) “O relacionamento dos Estados Unidos com o Brasil, país que fez Obama nascer” [The United States’ relationship with Brazil, the country that made Obama be born].

In the chapter “*Black Orpheus*, the movie that amazed Obama’s mother and made him be born,” the author delineates his thesis that “se não fosse o Brasil, se não fosse o poeta brasileiro Vinicius de Moraes,

se não fosse a sua peça *Orfeu da Conceição*, se não fosse o filme *Orfeu Negro*, baseado na referida peça, o presidente Barack Hussein Obama, dos Estados Unidos, jamais teria nascido no dia 4 de agosto de 1961 em Honolulu, no Havai” [if it were not for Brazil, if it were not for the Brazilian poet Vinicius de Moraes, if it were not for his play *Orfeu da Conceição*, if it were not for the movie *Black Orpheus*, based on the abovementioned play, the president Barack Hussein Obama, of the United States, would have never been born on July 4, 1961, in Honolulu in Hawaii] (40). To ratify his thesis, Jorge, therefore, describes a chain of non-accidental events related to Brazil’s national identity that, in turn, determined Obama’s birth in the United States.

This chapter of *Se não fosse o Brasil* centers on the previously examined episode of Ann Dunham’s novel experience of watching her first foreign movie in Chicago, as Jorge retells: “Ann saiu deslumbrada do cinema e confessou que esse havia sido a coisa mais bonita que ela tinha visto na sua vida, conforme Obama narra no capítulo seis do livro *Dreams from my father*” [Dazzled, Ann got out of the movie theater and confessed that this movie had been the most beautiful thing that she had ever seen in her life, according to Obama’s account in Chapter Six of *Dreams from My Father*] (38). In his bibliography, Jorge lists Obama’s English autobiography, and not its Brazilian translation. In this sense, it is interesting to note that the author preferred to highlight Ann’s positive view of the movie’s representation of a multiracial Brazil, rather than Obama’s critical comments on Camus’ problematic depiction of Afro-Brazilians. In an operation that is similar to the Brazilian Portuguese translation, the author chooses to disregard what he deems undesirable, while emphasizing what he considers crucial to the core of Brazil’s national identity: a racially harmonic society.

Fernando Jorge follows Ann’s story, creating his own mythology about the interracial relationship between “a moça branca vinda de Wichita” [the white young lady from Wichita] (40) and “o rapaz africano Barack Hussein Obama, de vinte e três anos, *completamente preto*, nascido no Quênia e criado no vilarejo Alego, cheio de rebanho de cabras” [the young African man Barack Hussein Obama, twenty-three years old, *completely black*, born in Kenya and raised in the Alego village, surrounded by herds of goats] (38, emphasis mine). Jorge tells that soon after having watched *Black Orpheus*, the young and idealistic Ann went to study at the University of Hawaii, where she met Barack Hussein

Obama Sr. in a Russian class. However, according to Fernando, she was truly infatuated with the Brazilian actor Breno Mello:

[Ann] apaixonou-se pelo moço africano que exibia a cara, o físico, o aspecto, uma semelhança impressionante com o ator brasileiro Breno Mello, também *completamente preto* e que foi o Orfeu do filme de Marcel Camus. Os dois se casaram em 1960, a despeito da preocupação das famílias de Ann e Barack, por ser um matrimônio inter-racial.

Entregando-se ao rapaz quêniano, ela, moça bem romântica, estava se entregando ao seu Orfeu, a uma transposição do ator Breno Mello, o Orfeu brasileiro que a encantou... (40, emphasis mine)

[Ann fell in love with the young African male who presented the same face, physical attributes, appearance, and an amazing similarity with the Brazilian actor Breno Mello, who was also *totally black* and who was the Orpheus of Marcel Camus' film. They married in 1960, despite the concerns of Ann's and Barack's families, because it was a biracial marriage.

Surrendering to the Kenyan youngster, she, a young romantic lady, was surrendering to her Orpheus, a transposition of the actor Breno Mello, the Brazilian Orpheus who captivated her...]

