

Extract from Barack Obama's **Dreams from my father**

Text pub 1995 (origins)

Obama's biography reveals many insights into the concept of belonging.

In this extract Obama is explaining the origins of his name Barack to his aunt, Regina. He carries his father's name which means "blessed" in the Muslim religion. His father Americanised his name to Barry when he arrived in the United States. This name was passed onto Barack "So I could fit in" This shows the cultural obstacles to belonging and the choices made to belong by Americanising his name.

His Aunt reveals the importance of connections to place and family by her accounts of her impoverished childhood in Chicago. The metaphor "the stew of voices bubbling up in laughter" captures the warmth, happiness and the importance of family to her.

For Obama this account presents him with a "vision of black life in all its possibility, a vision that filled me with longing—a longing for place, and a fixed and definite history" The repetition of the words vision and longing evoke the desire of Obama to gain a sense of belonging. It is as though for the first time he can understand that a black life in the world is possible and that he could belong to it. He craves to belong to a particular place and a fixed and definite history; as opposed to his diverse and multifaceted past. Like Skryzenicki he has a longing for a past that is his, where he belongs, a clear sense of his own identity.

The strong sense of Obama's personal voice is conveyed in this extract. He himself claims that after a long absence he felt his voice returning to him after that conversation with his aunt Regina. It grew "stronger, sturdier, that constant honest portion of myself". He is feeling more confident and secure about his identity. As a result he expresses this connection with his past self and his potential self with the secure metaphor that this voice was "a bridge between my future and my past".

Obama has made a firm connection with his past and his future sense of his identity and purpose. This is in contrast to Skryznecki who does not successfully resolve the conflict between his parent's heritage and his own identity. It is a continual struggle and source of conflict to him throughout the poems of Immigrant Chronicle as he wrestles with the uncertainty of "what's my choice to be?" He is unable to make the bridge with his past and attempts to reject the world of his parents without finding a comfortable sense of his own identity.

Find quotes/ examples from the poems to support this idea.

head. I knew she was a junior, helped organize black student events, didn't go out much. She stirred her coffee idly and asked, "What did Marcus call you just now? Some African name, wasn't it?"

"Barack."

"I thought your name was Barry."

"Barack's my given name. My father's name. He was Kenyan."

"Does it mean something?"

"It means 'Blessed.' In Arabic. My grandfather was a Muslim."

Regina repeated the name to herself, testing out the sound. "Barack. It's beautiful." She leaned forward across the table. "So why does everybody call you Barry?"

"Habit, I guess. My father used it when he arrived in the States. I don't know whether that was his idea or somebody else's. He probably used Barry because it was easier to pronounce. You know—helped him fit in. Then it got passed on to me. So I could fit in."

"Do you mind if I call you Barack?"

I smiled. "Not as long as you say it right."

She tilted her head impatiently, her mouth set in mock offense, her eyes ready to surrender to laughter. We ended up spending the afternoon together, talking and drinking coffee. She told me about her childhood in Chicago, the absent father and struggling mother, the South Side six-flat that never seemed warm enough in winter and got so hot in the summer that people went out by the lake to sleep. She told me about the neighbors on her block, about walking past the taverns and pool halls on the way to church on Sunday. She told me about evenings in the kitchen with uncles and cousins and grandparents, the stew of voices bubbling up in laughter. Her voice evoked a vision of black life in all its possibility, a vision that filled me with longing—a longing for place, and a fixed and definite history. As we were getting up to leave, I told Regina I envied her.

"For what?"

"I don't know. For your memories, I guess."

Regina looked at me and started to laugh, a round, full sound from deep in her belly.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, Barack," she said, catching her breath, "isn't life something? And here I was all this time wishing I'd grown up in Hawaii."

Strange how a single conversation can change you. Or maybe it only seems that way in retrospect. A year passes and you know you feel differently, but you're not sure what or why or how, so your mind casts back for something that might give that difference shape: a word, a glance, a touch. I know that after what seemed like a long absence, I had felt my voice returning to me that afternoon with Regina. It remained shaky afterward, subject to distortion. But entering sophomore year I could feel it growing stronger, sturdier, that constant, honest portion of myself, a bridge between my future and my past.

It was around that time that I got involved in the divestment campaign. It had started as something of a lark, I suppose, part of the radical pose my friends and I sought to maintain, a subconscious end run around issues closer to home. But as the months passed and I found myself drawn into a larger role—contacting representatives of the African National Congress to speak on campus, drafting letters to the faculty, printing up flyers, arguing strategy—I noticed that people had begun to listen to my opinions. It was a discovery that made me hungry for words. Not words to hide behind but words that could carry a message, support an idea. When we started planning the rally for the trustees' meeting, and somebody suggested that I open the thing, I quickly agreed. I figured I was ready, and could reach people where it counted. I thought my voice wouldn't fail me.

Let's see, now. What was it that I had been thinking in those days leading up to the rally? The agenda had been carefully arranged beforehand—I was only supposed to make a few opening remarks, in the middle of which a couple of white students would come onstage