The repetition of the words “completamente preto” [completely black] engulfs the subject, fully determining his existence; in other words, Obama Sr. and Breno Mello are the same because they are black (see Figs. 2.4 and 2.5). However, their skin color is not the only characteristic that supposedly unites the Kenyan economist and the Brazilian actor; Jorge also lists a set of physical features that have been historically associated with blacks: (kinky) hair, flat root of the nose, projection of the jaw area, and white shiny teeth. “A semelhança física entre Breno e Barack Hussein Obama senior, o pai do presidente dos Estados Unidos, era de fato impressionante. Os dois tinham *a mesma cor escura*, a mesma cara redonda, os mesmos olhos ovais, *o mesmo tipo de cabelo*, *o mesmo nariz chato*, *o mesmo queixo*, *os mesmos dentes brancos* e até o mesmo sorriso” [The physical resemblance between Breno and Barack Hussein Obama Sr., the father of the President of the United States, was, in fact, impressive. Both had *the same dark color*, the same round face, the same oval eyes, *the same type of hair*, *the same flat nose*, *the same chin*, *the same white teeth* and even the same smile] (49, emphasis mine).

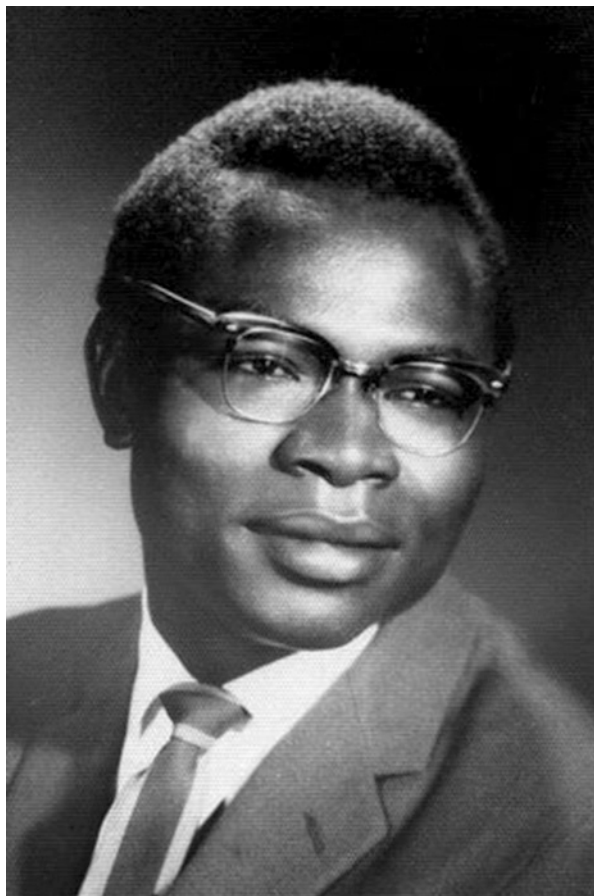


Fig. 2.4 Barack Obama Sr. *Source* Pinterest, “Barack Obama Sr.” (from barack-obama-pictures.com)

Racist descriptions based on skin pigmentation and exaggerated physical features have historically shaped whites’ perception of blacks. In *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, Jan Nederveen Pieterse analyzes how colonialism connected to the nineteenth-century European evolutionist discourses to construct images of Africa and blacks, noting that these stereotyped representations are still in circulation today. Moreover, Nederveen Pieterse observes that the



Fig. 2.5 Breno Mello. Source Pinterest, “Breno Mello” (from criterion.com)

representation of “otherness” requires a process of mental “oversimplification” and “typification,” in which one disregards what is unique in an individual or group and sets to categorize them in a single class that shares similar traits or qualities, homogenizing the subject (225).

In this sense, Mello’s and Obama Sr.’s blackness and physical features render them interchangeable: they are basically the same (no matter what their individual stories may be). To Fernando Jorge, there is an unequivocal physical similarity between the Kenyan Obama Sr. and the Brazilian Breno Mello, so much so that Jorge declares Obama Sr. a doppelganger of Mello.¹⁰ Hence, Ann Dunham was only swapping her love fetish: the platonic Brazilian black romantic interest with a real Kenyan lover.

Não duvide, amigo leitor, Barack Hussein Obama nasceu por causa desse filme. Insisto, o pai dele, *reluzente negro do Quênia*, país da África Oriental, foi para a sua mãe branca a transposição do ator Breno Mello, o Orfeu do filme, *reluzente negro brasileiro* do Rio Grande do Sul. (49, emphasis mine)

[Do not doubt, my friend the reader, that Barack Hussein Obama was born because of this movie. I insist, his father, the *shiny black from Kenya*, country of Oriental Africa, was to his white mother a transposition of the actor Breno Mello, the Orpheus of the movie, the *shiny Brazilian black* of Rio Grande do Sul.]

From the union of the white American Ann Dunham and the black Kenyan Barack Obama Sr., Obama was then born, a mulatto in a land of biracial polarity. According to Jorge, Obama owes his own existence to Brazilian art and poetry, cultural elements that, in turn, were strongly influenced by Brazil's black ancestry. Obama would be, therefore, the "true expression of Brazil," if not by his nationality, then by his essence. This "essence" carries the effigy of *mestiçagem*, coupled with the idea of racial democracy. Obama, in turn, had "Brazilianized" American political institutions, as Fernando Jorge tries to demonstrate with his wordplay: "Esta [a Casa Branca] agora já não é tão branca, virou mestiça..." [This (the White House) now is not so white anymore, it became mestizo...] (330).

In Jorge's interesting operation, the "other," an American Obama, transforms into the "we," the Brazilian Obama, incorporated into Brazilian nationality through the spirit of *carnaval* (the movie *Black Orpheus*) and *mestiçagem* (the love story between Ann Dunham/Eurydice and Obama Sr./Orpheus). Obama becomes, therefore, a true Brazilian, because he so perfectly expresses the real ideals of Brazil's culture and society.

In the chapter "Barack Obama understands why your mother was dazzled by the movie *Black Orpheus*," Jorge summarizes the president's life story, from his birth to his political ascension, quoting from both of Obama's autobiographies, *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*. Still at the core of the chapter is Ann Dunham's fascination with *Black Orpheus*. The Brazilian journalist returns to this episode and includes Obama's reflection on the experience: "My mother was that girl with the movie of beautiful black people in her head, flattered by my father's attention, confused and alone, trying to break out of the grip of her own parents' lives" (*Dreams from My Father* 132). In *Dreams from My Father*, Obama's thoughts emerge after a conversation with his mother about the absent (and thus mysterious) father; he unites Ann Dunham's fascination with an exotic universe of blacks in Brazilian *carnaval* with her naïve fascination with the equally intriguing Obama Sr. The president complicates his parents' relationship by focusing on the power of exoticism created by the same white people who are, at the same time, fascinated and repulsed by the "other." Jorge then simplifies the equation, emphasizing the exotic as a positive element of aggregation:

Minha mãe era aquela menina com o filme cheio de belas pessoas negras na cabeça, seduzida pela atenção de meu pai, confusa e sozinha, procurando fugir da clausura ...

Quem lê estas palavras tem a impressão de que, conscientemente ou instintivamente, Obama logo se convenceu disto: se não fosse o Orfeu Negro e o astro deste filme, Breno Mello, quase sócia de seu pai, ele jamais teria nascido na *exótica e paradisíaca* Honolulu ... (111, emphasis mine)

[My mother was that child with the movie full of beautiful black people in her head, seduced by my father's attention, confused and alone, seeking to escape a prison ...

Anyone who reads these words has the impression that, consciously or instinctively, Obama was soon convinced of this: if it would have not been for *Black Orpheus* and the star of the film, Breno Mello, an almost double of his father, he would have never been born in the *exotic and paradisiac* Honolulu ...]

It is interesting to note that there is a direct equivalence between Hawaii and Brazil in Jorge's reasoning: both emerge as exotic and paradisiac sites, where the different races have more freedom to mix and mingle. Thus, Obama was born in Hawaii, but he could equally have been born in Brazil: the same interchangeable operation of Ann's love objects (Obama Sr./Breno Mello) now can be applied to Obama's birth site (Hawaii/Brazil).

Hawaii emerges as a unique space in the United States, where races would coexist harmoniously. Obama himself notes that his grandparents' decision to move to Hawaii was connected to the idea that ethnic and racial relationships had much less social friction in that U.S. state.¹¹

There were too many races, with power among them too diffuse, to impose the mainland's rigid caste system; and so few blacks that the most ardent segregationist could enjoy a vacation secure in the knowledge that race mixing in Hawaii had little to do with the established order back home.

Thus the legend was made of Hawaii as the one true melting pot, an experiment in racial harmony. My grandparents—especially Gramps, who came into contact with a range of people through his furniture business—threw themselves into the cause of mutual understanding. (*Dreams from My Father* 38)

Hence, if Breno Mello is the double of Obama Sr., Brazil is a—better—double of Hawaii: not an archipelago, but an entire country devoted to embracing and celebrating all races, ethnicities, and cultures. Jorge constantly reminds readers of Brazil's accepting nature, a country thus more attuned to Obama's aspirations and sensibilities. If Brazil emerges as a positive sign, the United States has to function as its negative pole; throughout the book, Jorge carefully constructs the United States as Brazil's nemesis, a place where pervasive racial prejudice and violence were not only overlooked, but also sanctioned. Therefore, in the chapters "A mãe de Obama e o preconceito contra os negros, nos Estados Unidos" [Obama's mother and the prejudice against blacks in the United States] and "Racismo, o perigo que ameaça Barack Obama" [Racism, the danger that threatens Barack Obama], Jorge describes the "long history of North American blacks against racial discrimination" (12). He starts with Ann Dunham's childhood experience with racism depicted in *Dreams from My Father*—she and a black girlfriend were attacked for playing together—to preface the history of racism in the United States: the formation of the Ku Klux Klan after emancipation; lynchings; and the implementation of the Jim Crow laws. The Brazilian journalist also chronicles African-Americans' struggle to end racial discrimination: the foundation of the NAACP; the creation of Pan-Africanism; and the emergence of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Federal laws and policies aimed at the eradication of racial discrimination, as well as the social and economic advancement of African-Americans, helped to forge a strong black middle-upper class and to elevate blacks to higher positions in society. However, as Jorge concludes, "a progressiva ascensão social do negro norte-americano ... não significa que o ódio e o preconceito contra ele, bem antigos, tenham desaparecido completamente. Ambos estão ainda bem vivos, atuantes" [the progressive social ascension of the North American black ... does not mean that the hatred and prejudice against them (the blacks), so old, have disappeared completely. Both are still well alive, active] (332). In the chapter "Racism, the danger that threatens Obama," Jorge notes that, even after Obama's election, racial prejudice in the United States remains a critical problem, and he concludes that hatred against blacks could lead to the president's assassination.

Still, Jorge observes that Brazil is also plagued by racism, which is more subtle and hidden. Nevertheless, the journalist presents as examples isolated cases of racial prejudice in Brazilian society (371–374),

which certainly contrast with the more systematic nature of U.S. racism. In this sense, although Jorge acknowledges the “presence of this evil” among Brazilians, he certainly celebrates the nation’s ideals of miscegenation and racial unity. Actually, Brazil sets an example in the realm of race relations that needs to be emulated. In the chapter “O relacionamento de Obama com Lula e o Brasil” [Obama’s relationship with Lula and Brazil], the journalist reminds the reader that prior to Obama’s election in the United States, Brazil had a mulatto president as early as 1909: Nilo Peçanha (whom Jorge nicknames “the Brazilian Obama”), the vice president, took over power when President Afonso Pena suddenly passed away during his term in office (380).¹²

Most recently, the two largest countries in the Americas have elected rulers who have similar personal histories. Jorge compares Barack Obama and Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva,¹³ finding parallels between the biracial U.S. leader and the northeastern Brazilian head of state: both like animals, are very emotive, and were born under a lucky star. Yet the most important characteristic they share is their humble origins: “a origem modesta dos dois presidentes parece ligar um ao outro” [the modest origins of these two presidents seem to connect them to each other] (Jorge 374). The journalist also notes that soon after being elected, Obama called Lula, and they talked for over twenty-five minutes. In an informal tone, both presidents asked the other to be addressed by their first names and agreed to visit each other’s countries (397–399).¹⁴ In fact, Lula met Obama on March 14, 2009, in Washington, whereas the U.S. president came to Brazil for a two-day visit on March 19, 2011, when Lula had already left office and his successor from the Workers’ Party, Dilma Rousseff, had taken over the presidency. (Obama’s visit to Brazil and his relationship with the first female Brazilian ruler will be analyzed later in Chaps. 3 and 4 respectively.)

The next section, “Lula and Obama: How Hope (Momentarily) Trumped Classism and Racism,” investigates how the Brazilian media and political cartoons portrayed Lula’s and Obama’s relationship. The Brazilian media drew comparisons between the two presidents, highlighting similarities between their biographies. In turn, political cartoons emphasized Lula’s role as the president of an economically emerging nation. Obama and Lula were two political phenomena that symbolized a new optimistic perspective about the United States and Brazil; in other words, both leaders represented how race and class prejudice could be surpassed in Brazil and the United States.

LULA AND OBAMA: HOW HOPE (MOMENTARILY) TRUMPED CLASSISM AND RACISM

Presidents Obama and Lula seemed to be legitimately fond of each other. In fact, Obama's and Lula's mutual admiration was amply publicized in the worldwide media. During the Group of 20 (G20) summit in London in May 2009, Obama, a widely esteemed leader globally, affirmed that he was not the most popular politician on Earth; instead, this title belonged to the Brazilian president. During a lunch at the meeting, he shook hands with Lula and declared with a smile, "This is my man right here, I love this guy." The former lathe operator, who does not speak English but was helped by an interpreter, enjoyed the attention, enthusiastically grasping Obama's hand with both of his ("Obama: Lula 'Is the Most Popular Politician'"). Extensively broadcast on Brazilian television and Internet sites, this episode was also described in "Obama's relationship with Lula and Brazil," the last chapter of Jorge's *Se não fosse o Brasil*. The warm relationship between the two leaders, then, closes a circle: Obama is not Brazilian, but could well have been a native of the country. As Jorge underlines in the chapter, Obama himself affirms several times that he looks like a Brazilian and could certainly "pass" for one. In reply to Obama's "This is my man," Lula told the international media, "se você encontra [o Obama] na Bahia, acha que é baiano. *O Obama tem a cara da gente*" [if one finds (Obama) in Bahia, one will think that he is from Bahia. *Obama has our traits*] ("Eu adoro esse cara," emphasis mine).¹⁵ Jorge ends his book by returning to the syllogistic reasoning delineated in the first chapter of *Se não fosse o Brasil*: because of Camus' *Black Orpheus*, Ann Dunham fell in love with Obama Sr., a double of the actor Breno Mello, so Barack Obama could be born, thanks to Brazil, in a culmination of a "lógica perfeita" (444). In fact, Jorge's "perfect logic" aligns with the idea that Obama's multiracial and multicultural roots are, in fact, Brazilian *par excellence*. Obama's birth outside the realm of racially integrated Brazil was seen as an unfortunate and random accident, which had to be unequivocally corrected. In this sense, the Brazilian media have sought to recreate Obama as "one of us."

Undeniably, the Brazilian press took pride in having captured Obama's positive attention at the G20, perceiving it as a sign of the country's rise as a global economic power. Since the beginning of the 2000s, Brazil had grown to be the seventh largest economy in the world

and the second largest emerging market behind China. The first decade of the twenty-first century saw the Brazilian economy expand, with an average GDP growth of 4.2% between 2003 and 2012, peaking in 2010 at 7.5%, and an unemployment rate that reached a historical low of 5.4% (Casanova and Kassum 45).¹⁶ Brazil's greatest achievement was its international recognition as an economic powerhouse when its national debt became investment grade, a rating granted by the global rating agency Standard and Poor's in 2008 and later by Moody's (Casanova and Kassum 66). Focusing on Obama's relationship with Lula, political cartoons emphasized the U.S. economic crisis and Brazil's role as its potential financial rescuer, as seen in Figs. 2.6 and 2.7.

In the first cartoon, Obama puts his arm on Lula's shoulder in close proximity to the Brazilian head of state. He amiably declares to a smiling Lula: "This is the man!" However, in the sequence, the U.S. president reveals in thought his real intentions: "[The man] who will help [me] to pay the bill for this crisis." In the second cartoon, a destitute FMI—*Fundo Monetário Internacional* [International Monetary Fund, IMF]—approaches Obama asking for money. He replies: "Ask the bearded (man), he is the man!" Here Lula emerges very comfortably, smoking a cigar, drinking wine, and chatting with two prominent world leaders: Nicolas Sarkozy, president of France (May 2007–May 2012), and Tarō Asō, prime minister of Japan (September 24, 2008–September 16, 2009). As shown in Figs. 2.6 and 2.7 respectively, Brazil had proved its power by becoming the fifth biggest holder of U.S. debt (at that time, only after China, Japan, and the Caribbean banks) and turning from being one of the main recipients of the IMF's loans to an active lender to the organization (Casanova and Kassum 66).

In these satirical drawings, cartoonists Lute and Samuca¹⁷ seek to emphasize Brazil's growing economic and political role in the global scenario. Lula, who takes center stage, displaces the leader of the most powerful nation in the world as "the" key economic player, in the midst of one of the most significant economic crises since the 1929 collapse of the stock market. Lula proved to be a very apt politician, taking advantage of the dire situation to enhance his position in national and international scenes, boldly declaring in April 2008 that the economic crisis would only minimally affect Brazil (which later proved to be true): "Lá, nos EUA, ela [a crise] é uma tsunami; aqui, se ela chegar, vai chegar uma marolinha" [There, in the USA, (the crisis) is a tsunami; here, if (the crisis) comes, it will come as a small wave] (Galhardo).



Fig. 2.6 “Esse é o Cara” by Lute. Source: *Jornal Hoje em Dia*



Fig. 2.7 “G20: Peça ao barbudo, ele é o cara” by Samuca. Source: *Diário de Pernambuco*

Undoubtedly, the country's increasing economic importance fuelled Obama's interest in Brazil, but it also seems that he legitimately identified with Lula (and vice versa). Both presidents' humble beginnings created a common ground between them, helping to unite the leaders at a more personal level. The U.S. and Brazilian media also repeatedly focused on these presidents' modest roots, trying "to represent the election of an outsider (because of the ethnic or social class background) to the presidential office as a historical circumstance and an assertion of the democracy in their respective countries" (Pereira 389). In Brazil, where the notion of racial democracy paradoxically coexists with great social and economic marginalization, Lula's ascension to the presidency was attributed to the fulfillment of the notion of the self-made man, made possible by consolidation of the country's democratic structures. Yet in the United States, Obama's election was a ratification of this same myth of the self-made man, as well as a reaffirmation of the nation's democratic strength, which brought to power an individual from an ethnic background different from that of many mainstream politicians (389).¹⁸

Lula had shown a clear preference for the candidate Obama, even prior to Obama's election to the presidency in November 2008. On October 20, 2008, he declared that one of the benefits of the crisis would be to elect Obama: "Essa crise, entre os benefícios que vai causar, vai eleger Obama presidente dos Estados Unidos, vai ajudar a eleger um negro, o que não é pouca coisa" [This crisis, among the many benefits that it could bring, will help to elect a black president, which is not a little thing]. He also compared himself to Obama, noting that "do ponto de vista simbólico ... eleger um torneiro mecânico pela segunda vez no Brasil, eleger um índio na Bolívia, um negro nos Estados Unidos ... é bastante relevante" [from a symbolic point of view ... to elect a lathe operator for a second mandate in Brazil, to elect an Indian in Bolivia, a black man in the United States ... (this all) is very relevant] (Freire and Rodrigues).¹⁹ In another speech on November 12, 2008, Lula vigorously defended the already elected Obama, comparing his election to Nelson Mandela's rise to power in South Africa (Berlinck and Gois). On November 15, 2008, the newspaper *O Globo* remarked that at the end of the U.S. presidential campaign, Lula openly sided with Obama, to whom the Brazilian president considered himself closely related because of their humble origins ("O fator Clinton"). In an interview with the *Folha de São Paulo*, Celso Luiz Nunes Amorim, the then Brazilian minister of

foreign relations, also compared the two presidents, asserting that both had an inclusive perspective; Lula fought for the poor without excluding other segments of the population, whereas Obama did not reject his black roots, but did not disregard whites either: “Há um paralelo claro. Aqui, a ‘esperança venceu o medo’, e lá a esperança venceu o medo gerado pelo preconceito” [There is a clear parallel (between the two). Here, “hope triumphed over fear”, and there hope triumphed over the fear generated by prejudice] (Cantanhêde, “A visão de Brasília”).²⁰

Both Lula and Obama were popular and charismatic leaders nationally and internationally, and they were well aware of their similar personal trajectories and privileged positions as public figures. They also enjoyed a tremendous amount of media attention worldwide. In 2010, the magazine *Time* nominated Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva as the most influential leader on the globe; Obama lagged behind, occupying fourth place (“The 2010 *Time* 100: Leaders”).²¹ Yet, even prior to his election, Obama captured the hearts and minds of Brazilians, as magazines and newspapers featured the candidate on an unprecedented scale, opening more space to him than any prior U.S. presidential nominee. In 2008, twenty-eight articles from *O Globo* and ninety-seven from *Folha de São Paulo* mentioned Obama, and the popular magazine *Veja* featured Obama twice on the cover, as a candidate and then as president-elect. In June 2008, the magazine headline announced “Ele pode ser o homem mais poderoso do mundo” [He could be the most powerful man in the world], depicting a close-up of a smiling Obama. The cover article “Obama entra para a história” [Obama enters history] is a lesson in optimism, as the subheadline indicates: “A escolha do primeiro negro para concorrer a presidência dos Estados Unidos por um dos dois grandes partidos quebra um tabu de séculos e manda ao mundo uma mensagem de tolerância. Em cinco meses se saberá se o país lhe dará a chave da Casa Branca” [The nomination of the first black president to run for the U.S. presidency as a candidate of one of the main two parties breaks a taboo of centuries and sends to the world a message of tolerance. In five months we will know whether the country will give him the White House’s key] (Petry, “Obama entra para a história” 93). Recounting Obama’s biography, the piece emphasizes that he was the first candidate to overcome racism in a country historically tarnished by centuries of slavery and racial segregation. However, according to *Veja*, Obama’s strategy proved to be effective because he presented himself as a universal candidate who was beyond racial issues (99); moreover, his multicultural

and multiracial status allowed him to have widespread appeal and carry a message of tolerance (97).

It is interesting to note that “Obama enters history” begins with the story of Ann Dunham’s fascination with *Black Orpheus*, an episode that the Brazilian media have quoted to exhaustion, as observed in this chapter. The article offers a Brazilian perspective on Obama’s racial standing, underlining that “na verdade, metade branco e metade negro, mas, *para os padrões americanos, inteiramente negro*. Um negro parido do sonho da jovem Ann, mulher de personalidade tão fascinante, misto de ingênua e libertária, quanto a do seu filho. *No Brasil ... Obama se consideraria e seria considerado mulato*” [in reality, half white and half black, but *for the American standards, totally black*. A black man born from the young Ann’s dream, a woman whose personality—a mix of naïve and libertarian—is as fascinating as her son. *In Brazil ... Obama would have considered himself and would have been considered a mulatto*] (98, emphasis mine).

This passage focuses on the U.S. biracial (exclusive) racial system in opposition to the Brazilian multifaceted scale of racial classification (more inclusive). In this sense, the Brazilian press paradoxically oscillates between celebrating the United States as the country of all possibilities—no matter how improbable they might seem—and confirming the nation as a place of persistent racial intolerance. Obama himself addressed this contradictory issue in his campaign speech “A More Perfect Union,” delivered in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008: the unique U.S. “experiment in democracy” could not escape “the sin of slavery” and subsequent racial conflicts generated by discrimination and official segregation, provoking a “gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time.” To close this gap, he decided to run for president, inviting Americans to change the course of history, to “perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction—towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren.” This utopia is only possible, though, because Obama’s story is as unique as the nation’s history, as he describes: he is “the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas,” raised by white grandparents who survived the Depression and contributed to the U.S. victory in the Second World War, and married to a black woman who carries the blood of slaves and slave-owners. As Obama notes, his background makes him an unconventional candidate, but it is this same uncommon, fragmented,

and pluralistic story that, in turn, actually represents America—"out of many, we are truly one." Furthermore, he rejects "race as a divisive turn" and embraces the "American dream," the faith "that working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union." This speech was written in response to growing racial tensions during the presidential campaign. Obama especially addressed the criticism regarding his past relationship with Reverend Jeremiah Wright, whose controversial sermons fiercely exposed America's racist and imperialist legacy (Turner Jr. 4).²²

With "A More Perfect Union," Obama invites all Americans to overcome racial divisions, a prospect made feasible only by the strength and renewal of U.S. democracy, a social and political system in which everything is deemed conceivable. Therefore, this dichotomy of a "country of all possibilities" and the "nation as site of racial intolerance" would provoke a discursive short circuit that challenged a set of Brazilian representations about U.S. racial attitudes and its own racial practices—a short circuit that could be resolved by emphasizing Obama's multifaceted persona. On November 12, 2008, *Veja* released a special edition on the president's victory. The cover again depicts a smiling Obama, the historical date of November 4, 2008, and a quote from his victory speech in white letters on a black background: "Se existe alguém que ainda duvide que os Estados Unidos sejam o lugar onde todas as coisas são possíveis, que ainda questione a força de nossa democracia, a resposta está aqui esta noite" [If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer] ("Cover").²³ The editorial pages dedicate the issue to the "Obama phenomenon" and unabashedly praise the vitality of U.S. democracy:

Agora, no alvorecer do século XXI, com a eleição de Obama os Estados Unidos oferecem o espetáculo de sua própria superação. No espaço de pouco mais de uma geração, o país foi superando o racismo surdo e a segregação racial legalizada em alguns estados, processo que culminou com a aceitação eufórica de um negro no comando supremo da nação. ... Aos olhos do mundo, esse triunfo sinaliza a reconquista pelos Estados Unidos da autoridade moral baseada na igualdade de oportunidades para todos. ("O fenômeno Obama" 13)

[Now at the dawn of the twenty-first century, with Obama's election, the United States offers the spectacle of its own realization. In the space of a little more than a generation, the country gradually overcame blind racism and legalized racial segregation in some states, in a process that culminated with the euphoric acceptance of a black man in the supreme command of the nation. ... To the eyes of the world, this triumph signals the United States' recovery of its moral authority, which was based in equal opportunity for all.]

The main article, "Obama: a resposta" [Obama: the answer], underlines U.S. social progress in the arena of civil rights, reminding readers that, when the newly elected president was born, blacks could not vote or run for office (Petry, "Obama: a resposta" 77). The article retains an optimistic tone, noting that the world has also changed to overcome the after effects of the Second World War, colonialism, and the Cold War. To *Veja*, Obama is, therefore, a "candidate of our times," whose plurality of identities—his Arab name, African origin, an Asian connection—made him a "Ph.D. in diversity," broadening his appeal in the United States and abroad (78). If Obama might fit everywhere, he is not "completely" American, or he could be American and still contain any other nationality.

Unsurprisingly, the Brazilian media were quick to claim Obama as "ours," embracing the idea of a local Obama and refashioning his persona with elements of national identity, as investigated in the present study. Obama himself seemed to be very comfortable in his role as native. In his first encounter with President Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva in Washington on March 15, 2009, he joked with journalists when he affirmed that he looked like a Brazilian (D'Ávila). Obama's biracial heritage and multicultural personal history allow him to reinvent himself as a "brother," instead of posing as a foreigner.

By articulating his "Brazilianness," Obama hopes to be accepted as an equal, consequently enjoying all the privileges that would pertain to this group. Yet the ability to perform manifold nationalities holds perils as much as perks. Questions about Obama's U.S. nationality emerged during his first and second campaigns for the presidency, prompting the candidate to release his birth certificate as proof of citizenship. This episode was racially motivated; as Matthew W. Hughey highlights, dominant racial and civic representations produced an "othering" of Obama, condemning him to "an intangible yet potent ethos that betrays authentic

citizenship" (171). Hughey studies the phenomenon of "Birtherism"; that is, the idea that Obama is constitutionally disqualified from holding presidential office by *jus soli* [birth by soil] or *jus sanguinis* [birth by parents' nationality] (164). To Hughes, "narratives of belonging" reveal a continued relation between the idea of citizenship and a "hegemonic" form of white racial identity, which creates an "unhappy marriage between race and citizenship" (164). In this sense, constructions of whiteness inform citizenship, and citizens who do not correspond to dominant expectations by phenotype and performance are summarily disqualified from the political process (164). These narratives sanction white entitlement, while arbitrating on the appropriateness of black civic ontology; therefore, the individual would never be able to effectively "belong," no matter what he or she does: "While Birtherism first concentrated on demands that Obama release his birth certificate, the claims slowly expanded to different types of birth documentation, affidavits, and private information such as health records, educational transcripts, and international travel schedules from his childhood" (170–171).

In summary, Obama is, at the same time, an American insider and an American outsider. Post-racial, plurinational, multicultural: the African-American president emerges as a polymorphous sign in constant transformation. This "Obama-sign" has been reworked and reshaped to carry specific anxieties, desires, and aspirations, which seek to correspond to diverse groups, each of them carrying different demands. To the Brazilian media, the "Obama-sign" exposes the country's racial afflictions at a concrete level (the United States elects a black president, and yet Afro-Brazilians still have little actual power and representation in Brazil's political arena), while paradoxically confirming its ideology of racial concord in an imaginary domain (Obama, the "cosmopolitan mulatto," would be better understood through the lenses of Brazilian culture, history, and society). As a possible solution to this contradictory proposition, Obama is reconfigured and reaffirmed as a "true" Brazilian, reestablishing the "normal order of things." The next chapter, "Obama as One of Us," examines how political cartoons and other visual representations portrayed Obama, especially focusing on the 2008 election and the president's 2011 visit to Brazil.

<http://www.springer.com/978-1-137-59480-8>

Barack Obama is Brazilian

(Re)Signifying Race Relations in Contemporary Brazil

Oliveira-Monte, E.

2018, XVI, 208 p. 35 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-137-59480-8